

# Dr. George Payton, Bible Translation, Session 1, Introduction to Bible Translation, Part 1

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This is Dr. George Payton in his series on Bible Translation. This is session number one, Introduction to the Bible Translation, Part 1.

Hi, my name is George Payton. I am an instructor here at Dallas International University. My wife and I have been working with Wycliffe Bible Translators for over 40 years. Let me just tell you a bit about how I got into Bible Translation.

I was a student at Biola University and I was thinking, Lord, what do I do with my life? What do I do with the gifts that you've given me? I had an interest in missions, I had an interest in being in full-time ministry, and I thought, what can I do to serve you with the gifts that you gave me? I then changed my major to Cross-Cultural Ministries, and I found that I really belonged in that sphere because that coordinated both working overseas, working cross-culturally, but also in ministry. And then I thought, okay, what about Cross-Cultural Ministries suits me the best? Through a number of ways, God led me to Bible Translation. I was passionate about Bible Translation, and I really looked forward to being a Bible Translator once I finished my degree at Biola.

Along the way, I met this cute girl named Wendy, and she said, what are you majoring in? What is your work that you're doing over there? And I said I'm preparing to be a Bible Translator. And she said, me too. I said, sorry, what? Come again? Not too many girls come out with that.

And so, she just told me how God had led her through her family, growing up in a family that supported missions and missionaries. She met a number of Wycliffe missionaries as she was a child. When she was ten years old, she told her mom, I want to be a Bible Translator like those people.

Fast forward 10 years, we meet at Biola, and God brought us together with that common desire to serve in ministry, that common desire to serve overseas, and that common desire to be in Bible Translation. And that's where we got started. We then went overseas and worked in Kenya for a number of years in one of the local languages, doing Bible Translation in that language.

From there, we didn't complete that project because we moved into consulting, and I became a translation consultant for other people doing Bible translation. Then, we transferred to Tanzania to do more translation consulting. At that time, I turned over the work of that project to a colleague of mine.

And so, we've been involved in Bible Translation for all these years. Part of that work that I did as a consultant was in training other people. So, we would run training workshops for the Kenyans and the Tanzanians.

We would run training workshops for SAL colleagues. I was also involved in training workshops for translation consultants. And so we came home in 2010, and God redirected us to stay home in 2010.

Then I started teaching at the Work Cliff Training Program at Biola University in 2010. And so, I was teaching linguistics. I was teaching Bible Translation, preparing the next generation of Bible translators to go out and do the same work that we had done for all those years.

I taught there for about 10 years. Right about the time COVID hit, that program was coming to a close, and so I transferred to Dallas International University here in Dallas, Texas.

And this is our main linguistic center. Our main training center is for Wycliffe, for the SIL, Summer Institute of Linguistics, and for other organizations as well. They send their people here to be trained in Bible Translation.

And so, I've been here since 2020. I teach Bible Translation courses here. Along the way, I got a Doctor of Ministry degree at Gordon Conwell Seminary in Bible Translation.

Later, I got a PhD in Ancient Languages at Stellenbosch University. All of those were professional development degrees, so I could improve my translation, teaching, and consulting skills. So, I have that background.

And so, what you're hearing in this series is the outgrowth of all those things that we've experienced all these years. The next thing I'd like to mention is just what is this program all about. And so this series that we're doing is all about Bible Translation.

It is translation, but specifically Bible Translation. And so, the first talk that we're going to have is What is Bible Translation? What is translation to begin with? And just the basics of the process of translation. Second of all, we're going to be talking about language.

We're going to be talking about communication and meaning and how do you communicate the meaning in a language from one language to another language. And that's the process of translation. Another thing, that translation is communication.

Translation is a subset of human communication. It's a special type of human communication. And so, we're going to be talking about translation as communication.

But we do that from a foundation of understanding how people communicate. We do that from an understanding of the process of trying to communicate in one language a text that came from a different language. We'll talk a little bit about translation history, Bible translation history, approaches to translation, and some theories thrown in there.

We're going to be talking about transfer challenges. Why is it difficult to translate a given text from one language to another? Some of those challenges are language challenges where you just have to say that our language can't say it like that. There are a number of challenges that come from the biblical text that are difficult to translate into other languages.

