



## Living and Active

### The People of God and the Word of God in the 3rd Millennium

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**Executive Summary:** Bible societies and translation organizations were established by the church to steward the Bible on its behalf and have largely succeeded in increasing access to Scripture across languages. As the church has expanded globally and taken on more responsibility for its own translation needs, the model of external stewardship is being reconsidered. Rather than diminishing their relevance, this shift calls for these organizations to focus on equipping the church for deeper Scripture engagement. Such engagement leads to transformation, which in turn fuels greater demand for translation and access. By exploring new ministry models and embracing global collaboration, these organizations are positioned to serve the church in even more impactful ways in the years ahead.

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# Introduction

Over 3,000 years ago, Moses penned these immortal words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: “Lord, You have been our dwelling place through all generations. Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God” (Ps 90:1).<sup>1</sup> David picks up the same theme when he writes, “The entirety of Your word is truth, and all Your righteous judgments endure forever” (Ps 119:160). As we observe the many and varied changes occurring globally at the dawn of the 3rd millennium, these words remind us of God’s eternal protection for His people and the enduring permanence of the Holy Scriptures. In the face of threat and opposition, God has always protected His people and His Word, and He will continue to do so forever.

From this vantage point, we can look back with gratitude at the honorable history of the people and organizations who have given the best of what God entrusted to them for the translation and distribution of the Bible, leading to the flourishing of God’s people worldwide. Because of God’s enduring protection and guidance, we can also look ahead with hope to a future of immense possibility. As we survey the outcomes of the past and observe the needs of the church in a rapidly changing global context, we are convinced that Bible societies and Bible translation organizations could have a profoundly positive impact in helping to meet these needs.<sup>2</sup> However, to do so, they must reconsider how they accomplish their enduring purpose. The central premise of this paper is that **the need for Bible societies and Bible translation organizations in the digital era is greater than it ever was in the print era, but the specific services needed by the church are changing.** We see many opportunities for exploring innovative approaches to advance God’s Word and the strategic position of these organizations to that end, in their continued service to the church. We suggest that this will create a fertile context for the transformation of lives and societies in every people group and nation, as well as a further increase in translation of the Scriptures into every language.

## An Honorable History

The Scriptures themselves tell us that the Word of God is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...” (He 4:12) and that all Scripture is “God-breathed and is useful for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2Ti 3:16). By them we come to “the knowledge of him who called us by His own glory and excellence” and experience what God declares, “My word... will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and it will prosper where I send it” (Is 55:11). The Bible, we affirm, “was, is, and always will be the basis of the worship and work of God’s church.”<sup>3</sup> With regard to increasing access to the translated Scriptures in more languages, two recent inflection points are worth noting: the rise of the Bible societies and the rise of the Bible translation organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the Berean Standard Bible, CC0, <https://ber-ean.bible>.

<sup>2</sup> Unless noted otherwise, when we refer to “the church” in this paper, we mean every expression of Christian tradition that aligns with historical orthodoxy, without reference to variations or distinctions in confession, denomination, etc. When we refer to “the church” in the context of Bible translation and language use specifically, we generally mean the “lingual church”—the element of the global church that speaks a given language.

<sup>3</sup> Minutes of the UBS Council, Chiang Mai, 28 September-5 October, 1980, (Appendix VI), 280. Cited in *Taking the Word to the World*, 229.

## Rise of the Bible Societies

In the late 18th century, some 275 years after the Protestant Reformation, William Carey proposed an innovative approach: the formation of voluntary societies to benefit the cause of world missions.<sup>4</sup> Christendom was divided along lines of different confessions and traditions, so Carey suggested that the organization of societies for mission would be more effective “in the present divided state of Christendom” if they engaged separately in the work.<sup>5</sup> Not long afterward, in 1804, the vehicle of the voluntary society was employed in an interdenominational posture with the express purpose of increasing access to the Bible. The first modern Bible society, with its “worldwide missionary outlook, its ecumenical character and its commitment to serving the Churches, was the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). Formed in 1804, its stated aim was, ‘to encourage the widest circulation of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment.’”<sup>6</sup>

Bible societies were soon established in many countries for the same purpose. Eventually, they organized into the United Bible Societies, with a clear objective: “to make the Bible available in a form which all can understand and all can afford.”<sup>7</sup> From early in their history, the Bible societies’ priority of Scripture distribution and engagement was preceded by the need to produce a Bible translation. This is clearly expressed in *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society*:

The provision of Scriptures in foreign languages is of greatest importance in the eyes of a Bible Society. Skilled translators have to be found, and arrangements made for properly printing and binding the Scriptures when they are translated. It is always necessary to remember when looking at Bible work in foreign lands that nothing whatever can be done until the Bible is translated into the tongue of the people. This implies very slow progress but the delay, like that in building a temple, must not dampen ardour since time is needed for laying foundations for the future.<sup>8</sup>

Within a century of the establishment of the first Bible societies, new organizations that were primarily focused on increasing the production of Bible translations came into existence.

## Rise of the Bible Translation Organizations

In the early 20th century, new mission organizations were formed with the purpose of using applied linguistics to produce Bible translations for use in minority language communities. At the outset, this

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<sup>4</sup> Carey, William. *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, 1792.

<sup>5</sup> Carey proposes: “Suppose a company of serious Christians, ministers and private persons, were to form themselves into a society, and make a number of rules respecting the regulation of the plan, and the persons who are to be employed as missionaries, the means of defraying the expense, &c. &c. This society must consist of persons whose hearts are in the work, men of serious religion, and possessing a spirit of perseverance; there must be a determination not to admit any person who is not of this description, or to retain him longer than he answers to it. ... I wish with all my heart, that every one who loves our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, would in some way or other engage in it. But in the present divided state of Christendom, it would be more likely for good to be done by each denomination engaging separately in the work...” (Carey, *Enquiry*, 1792).

