Quality Assurance of Open-Licensed Biblical Content

toward an accelerated, sustainable model of assuring excellence in translated Scripture.

A description of a multi-tiered strategy for identifying the quality of translated biblical content with increased efficiency and sustainability.

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Revision History

- revision 14: refinements to criteria for achieving checking Levels 1-3 (p. 10-12), wording adjustment to definition of "Faithful" (p. 16)

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- revision 12: addition of paragraph regarding historical alignment of translations (p. 7)

- revision 11: minor adjustment to "Appendix A - Statement of Faith"

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The technological constraints of the post-Gutenberg, pre-Digital era permitted only two models for Bible translation: the individual approach (a person translating the Bible by themselves), and the institutional approach. Given the scope of the effort and significant costs associated with Bible translation, the predominant model of Bible translation in the last century has depended on an institutional hierarchy that funds the work, oversees the process, and ensures the quality of the finished work.[1]

The institutional model for quality assurance of translated biblical content[2] has traditionally depended on three key pillars:

1. **Once-for-all-time "scarcity" model** — The institutional model of Bible translation is firmly rooted in the print era, where producing biblical content in a redistributable format was a costly undertaking. Correcting errors in this model was prohibitively expensive, so extreme care (and time) was taken to ensure the highest possible quality in the first version of the content, because often there was no plan or funding for a second version.

2. **Binary, "pass/fail" strategy** — In this model, when translated biblical content is checked, it has traditionally been done using a "pass/fail" paradigm. Either the content has passed the approval of the translation consultant, or it has not. Understandably, biblical content in this paradigm that has not been approved by a translation consultant tends not to be published or distributed.

3. **Parachurch authority structure** — In general, the approach used in the last few decades for checking the quality of translated biblical content has been dependent on parachurch authority structures and a relatively small group of translation consultants. In this paradigm, the translation consultant is the one in the position of ultimately determining for the Church what is and what is not a faithful translation of the Word of God in their language.[3] The use of translation consultants in the Bible translation process was first introduced in the 1960s, and is attributed to Eugene Nida, then

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[1] The "quality" of a translation can refer to many things (e.g., the naturalness of the translation, its clarity, etc.). The primary focus in this document with regard to the concept of "quality" is the faithfulness of the translation to the original text.

[2] The term "biblical content" is used in this document to refer to translations of Scripture as well as content that is highly biblical in nature, including Bible study resources, Bible stories, etc.

[3] According to Dr. Larry Jones: "Historically, consultants were perceived as the guarantors of faithfulness in a translated text of Scripture… This aim of a consultant check has an important social function in that it gives the Bible publisher, the target audience, and the greater Christian community in that nation confidence that the translation truly is God's word in that language." (Jones, *Consultant Qualifications*.)

president of the American Bible Society.[4] Over time, the role of the translation consultant has increased in importance, to the point that translated Scripture is rarely published without first being approved by a translation consultant.[5]

There are two direct results from the combination of these three factors. First, a lot of translated biblical content has been checked to very high standards. Second, *a backlog of unchecked biblical content is continuing to grow.* The worldwide queue for access to the translation checkers is long and, in some parts of the world, getting longer. Some translations sit on shelves, unused, waiting for the line to dwindle and for their number to be called.

The growth of the pool of qualified translation consultants is not keeping pace with the rising tide of newly produced biblical content in thousands of languages. In some ways, this is a good problem to have! But it is a real problem.

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Toward a Sustainable Translation-Checking Model

Digital technology enables a third model for Bible translation, one that is immensely capable and extremely cost-effective: open collaboration. Using mobile devices and data connections (from direct Internet links to peer-to-peer mesh networks), the global Church can self-organize to undertake immense projects, like Bible translation, in every language of the world.