And we'll get into those. Second of all, there are cultural differences. And those cultural differences make it hard to have your text in this second language make sense because they don't have the cultural background, the cultural understanding, the cultural worldview of the original text with these people who live in 2024 somewhere in the world and were removed over 2,000 years from the biblical culture, the biblical times, and those languages.

And so those two areas, language challenges, and culture challenges, are what we're going to be focusing on. Then we're going to get into how to overcome those challenges. Okay, so first of all, I'd like to talk about what is translation and what does it look like? You can't pick up anything that's produced today, even a can of soup, even a container of oil, or a printout of the instructions for the electronic device that you picked up without seeing it in how many languages.

Translation is everywhere, and it is much more widespread than it was when I started in translation back in the 1980s. We didn't have this.

We didn't have a soup can with five different languages written on it or whatever. But now it's everywhere. It's a way of bridging between one culture and another, but it's a way of spreading out and increasing one's financial influence.

But also, I even went to Walmart and there was a monitor on Walmart giving instructions to people about how to deal with the pharmacy. So, it was a screen that was just next to the pharmacy. Now I noticed that it was scrolling through two, three, four different languages, and then it would start at the top again.

It would scroll down. So, everywhere we go, everything is written now in multiple languages. And so that's what translation is.

How do we then communicate? So, I want to ask you, think for yourself, how would you define translation? What is translation? Let me say, just a minute about what translation is. Let me use this illustration. Translation: basically, we're talking about written translation.

Written translation is writing a text in a second language that came from a first language. Interpreting is another type of translation, so verbal interpretation.

So you have a person from language A and a person from language B, and the person in the middle, here's what the first person said and says it to the second person over there. That's verbal translation if you will. That's interpreting.

So what is the difference between a translation that's written and a translation that is not this interpreting? And I'm not talking about interpretation for understanding. I'm talking about communicating the message across. So, obviously, in both of them, you're transferring the meaning from the first language to the second language.

Another thing is both of them are trying to communicate the meaning of the message from the first text over into the second language. Whether that is a spoken utterance or whether that is a written piece of text, we're trying to get the meaning across to the other side. I've actually done verbal translation.

I've done interpreting. I've worked as a translator or an interpreter in Swahili here in America. And so I work with people, sometimes it's been a doctor's office, sometimes it's been a lawyer, sometimes it's been someone else, who has a client who speaks English but not well enough to really understand what they're talking about in the particular area that we're dealing with.

So I'm there, and I'm then the person who's the go-between between the doctor and the client. And so my goal is to then communicate what the doctor says to the Swahili-speaking person and vice versa. When I do that, I'm in the middle, and I speak in the same first person that the speaker does.

So, if the doctor says, I want you to go get an x-ray, I say in Swahili, I want you to go get an x-ray. And then the patient might say, where do I go? And then I say, where do I go? Notice I didn't say, where does he go? Or, can he tell me where I should go? No, I am that voice of being that in-between thing. That's what the written text is.

The written text is that voice who carries meaning and everything associated with it in the first text over to the second text. Now, there's some differences between them. Obviously, one is written, one is spoken.

Okay, we know that. But what else? So, the translation being written, and when we say it's written, it stays around for a while. You have a written text that's there.

But when you say something, just like this speech that I'm giving, this talk that I'm giving, if it wasn't recorded, as soon as I say it, it's gone. And you can't get it back. Having recordings is really, really helpful.

Now, I have done deputations on Zoom, where this one woman was a Swahili-speaking person. She got into a car accident here in Dallas. The lawyer for the opposition, the person that this lawyer was defending, was asking the Swahili-speaking woman questions.

And then her lawyer was also there. And so, I was then the go-between. And that was recorded.

And why was that recorded? Because that was then court evidence. So, it was pretty serious. So, I had to make sure that I got it right.

And part of the problem was, this woman was saying, well, this person hit me like this. And so, in Swahili, you would say, alipiga, he hit me. So, that ah in there can be for man, or it can be for a woman.

So, what do I say? I don't know, because she said, alipiga. I don't know if it's a man or a woman, so I guess. And I said, he hit me.

The lawyer for the defense, wait a second. Why are you saying he? It says here in my notes that it was a woman. Are you changing your story now? And I'm going, oh no, I've just made a mistake.

So, one of the things about translation is, you can go back and correct it later. What do I do when I make a mistake like that? Well, immediately I said, off the record, I need to tell you something. And I said the language is like this.

I assumed it was a man, but it wasn't. So, from now on, I'm going to say she. But Swahili is vague, and I didn't know.

