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# DISCERNMENT NEWSLETTER

“...how is it that ye do not discern this time?” Luke 12:56

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## “Son of God” Translation Controversy

By Dave James

For years there has been a discussion among missiologists and linguists concerning the proper translation of certain biblical passages into various languages in the Muslim world. Over the years, the discussion has turned into a debate and more recently into a full-blown controversy that has gained a lot of momentum over the last few weeks. The present controversy centers around specific decisions by Wycliffe Bible Translators, SIL International and Frontiers (an exclusively Muslim ministry) concerning the translation of the “Father-Son” (“divine familial”) language in a number of Bible versions created for the Muslim world. *Note: In the case of Frontiers, this issue was addressed in a 2007 article by Thomas Cosmades (a Turkish-born missionary and evangelist) where many other significant translation problems were noted.*

As part of the groundswell of opposition to these changes, Biblical Missiology initiated a petition campaign aimed at trying to persuade the above-mentioned organizations to reconsider publishing these translations. It appears that in response to the petition, as well as concerns within those organization, Wycliffe and SIL have temporarily suspended their plans to approve their publication.

### Wycliffe Bible Translators

In recent weeks, the debate over the translation of the divine familial terms (words translated into English as *Son of God, Son, and Father*) has grown. It is the policy of Wycliffe USA that the literal translation of divine familial terms be given preference. If the accuracy of the meaning would be lost when using a literal translation, Wycliffe USA, along with SIL, has sought to provide clear guidance for the translation teams. It is this allowance, in rare cases, that is the point of debate. While Wycliffe USA believes this approach has allowed for accurate and clear translation of the divine familial terms, the concerns that have been raised in recent weeks deserve prayerful consideration.

### SIL International

(6 February 2012) In light of a number of questions raised about our Best Practices Statement on the translation of Divine Familial Terms, we recognize it is important to have a fuller dialogue with our many partners globally and benefit from their input to our approach in Scripture translation related to this issue. Since questions about our commitment to these translation principles have been raised, we will proactively engage to understand the concerns, clarify misunderstandings, and where

indicated, adjust practice.

Therefore, SIL announces that as of today, February 6, 2012, in situations where we are involved and partnering with others in translation, and have the responsibility to do so, we will put on hold our approval of publication of translated Scripture around which this criticism is focused.

I have not found any indication that Frontiers USA has followed Wycliffe and SIL, and appear to be standing by the following statement:

When reached for comment, Frontier’s director Bob Blincoc defended the Turkish translation stating, “If it has the Turkish-Greek interlinear, it is faithful to the original Greek.” When pressed further how “protector” and “guardian” could be equivalent to “Father” and “proxy” and “representative” to the “Son” in the translation, he said, “It has the original Greek, it is true to the exact Gospel of Matthew.”

As part of the petition campaign, Biblical Missiology created an informative and well-written FAQ (published prior to the above statements by Wycliffe and SIL) that outlines the major issues and concerns surrounding this controversy. Below are extensive quotes from the article followed by my response to the matter of “culturally relevant/ sensitive translations” in general and “Son of God” specifically.

### Lost in Translation FAQs

“Years of private exhortations, meetings with agency leaders, internal dissent from agency staff including resignations over the issue, criticism and earnest appeals from national believers most affected by the translations, group discussions, conferences of proponents and critics, missiological articles, and church and denominational admonitions, have all failed to persuade these agencies to retain “Father” and “Son” in the text of all their translations.

“In the summer of 2011, a group of Insider Movement advocates and critics met to openly and respectfully discuss their differences. The issue of Muslim Idiom Translation was a major focus. At that conference, there were hopeful signs that progress had been made, including a commitment to faithfully translate familial terms. Then three things happened in the fall of 2011 to dispel those hopes. First, Wycliffe/SIL issued policy statements allowing the use of alternative terms. Second, Wycliffe/SIL leaders published an article that presented their rationale for these changes. Third, Wycliffe/SIL demonstrated their commitment to this translation practice by posting an online version of Frontiers’ translation of Matthew, which replaces “Father” with “guardian” and “Son” with “representative.”