<sup>6</sup> 150 Years & Beyond, 2013, 21-22. Schaff recounts the original meeting: “On Mar. 7, 1804, a public meeting was held at the London Tavern, on the call of Mr. Hughes. Three hundred persons attended the meeting. It was quickly evident that a society for increasing the circulation of the Bible presented common ground, upon which all sects and parties could stand. Dissenters met churchmen, and in their interest in the needs of the masses, they forgot for a time their divergent interpretations of the same book. The sole condition necessary to union of action was that a text accepted by all should be issued without note or comment” (“Bible Societies,” § 1.2.1 “Origin and Constitution”).

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, *Taking the Word to the World*, 1996, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Dwight, *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society*, 1916, 133.

was a pioneering effort, as many of these communities had no known believers and no expression of the church. They describe their top priority as being “to provide the Word of God for those with no light at all... [We] are laying foundations by providing the basic document for evangelism, teaching and discipline by others....”<sup>9</sup>

In this way, an innovative paradigm of Bible translation and distribution developed that was shaped by the ecclesiastical and missiological realities of the era. Improvements to this model have been many over time. However, the fundamental aspects of the model itself have remained largely intact: Bible translation organizations and Bible societies work together in service to the church to produce and publish Bible translations for the church, then steward access to the translations on behalf of the church.

## Stewarding the Bible for the Church

**What happens when Bible societies and Bible translation organizations produce, publish, and steward access to Bible translations for the church?**

To depict these essential elements of this Bible translation paradigm, consider the following simple diagram:

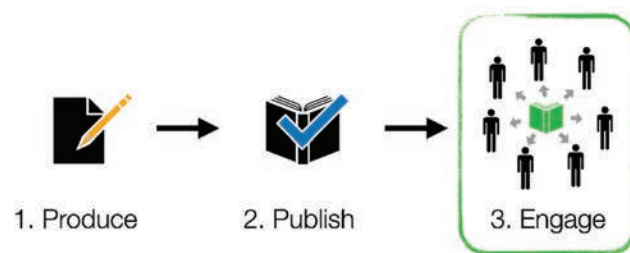


Diagram 1: Bible Translation Followed by Scripture Engagement

As depicted here, the essential process is generally linear and sequential, with the desired outcome being the engagement with the translated Scriptures by the church that speaks the language. As noted above, both Bible societies and Bible translation organizations started by seeking to position the Bible translation work before the evangelistic and theological work that would benefit from the translated Scriptures. Once produced, the translated Scriptures were published and distributed to the lingual church for engagement in ministry. A survey of the outcomes of nearly 200 years of this ministry shows remarkable success, as well as certain unintended consequences.

## Some Wonderful Success

Over the past 200 years, God has blessed the efforts of countless faithful people serving the church in the ministry of Bible translation and Scripture engagement. Together, Bible translation organizations and Bible societies have produced translations of Scripture in thousands of languages and equipped the church to engage with Scripture in ways that continue to transform lives and cultures around the world.

<sup>9</sup> Cowan, *The Word That Kindles*, 1979, 206. Later in the same book, this point is repeated, “Some people have been called by God to mass evangelism, church planting and theological training ministries. We have not. The very difference of our tasks enables us to serve and complement each other. Their ministries will be better with the Bible in the language of the people than without it. Their ministries supplement ours and thus leave us freer to move on” (Ibid., 209).