We are no longer constrained by the technological limitations of the preceding centuries that imposed a "scarcity" model for production of biblical content in other languages. In this new era, print is only one of many viable distribution formats for translated biblical content. Today, we can take full advantage of the opportunities in the Digital Era and adopt an "abundance" mentality. Translations of biblical content can be collaboratively created with relative ease, and republishing improved translations in digital formats can often be "too cheap to meter."

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4 Robertson, *Taking the Word to the World.*

5 As Dr. Bryan Harmelink observes, "One liability [of the translation consultant paradigm] is the potential for seeing our current consulting practices as the only way to ensure acceptable levels of quality and fidelity in translation. …translation consulting, as we know it, is a very recent phenomenon. It's also a very peculiar phenomenon of a very brief period in translation history. Just because consulting has developed as we know it today, doesn't mean that it's the best or only way to achieve the values we strive for in translation." (Harmelink, *Developing Team Consultancy Skills*)

Can Bible translations be "perfect"?

A widespread notion exists that it is possible to achieve "perfect" translations of biblical content. With great care (and often through multiple revisions), translations of biblical content can achieve a high degree of excellence. Given the incredible complexity involved in translating God's Word, aiming for "perfection" can be disappointing.

For example, speakers of some minority languages are embarrassed to read the consultant-checked translation of the Bible in their language out loud because it sounds like baby talk (i.e., imperfect at the linguistic level). Some consultant-checked Bible translations have left speakers of that language wondering what to do with their translations, since they contain clear errors in key terms (i.e., imperfect at the lexical/theological level). Imperfections in "finished" translations are undesirable but extremely difficult to avoid. As Dr. Larry Jones observes: "…those of us who have done a translation consultant check with languages we do not speak know that gaps remain regardless of the procedure we used to check the translation. In reality, we cannot really fully guarantee that the translation is a faithful rendering of the meaning of the original text."[6]

Given its central role in the Reformation, Luther's translation of the Bible into modern German was one of the most important vernacular Bible translations in all of history. Interestingly, his translation was not the first, nor was it an original work, nor was it perfect. A translation of the Bible in mediaeval German had been completed sometime during the 14th century and Luther made judicious use of it in the creation of his own translation. But even with a good text, command of the original languages, and a team of scholars working with him, Luther's translation was far from perfect. He revised his translation of the complete Bible over five separate editions, improving the quality of the translation over time. Philip Schaff writes, "He never ceased to amend his translation. Besides correcting errors, he improved the uncouth and confused orthography, fixed the inflections, purged the vocabulary of obscure and ignoble words, and made the whole more symmetrical and melodious."[7]

It is understandable and right that translators of the Bible approach the task with reverence and a deep desire to be faithful in the work. It is the Word of God and it should be translated with care. However, fear of not achieving a "perfect" translation creates an unfortunate choke point in the translation process and has delayed the release of some translations by many years.

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[6] Jones, *Consultant Qualifications.*

[7] Schaff, *Modern Christianity. The German Reformation.*

Translations, revisions, and language change

The difference between "perfection" and "excellence" is a pivotal distinction in Bible translation, especially since the quality of even the best translations diminishes over time. In terms of accurate and effective communication in the target language, even the best translations have a "shelf life" and will eventually need to be revised. This has nothing to do with the quality of the translation and everything to do with the nature of language and how it is used in society over time.

Every language shifts and morphs dynamically. Smaller languages, comprised of primarily oral communicators (and thus also lacking a large body of literature to help anchor the language) can change rapidly. Determining this rate of change is not an exact science, but the evidence suggests that even the best translations of biblical content into smaller languages will likely need revision within one generation of completion. (Some estimates put the time to "needs revision" at 12-15 years from publishing).

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By this metric, a quick, back-of-the-envelope calculation (based on date of publishing) suggests that as many as 400 translations of the Bible in languages around the world that are listed as "finished" may already need revision. Furthermore, within ~20 years from now, *every Bible translation that exists today will likely need to be revised*. Unless we adopt a different paradigm for checking of translated content, these revisions of Bible translations will join other translations in the "waiting to be checked" queue for an indefinite amount of time.