“As reported in Christianity Today, [1] an SIL meeting in Istanbul resulted in a Best Practices statement that said translations “should promote understanding” of the term “Son of God.” It did not, however, include the more objective requirement that the term is translated faithfully and accurately

in the text of the Bible. Lest there be any doubt that alternative language is permissible, the same sentence added, “while avoiding *any possible implication* of sexual activity by God” (emphasis added).

“Wycliffe’s Translation Standards indicate that in Muslim contexts “where it has been demonstrated that a literal translation of ‘Son of God’ would communicate wrong meaning, an alternative form with equivalent meaning may be used.” Who decides what a “wrong meaning” of “Son of God” is? The reader? The translator? Why not translate the term accurately and faithfully, and offer explanation as needed? Further, the examples of an “alternative form with equivalent meaning” to “Son of God” deeply trouble us. For example, the controversial Turkish translation uses “representative of God” rather than “Son of God,” thus failing to convey Jesus’ deity and the familial relationship of a father to his son.

“For years, SIL Translation Consultant Rick Brown has been publishing articles promoting alternative terms for “Father” and “Son,” arguing, for example, that “Muslims have heard that Christians call Jesus the ‘offspring of God,’ and this has been presented to them repeatedly as exhibit A in the case against Christianity and its ‘corruption’ of the Bible. So there is a dire need to correct these misunderstandings and to invalidate the accusation in a timely manner. This can be done in communications of every sort, but *by all means it should be done in the Scriptures*” (emphasis added)

“In the Turkish text of Matthew, “Son” is rendered as “representative” or “proxy,” and “Father” is translated as “protector” or “guardian.” Turkish Christian leader Thomas Cosmades expressed in a [2007 letter](#) his deep concerns of the Frontiers translation, describing it as a “lamentable and hazardous wager.”<sup>[4]</sup> While the Frontiers translation had been produced years ago in hardcopy, it was SIL’s decision to post it online that confirmed their commitment to publishing Bible translations that remove “Father” and “Son” from the text.

“Wycliffe/SIL justify using alternative terms to Father and Son because they say Muslims cannot hear these terms in relationship to God without inferring that God had sex with Mary, a blasphemous notion in Islam—and Christianity as well. There are at least two problems with this justification: it is not true and it is not biblical. The justification is not true in that native speakers of Arabic, Turkish, Bangla, and other languages say their words for “Father” and “Son” do not have these sexual implications—and certainly not any more than other languages.

“Other Arabic speakers reject the notion that their commonly used terms are inadequate. As Jihan Husary says, “Arabic is my native language so I can affirm that there is no valid reason to change those terms in Arabic.”

“Regardless of whatever is actually said in the footnotes—which itself has been controversial—our focus is that in various ways, “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God” do not appear in the text of some translations.

“In late January 2012, SIL released a [statement](#) saying, “SIL restates emphatically: SIL does not support the removal of the divine familial terms, ‘Son of God’ or ‘God the Father’ but rather requires that Scripture translation must communicate clear understanding of these terms.” On a first reading, that sounds acceptable. But given [other statements](#) that explicitly allow alternative terms, SIL likely means that in some cases they will relegate the terms to the footnotes or introductions. To us, that is

still removing them from the text. Note that rather than explicitly committing to keep “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God” in the text, they instead promise to “communicate clear understanding of these terms.” That is a subjective commitment that in practice has led to translations such as [Matthew 28:19](#) in Arabic, “Cleanse them with water in the name of God, the Messiah and the Holy Spirit,” which is not a faithful or accurate translation of the verse.

“When reached for comment, Frontiers’ director [Bob Blincoe](#) defended the Turkish translation stating, “If it has the Turkish-Greek interlinear, it is faithful to the original Greek.” When pressed further how “protector” and “guardian” could be equivalent to “Father,” and “proxy” and “representative” could be equivalent to “Son,” Blincoe said, “It has the original Greek, it is true to the exact Gospel of Matthew.” <sup>[7]</sup> We disagree. Attaching an interlinear (a separate document matching Turkish words with biblical Greek) still leaves the Turkish text replacing “Father” with “guardian.” Senior [Turkish pastors](#) and Christian leaders opposing the translation have signed the petition, including Engin Duran who says, “I am a Turkish Pastor and I don’t want to use this wrong translation in my church. How dare they can publish such a wrong translation and distribute it in my country? Already Muslims in my country believe that the Bible is changed by men and these mission agencies are making it harder for us!”