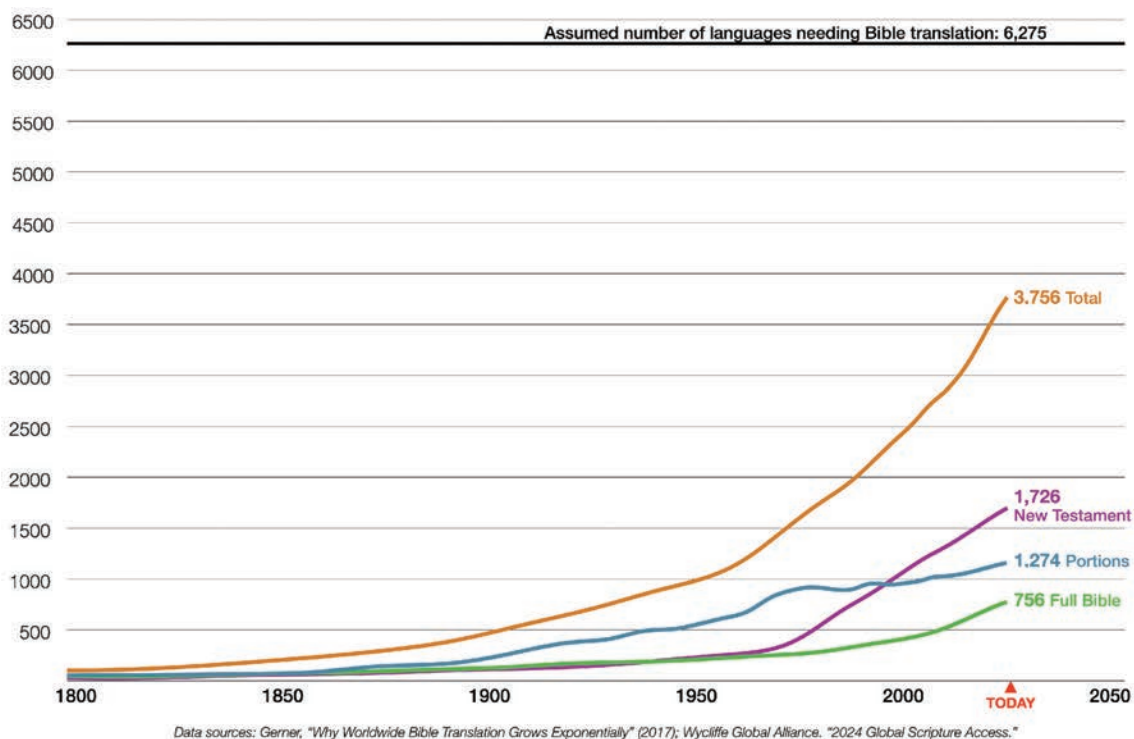


Diagram 2: Progress of Bible Translation<sup>10</sup>

The following is but a sample of the ministry of Bible societies and Bible translation organizations around the world in service to the church. In the Philippines, Scripture engagement is bringing transformation to remote towns and villages by introducing the Gospel through film showings, preaching, and altar calls. New believers are invited into small listening groups where they hear the Bible, grow in their faith, and learn to entrust their lives to God. Among tribal communities that once worshiped nature, many now worship Jesus Christ, finding new hope, strength, and peace.

In Guatemala, Scripture is reaching young gang members in detention centers through Bible studies and workshops. These programs offer spiritual support and help the youth break cycles of violence and crime by encountering God's love and hope. In Angola, Bible distribution in prisons has grown into a movement of worship, discipleship, and vocational training for former inmates. In Malawi, the Bible Society is teaching non-literate women to read the Bible in their own language, giving them new freedom. In Kenya and 25 other African nations, the provision of a women's devotional Bible in multiple languages is helping women see their worth through daily devotions, addressing real-life challenges and inspiring transformation. A discipleship program operating in 16 African countries is empowering youth through Bible-based stories and workshops to make wise choices, resist violence, and lead positive change.

In Slovenia, new Bible-sharing communities are being established to encourage regular Scripture reading and personal discipleship among Catholics and those on the margins of the church. In Egypt, the Bible is reaching a wider audience through various digital and print resources, including

<sup>10</sup> Chart is based on data from: Wycliffe Global Alliance. "2024 Global Scripture Access." Accessed May 15, 2025. <https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/>; Gerner, Matthias. "Why Worldwide Bible Translation Grows Exponentially." *Journal of Religious History* 42, no. 2 (April 12, 2017): 145–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12443>. The assumption of total Bible translation need is from Wycliffe Global Alliance (Total languages (7,396) – Likely no need (1,131) = Total Need: 6,275), though estimates vary widely, especially when inclusive of translation into multiple language variants, as needed by the church.

youth apps, animated Bible stories, and social media, making Scripture accessible and understandable to Egyptians and other Arabic speakers.

Countless similar stories could be told of the ministry of many other Bible societies that we do not have the space to recount in this paper. However, as encouraging as these past successes of the Bible societies and Bible translation organizations have been, as with every innovation, there have been unintended consequences.<sup>11</sup>

## Some Unintended Consequences

While the success of the goal of “stewarding the Bible for the church” has enjoyed considerable success over the last two centuries, unintended consequences like the following have also occurred.

**Outdated translations** (*Available, but needing revision*) – Despite great effort to avoid it, some published Bible translations are later found to include errors of theological and linguistic consequence. Furthermore, languages are constantly changing, and languages that do not have a long literate tradition to anchor them change rapidly. In all these situations, the need of the church is for ongoing revision to their Bible translations, in order to improve its trustworthiness and comprehensibility. But it is costly and difficult to revise a printed Bible, especially given that the missiological economics are opposed to it—it can often be difficult to find outside funding for improving an existing translation in a world where donors are understandably motivated to fund “first Scriptures” for those who have never had any in their language.

**Unused translations** (*Available, but not desired*) – Some languages that are listed as having a completed translation of the Bible (or portions thereof) are found, upon observation, to not be using it as expected.<sup>12</sup> This may be for any number of reasons: the translation might not be in the needed dialect, or it is in need of revision, or it was never appropriately connected to the life of the church in production, or there was too long of a delay between production and Scripture engagement, or simply because the church is unaware of its existence. The net result is a growing list of Bible translations that are listed as “finished” but are not used as expected (and sometimes no longer used at all) by the church for whom they were intended.

**Unavailable translations** (*Needed, but not found*) – Thousands of languages now have at least some portion of Scripture translated, but there are nonetheless gaps between the need of the church and the availability of the translated Scriptures. Sometimes this is because a translation that was published is now out of print even though the church desires it. It may also be due to lack of funding for another print run. At other times it may be due to clerical anomalies where the records list a Bible translation as “finished” but no one can locate a copy.

**Expensive translations** (*Needed more affordably*) – In some scenarios, the economic factors affecting a Bible society make it difficult to provide printed Bibles at affordable prices without undermining the financial viability of the Bible society that publishes them. In these cases, the demand of the church for the Bible translation is high, and the available supply may also be sufficient to meet the need, but the economic model may be a limiting factor.

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<sup>11</sup> Berkun argues, “...all innovations have good and bad effects regardless of the intention of the innovator. If we accept this, and concede that perspective is everything when it comes to goodness, we can reframe our judgment of innovations” (*The Myths of Innovation*, 143-144).

<sup>12</sup> For examples from Papua New Guinea, see: SIL Papua New Guinea. “Scripture Use Research and Ministry.” Unpublished Report, April 2017.