A new paradigm for translation checking

In this context, we propose a shift in how the global Church approaches the checking and validation of translated biblical content. The proposed strategy is built on three pillars that correspond to the ones listed above:

1. **Ongoing, iterative, "abundance-mentality" translation process** — Given the fact that languages are dynamic and translation itself is both art and science, the process of checking translated biblical content should reflect these realities. Accordingly, we propose that translation checking itself be modeled on an ongoing and iterative process that takes full advantage of the tools and workflow processes that are easily modeled in digital content and technology.

2. **Graduated, multi-level checking strategy** — In the proposed model, translated content is checked and positioned on a graduated, multi-level scale that corresponds to the degree of checking. Content that has been put through a higher degree of rigor in the

checking process is identified accordingly, with clearly-defined criteria comprising each checking level.

3. **Church-centric authority structure** — We believe the Church in each people group is ultimately responsible for determining what is and what is not a faithful and excellent translation of the Word of God in their own language. To enable local church structures to have both the authority and knowledge to do this work well, there needs to be much more clarity in the translation checking criteria, as well as widespread and unrestricted availability of biblical and training resources. To that end, it is important that the resources required for adequate transfer of knowledge be made available under open licenses, without legal restrictions that hinder access to and reuse of the content.

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An important implication of this paradigm should not be missed: *the Church in each people group is accountable to God for their translation and use of His Word.* That is, the various elements of the Church are and should be on equal footing, avoiding paternalistic tendencies to control outcomes in order to "prevent bad things from happening to God's Word."

The broader context of the global and historical Church is extremely relevant, however. Faithful Bible translations necessarily align with the established, historical Church. The determination by the local Church of the faithfulness of translations of the Bible in their language should not be done in a vacuum. They must be in alignment with historical Christian doctrine as established in the creeds and doctrines of the Church through time.

From Theory to Reality

This new paradigm is being put into effect in a project called unfoldingWord. The unfoldingWord project is designed to provide biblical content of the highest quality, in multimedia and mobile-optimized offline formats, in every language of the world, without restrictions, for free. It is built on an openly collaborative model and is comprised of open-licensed biblical content available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0). Following is an explanation of how we are accounting for the quality of the open-licensed biblical content in the unfoldingWord project.

Separate content from branding

The first aspect of the strategy is crucial: we are separating the licensing of the content from the branding (identifiers) of the project. It is very

common to misunderstand the difference between copyright restrictions and trademarks. Many assume that restricting biblical content with the default "All Rights Reserved" granted by copyright law is necessary to preserve the authoritativeness and integrity of the content. Often, the assumption is that a highly restrictive license is necessary to prevent others from corrupting the content, causing damage to the reputation of both the content and the content's owner.

This is unfortunate because it is a misapplication of copyright law and has significant negative consequences. Excessively restrictive licenses on biblical content perpetuate the spiritual famine of the global Church. Such licenses hinder the global Church from legally translating, format-shifting, and distributing biblical content *for themselves*.

Since the invention of copyright 300 years ago, the notion of restricting the reach and usefulness of content in order to increase the potential for monetization of the content has been the norm. There are at least two important points to note about this. First, copyright law cannot prevent bad things from happening to content. Bad things happen to copyrighted content all the time. All copyright law provides is a platform from which we can take legal action against those who take what the laws of men say belongs to us.

Second, there is no biblical support for the concept of restricting biblical content, for any reason. In the span of history, the idea that the Church must use secular laws in order to preserve the integrity of the Word of God is quite new. There were no such restrictions on God's Word for the first 19 centuries of the Church.

Identity and authoritativeness in the Digital Era are not preserved by copyright; they are preserved (to the extent that is possible) by trademark. So it is possible to safely separate the licensing of the content—which we release under a wide-open license—from our trademark—which we permit to be used only in accordance with our terms.

