

‘People from every language’: Australia’s indigenous peoples and God’s global gospel plan

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Introduction

I first began speaking on the British treatment of indigenous Australians in 2009,¹ and I have been encouraged to continue to do this by an indigenous elder from Brisbane, Auntie Jean Phillips, and I thank her for her encouragement.

I want to pay my respects to the indigenous people of this land, and to their elders. My comments are mainly addressed to non-indigenous people, because I want to alert them to the important issues that still need our attention today. I realise that indigenous people will feel the issues I raise very deeply, and I want to assure you of my respect for you, and explain that I do not intend to distress you, and apologise if I do so.

I am heavily dependent on the research and writing of others. I am merely drawing together some threads, and wanting to prompt us to deeper understanding of the past and present, and some effective action for the future.

The title of this lecture, ‘People from every language’ comes from the book of Revelation. There we see people of all nationalities, ethnic groups, tribes and languages gathered together around God’s throne worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ <https://stjudes.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Australia-whose-land-Peter-Adam.pdf>

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
people from every tribe and language and people and
nation
[Revelation 5:9].

This certain hope inspires this lecture.

Stolen languages

We stole the land. We remember the apology made by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2007, about The Stolen Generation. But my focus here is on stolen languages. Stealing languages does not look violent, but does deep damage. And all theft is condemned by God's commandment, 'You shall not steal' [Exodus 20:15].

One of the many destructive actions of the British in taking over Australia was the suppression of indigenous languages. Superior power meant that the subject people had to dispense with their own culture, including their native language, to live in the new world of their conquerors. The policy of assimilation was a polite version of this political reality. Use of native language was discouraged if not forbidden. And later, children separated from their parents in The Stolen Generation, were raised to speak English, and forget their native languages.

The loss of native language has a drastic effect on people. It means a breakdown in intergenerational communication and common life. It means a loss of history, a loss of identity, and a decrease in communication. It frays family life. It is as serious as the loss of land, loss of life-style, loss of skills, and the loss of birds and animals. We have apologised for 'The Stolen Generation'. We have not yet apologised for the stolen land, the stolen culture, or the stolen languages. We have belatedly recognised native title to land. We should have recognised native entitlement to language as well.

It is an even more serious crime, when we think of God's desire to communicate to people in their own native language. We believe that God accommodates himself to us in his verbal revelation, by speaking in comprehensible human language. What grace! What kindness! What mercy! And God's words are so powerful and he is so compassionate and gracious, that his verbally inspired Scriptures can be translated into any human language, and still function as God's powerful, life-giving, converting, and communicating word! In words attributed to St Augustine, 'God seems especially close to us when he speaks our own language'.

Our translatable Bible

It is interesting that many religions which are based on ancient written texts believe that they are untranslatable, that is, that they are not effective in translation. I remember seeing little Pakistani boys learning the Islamic Koran in Arabic by heart, even though they did not understand Arabic! You can go to mosques, synagogues and temples around the world, and find that their holy writings are read in languages which most people do not understand.

However, Christians believe that the Bible is translatable, that God's words are so powerful that they can work even in a bad translation, and that God is so compassionate that he wants us to hear him speaking in our own heart language.

The translatability of the Bible into any language was one of the great discoveries and contributions of the Reformation.² It signified that God came down to speak to everyone in the Bible. It meant that God could speak in any language, to any people. It had a profound effect on gospel progress, as it had a profound effect on all cultures, languages and nations into which the Bible was translated. It promoted education in reading and writing, the study of languages, and the idea that great ideas could and should be entrusted to ordinary people, not just the elite. It promoted the democratisation of education and learning and knowledge. And if God

² Though at the time the Roman Catholic church actually used a Latin translation, the Vulgate!

speaks to us in our own language, then he can hear and understand us when we pray in our own language! Praise him!

The idea of God speaking in native languages is pervasive in the Bible. We might have thought that the story of the tower of Babel means that God does not like the many languages of the world. That is not true. The wonderful discovery of the day of Pentecost was: ‘we hear them telling in own languages the wonderful works of God’ [Acts 2:11]. When Ezra taught the Law in Nehemiah 8, the Levites walked among the people to ensure that they understood what they were hearing, and this probably included translating Hebrew into Aramaic. [Aramaic, similar to Hebrew, but a different language, was spoken by many Jews in later Old Testament times and in New Testament times.]