**Insufficient translations** (*More translations needed in more languages*) – In spite of all the progress made in Bible translation in recent years, many communities are still waiting for the first translations of the Bible in their languages. In addition, many language communities that have only portions of translated Scripture have had their appetites whetted and urgently desire the rest of God’s Word in their language. The church in many people groups affirms that the scope of their Bible translation need includes not merely one Bible translation in a single dialect, but translations in every language variant spoken by the church (and sometimes more than one complete version of the Bible in a given variant, perhaps in different registers of the language). In the aggregate, reports from church networks around the world suggest an actual Bible translation need that greatly surpasses the combined capacity of Bible translation organizations and Bible societies to meet.

**Restricted translations** (*Needed with greater freedom*) – The church often desires greater legal freedom to redistribute and use translations of the Bible in their languages in ways beneficial to their ministry. Even when those who by law are the legal owners intend to be generous, managing custom copyright licenses for an ever-increasing number of Bible translations and people desiring to use them becomes more cumbersome and costly over time. In spite of good intent to the contrary, the legal friction in this system results in a default answer of “no” to many of the needs experienced by the church (whether or not the copyright owners are even aware of these needs).

## New Opportunities

The world today is significantly different from the world in which the Bible societies and Bible translation organizations came into existence. Back then, the existence of truly monolingual societies was much more prevalent, and the expansion of the gospel into the people groups of the world was not as widespread. Thus, in that era, if a people group spoke a minority language, one could generally assume that they were unlikely to have an established church or a Bible translated into their language. Furthermore, if they did not have a printed Bible in their own language, one could generally assume that they had no access to Scripture at all, such as through other languages or media.<sup>13</sup> It follows, then, that if they were going to engage in Scripture for evangelism and discipleship, someone else (e.g., a Bible society or Bible translation organization) would need to produce and publish a printed Bible translated into their language for them.

After the Second World War (1939-1945), many things began to change rapidly. The post-war economic system began to accelerate patterns of urbanization and globalization. This resulted in a significant increase in ease of travel and increased patterns of multilingualism. As more jobs became available in the cities, more people who had lived in rural areas and spoke only local language(s) moved to the cities for work and learned the languages necessary for employment.<sup>14</sup> With the rise of global commerce, the means of producing and expanding educational opportunities also increased, contributing to generally increasing education levels as well as multilingualism.

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<sup>13</sup> Technology for sharing and consuming Scripture in this era was typically limited to production of physical media (composed of “atoms”), namely printed books (and later, recorded cassette tapes). Radio broadcasts were also used (and are still), but given the cost, these were typically limited to major languages in a region. Even where minority languages could be included, their ephemeral nature rendered them suboptimal for deep and persistent engagement with Scripture.

<sup>14</sup> According to Johnstone, “In 1800, only 3% of humankind lived in cities. It is estimated that in 2100 the figure will be nearly 90%... The 21st Century will be the first urban century in history” (*The Future of the Global Church*, 2011). The rise of multilingualism and the role of globalization and technology in shaping the global sociolinguistic context is described in *The Handbook of Language and Globalization* (Coupland, 2011).

A second significant change was the rise of the digital era in the late 20th century. As digital technology developed, the Internet was invented. Around the dawn of the 3rd millennium, the world became connected via fiber optic cables that enabled data transfer at quantities and speeds never before imagined. Shortly afterward, mobile technology began to spread rapidly until, in a very short amount of time, the world went from largely isolated, generally monolingual people groups to increasingly multilingual people groups using mobile phones that enable them to connect with virtually anyone, anywhere, at any time.

The implications of this for Bible translation and Scripture engagement cannot be overstated: in the past, the only practical means of distributing Scripture was using “atoms” in the form of printed books (perhaps augmented by radio broadcasts). This was a process constrained by scarcity—production and publishing were costly (and risky)—and that scarcity was typically managed on behalf of the global church by Bible societies and other publishers. Today, in the digital era of “bits,” more Scripture can be produced more rapidly and shared in more media formats on more digital devices, nearly instantaneously and effectively for free. While this in no way nullifies the need for printed Bibles (more on this below), it nonetheless fundamentally changes the global system of Bible translation and Scripture engagement.

A third significant change is the accelerating advance of the gospel into more people groups and places than ever before.<sup>15</sup> Through Bible societies, missionary efforts, established churches, movements of disciples in hostile regions of the world, and many other means, Jesus continues to expand His kingdom and bring more people into His family from the farthest reaches of the globe.

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<sup>15</sup> At the Lausanne Congress in 1974, the missiological priority of “people groups” (ta ethne) began to come into focus. Before then, missiological emphasis tended to focus on evangelizing nations (ie., countries), which was shaped by the Christendom mindset of “Christian nations” as distinct from “heathen nations.” As depicted in William Carey’s *Enquiry* (1792), the missiological worldview in the 18th century reflected a neat dichotomy between nations in the Christian world and nations in the heathen world: “God has promised the most glorious things to the heathen world ... We can neither expect to be transported into the heathen world without ordinary means ... none shall be converted in the heathen world till the universal down-pouring of the Spirit... (*Enquiry*, § I.)” This same missiological dichotomy is evident in the early 20th century: “...God has not left Himself without witnesses, even in lands that we are accustomed to think of as heathen lands. ... In view of the great extent of the heathen world, and the degree to which it is opened ... considering the vast extent of the yet unevangelized world of heathenism ... an efficient pre-occupancy of any particular portion of the heathen field by any evangelic church or society should be respected by others ... the multiplication of suitable agents for the heathen missionary field. (*Report of the Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions, Held in Carnegie Hall and Neighboring Churches*, April 21 to May 1 .. Vol. 1. 2 vols. New York : American Tract Society, 1900. Ch. 1 Origin of the Conference, 14, 20. Emphasis added.)