So, that's one thing that I had to do. So, interpretation, unless it's recorded, it's gone. And once you say it, you can't go back and fix it.

So, I'm in a doctor's office. I can't go back unless the doctor says, hey, can you make that more clear? I'm not really sure he got what I'm trying to say. So, the fact that it's there, that spoken stays, means you can go back and edit it later and revise it.

You can also take your time. You can go back any number of times and correct it and fix it, just as long as you can, then make sure that it says everything that you want to say. You can give it to someone else.

They can read it for you. You can have a professional editor go through it for you. But you have that luxury in written translation, and you don't in oral interpreting.

And the other thing is when you're on the spot like that, you have to think right now. And in some ways, you have to think in two languages at the same time, which is hard. This is why I won't do core interpreting because it just goes too fast, and my brain can't work that fast, especially the older I get.

So, I still do oral interpreting some. I still do translation some, Swahili to English, English to Swahili written translation. And we'll get into that some more.

But that's what we mean by translation is the written aspect of translation. Okay. So, we want to talk about what is translation, but then specifically we're moving into what is Bible translation and how does that differ from normal translation.

Okay. When you talk about translation, we can say it is a product. Here is a translation of the Bible in X language.

So, you can talk about the thing itself is a translation. And we will talk about that in our process. Second of all, translation is a process.

The process of taking this written text in language A, in our case, the Bible, Old Testament would be either Hebrew or Aramaic, New Testament is Greek. So, taking it from those languages into a language today somewhere in the world. Usually, these languages are not the major languages like French and German and Spanish and whatever.

Usually, they're minority languages around the world or languages that have not had the Bible in them. There are cultures in Central Asia who are not Christian countries and Christian groups. They don't have a Christian presence, and they don't have a Bible, and they number in the millions.

So, you can't think, oh, a group without the Bible is probably a couple of hundred people or maybe a couple thousand. No, some of these languages are actually quite large. And so, we're going to be talking about this process of communicating the scriptures across those language barriers.

Here at Dallas International University, translation is a subject. So, we have students who say I'm in translation studies. I'm in linguistics.

I'm in anthropology. And so, it's a field of study. Is translation a science? So, you're talking to someone who's been trained in linguistics.

Linguistics is very scientific. It's left-brained. It's analytical.

It's looking at language from the perspective of trying to break down all the little parts of it, trying to understand the ins and outs of a language, and then moving into translation. Why do we do that? Well, the language that I worked with in Kenya, didn't have an alphabet. My training was on how to hear sounds, how to write them down, how to figure out all those sounds, and how to make an alphabet.

So, I was trained in linguistics before we went overseas. Great. So, you have an alphabet.

What else do you need to know? You need to know about the grammar of the language. Even if there's already an alphabet, you still need to know the grammar of the language. You need to be able to understand how the sentences and phrases are put together.

Obviously, in Spanish, if you say Casablanca, Casablanca means house white. But we don't say house white in English. We say white house.

And so, you know, oh, in Spanish, they reverse the order of the adjective and the noun. Knowing how to break down the grammar of a language is part of our training here at Dallas International so that we can then go and work with languages that either don't have a grammar, don't have even a written language, and someone needs to produce that in order to then be able to produce a good translation. So, it's very analytical to a point.

So, some say, well, translation isn't a science. Translation is an art. So, who's right? Is translation a science, or is translation an art? And the answer is yes.

It's both an art and a science. Anytime you create any written document, there's an element of creativity there. Anytime, okay, you don't think about it when you're writing a text. You just write.

But when you're writing anything, it takes time to think about what you want to say, choose the words you want to use, and choose the way that you want to say it. And so, that act of speech is a creative act, something that we human beings are born with. It's innate in us.

That innate nature of language and communication is an act of creativity. And so, it's both a science, translation is also an art. And so, when we produce the scriptures in another language, we're relying on the creativity of the native speakers of that

language to then dovetail with what we know about the language itself, so that we can produce a text, a Bible, that is effective and communicates well.

Okay, and Bible translation? Bible translation is a ministry. And I tell my students, you're taking linguistics courses. Studying linguistics is part of your ministry. What do I mean by that? When they go to another culture like I did with my wife and our kids, and break down this language, that is the precursor to doing translation.

And that translation is the end goal, and that's a ministry. Now, these people didn't have a dictionary. They didn't have a grammar of the language.