In the New Testament we find two groups of Jews, converted to Christ. There are those described in Acts 6 as ‘the Hebrews’, and as ‘the Hellenists’. The Hebrew Jews would have spoken Aramaic as their heart language, and would have understood the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hellenist Jews would have spoken Greek as their heart language, and they would hear the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in their synagogues. They would have been the diaspora Jews, that is, those who lived outside the Holy Land.³ There was, for example, a large Jewish community in Alexandria in Egypt. Greek speaking Jews and synagogues formed the basis for Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. It is likely that the Ethiopian eunuch and the Roman Centurion of Acts 8 and 10 had read the Old Testament in its Greek translation.

And it is one of the interesting features of quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament that many of them are quoted from Greek translations of the Old Testament, not from the original Hebrew or Aramaic. God’s words are so powerful that they work in translation!

One remarkable feature of Jesus’ ministry is his use of both Greek and Aramaic. I think he spoke both languages. [There is lots of debate on this

³ It is likely that synagogues in the Diaspora called ‘Hebrew synagogues’ were Hebrew and Aramaic language meetings, while others used the Greek language including the Septuagint for Bible readings.

question!] When he called a dead little girl to life he used the Aramaic words ‘*Talitha kourm!*’ [*‘Little girl, get up.’* Mark 5:41], and when he prayed for the deaf and dumb man he used the Aramaic word ‘*Ephphatha!*’ [*‘Be opened,’* 7:34], no doubt because this was their native language. Most movingly, when he prayed for himself in the garden of Gethsemane, he said, ‘*Abba, father*’ Mark 14:36], using the Aramaic and Greek words for Father. And when he was crucified, he prayed in Aramaic, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*’ [*‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’* Mark 15:34]. We find the Jewish crowds calling out the Aramaic word, *Hosanna*, [*‘Save us now’*] when they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, and the Christians used the Aramaic ‘*Maranatha*’ [*‘Our Lord come,’* Mark 11:8 and 1 Corinthians 16:22]. According to Acts 26:14, Jesus spoke in Aramaic when he asked Saul on the Damascus Road, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ Interestingly, Paul uses the Aramaic word ‘*Abba*’ in the context of prayer, echoing Jesus. ‘We cry, *Abba, Father*’. And he points out that such prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit [Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6]. Greek-speaking and Aramaic speaking believers can pray in their own languages.

And in the song of praise to the slain and risen Lamb in Revelation we read these words, as we have already seen:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
people from every tribe and language and people
and nation

[Revelation 5:9].

It is precisely because we believe that the Bible is translatable into any language that people have translated it into the many languages of the world.

What has been the history of the translation of Bible translation into Australian indigenous languages?

Some faithful Bible translators, both missionaries and indigenous people worked hard to do the same task here. That meant finding out the words and structure of each language, producing a written version of the language, and then producing a faithful Bible translation.

Of course Bible translation does not necessarily mean that people have to be able to read, or to own a copy of the Bible. Bible translation for an oral language can work without people learning to read. But if the Bible is not translated into your language, then God's words cannot be heard in your language!

The by-product of this work was the preservation of many languages which might otherwise have been lost. Unfortunately, however, the history of Bible translation in Australia has not been generally impressive. In John Harris' words,

Given the predominance of evangelical missionaries and missionary societies in the long history of the Christian church in Aboriginal Australia, one of the most surprising and most shameful deficiencies has been the long failure to translate the Bible into the languages of the people.⁴

By way of contrast, at the Baptist centre at Serampore in India, William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward between them translated the Bible into 24 different Indian languages and dialects, and compiled dictionaries in Marathi, Sanskrit, Bengali and Punjabi.⁵

There were six powerful and painful reasons for this deficiency.

The first was that of assumed cultural superiority. Europe was assumed to lead the world in culture and civilisation, and therefore non-Europeans

⁴ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity*, Sutherland: Albatross, 1990, 829.