“The reaction of national Christians is overwhelmingly and strongly negative. [Bangladeshi Christians](#) have produced a short video expressing their concerns. On February 8, 2012, the [Presbyterian Church of Pakistan](#) wrote a letter to “Christian leaders and believers worldwide” criticizing SIL and Wycliffe’s translation practices and “justifications for the sake of convenient translations.” Additionally, church leaders in places like [Iran](#), [Turkey](#), and [Malaysia](#) have called for an end to these translations, but to no avail.”

Further research reveals that the above may only be the tip of the iceberg:

According to Joshua Lingel of [i2 Ministries](#), “Even more dramatic a change is the Arabic and Bangla (Bangladesh) translations. In Arabic, Bible translations err by translating ‘Father’ as ‘Lord,’ ‘Guardian,’ ‘Most High’ and ‘God.’” In Bangla, ‘Son of God’ is mistranslated ‘Messiah of God’ consistent with the Quran’s Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah), which references the merely human Jesus. [\[source\]](#)

According to reports, of the roughly 200 translation projects Wycliffe/SIL linguists have undertaken in Muslim contexts, about 30 or 40 remove the terms father and son with reference to God and Jesus. [\[source\]](#)

### The Commendable Work That Has Been Done

The Lord has unquestionably used Wycliffe, SIL and Frontiers for decades to reach untold numbers for Christ through their tireless efforts to get the Word of God into the “heart language” of great numbers in largely unreached people groups. I am inexpressibly thankful for these organizations and for the individual missionaries who in so many cases have forsaken all to follow the Lord in faithful obedience to the Great Commission. I would not want anything I write to be

misconstrued as disparaging in any way the ministry that has been accomplished for Christ or impugning the motives of anyone either individually or collectively. My intention is not to be critical of these men and women of God, but it is rather to offer a critique of a philosophy of ministry and of methods that may flow from that philosophy.

### **Response to Culturally-Sensitive Translations and Changing Familial Terms Pragmatic versus biblical approaches**

Over the past 10-20 years, it seems that there has been a broad shift toward pragmatic approaches to philosophy of ministry, and away from thoroughly biblical ones. More than once, I have heard the catchphrase, “Whatever it takes!” as a sort of ministry motto.

Of course, this idea flows from a very sincere desire to reach the world with the gospel and the truth of God’s Word. I would suggest, however, that somewhere along the line, “whatever it takes” has undergone a shift away from “whatever the cost” to “whatever works.”

This is not simply a matter of semantics – it represents a paradigm shift. If “whatever it takes” takes on the pragmatic meaning of “whatever works,” it simply doesn’t work as a philosophical foundation. For example, lying often actually works, i.e., it can be used to achieve a desired outcome, but it is obviously not a commendable method. The same can be said of many things that sometimes work (even if temporarily) such as cheating, robbery, violence, etc.

And unfortunately, pragmatism’s philosophical twin is the idea that “the end justifies the means.”

Combined together, the argument for a culturally-sensitive philosophy of translation for “familial terms” related to the Father and Jesus might go as follows:

1. We are called to make disciples of all nations.
2. Because the eternal destiny of individuals is at stake, nothing is more important than seeing them trust Christ for salvation.
3. However, some cultures, because of unique customs, worldviews, and religions find certain aspects of Christianity inherently objectionable, making them extremely resistant to “normal” methods of ministry.
4. Therefore, in order to effectively penetrate these people groups with the gospel, we must find ways to overcome, minimize or otherwise get past their objections by using methods and means that are culturally sensitive.
5. When trying to reach Muslims with the gospel, we must find ways to translate “familial” terms in a way that

adequately describes the relationship between the Father and Jesus, while not offending their cultural / religious sensibilities in way which can cause them to reject the gospel out-of-hand.