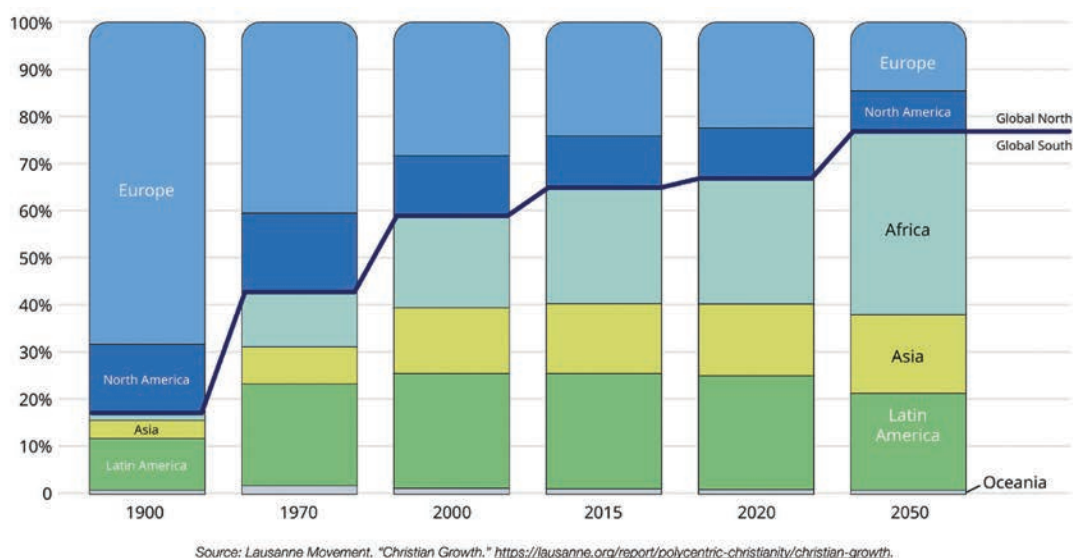


Diagram 3: Growth of the Global Church

Finally, as noted above, the increase in Bible translation has been both a contributing factor in the expansion of the church as well as the result of the expansion—as more people in more languages gain access to the first Scriptures in their language, it tends to catalyze an even greater hunger for Scripture in more languages than ever before. For the first time, perhaps, the rise of Bible-translating church networks is giving the rest of the global church early visibility into the actual scope of the Bible translation need, including not just more languages, but more versions of Scripture in more language variants than have ever been in view before.<sup>16</sup>

Organizations that are created to manage the scarcity of a process (like Bible publishers) will find that their business model may need to change significantly when global trends in technology, economics, education, multilingualism, missiology, and the rise of the global church all converge to fundamentally transform the scope of the need and the means of meeting it. This is especially true for those focused on Bible translation and distribution, but this in no way undermines the need for Bible societies and Bible translation organizations. It suggests the opportunity to reimagine how these organizations can achieve the unchanged purpose for which they exist in the first place. We close this section with Gonzalez's observation in light of the rise of the global church:

... to send the same kind of missionaries we did a hundred years ago, to do the same task, implies that the task was not done, when all facts indicate the opposite. The missionary movement did succeed. It is precisely because it succeeded and strong churches now exist in practically every country to which missionaries went, that new forms of mission must be found.<sup>17</sup>

## Catalyzing Scripture Engagement Globally

We noted above two inflection points regarding the church's provision of the Bible for all people: the formation of the Bible societies in the early 1800s and the formation of Bible translation organizations in the early 1900s. We are now, in the early 2000s, in the midst of what may one day be recognized as a third major inflection point in the history of the church, with regard to maximizing

<sup>16</sup> The expansion of the scope of Bible translation when undertaken by the church is considered in Jore, "Duplication of Effort?"

<sup>17</sup> Gonzales, Justo L. *Christian Thought Revisited*, 2013, ch. 9.

access to the translated Scriptures: the translation of the Bible by churches into their own languages as part of their discipleship ministry. The rise of the Bible-translating global church is already greatly expanding the scope of Bible translation. This raises an important question:

**What happens when Bible Societies and Bible Translation Organizations equip the church to meet its own Bible translation and distribution needs?**

## Increasing Scripture Engagement

All over the world, the desire for God’s Word is increasing. Despite opposition and scorn from some who are opposed, anecdotes from around the world suggest that the desire for increased engagement with Scripture is surging even to levels of desperation in some places. Seekers of Jesus steeped in other religious traditions are longing to understand the message to them from the King of kings and Lord of lords. Christians from traditions that span generations earnestly desire the current and next generations to engage with the life-transforming Scriptures in printed books and on their mobile phones. Movements of disciples in unreached people groups face hindrances to the expansion of the gospel due to the need for more translations of the Scripture into more languages. All over the world, the desire for meaningful engagement with Scripture is on the rise.<sup>18</sup>

In light of this, we confidently affirm that the same need driving the purpose of forming the first Bible societies in the early 19th century is still true today and will be into the future—maximizing the availability of and access to the translated Scriptures in every language. The need for organizations like Bible societies and Bible translation organizations is greater in the digital era than in the print era, and their purpose of maximizing access to God’s life-transforming Word is effectively unchanged. However, the former need of the global church for Bible societies to manage the scarcity of print-only distribution is waning, and in its place is rising a corresponding need: Scripture Engagement.