⁵ Tim Hiney, *On the Missionary Trail*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000, 223, 24.

were inferior, and their culture, including their language was inferior as well. Cultural superiority included traditional European farming, and the benefits of the industrial revolution and scientific discoveries. This assumption was also implemented in terms of all aspects of culture, including language. Rousseau's notion of the 'noble savage' was not popular in Britain. So Australia was regarded as effectively a *terra nullius*, because there was no recognisable civilisation.

Unfortunately this prejudice was later reinforced by Darwin's ideas, and the rise of the Eugenics movement, which thought that inferior stock should not breed. So despite the fact that the British brought with them translated Bibles, that is, the King James English version, there was little motivation to do the hard work of translating the Bible into obviously inferior languages. Government policy was that indigenous people should speak English. However as Dr Ros Kidd has written, in Queensland, there was generally inadequate education for Aboriginal children, but there was better on church missions. In particular Presbyterian and Lutheran missions included classes in Aboriginal language, 'an important factor in the continuation of Aboriginal culture'.⁶

This cultural arrogance was not confined to Australia. Robert Morrison completed his translation of the Bible into Chinese, and also produced an English-Chinese dictionary, and a Chinese-English dictionary, in the early 19th Century. When he offered the dictionaries to the Libraries of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, they refused them, on the grounds that they could not see any benefit in acquiring them!⁷

The common idea was that the future for indigenous people was assimilation, a polite way of saying that their future was to abandon their culture, their way of life, and their languages, and join the British culture, though at a lower level than the white invaders.

Sadly, there is plenty of evidence of cultural superiority expressed by missionaries. John Bulmer served as an Anglican missionary at Lake

⁶ Rosalind Kidd, *Black Lives Government Lies*, Redcliffe: Dr Ros Kidd, 2002, 22.

⁷ Christopher Hancock, *Robert Morrison and the birth of Chinese Protestantism*, London: T&T Clark Theology, 2008, 117-8.

Tyers in Victoria from 1862. He thought of indigenous people were intrinsically inferior, and regarded them as ‘physically, morally and indeed phrenologically ... very low’: he even said that ‘They will never be thoroughly civilised while they have to hunt for meat.’⁸ He later changed his opinions, and in the long term was highly regarded by the people he served for 51 years.⁹

It is sad, though not surprising to read comments from Christians and missionaries which expressed this cultural arrogance. However, despite their sins, God used them. And we should remember that they were among the very few Australians who were not killing indigenous people, or ignoring them, but were doing their best to care for them. And we should reflect on our own blindness to our own contemporary cultural captivities. The Bible tells us that the human heart is deceitful, and that sin is deceitful [Jeremiah 17:9, Hebrews 3:13]. We should turn to God every day to forgive and deliver us.

The second is that it is estimated that they were up to about 500 Australian languages or dialects.¹⁰ This was a formidable challenge, especially as they were spoken, not written languages.¹¹ So the translator would need to learn the language, then work with native-language speakers to produce a translation that was true to the original and also effective in communication in a very different culture. Then the people could either learn Bible passages by heart: or the Bible could be published, and people would then need to learn to read it in their language. Of course indigenous people made use of ‘Message sticks’, and also communicated by drawings. However these were not adequate to convey the literary quantity and complexity of the Bible.

The third was that of difficulty in translation. These were not European languages, with a common linguistic culture. They were entirely new and

⁸ Harris, *One Blood*, 210.

⁹ Harris, *One Blood*, 211-19.

¹⁰ John Harris, *We wish we'd done more: Ninety years of CMS and Aboriginal issues in north Australia*, Revised Edition, Adelaide: Openbook, 1998, p. 116.

¹¹ Though see Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal cultures of writing in Australia*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006.

different languages. And many missionaries were not trained linguists, and also had other responsibilities which demanded time and energy.

Here in Victoria, Edward Parker, a Wesleyan Methodist missionary, was appointed as Assistant Protector of aborigines in 1840 and founded a protectorate at Larrnebarramul. He was committed to translation the Bible, but, as he wrote in 1842,

For physical objects and their attributes, the language readily supplies equivalent terms, but for the metaphysical, so far as I have been able to discover, scarcely any ... What can be done with a people whose language knows no such terms as holiness, justice, righteousness, sin, guilt, repentance, redemption, pardon, peace etc, and to whose minds the ideas conveyed by these words are utterly foreign and inexplicable?¹²

We meet similar challenges today in preaching Christ to a post-Christian Western world, and a multi-cultural world today.