6. The substitution of familial terms in these passages has essentially no substantive impact on the overall meaning being communicated by the biblical authors. (*This will be questioned later.*)
7. Reports from missionaries in the Islamic world indicate that Muslims are much more receptive to the gospel and the teachings of Christianity in general once these terminology obstacles have been removed – and that many are coming to Christ largely because of these culturally-sensitive translations.
8. The translators, organizations and missionaries using these translations are in no way denying the deity of Christ or that Jesus is the Son of God, so there are no fundamental theological compromises or changes taking place at the personal or organizational level.
9. Whatever concerns and objections might be raised concerning such culturally-sensitive translations pale in comparison to the overwhelming positive results of seeing multitudes of Muslims turn to Christ.

As one missiologist, Rick Brown (who has worked in Africa and Asia since 1977), puts it in a February 2010 interview with *Christianity Today*:

“Missionaries can live in a Muslim culture for decades, blaming Muslims for being ‘resistant’ to the gospel, when the problem actually lies with linguistic and cultural stumbling blocks,” Brown told *Christianity Today*. “Once these are removed, many Muslims are quite open and interested in knowing more about Jesus.”

The question that must be raised, however, is whether these arguments legitimately justify implementing this particular culturally-sensitive approach to translation?

### **Objections by Middle East Pastors and Christian Leaders**

If we’re going to attempt some sort of contextualization in any cross-cultural context – particularly when it involves translation issues – we need to listen carefully to the born-again believers in that culture, and especially to those whom the Lord has entrusted with ministry responsibilities.

As reported in *Christianity Today* (“The Son and the Crescent”), Georges Housney founder-director of Horizons International (a ministry to Muslims), was asked in 1974 to contextualize an Arabic translation by using terms from the Koran. Pastors and Christian leaders throughout the Middle East reacted vigorously (sometimes threatening violence) to a 32-page test booklet which combined the birth narratives of Jesus from Matthew and Luke. In this version, “Son of God”

was translated “beloved of God.”

He visited dozens of pastors throughout the Middle East and asked why they objected so strongly. They offered several reasons. They saw the booklet’s terminology as conceding too much to Islam. It threatened to confuse both Muslims and Christians, especially new believers who struggled to adjust to a more literal translation used in churches. They believed it would embolden Muslim apologists who teach that the Bible has been tainted due to translations that differ in significant ways.

Others pastors said Muslim apologists would notice that translators had borrowed phrases from the Qur’an and would claim that this proved the Qur’an’s superiority to the Bible. Or that Muslims would regard the translation as a nefarious plot to dupe Muslims into reading the Bible.

Finally, pastors noted that a translator who adopts words from the Qur’an risks leading readers to import their prior understandings to the Bible. In other words, if the Bible calls Jesus *Isa*, Muslims may associate him with the Qur’an’s account, which denies that he died on the cross, for example. Housney eventually released a more literal translation.

### **Inspiration, Inerrancy, Infallibility, Sufficiency, Authority**

These five inseparably-linked concepts form a logical progression that speaks directly to this issue.

The biblical view of inspiration is that process by which the Holy Spirit carried along the biblical writers to faithfully, accurately and completely write the very words of God. (This does not imply any sort of dictation theory.)

2 Peter 1:19–21 (19) And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; (20) knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, (21) for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 (16) All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

It is broadly accepted by conservative evangelical scholars that the inspiration of the Scriptures extends to the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of the original manuscripts. This means that every word reflects a perfect decision by God so that His precisely-intended meaning would be conveyed by the specific words of the text.

From this flows the concept that the original text is without error. To say that the text was perfect is not to say that it cannot be expounded upon, but it does mean that it cannot be improved upon. In other words, there is no upside to employing different words, while there is a potentially huge downside, not the least of which is actually tampering with the Word of God:

Revelation 22:18–19 (18) For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; (19) and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

Of course, John is specifically referring to the book of Revelation, but from Moses’ words we understand that John’s warning is based on a fundamental principle involving a prohibition and warning from God concerning anything He says.

Deuteronomy 4:2–3 (2) You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

Deuteronomy 12:32 (32) “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.