The global church needs Bible societies and other organizations that can not only maximize access to more Bible translations in more language variants than ever before, but also equip the church to understand and respond to the Scriptures. This includes providing Scripture in many more languages in multimedia formats and available on any technology. Ultimately, however, it is essential for readers of Scripture to be equipped to engage Scripture faithfully. These organizations have an opportunity to help meet the church’s need for resources that lead to sound understanding and application.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> These assertions are supported by the recent findings of The British and Foreign Bible Society in “The Patmos World Bible Attitudes Survey” which makes the following key global findings: “Finding 2: ... In every cluster, there is at least one population segment that is committed and engaged with the Bible. ... Finding 3: ... Across all clusters, the majority of Christians are interested in learning more about the Bible. ... Finding 4: ... In all clusters, respondents agree that it is good for children to know at least some stories from the Bible, even if they are not interested in learning more about the Bible themselves. ... Finding 5: ... The survey has found 11% of respondents from multiple religious traditions — and those with no religious tradition — are open to learning more about the Christian Bible. This represents over 250 million people” (2025, 3).

<sup>19</sup> The need for basic explanatory resources and study resources is already a recognized need, and the UBS continue to provide resources oriented especially to translators (e.g., MARBLE). It is also important to note that this fits neatly into the “Bible lifecycle” of the UBS, which emphasizes not only Bible Availability (Translation and Production), but also Bible Accessibility (Distribution and Engagement) and Bible Credibility (Advocacy and Ministry).

## Resulting in Transformation and Translation

The reason for the existence of Bible societies and translation organizations that increase the availability of and access to Scripture is that engagement with Scripture tends to result in the transformation of lives, societies, and even entire cultures.<sup>20</sup> Scripture enjoins us to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Ro 12:2) through engagement with Scripture. It is through the “living and enduring word of God” that we are born again (1Pe 1:23). Salvation is the result of repentance and “humbly accept(ing) the word planted in you” (Ja 1:21). So it follows that we should “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” (Co 3:16).

Less commonly known is how Scripture engagement results in increased translation of the Scriptures. One of the most remarkable aspects of the growth in the number of churches around the world that are beginning to meet their own Bible translation needs is that it is Scripture engagement that is driving the need for more Scripture. The interaction with early Bible translations—often only made available in limited scope (selections, the New Testament, etc.) and in limited languages—has catalyzed a greater hunger for Bible translation than was previously realized. Scripture engagement increases the need for Bible translation and creates the context where the church can grow in its capacity for understanding and gain experience in Bible translation.

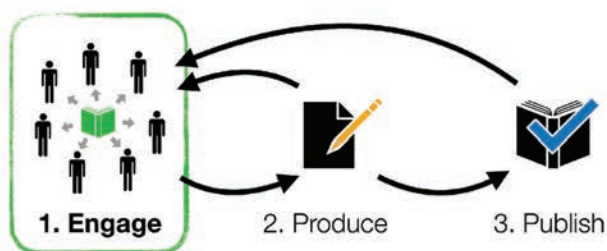


Diagram 4: Bible Translation as a Result of Scripture Engagement

Seeing how increasing Scripture engagement generally results in increased transformation and Bible translation, it suggests that a focus on engagement could be catalytic toward achieving the ends of Bible Societies and Bible translation organizations. What might happen if these organizations were to emphasize building up the global church’s capacity for understanding Scripture and translating it faithfully into their own languages?

## Some Desirable Consequences

When the church is equipped and strengthened to meet its own Bible translation and distribution needs, desirable outcomes like the following typically occur.

**Always current translations** (*Available with improved quality in current forms of the language*) – By equipping the church to meet their own Bible translation needs, the church is able not only to decide when a revision is needed, but also to undertake the revision directly to improve their translations of Scripture. This is especially true when the church does not rely on external funding sources to provide for the translation work.

**Actively used translations** (*Alignment of supply with demand*) – Meeting urgent Bible translation needs is the driving force behind Bible translation by the church. When the church is equipped to meet its own Bible translation needs, it tends to result in near-perfect alignment of translation need

<sup>20</sup> In “Bible Engagement as the Key to Spiritual Growth,” Cole and Owigwo show how consistent engagement with Scripture is the most powerful predictor of spiritual growth.

with translation availability. Because Scripture engagement happens first and is the impetus for translation into needed languages, there is an intrinsic determination of need that results in virtually no gap between the availability of a Bible translation and the desire for it.

**Available translations** (*Alignment of data and reality*) – Equipping the church for translation of Scripture in the context of the life and ministry of the church, greatly minimizes the potential for misalignment of data pertaining to translation production and availability. Instead of translations that are reportedly finished but can't be located, the opposite is not uncommon: More translations are created in more languages and variants than were previously recognized as needing translated Scripture.

**Affordable translations** (*Available at the lowest possible cost, including free*) – A common factor motivating the church to meet her own Bible translation needs is the desire for more affordable printed Bible translations, and for free access to digital Bible translations in text, audio, and (increasingly) digital formats. A growing number of Bible societies and Bible translation organizations are acknowledging this need and making the Bible available in digital formats free of charge and with the freedom to share with others: “freely you have received, freely give.”

**Abundant translations** (*Available in any quantity*) – When the church is able to publish (and republish) Bible translations in response to their own identified need, the lag between need and availability of Bibles to meet the need drops considerably. The net result is that Bible translations are abundantly available in both digital and print formats, sufficient to keep up with any increased demand.

**Accessible translations** (*Freely available*) – A characteristic aspect of Bible translation by the church is a willingness to remove every legal restriction that hinders widespread sharing of the Scriptures to anyone, using any technology. In addition to the freedom to redistribute, some church networks are releasing translations under open licenses (e.g., Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike) to perpetuate the freedom to revise the translation in the future, to extend it from portions to the entire canon, to adapt it into new language variants, and so on. This approach to Bible translation has been underway for several years, and the early evidence of its impact is encouraging.<sup>21</sup>

## A Consideration: Increasing Access to Trustworthy Resources

On this point, we recognize the importance of Intellectual Property Rights, a topic that requires grace and balance. These rights are not inherently good or bad. However, it may be helpful to take a fresh look at them in light of Scripture and the needs of the church in the digital era. A full treatise is outside the scope of this paper, but let us consider two pertinent points.<sup>22</sup>

First, legal systems have affected the spread of God's Word since at least the beginning of the church's mission. The Apostle Paul, bound by the legal system of his day in an attempt to restrict his gospel ministry, rejoiced that “the word of God is not bound” (2Ti 2:9). To what extent can the global church joyfully agree with the Apostle Paul that, in our day, the word of God is not restricted by the legal systems of our day in ways that hinder the church's gospel ministry? What if Christians became known as the most generous sharers of content in the entire world of content creation?