The fourth reason was that across Australia, so many indigenous groups were dying out. So one early translation team comprised Lancelot Threkeld, a Congregationalist missionary at Lake Macquarie, NSW, and Biraban, an Awabakal man. Actually Biraban was the translator, because he spoke both Awabakal and English! Threkeld had been commissioned by the London Missionary Society 'to acquire such a knowledge of the language of the people ... to preach to the people in their own tongue, and wonderful works of God'.¹³ Threkeld's policy was 'first obtain the language, then preach the gospel ...'¹⁴ He and Biraban began the work of translating Luke's gospel in 1824, and completed it in 1830. However by 1841 the mission had closed, as most of the tribe who spoke that language had died out. Across Australia, many indigenous people died by murder by the British either officially or unofficially, or by new diseases brought

¹² Bain Attwood, *The Good Country, The Djadja Wurrung, the Settlers, and the Protectorate*, Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2017, 125.

¹³ As quoted in Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2007, 104.

¹⁴ Harris, *One Blood*, 830.

to Australia by the British, or by hunger and thirst caused by the theft of their land, or by communal dislocation and despair. Threkeld wrote,

... the mission ceased, not from any want of support from the Government, nor from any inclination on my part to retire from the work, but solely from the sad fact that the Aborigines themselves had by then become almost extinct.¹⁵

Luke's gospel in Awabakal was published in 1892, as an historical curiosity.¹⁶ The common theory was that full-blood Aborigines would soon die out, and those of mixed descent should do their best to join the predominant Western culture.

The fifth reason was that so many indigenous people were displaced from their lands, that when they found refuge in the Government Protectorates or Reserves, they could come with a range of indigenous languages. When Alf Dyer opened the CMS mission at Oenpelli in 1925 he had 11 indigenous children who spoke 5 different languages!¹⁷ There was no common indigenous language, so it made sense to have English as the common language.

The sixth reason was that missionaries worked from settlements, and the indigenous people were nomadic. This reduced contact and relationship. As Vincent Donovan found when working with the nomadic Masai in East African, and as Thomas Ragland found in south India, the best way to evangelise people on the move is to join them on their journeys.¹⁸ As John Dunmore Lang observed, the best way to evangelise the indigenous people was

... to find some zealous missionary who was willing to conform to the Aborigines' wandering habits, who would follow them in a bark canoe as they skimmed across the

¹⁵ Harris, *One Blood*, 831.

¹⁶ For more on Threkeld, see Anna Johnston, *The Paper War: Morality, Print Culture, and Power in Colonial New South Wales*, Crawley: UWA, 2011, 60-103.

¹⁷ Harris, *One Blood*, 839.

¹⁸ Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, London, SCM, 1978; Amy Carmichael, *Ragland Pioneer*, Melbourne: Watts and Watts, 1924.

lakes, who would go hunting with them for possums and bandicoots in the depths of the forest, who would join with them in singing their tribal songs by the evening fire... Only such a person might secure their confidence and so be able to win them for Christ.¹⁹

The same view was later expressed by Dr Donald Thornton in 1936.

If it is desired to teach Christianity to these people, it should be insisted that the Christian teacher or missionary be prepared to visit their people in their own country, and not to gather them about a station or mission school.²⁰

But government policy continued to be to gather indigenous people to such centres, and most of their traditional home-lands had been lost.

So for these six powerful and painful reasons, translating the Bible into indigenous languages was not a priority for most missionaries. There was of course good will.

However, we should honour those who did engage in the demanding work of translation. They included William Watson, who worked on parts on John's gospel for the Wiradjuri in NSW in the 1830s and completed a 2000 word Wiradju dictionary. In 1836 he recounts reading from the translated Bible, when a number of people

... came and sat with me one after another, and paid the greatest attention; they said they understood what I read. When I gave over reading, some of them said: 'Kurrandirung myengoo! Kurrandirung myengoo! - Book for black fellow! Book for black fellow!²¹

¹⁹ As quoted in Stuart Piggin, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia: Spirit, word and world*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996, 47.