Limited use of the trademark

Anyone is free to distribute unmodified unfoldingWord-branded content without hindrance, restriction, or the need to ask for permission. They can even sell it without remuneration to us.[8]

In the event that someone wants to create derivative works from unfoldingWord content (like a translation, or another resource) they are free to do so, according to the terms of the Creative Commons Attri-

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[8] A detailed explanation of the strategy behind this approach is provided in "The Christian Commons", http://thechristiancommons.com.

bution-ShareAlike License. However, **they are not automatically permitted to use the unfoldingWord name or brand on the derivative work**. Unless their work has been checked by us against our Statement of Faith and Translation Guidelines, our brand is not available for use on content created by others. Note: we provide an open-access platform called Door43 (http://door43.org) that makes it easy to translate content, check the work, use the unfoldingWord brand, and use all the unfoldingWord distribution tools, for free.

Three levels of checking

Biblical content that has been translated into another language may inherently be of exceptional quality, abysmal quality, or somewhere in between. Unless we speak the language ourselves, we cannot independently ascertain the faithfulness of the translation. In the institutional model, it is at this point that translated content is put into the queue of other translated content waiting for an available translation consultant to check the translation's quality. Until then, the content is usually unavailable to the general public because of the risk that the content might contain significant errors.

We are taking a different approach and assuming that the content is good until proven otherwise. That is, our experience suggests that when the global Church has unhindered access to good tools and adequate training, *more acceptably good content is created than disastrously bad content.*

More important still, the model we are using *depends* on a "release early, release often" approach. It is essential in this model to engage the greater Church in a people group early in the project and get their input and feedback throughout the entire process of translating and revising the translations of the Bible in their language. Having many eyes on the project throughout the process is a strong safeguard against error and can yield ideas for expression that a small team might not discover. Furthermore, this approach tends to create a strong sense of Church ownership of the project. It also enables the entire Christian community to have direct involvement in the process, no matter how few in number their individual contributions may be.

So, rather than use an "on/off" switch for content that has or has not been checked by a translation consultant (a linear process), we are using

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a three-level checking scale (an iterative process).[9] The level to which a particular piece of content has been checked is prominently displayed with the content itself. In this model, the mere availability of the content in a branded format does not necessarily mean the content is of optimal quality. The likelihood that the content is of excellent quality tends to increase in proportion to the checking level, but even content checked to "level 3" will at some point need to be revised (and identified by version number).

The three-level checking scale we use is dependent on the unfoldingWord **Statement of Faith** (see Appendix A) and **Translation Guidelines** (see Appendix B). All translated content is compared against the theology of the Statement of Faith and against the procedures and methodologies of the Translation Guidelines. With these documents forming the foundation, these are the three levels of checking used in the unfoldingWord project:

Checking Level 1: Internal Check

▸ The translator (or team) asserts that the Statement of Faith is an accurate reflection of their own beliefs and that the translated content is also in harmony with it.

▸ The translator (or team) asserts that the translated content has been done in accordance with the Translation Guidelines and that they have made full use of available exegetical and translation checking resources in the translation process.

▸ The translator (or team) is in personal contact with at least one element of the unfoldingWord network.

▸ For the purposes of the unfoldingWord project, translations of Bible texts are only published once they achieve Level 2. Other biblical content is made available at Level 1.

▸ *This enables the broadest reach of the content as an active project, with an open invitation (implied or direct) to help improve the translation.*

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[9] Regarding the improvement of quality through an iterative translation process, Dr. Gilles Gravelle writes: "If in a cluster project, translation and exegesis is seen as an iterative process with a larger segment of the community involved, then it could be that the translation may indeed be exegetically un-tight during the early stages of the work, but it could communicate meaning more naturally and be more culturally engaging sooner. As the translators and the community of reviewers are taught to grapple with the text, the exegetical quality should improve over time as an outcome." (Gravelle, *Rearrangements: New Ways of Doing Old Things.*)

Checking Level 2: External Check

‣ The content has been comprehensively reviewed by at least three church leaders who are native speakers of the target language, and at least one of which understands well one of the languages in which the source text is available. The reviewers should not be related to, or otherwise closely connected with the translator (or translation team). Usually the reviewers will be pastors of church congregations.