This principle is also seen in the provisions in the Mosaic Law concerning false prophets:

Deuteronomy 18:20–22 (20) But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ (21) And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’— (22) when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

By way of application, this would necessarily extend to the substitution of words that would alter the meaning of what God has said. However, this is exactly what has happened with the Turkish translation of Matthew 28:19 cited above in the FAQ by Biblical Missiology. In that translation it is reported that “Son” has not actually been translated, but actually replaced by “Messiah.” *NOTE: After much searching, I have not been able to find this specific translation on the internet, so I cannot independently confirm what has been reported. I am relying on the fact that it has been widely reported and has not been refuted by the organizations in question. That it is accurate is further confirmed by the decision to put a temporary hold on publishing these translations.*

This goes far beyond the “word-for-word” versus “thought-for-thought” (“dynamic equivalence”) translation discussion. Dynamic equivalence seeks to accurately render the Greek and Hebrew with phrasing that carries the equivalent meaning in the target language. Even this approach is fairly vigorously debated, but culturally-sensitive translations sometimes carry only a somewhat-related idea, but nothing approaching an equivalent one.

In the context of the inspiration-authority continuum, the obvious question is, “if words and phrases with different meanings are used to translate the original, do

we still have an inerrant, infallible, sufficient and authoritative text?” Or more pointedly, “Do we still have the Word of God?”

In fact, it would seem that we are left with something far less than even paraphrases, which in most cases at least represent attempts to accurately render the concepts in the original text albeit with contemporary phrasing. (*This is not meant to endorse the use of paraphrases in place of actual translations.*)

### Theological Issues

In the [same CT article](#) cited above, David Abernathy, a translation consultant in Africa expresses his concerns about the theological issues at stake:

“As much as Christian theologians have used the term and concept of ‘Word’ throughout the history of theology, they did so with the understanding that this eternal Word was also a person who was [the] eternal Son,” Abernathy wrote. “It is the eternal sonship that makes sense of calling him the eternal Word, but when that sonship is removed, the Trinity as we know it dramatically changes. There is no eternal Father-Son relationship, only an eternal God-Word relationship, which is conceptually very foreign to the doctrine of the Trinity as it has always been understood. The historic Christian understanding of the Trinity essentially collapses.”

J. Scott Horrell, professor of theological studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and an adjunct professor at Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), writes in *St. Francis Magazine*:

Ingrained in Islamic cultures, the words “Son of God” elicit the image that Jesus is God’s offspring through physical relations with a woman. Conversely, central to Christian faith is the invitation to “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

What is the bottom line? Both terms “Father” and “Son” for God are repugnant to the Muslim. Yet in the Bible and Christian faith these words take on more meaning than mere metaphors or titles, rather they become the divine names that most disclose the divine relations. Without the Son there is no Father, and without the Father there is no Son. In the developing theology of the New Testament, the names “Father” and “Son” assume the force of being not merely external (or economic) descriptions but intrinsic to God’s own deepest reality. Again it must be asked, if “natural” terms replace “Son,” “Son of God,” and even “Father” in Muslimsensitive translations, then what other language allows us access into this intimate reality? If such designations were rejected by the Qur’an in explicit opposition to Christian faith—even if Muhammed misperceived these terms—what might serve as licit alternatives?

I have addressed the following questions: First, exegetically, are non-word-for-word renditions of Jesus as the “Son of God” omitting too much? My response is that the multi-layered meanings of “Son of God,” as in the Gospels, often point beyond the limited concepts of those in Jesus’s immediate world. Replacing Sonship language—as uttered from heaven at the baptism and the Transfiguration, by Satan in the temptations, and by demons as early testimonies to Jesus’s supernatural origin—

can detract from the canonical text’s post-Easter implications. Jesus’s own Father-Son language reaches the deepest levels of divine self-disclosure.

To confess Jesus as the “Son of God” is finally to recognize both his essential equality with the Father and his eternal filial relationship. As for translation of the “Son of God,” all translation is unavoidably interpretation. Biblical translation carries the special responsibility of bridging not just from the text to the receiving culture. It further functions as an invitation to enter the Christian faith—the faith of the church. Therefore, especially in regard to the phrase “Son of God” when related to Jesus, extreme care should be exercised lest the rich meanings of the deity of Christ and his eternal relationship with the Father be subverted.