²⁰ As quoted in Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church: The CMS Mission to the Aborigines of Arnhem Land 1908-1985*, Bendigo: Keith Cole Publications, 1985, 30.

²¹ van Toorn, *Writing*, 37.

Thomas Wilkinson translated part of Genesis for Tasmanian aborigines exiled to Flinders Island. Governor George Arthur believed that ‘The Bible is the most effectual mode of introducing civilisation.’²² Yet he described this work of translation as ‘imprudent!’ Arthur ‘could not understand that the only way to enter the hearts and minds of the Aborigines was through their language.’²³

The Methodist Francis Tuckfield who came to the Port Philip Settlement in 1838 translated parts of the Bible, and taught in the mission school in the local indigenous language.²⁴ In Melbourne both Bishop Perry and Lieutenant Governor Charles La Trobe were in favour of Bible translation when possible. Perry wrote,

Owing to the difficulty presented by the multiplicity of dialects, it was deemed advisable to conduct instruction in English, as a language which might be common to all; but the importance of preaching to them in the native tongue, and of translating the Bible and Liturgy, at least in the simple parts, as far as practicable was not to be lost sight of.²⁵

William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines on the Mornington Peninsula first led a Sunday service in Bunerong in 1840, and made some Bible translations.²⁶

George Taplin in South Australia translated parts of the Bible in Narrinyeri, and this was published in 1864, the first indigenous Bible publication. Lutherans led the way in South Australia. The most significant project in the 19th Century was that of the Lutheran mission called Bethesda at Coopers Creek in South Australia among the Diyari people. They

²² Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History*, Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018, 51.

²³ NJB Plomley as quoted in van Toorn, *Writing*, 100.

²⁴ Stuart Piggin & Robert D Linder, *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1740-1914*, Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2018, 226.

²⁵ Kenny, *Lamb*, 110, and 104.

²⁶ Marie Hansen Fels, ‘I succeeded once’: *The Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula 1839-40*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2011, 97, 393-97.

published the whole New Testament in 1897. Bob Love worked with Njimandum, Barungga and Woonoonmoi in Western Australia to translate Mark and Luke's gospel in the 1930s and 40s. The CMS missionary Nell Harris began translation work at Oenpelli in 1933, and published Mark and 1 John. CMS missionary Len Harris at Roper River and Groote Eylandt worked with Grace, Joshua, and Bidigainj, and translated Mark and James into Nungubuyu in the 1940s.

There was a later move to increase Bible translation in the 1950s, led by such heroes as Mary Moody, Judith Stokes, Peter Carroll, Earl Hughes, Meryl Rowe, and Julie Waddy in the Northern Territory. This was assisted by cooperation with Wycliffe Bible Translators SIL [Summer Institute of Linguistics]. Paul and Ann Eckert spent 40 years helping with the translation of the Bible into Pitjantjatjara as Pukatja [Ernabella]. The full New Testament was published in 2002, and it is planned to publish the Old Testament, so it will be the first complete Bible in a traditional aboriginal language. Paul Eckert said, 'I could see that having the work of God in their own language empowered that church to grow, rather than being taught by outsiders.'²⁷

In 2007, the first complete edition of the Bible in an indigenous language was finally published. This was the *Holi Baibul*, in the Kriol language. John and Joy Sandefur had begun work on the Kriol language and then the Kriol Bible in the 1970s. Kriol had developed among indigenous people as a common language, and so this made good sense. Translation took over 29 years. It was undertaken by a team of native Kriol speakers and finally brought to fruition by Rev. Canon Gumbuli Wurrumara.²⁸ The publication was a joint venture of The Bible Society, Lutheran Bible Translators, The Church Missionary Society, the Anglican church, Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Australian Society of Indigenous Languages.

Significant progress was made when the Bible was translated. Harry Huddleston commented on the Kriol Bible,

²⁷ *Eternity*, ed 91, May 2018, 13, and see also *Eternity*, ed 92, June 2018, 8.

²⁸ Murray Seiffert, *Gumbuli of Ngukurr: Aboriginal Elder in Arnhem Land*, Brunswick East: Acorn Press, 2011, 303-06.