‣ The reviewers should be affiliated with Church networks that are in agreement with the Statement of Faith and Translation Guidelines. It is preferable for the reviewers to be from a representative sample of the denominations in the language.

‣ As in Level 1, the translated content is compared to the Statement of Faith and Translation Guidelines and the checkers assert that the translated content conforms to both.

‣ *This implements the concept of a "testimony of two or three witnesses" in the checking process.*

Checking Level 3: Authenticated Check

There are two tracks by which content can achieve level 3.

‣ Track 1:

- The first track is completed when the content has been thoroughly checked by at least three separate Church networks.

- Those checking the translation must be first-language speakers of the language, and those signing off on the check must be leaders of the Church networks.

- A leader of a Church network who is also a first language speaker of the language of the translation may both check the translation and sign off on its quality.

- Level 3 in this track is thus achieved by the mutual agreement of multiple elements of the Church internal.

▸ Track 2:

- The second track is completed when the content has been thoroughly checked by an accountable entity in the unfoldingWord network that has training and experience in checking translated biblical content, as well as by a Church network with first-language speakers of the language (as described in the first track).

- Level 3 in this track is thus achieved by the mutual agreement of the Church internal and the Church global, as represented by the accountable entity.

Note: Entities such as translation organizations and church denominations can be part of the unfoldingWord network, given that they agree with the Statement of Faith and Translation Guidelines and that they are publicly accountable in some way to constituents who are part of the Church (including donors, members, etc.). Based on the strength of the trust relationship between entities, the unfoldingWord network can grow rapidly and it becomes self-reinforcing as multiple nodes connect to each other.

▸ In either track, the checking entities must have a track record that does not contradict their assertion that they adhere to the Statement of Faith and Translation Guidelines.

▸ *This implements a "by their fruit you will know them" component.*

As translated content is checked by more people, using freely-available resources and following the established doctrinal and procedural guidelines for the unfoldingWord project, the content is iteratively improved and checked to increasingly higher levels of quality. The checked translations are made available in the unfoldingWord "catalog" of available content and labeled according to the checking level.

Checking the checkers

The process and checking framework described in this document depends on an ongoing process of checking and revising content, as determined by the Church that uses the content. Feedback loops are encouraged (and modeled in translation software, where feasible) with a view to maximizing input from the greatest number of users of the content. The translations of the content are made available on the Door43 translation platform, (http://door43.org) which is designed to make it easy for users to collaboratively create content that increases in quality over time.

Feedback loops are encouraged with a view to maximizing input from the greatest number of users of the content.

So, what happens if "bad" translations get into the unfoldingWord catalog? This is a fair question, and there are three points to consider in answering it.

1. Not all open-licensed content is available in the unfoldingWord project. The project has specific objectives, projects, and an established workflow. That is, unfoldingWord is not a collection of "all the random, open-licensed content you could ever want" where anyone could show up with " content" in an esoteric language and expect to make it part of unfoldingWord. We are working toward specific objectives, with clearly defined translation projects (Bible stories, study resources, lexicons, teaching guides, etc.) that are done in the open, where anyone can immediately see and improve the translations.

2. The translation workflow that we implement in software intentionally makes it easier to create good content than bad content, and it is designed never to lose good content under any circumstances. People who would attempt to vandalize pages or introduce problematic translations are easily identified, blocked, and their changes painlessly reverted. In short, since we control the open-access translation platform, we can (and do) configure it in such a way that it is far easier to collaborate openly in the creation of content of iteratively increasing quality, than to damage the work of others.