### “Son of” (singular) versus “Sons of” (plural)

One argument that is sometimes employed as part of the justification for an alternate translation to “Son of God” is the use of “son” to denote something other than a familial or lineal relationship. Cited examples include “sons of the kingdom,” “sons of this world,” “sons of light,” “sons of this age,” etc.

These examples do demonstrate that “sons of” (plural) does not necessarily imply a familial / lineal relationship, although naturally, in many instances, this is the way it is used. However, it must also be noted that of the 274 uses of “son of” (singular) with only one exception, it always denotes a familial / lineal relationship. This difference in usage seems to be significant. (*The single exception is in reference to the Antichrist, whom Paul calls the “son of perdition” (2 Thess. 2:3).*)

Jesus’ other titles, besides “Son of God,” must also be considered. For example, Matthew refers to Jesus as “the Son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1) for the purpose of demonstrating his familial connection to Abraham as part of his presentation of Jesus as the Jewish King. Matthew also uses “the Son of David” as part of his argument that Jesus has a familial connection to David that makes him a legitimate candidate to be the Davidic King.

Furthermore, “Son of David” is used a total of 17 times in the gospels, which is the third most frequently-used title after “Son of Man” and “Son of God.” The familial / lineal connection is clearly a significant part of His identity and directly related to His claim to the throne of David.

The most frequently-used title for Jesus is “Son of Man” which occurs 87 times in 83 verses. While Matthew’s genealogy begins with Abraham and moves forward, Luke’s genealogy begins with Mary and traces Jesus lineage backward, all the way to Adam – establishing the fact that Jesus is also truly a member

of the human family.

This leaves us with Jesus' second most frequently-used title: "Son of God." It seems inescapable that given the purpose for the titles "Son of David" and "Son of Man" to establish a familial connection to David and to the entire human race, "Son of God" is explicitly, if not primarily, for the purpose of designating His familial relationship with God the Father.

### First Century Jews

All of the writers of the New Testament were Jewish except for Luke. And all except James and Jude use the phrase "Son of God" in some way – for a total of forty-two times. Although it is frequently a record of the taunts and accusations against Jesus by His enemies, it is always referenced matter-of-factly and never challenged as to its accuracy.

Mark begins his gospel: Mark 1:1: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

John the Baptist is quoted as saying: John 1:34: And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Nathaniel declared: John 1:49: Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Jesus Himself challenged Nicodemus: John 3:18 (18) "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Martha confessed: John 11:27: She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

And John makes it clear that believing Jesus is the Son of God is at the very heart of the gospel and essential to the faith necessary to receive eternal life: John 20:31: but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

These all stand in remarkable contrast to the violent reaction this identification frequently elicited, particularly by the Jewish religious leaders. Certainly no less than modern-day Muslims, first-century Jews, apart from the work of the Spirit of God, regarded such a claim as both extremely repulsive and the height of blasphemy. In their view, such claims demanded nothing less than Jesus' death. However, this is a title that Jesus used of Himself – and which was also proclaimed by the Father at Jesus' baptism when He said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17). This is also significant because it is a departure from the "son of" construction, and therefore informs us as to how "son

of' should be understood.

### The Work of the Holy Spirit

An important factor that culturally-sensitive translators seem to not take into account is that it is only the work of the Spirit of God in someone's heart that can overcome all objections to the gospel related to Jesus' identity. This is true not only concerning Him being the Son of God (as if that were the only issue). The obstacles to faith for every sinful human being includes the fact that He is also the Savior, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Creator, the Lord of Glory, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The New Testament also makes it clear that the open recognition that Jesus is the Son of God, was not a problem in a cross-cultural setting any more than it was with the Jews, when the Holy Spirit is at work.

Matthew records the declaration by a Roman centurion who witnessed Jesus' death: Matthew 27:54: So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

In the book of Acts, we find the confession of an Ethiopian who was an attendant in a royal court: Acts 8:34-37 (34) So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" (35) Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. (36) Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" (37) Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

### Summary and Conclusions

#### Goals and Motivating Factors

A number of goals and motivating factors can be identified as driving forces behind culturally-sensitive translations:

1. To reach as many as possible with the truth of the gospel and God's Word in general, and see as many as possible come to faith in Christ.
2. To minimize or remove as many cultural, religious and philosophical obstacles as possible which are perceived to be hindering ministry efforts among Muslims.
3. To provide culturally-sensitive, alternate translations for biblical phrases and terms which are inherently offensive to Muslims, while remaining true to the meaning of the original text.
4. To change false perceptions that Muslims have about what Christians believe and teach.