I always thought I understood English. I read the English Bible every day and I do think I understood it all right. But I suppose I have to sit there and think about it a lot. But when I read the Kriol Bible, I understood it right away.²⁹

Or in the words of Maratja Dhamarrandji, Djambarrpuyagu Translator, Elcho Island,

The Word of God in the heart language of the people can withstand all the pressures of life. This is what our people need, the Word of God in the language of the people. It is essential for our survival.³⁰

Why is Bible translation important?

God speaks to us in our language, directly, and without an unnecessary sense of cultural distance or alienation. There are enough challenges and difficulties in our understanding and receiving the Bible without having to read and hear it in a foreign language, or a partly known language. The Bible is a demanding literary document, and a knowledge of day-to-day English is scarcely sufficient for deep understanding. Of course the Bible remains a document from an ancient and alien culture, and translations should not try to cover this up. But they should work at reliability and comprehensibility, so that we feel hear and see the full impact of God's written words.

If God speaks in our language, then he understands our language, and so we can pray from our hearts in our language and he will understand not just our words, but our hearts. Praying in our own language, in our words, expresses our own identity most easily, both our cultural and personal identity. We are set free to speak to God in our own words by a translated Bible, not least because the Bible includes prayers for us to pray.

Our common humanity as created beings made in God's image means

²⁹ Harris, *We Wish*, 167.

³⁰ <https://www.biblesociety.org.au/2012/domestic/indigenous.html>. For more on Bible translation into indigenous languages, see Lake, *The Bible*, 58-75, 321-27.

that we should all know God. Bishop Perry wrote in defence of the evangelisation of the indigenous people and the Chinese immigrants of Victoria, and referred to,

... the adaptation of the Christian religion to all the various races of mankind, and of the capacity of the whole human family, under the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit, for understanding, believing, and rejoicing in those 'good tidings of great joy' which the ministers of Christ are commanded to proclaim to all nations.³¹

If God speaks in our language, then we are better able to speak God's words to others who speak our language. As John Harris comments,

I believe there is a connection between the failure to pay emphasis on Bible translation and the failure to give recognition to Aboriginal leadership.³²

Or, to put it positively, reading the hearing the Bible in your own language, and praying in our own language, will give you confidence to speak to others about God in your own language.

In Victoria, Nathanael Pepper famously began preaching to his fellow Aborigines in their language within a month of his conversion in 1860 to great effect.³³ In Ernabella in South Australia in the 1950s, the Pitjantjatjara language was taught, and Bible studies were in the local language. By the 1960s, strong indigenous leaders were being raised up by God in this community.

In thinking about a wise policy in terms of the use of language today, it is important to realise the diversity of context of indigenous and part-indigenous people. Some live in out-back communities using a living indigenous language. Some live in communities of mixed language, where

³¹ Charles Goodman, *The Church in Victoria during the Episcopate of the Right Reverend Charles Perry, First Bishop of Melbourne, etc*, Melbourne: Melville, Mullen and Slade, 1892, 397.

³² Harris, *One Blood*, 855.

³³ Kenny, *Lamb*, 14,15.

they use their own language and also use English. For some English is their only language. And for some, their ancestral language has been lost.

On the broader cultural issue, I think that when possible we should encourage and enable indigenous people to know their own indigenous culture [and language, if it is available], and also to know Western culture, and the English language. If they are bi-cultural, then they will be able to decide what mixture of those two cultures they want to live in and embrace. And no doubt different people in different contexts will make different decisions. For some live in majority indigenous communities, some live in mixed communities, and some live in communities in which they are a small minority.

There is currently a move to teach local indigenous languages in government schools, both to indigenous children and others who want to learn them. Apparently indigenous students who learn their own language and learn in their own language as well as English at school are more likely to finish school and go on to further education.³⁴ If this is true, it is likely that a similar policy would work well in churches.

In the words of Keith Cole,

The communication of Christ cross-culturally can only take place effectively in the language in which the recipient thinks and speaks voluntarily. An Aboriginal person thinks and speaks in his or her vernacular. This then is the language in which the deep spiritual truths should be presented and expressed ... Another serious consequence follows the

³⁴ Here are some resources:

<http://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/152110/teaching-aboriginal-languages-in-schools>

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/language/teaching-aboriginal-languages-at-school>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-20/let-children-speak-the-languages-of-their-ancestors/9446860>

<http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/>

https://www.ternitynews.com.au/culture/game-changer-in-indigenous-education-honoured/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ENW122062018&utm_content

preaching of the gospel in English to non-English speakers. Automatically Christ becomes equated with the religion and culture of the white conqueror instead of being associated with the universal saviour of the world.³⁵

What remains to be done?

