



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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SERMON – 5<sup>TH</sup> EPIPHANY

I CORINTHIANS 14:12-20 AND ISAIAH 6:1-13

FEBRUARY 6, 2022

“WHO WILL GO FOR US?”

I wish to talk today about world missions. It is entirely appropriate to do so since our lessons all concern themselves with the subject. True, Isaiah's call was to his nation Israel alone, Paul is speaking about something particular to the Corinthian church and quite mysterious – speaking in tongues, and in Luke the great catch of fish is as much a revelation of Jesus as Lord – who else after all could command such a thing - as it is the commissioning he alludes to when he says, *“do not be afraid, from now on you will catch men.”*

My remarks today coincide with and I hope will amplify world missions and our mission of the month – which is missions - Lutheran Bible Translators. It is one of our two related to the gift and task of world evangelization – NALC International Missions and the WMPL being the other, even as all our “MoM's speak the gospel one way or another. So, I begin with our lesson from Corinthians. Paul had spent several years in Corinth planting churches and discipling new believers. He left with high expectations the church would keep growing.

But sometime after Paul departed so-called “enthusiasts” appeared in the church. These were mostly men from the educated classes, slick rhetorically and above all, “filled with” the Spirit. They could “speak in tongues” – conveyed by a Greek term “glossilea” meaning “ecstatic” - excited speech, but by and large unintelligible speech. It was impressive, spellbinding, spiritually energizing for the speaker, but of little value to anyone else unless the speaker also gave an interpretation or someone else did.

This “speaking in tongues” is distinguished from the gift of the Spirit given at Pentecost. Then, as in Corinth, “spirit filled” apostles were given the “gift of tongues” – the Greek word for tongue “glossa” and language “glossais” (from which we get the word glossary) are quite similar. But Acts tells us hearers of the Apostles, people of other ethnicities who were in Jerusalem, heard the disciples speaking the wonders of God *“in their own language”* and the word used in that instance for language was “dialekto” - dialect. They heard the gospel in their own language, their heart language, their first language. And in hearing they became believers.

So, what's the point? In our lesson from Corinthians Paul invokes the real miracle of Pentecost – that in hearing the gospel people believe it. *“Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard is the preaching of Christ”* he famously said in Romans 10:17. The problem in Corinth was not this ecstatic speaking in tongues – Paul claimed he did too, but that the tongues were unintelligible. Thus, *“I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in tongues.”*

Today, there are about 7,400 languages in the world – and I use language as Acts used it – dialect, heart language, first language of a person. About 1500 of these languages have less than 1000 speakers of it... about 600 of them less than 100 speakers of it. The world as they say, is getting smaller. And the world is getting rapidly less diverse linguistically.

It is said a language or dialect dies every 14 days – about 26 per year. Linguists believe half of all world languages could disappear in this century. So why do Bible translation – why take the time, effort and expense when the world may one day speak only major languages? Nearly 2/3 of the world's people today speak, as a first or acquired language, one of the ten most common world languages – English being the largest. But when a language dies it's often because all the people who speak it have died – without Christ. That alone answers the “why” question.

But also, because Bible translation can be the gift of God that preserves a language – the business and academic world forces people, almost like a sieve, into increasingly fewer languages. But if a person has a bible in their own dialect – they have Jesus in the language God gave them. Bible translators increase literacy among the people they work with. That in turn increases a person's ability to read other languages they may need to go to school for example and enter a trade. But we support Bible translation yet for another reason – the unreached people reason – the *“I will make you fish for people...who will go for us, here I am send me”* reasons. Bible translations escorts evangelization.

In the world today, nearly 2 billion people are part of what is called “an unreached people group” – defined as less than one person in a thousand who is Christian. Many of these are groups without a bible in their dialect. Yet only 1% of world mission funding goes to evangelization of these groups – 60% goes to support missionaries in places where the church is established. Bible translation efforts enable the tools – scripture, catechisms, hymnbooks, that make reaching the unreached easier and discipling them possible – the net Jesus commanded his church to cast.

Good things are happening in world missions – India's Christian population is increasing dramatically, as it is in China and many predominantly Muslim countries. But the % of the world's population that is Christian is relatively flat – it was an estimated 34.5% in 1900 and estimated to be 35.4% in 2050. Not good. That of course means the absolute number of non-Christians in the world is skyrocketing – from an estimated 1 billion in 1900 to an estimated 6.3 billion in 2050. *“Who will go us...be not afraid...I will make you fishers of men.”*

It was President Calvin Coolidge who famously said, *“the chief business of America is business.”* It was Jesus Christ who said, *“go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.”* We might say, *“the chief mission of the church...is missions.”* Yet the actual commitment of churches financially to missions among people with fewer than 5% of its members who have been evangelized belies that statement. And overseas mission giving among American churches in total represents about 2% of total spending – congregations devote nearly 85% of their budgets to internal ministries.

I appeal to you today to support well our mission of the month – Lutheran Bible Translators and in a few months our NALC /WMPL partner. They take the Word where words themselves cannot go. They make intelligible the promises of Jesus. Yes, the task of the church is to prepare people for Christ's second coming. But surely that task presupposes we concern ourselves with the 2 billion people of this world who have never heard of his first. Pastor John Piper said, *“the gospel is not simply how to get people to heaven...the gospel is how people get to God.”* As we are given opportunity, may we make that gospel all the more hearable. There are people who will go for us...let's send them. AMEN