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<sup>21</sup> Champeon documents several examples in “Dichotomies in Bible Translation.”

<sup>22</sup> For a more in-depth consideration of Intellectual Property Rights in light of biblical missiology, see: Jore, “Letting Go.” [https://ufw.io/letting-go\\_](https://ufw.io/letting-go_)

Second, owning the copyright to a Bible translation does not stop bad actors from doing bad things with the content. Furthermore, enforcement of copyright restrictions requires filing lawsuits (ostensibly, for the protection of God's Word) in secular courts. However, this creates a fear-based culture that is antithetical to the foundational principles of the gospel. The net result is too often a church that is hindered from doing good things with God's Word and bad actors who continue to break the law, regardless of copyright restrictions to the contrary.

We believe Bible societies can continue to honor their obligation to the church of ensuring that they are providing trustworthy Bible translations for the church's theological well-being. We propose they can do so while also removing barriers to access. To that end, consider the following.

Jesus told a story about the kingdom of heaven, likening it to a man who sowed good grain in his field, but his enemy sowed weeds in it (cf. Mt 13:24–30). The weeds to which He referred were likely dandelion, which looks similar to wheat but is toxic if consumed. By way of analogy, let us consider trustworthy Bible translations and other biblical resources as the good seed that is sown, and the proliferation of theologically untrustworthy resources to be the weeds that are sown by the enemy.

It is impossible to prevent the creation of content that purports to be biblical, but that is actually theologically detrimental. This has always been true, and is especially so now in the digital era, when "biblical content" of dubious theological reliability can be instantly created, changed, and distributed by anyone with a mobile phone. Consequently, the ability to leverage copyright restrictions in order to prevent bad things from happening to good content has diminished drastically. Furthermore, it seems unlikely to increase, especially now that we are well into the era of Generative Artificial Intelligence. But when content is ubiquitous, the need for identification of the "wheat" in a field overrun by weeds becomes increasingly urgent. This presents a new and critically important opportunity.

Bible societies the world over are respected and appreciated as trustworthy, serving the church across many traditions, and holding a high view of Scripture. The massive increase of theologically ambiguous content in the digital era creates a greater need than ever before for Bible societies to return to a different aspect of Intellectual Property Rights for the glory of God and the good of His people: trademarks. Whereas copyrights restrict access to urgently needed biblical resources, trademarks and imprints provide clarity as to which of the many resources available are actually trustworthy and beneficial to God's people. It is important to note that widespread use of copyright restrictions on Bible translations was a later development that did not become common practice until the early 20th century. Reflecting on the first century of the American Bible Society, Dwight observes that the safety of the text was tied to the imprint (identifier) of the Bible society, with no mention of restricting access through copyrights:

An interdenominational Society only can properly secure the text against alteration; it being a body trusted by all denominations, it watches over the inviolability of the text. A copy bearing the imprint of such a Society is of guaranteed authenticity. ... Only after Bible Societies became established could one feel that an authoritative control guaranteed the new editions as they came from the press.<sup>23</sup>

What we suggest is an emphasis on identifying trustworthy Bible translations and biblical resources on behalf of the global church, rather than relying on protection methods that inadvertently restrict usage. This approach makes it possible to maximize the availability of reliable Bible translations that are beneficial to the global church.

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<sup>23</sup> Dwight, *Centennial History*, 133-134.

## A Hopeful Future

Of the many factors contributing to the potential for Bible societies and Bible translation organizations to fulfill their enduring purpose in new ways, we will focus on two: the rise of technology and the increase in Bible translation by the global church.

### Rise of Advanced Technology

An obvious result of the continued growth of worldwide mobile technology and internet connectivity is the ease with which digital multimedia resources can be shared. Many Bible societies are leveraging this opportunity to provide Scripture and other biblical resources in text, audio, and video formats in order to maximize engagement with Scripture using the devices that people carry with them every day. These new technologies also provide creative means of providing access to the Scriptures for those who live in environments that are hostile to followers of Jesus.

Some advanced technologies like Generative Artificial Intelligence are providing fresh hope of solving age-old challenges pertaining to Scripture engagement and Bible translation. For example, some Bible translation organizations are exploring the use of these advanced technologies to strengthen the church's ability to study Scripture and learn how to translate the Bible effectively. Early results indicate that what used to require considerable technical ability, financial resources, English language fluency, and time is becoming ever more accessible, affordable, and usable for everyone—in languages that communicate meaningfully to them.

It would be understandable to conclude that the increasing global demand for Scriptures in digital and multimedia formats might result in a decrease in demand for the Scriptures as a printed book. But observation across many regions suggests the opposite tends to be true. As access to Scripture on mobile devices increases, there is typically a commensurate increase in desire for the printed Scriptures. New technologies (including print-on-demand) are improving the ability to produce more printed Bible translations in more languages, at lower costs.