3. In the event that problematic translations inadvertently make it into the unfoldingWord catalog, the content can be easily flagged and temporarily removed from the catalog until the discrepancy is resolved. The content can then be re-exported, and the catalog updated accordingly. A time-stamped audit log is automatically maintained of all changes to the content in Door43, as well as the quality control timeline for content in the unfoldingWord catalog.

We are not expecting to create perfect content in every language, but we are absolutely working toward the collaborative creation of content that increases in excellence over time in every language, without in any way restricting how the global Church uses it.

Conclusion

This document describes a new approach to checking and verifying the quality of translated, open-licensed content in thousands of languages in the Digital Era. We welcome feedback and suggestions for how this model could be improved. Feel free to contact us and let us know what you think: http://distantshores.org/contact.

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Appendix A — Statement of Faith

The following statement of faith is subscribed to by all member organizations of and contributors to the unfoldingWord project. It is in agreement with the Lausanne Covenant.

We believe that Christian belief can and should be divided into essential beliefs and peripheral beliefs.

Essential beliefs

Essential beliefs are what define a follower of Jesus Christ and can never be compromised or ignored.

- We believe Bible to be the only inspired, inerrant, sufficient, authoritative Word of God.

- We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit.

- We believe in the deity of Jesus Christ.

- We believe in the humanity of Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father.

- We believe that every person is inherently sinful and so is deserving of eternal hell.

- We believe that salvation from sin is a gift of God, provided through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, attained by grace through faith, not by works.

- We believe that true faith is always accompanied by repentance and regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

- We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the follower of Jesus Christ is enabled to live a godly life.

- We believe in the spiritual unity of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, from all nations and languages and people groups.

- We believe in the personal and physical return of Jesus Christ.

- We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; the unsaved will be resurrected to eternal damnation in hell and the saved will be resurrected to eternal blessing in heaven with God.

Peripheral beliefs

Peripheral beliefs are everything else that is in Scripture but about which sincere followers of Christ may disagree (e.g., Baptism, Lord's Supper, the Rapture, etc.). We choose to agree to disagree agreeably on these topics and press on together toward a common goal of making disciples of every people group (Matthew 28:18-20).

Appendix B — Translation Guidelines

Online: unfoldingWord.org/translation.

The following statement on the principles and procedures used in translation is subscribed to by all member organizations of and contributors to the unfoldingWord project. All translation activities are carried out according to these common guidelines.

- **Accurate** — Translate accurately, without detracting from, changing, or adding to the meaning of the original text. Translated content should faithfully communicate as precisely as possible the meaning of the original text as it would have been understood by the original audience.

- **Clear** — Use whatever language structures are necessary to achieve the highest level of comprehension. This includes rearranging the form of a text and using as many or as few terms as necessary to communicate the original meaning as accurately as possible.

- **Faithful** — Use key terms that are faithful to the vocabulary of the original biblical languages. Use equivalent common language terms for the biblical words that describe the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. These may be clarified, as needed, in footnotes or other supplemental resources.

- **Authoritative** — Use the original language biblical texts as the highest authority for translation of biblical content. Reliable biblical content in other languages may be used for clarification and as intermediary source texts.

- **Pure** — Avoid any political, denominational, ideological, social, cultural, or theological bias in your translation.

- **Expressive** — Communicate the feelings and attitudes of the original text. As much as possible, maintain the literary forms in the original text, including narrative, poetry, exhortation, and prophecy, representing them with corresponding forms that communicate in a similar way in your language.

- **Historical** — Communicate historical events and facts accurately, providing additional information as needed in order to accurately communicate the intended message to people who do not share the same context and culture as the original recipients of the original content.

- **Natural** — Use language forms that are effective and that reflect the way your language is used in corresponding contexts.

- **Collaborative** — Where possible, work together with other believers who speak your language to translate, check, and distribute the translated content, ensuring that it is of the highest quality and available to as many people as possible.

- **Ongoing** — Encourage the periodic review of translations to ascertain when revision or a new translation is needed.