Here is what is needed.

1. Teachers, social workers, police, doctors, nurses, builders, carpenters, plumbers, shop-keepers, people who run small businesses etc should go and live and work long term in indigenous communities, and learn any living local indigenous language, in order to help to educate and train indigenous young people, join and strengthen the local community, and support, encourage and train the local indigenous Christians and their church.
2. Trained gospel workers and Bible teachers and pastoral workers should go long-term to live and work in indigenous communities, and learn any living local indigenous language, to train up young people, and strengthen and support indigenous people in gospel and Bible ministry, and help raise up the next generation of indigenous leadership for the community and for gospel ministry.
3. Christians should provide servant-hearted support for local indigenous gospel and church ministry near where they live.
4. Christians should pray for indigenous people, and especially for those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should pray that they will read and hear the Bible read and taught, and that God's holy and powerful words will shape them in heart, mind, soul, and strength.
5. Christians should provide financial support for local indigenous churches and gospel ministries; for training provided at Nungalinya College in Darwin; for the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship; for the Bible Society and Wycliffe Bible translators

³⁵ Cole, *Mission to Church*, 188,89.

for work on Australian indigenous languages; and for training up young indigenous people to be leaders in their communities and in gospel ministry.

6. Christians should exert social and political pressure on our society and our governments:
 - to respect and encourage indigenous leaders;
 - to allow different indigenous peoples in different places to decide how they will live, and how they will engage with their traditional culture and Western culture.
 - to ‘Close the gap’ in health, education, housing, justice, community life and political participation, but without imposing an assimilation which requires the abandonment of indigenous culture and without imposing Australia-wide policies without regard to local values, ideals, and practices.
 - to repent of racism and any sense of cultural superiority, and repent of any expression of Western cultural superiority.
7. We should pray for and expect such a growth in maturity in Christ among indigenous people, and such a growth in Christian ministry, that we will see indigenous people helping to evangelise Australia, and evangelise the world. We believe that God’s great gospel plan will be achieved in the indigenous peoples of Australia, and that that God will also use them to achieve his great gospel plan in his world.

Why should we respond?

The first reason is based on the idea that humanity is one race, one blood. Paul famously characterised all humanity as fundamentally one, a unified human race. He said,

[God] made from one man [literally ‘one blood’], every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place... [Acts 17:26].

This belief in our commonality, that we are of ‘one blood’ was the basis for the Christian view of the equal value of all human beings, and so the basis for concern for indigenous people, and the desire to see them come to faith in Christ, as both Robert Kenny and John Harris point out.³⁶

The second is that as we are all made of one blood, so we are also saved by one blood, the blood of Christ.

For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things ...making peace by the blood of his cross [Colossians 1:19,20].

In the words of John Saunders, preaching after the Myall Creek massacre of 1838,

Does it seem strange to speak of the majesty of the New Hollanders [aborigines]? Wilt thou despise the Saviour of the world? Then despise not him who sprang out of the same stock, despise not him for whom Christ died. The Saviour died as much for him as he did for you. Now by every sentiment of humanity and love you are bound to love him, to admit him to your fraternity and to treat him as a fellow man.³⁷

³⁶ Kenny, Lamb; 13, Harris, *One Blood*, 34,35.

³⁷ ‘Claims of the Aborigines’, a sermon preached by the Rev John Saunders, Bathurst Street Baptist Church, Sydney, 14 October 1838. *From The Colonist*, 17 October 1838.

The third reason is because we see people of all nationalities, ethnic groups, tribes and languages gathered together around God's throne worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation.

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
people from every tribe and language and people
and nation
[Revelation 5:9].

In the words of Isaac Watts.

From all that dwell below the skies
Let the Creator's praise arise
Alleluia!
Let the Redeemer's name be sung
Through every land by every tongue.
Alleluia!