As mentioned above, one of the greatest needs of the global church going forward is the identification of trustworthy Bible translations and biblical resources. Advanced technologies are providing new opportunities for Bible societies to meet this need at scale, in ways that were never before possible. This suggests an opportunity for Bible societies and other publishers to provide abundant access to legally unencumbered digital versions of Scripture that contain clear identifiers of the Bible society that is making them available.<sup>24</sup> In this way, Bible societies can take full advantage of every new digital technology to maximize the availability of biblical resources, ensuring that only those that they deem trustworthy carry the identifying mark of their affirmation.

### Rise of the Global Bible-Translating Church

As the global church continues to take responsibility for meeting its own Bible translation needs, Bible societies and translation organizations are discovering new opportunities to catalyze and expand Bible translation at a scale that was not possible before. In this context, two desires of the church are readily apparent. First, the church urgently desires free and unhindered access to God's Word in every language in digital formats. Second, the church wants strong Bible societies to

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<sup>24</sup> Modern technologies such as blockchains make possible widespread availability of cryptographically secure information pertaining to the identity and provenance of trustworthy resources. These could provide powerful tools to accomplish the objective of identifying trustworthy biblical resources.

continue their ministry to the church in the days ahead. The church does not want to supplant the Bible societies, but to work with them in ways that are beneficial and supportive.

This will require churches and Bible societies to work together to negotiate the means by which the Bible societies can honor both of these requests. There are many (largely unexplored) opportunities for Bible societies to enjoy financial sustainability in service to the church in the digital era. We suggest that, to the extent that Bible societies continue to fulfill their purpose of service to the church, these opportunities in each region and country can be discovered and leveraged for the glory of God and the good of His people.

When the church in a given region takes up the responsibility of meeting its own Bible translation needs, much of the scarcity that is typical of historical expressions of Bible translation is replaced by abundance. For example, instead of only very few people involved in the work, there may be dozens or even hundreds. Instead of a narrow focus on only one dialect of a selected language, the church often undertakes translations in multiple dialects of many languages in parallel. The scope of translation is not constrained to limited selections of Scripture but is often expanded to the entire Bible for everyone in whatever language variant they speak. In light of the new opportunities the Holy Spirit is bringing about at the dawn of the 3rd Millennium, the future can—and we argue should—have a scope of vision never before possible: the Bible in every dialect, every people group, on every technology, in every format, accessible to everyone. Could the Bible societies and Bible translation organizations in the near future be instrumental in bringing about the complete saturation of the earth with the living and active Word of God in the heart language of every person?

To that end, we invite Bible societies and Bible translation organizations to consider meeting three needs that will help achieve this vision.

1. How might we make every Bible translation available for free in digital formats, with the legal freedom for anyone to join in sharing and redistributing it? This is especially important for languages where only one Bible translation is available.
2. How might we provide widespread access to the biblical resources that illuminate comprehension and catalyze faithful interpretation of the Scriptures? In what strategic languages does the church need these resources, and how could they be made freely available in digital formats?
3. How might we equip the church to meet its own Bible translation needs? What new opportunities are there for achieving the enduring purpose of Bible societies and Bible translation organizations by emphasizing a primary function of coaching and encouraging the church to achieve the desired outcome of trustworthy translations?

Bible Societies and Bible translation organizations face several pressing challenges as they seek to serve the church more effectively across its diverse expressions and stages of maturity, and they need the church's collaboration to solve these challenges. One is the need to reposition their role in ways that maximize their ability to meet the current and emerging needs of the global church. Another is to curate and steward the abundance of biblical content wisely, while avoiding models that inadvertently reinforce scarcity. A third is the urgent task of developing sustainable financial models that support their long-term ministry impact. Ultimately, the innovative approaches discovered and developed to address these challenges will themselves have unintended consequences that will also need to be addressed collaboratively in the days ahead.

## Conclusion

We have shown in this paper that Bible societies and translation organizations were formed by the church many years ago to steward the Bible on behalf of the church. These organizations generally succeeded in their objective of increasing access to Scripture for more people in more languages. At the same time, the church has advanced into more people groups and places than ever before, increasing the demand for Bible translation in more languages. As the church continues to meet its own Bible translation needs, they are addressing the unintended consequences of the “stewarding the Bible for the church” model. This has not diminished the need for Bible societies and translation organizations, but the nature of how they serve the global church’s Bible needs.

We have suggested that the most important and catalytic emphasis that these organizations could have in this new era is equipping the church for increased engagement with Scripture. As more people understand the Scriptures and learn to obey everything Jesus has taught us, the transformation of lives and societies increases. This, in turn, increases the church’s need for more Scripture in more languages, which results in more translation of Scripture than could ever have been possible before.

This requires new explorations of opportunities and ministry models, some of which are already being pioneered by some Bible societies and translation organizations. We invite a global participation in discovering how God will be glorified by massively increasing access to his living and active Word which will not return to Him void. We are convinced that God intends to use those vessels instituted for this purpose in order to accomplish it in new and even more effective ways than ever before.

In closing, we want to draw attention to the encouragement given by the Very Rev. Dr. Kenneth C. McMillan, who after many years in the service of the Canadian Bible Society and the United Bible Societies, looked forward to the future with confidence and encouraged the Bible societies to do the same. In the final pages of *Taking the Word to the World*, in the chapter entitled “Looking Toward the Third Millennium” he said:

There is every reason to believe that the greatest days of the Bible Society movement are in the future, not the past. Rapidly changing world events which made traditional work difficult can be new opportunities for the Bible Society. ... Even in the post-Gutenberg age the printed page will communicate in a unique and distinctive way, but the Bible Societies will be involved also and increasingly in electronic publishing. ... The greatest challenge the Bible Society movement faces is meeting the modern world with the same vision and faith the founders met their world.

We hope that this paper is found to be constructive to the end of discovering together that the greatest days of the Bible societies and Bible translation organizations in service to the global church are, in fact, still ahead.

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