

How Understanding God's Love Can Change a Culture

The mother tongue translators for the Mbam cluster of languages in Cameroon, West Africa, had gathered to say farewell to their SIL translation consultant, Patricia Wilkendorf, who was leaving for an extended time in the U.S.

Patricia had given a lot of thought to how she might encourage the translators to keep translating clearly and accurately, using all the resources of their language, while she was gone. She decided to tell them the story about the Hdi people and how God helped them recognize their word for unconditional love.

When it was her turn to speak, she began to tell them the story in their common language, French. God had prompted translator Lee Bramlett to ponder the Hdi word for love. Lee realized that he'd heard the Hdi people use two forms of the word—*dvi* and *dva*—but he'd never heard *dvu*, which language patterns suggested should be possible.

Patricia told her audience that Lee asked the Hdi translation committee, "Could you *dvi* your wife?" "Yes," they said. She explained that *dvi* meant that the wife had been loved but the love was gone.

She sensed that her listeners were tracking with her. They didn't have a grammar construction like that, but they knew what it meant to stop loving a wife.

She went on: Lee asked the Hdi men, "Could you *dva* your wife?" "Yes," the Hdi men said. *Dva* love depended on the wife's actions, Patricia explained. The wife would be loved as long as she remained faithful and cared for her husband well.

There were murmurs of agreement as Patricia's friends

acknowledged that, yes, they understood the meaning of *dva*. In their culture, too, wives were often treated like servants, receiving love as long as they were useful and faithful.

Then Patricia repeated Lee's next question: "Could you *dvu* your wife?" To the Hdi men, she said, that would mean, "Could you love her even if she never got you water, never made you meals? Even if she committed adultery, could you love her then?"

The Mbam men's response was immediate. They laughed—exactly as the Hdi translators had done. It was clear that, like the Hdi men, they were thinking, "Of course not. That would never happen!"

Quietly she quoted Lee's next words: "Could God *dvu* people?"

Silence. Total silence. And then, one by one, these men who were responsible for conveying God's truths to their communities began to click their tongues, signaling their recognition of a surprising new truth. God loved them unconditionally. The idea was as new to them as it had been to the Hdi translators. God loved them not because of what they did or how they loved Him, but because it was in His divine nature to love them. He would never stop, whether or not they loved Him, whether or not they served Him, whether or not they were faithful to Him.

When she thought they were ready to move on, Patricia quoted Eph. 5:25: "Husbands, '*dvu*' your wives, just as Christ *dvu*-d the church..."

Again silence reigned—silence longer and deeper than before. She could almost see the thoughts swirling around in their heads. Were they really to love their wives that way? Unconditionally? No matter what the wives did or didn't do? Impossible. Unheard of. And yet, if the God of the Bible told them to ... if He had set the example in Christ.

Patricia was caught a bit off guard. She'd meant to encourage her Mbam colleagues to seek out the very best ways to represent Scriptural truths in their mother tongues, and they had grasped her intention. But she hadn't predicted the extent to which they'd begin to engage with the Scripture and catch a vision for a whole new way of relating to their wives.

These men had discovered one of the defining elements of Christianity: God expects his followers to respect and honor women; men are to love their wives and to care for widows and orphans. That's not a given in most societies, but it's a distinguishing characteristic of communities that have been transformed by God's Word.

Translated and understood, God's Word has incredible power to change lives and communities. It transforms the way people relate to God and the way they relate to others—including women. It gives them a whole new worldview.

The Good News is reaching community after community more quickly than ever before. Thirteen years ago, 3,000 people groups had no access to God's Word and no translation project underway. According to the 2012 statistics, that number has now dropped to 1,967. Someday, the last community will hear and understand the Word of God, and all will have access to His Kingdom.

Bob Creson *is the president and CEO of Wycliffe USA.*