They didn't even have an alphabet. So, providing that for them, even though some of them are non-Christians, is a ministry to the community. They now have a way to write down their language.

They now have a way to communicate through written forms to people in their culture. And so, that is a ministry to the culture on that side of linguistics, just on the secular side. But also, in Bible translation, we are there to serve the local church, to minister to them by providing the scriptures for them, so that they can then communicate God's Word in a language they understand so that the people can grow in Christ so that they can do evangelism, so they can do teaching from the scriptures.

So, what we do in Bible translation is a ministry to the church. In one sense, Bible translation is also a service. We're serving God.

We're ministering, and every act of service can be considered an act of worship. So, ministry, in Bible translation, is when we approach God; this is our service to God.

This is our way of worshiping God by doing this ministry. Keeping that ministry aspect in perspective was really important for me and my wife when things got tough where we were. We lived in a desert area in eastern Kenya.

We were actually working on an unreached people group. And even our colleagues said, why are you out there with this unreached people group? Do they even want the Bible that you're trying to produce? We were there for God. We were there for this ministry.

We were there to serve these people in ways that they would benefit from later. And we kept that vision for what God wanted us to do in the forefront of our thinking so that when times got difficult, that's what we fell back on, on the sovereignty of God that he had called us into that ministry. And so, that's very connected to not only who we are, not only the role as missionaries but also servants of the Lord and wanting to do what he called us to do.

So, in that regard, Bible translation is a spiritual endeavor. And I could sit here and tell you stories about how God entered into our translation process and we had just the right phrase at the right moment. We'll get to some of those later.

But this is a spiritual endeavor, and any spiritual endeavor needs spiritual resources. And the Lord is the source of those spiritual resources. Holy Spirit is there to help us in a number of different ways on the side of interpreting and understanding the scriptures, on the side of understanding the language that we're trying to translate into, and then also how to bridge that gap between the two languages.

So, it is a spiritual endeavor. So, I like to explain this spiritual endeavor in the ministry that God is doing by talking about what is the *missio Dei*? What is the mission of God? What is he doing in the world? And God has this vision of what he's doing in the world. And that vision started when he created Adam and Eve, and that vision continued when Adam and Eve and their children rebelled against him in the garden.

And he has been working ever since to restore that relationship. And so, his big vision is restoring this relationship between humanity and himself. But in some ways, we as human beings, it's really hard to conceptualize this grand vision that God has.

And so, God gives us a part of that vision that we can latch onto, and that we can connect with, and that we can then live out in our ministry. And so, our vision was getting the gospel, getting the Bible into this language in Kenya. That's how it started out.

And so, that was our vision within God's grand vision. So, we're always seeing this interplay between both. And what is his vision? His vision is to see people reconciled to himself, and that is God's mission.

So, God's vision then feeds into his mission. This is what he sees. This is what he desires.

He then puts feet to that by playing out and proclaiming his gospel to all nations. But again, this is a huge thing. God started working with people from Adam and Eve to Abraham, from the Israelites to the people today.

That is too big for us to conceptualize. But what is my mission? What is the work that God has called me to do, which is fueled by my vision? So, that work is our mission. So, each person they're a part of that mission of God that associates with them, and God calls them to do work that they are gifted at, work that he wants them to be involved with.

And so, we're involved with God's vision, and we're involved with God's mission. And the ultimate goal is the kingdom of God. We are there to be a part of expanding the kingdom of God around the world.

And again, this is a huge, magnanimous goal that God has of expanding the kingdom of God. But what can we do? We can help expand the kingdom of God where we are. We can help expand the kingdom of God among this people group in Kenya.

And now, we're here to train students to go out and then expand the kingdom of God, where God sends them to these different countries around the world. Ephesians 2:10 says, We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, to do the work that he prepared in advance that we should walk in them. What does that mean? That God created each one of us with special gifts and special abilities to be used in the kingdom of God, in kingdom work.

So, he prepared us this way even before we were born. We were born with these giftings. Mine happen to be in languages.

I just love languages. But he's prepared each one of us with giftings that we will then use those giftings in ministry to other people. And that's what he's called us to do.

And so, Bible translation is that mission, that vision, that kingdom work, that God has called us to do. God calls us as Bible translators, too, so that we can serve the church and so that people can know Christ and people can grow in their relationship to God. Thank you.

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