Missionaries who have adopted this approach to translation report large numbers of Muslims who are

reading the Bible for the first time, as well as large numbers of Muslim converts – perhaps in the tens of thousands world-wide. This is seen as undeniable evidence for the philosophical and theological correctness of the culturally-sensitive approach.

### **Preliminary Analysis and Evaluation**

Based on the initial research and study of the issues surrounding culturally-sensitive translations of divine familial terms, I have come to the following preliminary conclusions.

1. Any approach that exchanges words which do reflect the contextual meaning of the original text for ones which are not genuine synonyms undermines the doctrines of the inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, sufficiency and authority of Scripture.
2. To the degree that translated words depart from the contextual meaning of the original text, to that degree the translation ceases to be the Word of God.
3. There are biblical prohibitions against tampering with the Word of God – against adding or subtracting from that which God has revealed and there are warnings of potential serious consequences if this is done.
4. A significant number of pastors and Christian leaders who are native speakers of the target languages and who live and minister among Muslims have reacted against culturally-sensitive translations in ways ranging from deep concern to outrage.
5. God could have easily inspired the proposed alternate words in the first place. However, even though God desires that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, in His wisdom He has inspired specific words and concepts that He knew beforehand would be offensive to Muslims.
6. Given the familial / lineal meaning and purpose of Jesus' titles "Son of Abraham," "Son of David" and "Son of Man," that "Son of God" can be understood and replaced with non-familial terms cannot be easily justified.
7. The offense to sinful men from any culture is not limited to "Son of God," but is much more broadly connected to Jesus' identity as the Savior, King, Lord, Alpha and Omega, Lamb of God, etc. Changing just "Son of God" only potentially lessens one of a myriad of offenses, not the least of which is the offense of the cross.
8. The offense of "Son of God" to Muslims today, is no less an offense to the Jews of today or to those of the first century. Yet, "Son of God" has always been understood to be Jesus' claimed identity – both by His enemies and by those who embraced Him as Lord and Savior. In spite of this, there has never been an attempt (of which I'm aware) to change these familial terms when ministering to Jews or any other people group.
9. It is only the work of the Holy Spirit, not the methods of men, that can overcome all obstacles, objections and offenses caused by the person and work of Jesus Christ.

10. For those who reject Jesus as Savior, changing the familial terms is not helpful. For those who accept Jesus as Savior, changing the familial terms is not necessary.
11. To change the divine familial terms is to change the gospel itself.
12. Pragmatic approaches, even when they appear to produce positive results, cannot be justified if they violate biblical principles.

The issue of culturally-sensitive translations seems to be part of a larger trend in missions called the *Insider Movement*, which is what could be termed as a "hyper-contextualization" philosophy of cross-cultural ministry. It includes a method for reaching Muslims with the gospel sometimes referred to as Camel Evangelism – and a sort of synthesis of Christianity and Islam, pejoratively referred to as "Chrislam." I plan to discuss this movement in future articles.

### **Final Thoughts**

That this is an issue at all points to the fact that we live in a fallen world that is at enmity with God and openly rejects the person and work of Jesus to bring the hope of salvation to all men. The Muslim rejection of Jesus as the Son of God is but one symptom of the underlying problem.

The task of fulfilling the Great Commission is faced with many obstacles, not the least of which are connected to cultures and religions. It is certainly commendable and wise methodology to be aware of and sensitive to cultural issues and to take steps to avoid causing unnecessary offense. This includes ministry philosophy and methodology. Our task is not to simply exchange one set of cultural norms for another by imposing our culture upon theirs. However, it is our task to bring the truth to bear upon every culture, which happens through individuals having their lives changed through a personal relationship to Christ.

The way in which we communicate that truth may vary from culture to culture, but the content of that truth is unchanging – and must not be changed.

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