



Watchman Fellowship, Inc.

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Friday, July 27, 2012

Dear Friends,

Last month I reported on a controversial policy adopted by Wycliffe Bible Translators, a very well respected Christian missionary organization, and some of their partner ministries. In order to be less offensive to Muslim readers who would likely misinterpret the Scriptures, Wycliffe had approved the use of substitute phrases for the “familial terms” describing God throughout the Bible. Thus, verses that literally read “God the Father” and “Son of God” in Greek are being translated as God the “Guardian” and “Beloved of Allah” in some Arabic and Bengali translations designed to reach Muslim readers.

I strongly feel this strategy is a disaster and will have the unintended consequences of compromising a central message of the Bible while weakening confidence in the inspiration and preservation of God’s word. Muslims *will* find out and publicize this as evidence that the Bible and Christians can’t be trusted. This can do incalculable damage to Muslim evangelism.

LATEST UPDATE

Apparently, this policy has sparked a huge reaction from thousands of Christian individuals and organizations. Like us, many Christians have directly contacted Wycliffe and respectfully requested that they reconsider this policy (See the copy of our letter to Wycliffe below).

I am pleased to report that Wycliffe has announced their willingness to reconsider their guidelines. At their request, World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has agreed to conduct an “independent external audit” of Wycliffe’s translation policy (www.worlddea.org/news/3934). Please pray that as a result of this independent review, this policy will be overturned.

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD

Do you agree that “Son of God” should remain in every translation of the Bible? Last month I asked you to join your voice with mine by sending me an email saying that you stand with me on this. As cited in my letter to Wycliffe, I am pleased to report that over 600 of you have already written back or emailed to let me know that you wholeheartedly agree. There is still time to let your voice be heard. If you have not yet done so, please send me an email (JWalker@watchman.org) saying “I concur.” Your name and email will remain confidential.

SUMMER MISSIONS REPORT

I am also asking for your prayer and financial support to help us continue our ongoing ministry of “defending the faith” and to help our Summer Missions. Our summer calendar has been filled with great witnessing opportunities to reach out to Mormons. We have teamed up with hundreds of Christians to share the gospel at major Mormon events including:

- **Mormon Miracle Pageant in Manti, Utah** (June 22–30). In this huge outdoor production, a cast of 800 Mormons reenact key scenes from the Book of Mormon and early Mormon history viewed by over 80,000 Mormons and non-Mormons who attend the nightly

performances. Watchman has had staff missionaries at each pageant for over 20 years. We team up with many other Christians to share the gospel and distribute Christian literature.

- **Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, NY** (July 13–21). Billed as “America's largest and most spectacular outdoor theatrical event” a costumed cast of over 650 present the story of the Book of Mormon on a 10 level stage with Hollywood-style special effects. Annual attendance has been running about 30,000 the last few years. I first attended this pageant as a Mormon and many years later returned as a Christian to witness and pass out Christian tracts. This year Tim Martin from Watchman Fellowship joined with other Christian missionary teams to share the message of God’s grace.

- **Mormon Temple Opening, Brigham City, UT** (Aug. 18–Sept. 15). The LDS Church is opening a new Temple in Brigham City. There are only about 140 Mormon temples in the world and once dedicated only “temple-worthy” Mormons are allowed access. When a new temple is built, however, there is an “open house” where visitors are allowed in for silent tours before the temple is dedicated. Tens of thousands of Mormon and non-Mormons often flock to take advantage of the rare opportunity to see inside. Watchman had a team sharing Christian gospel literature and witnessing at the Mormon temple opening in Cebu, Philippines two years ago. Earlier this year, I was able to attend the Temple opening in Kansas City, MO. Next month, Renae Storms from Watchman will be traveling to Utah to join with other Christian missionaries to share the gospel at the Brigham City Temple Opening.



Hill Cumorah Pageant: An actor portrays Jesus visiting America in a scene from the Book of Mormon.



Manti, Utah: One of the teams of Christians at the Mormon Miracle Pageant passing out Christian literature and sharing the biblical Gospel of Grace with thousands of Mormons in attendance. Watchman has had a team at Manti each summer for over two decades.



Brigham City, UT: The new Mormon temple begins tours next month. Pray for our missions outreach.

CAN YOU HELP THIS SUMMER?

Please pray for the thousands of Mormons who received (or will receive) a Christian witness, and gospel literature at these events. Also pray that we will have the resources to continue and expand our outreach. Your support keeps us on the front lines of apologetics!

Yours in Christ,


James K. Walker,
President

P.S. Like many summers, we are now seeing a sharp drop off in donations. Because of summer missions, we have additional expenses with printing free literature, travel, etc. above and beyond our normal ministry expenses. Would you be willing to help us with a donation to help fund our ministry this month? **DONATE ONLINE:** www.watchman.org/donate



Monday, July 23, 2012

COPY

Dr. Robert E. Cooley
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Bob Creson
President
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Dear Dr. Cooley and Mr. Creson:

I understand that the translation policy of Wycliffe USA and their ministry partners concerning the use of familial divine titles such as “Son of God” and “God the Father” in translations for Muslim readers is currently under review. On behalf of my staff and over 600¹ of our ministry prayer partners and supporters, I respectfully request that you revise your translation policy to discontinue the substitution of non-literal phrases such as “beloved of God” and God the “Guardian.”

While I am not a scholar or linguist, I have had two years of Greek and Hebrew and have a basic awareness of the important and difficult choices translators must often make to assure that the scriptures are clearly understood in a target language. I also teach the course Encountering Islam at Criswell College in Dallas and I am very aware that Muslims often misinterpret phrases like “Son of God” claiming that would mean God procreated a son through sexual union with a wife or consort.

Interpretation Problem Not a Translation Problem

The Muslim difficulties with familial titles for God and Jesus are not caused by translation but by interpretation. This is not a case of a translator using a “dynamic equivalent” because the target language lacks a corresponding word. That may be valid with a phrase like “white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18) when the target culture has never seen snow and the simile would be meaningless. There are, however, perfectly valid words for “son” and “father” in Arabic that have virtually the same lexical value as the corresponding Greek and English words. Muslims misunderstanding of those phrases is based on misinterpretation. That misinterpretation is rooted in Muslim theology that is adverse to these and many other clear Bible doctrines. It must be addressed on that basis.

First century Jewish leaders also misunderstood the phrase “Son of God” and found it to be very offensive. “The Jews insisted, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God’” (John 19:7). If Jesus claimed instead to be merely “beloved of God,” He may have had had a more positive reception. Perhaps the whole crucifixion thing could have been avoided. Yet in His infinite wisdom, Jesus clearly chose the more provocative title for reasons we can never fully know. Who are we to improve upon the divine claims of Christ? He intentionally made these claims and chose specific titles with full foreknowledge that He would be misunderstood and condemned for using them.

Use of the Phrase “Son of” in the Qur’an

The fact that this is *solely* an interpretation issue is evidenced by the Qur’an itself. In the Qur’an, the term “son of” is often used of Jesus without implying any kind of procreation or sexual union. Jesus (Isa) is given the title “son of Mary” by Allah himself (Qur’an 5:116). No Muslim, however, interprets that to mean that Mary must have had a sexual partner or male consort. The Qur’an clearly teaches that although Jesus is the “son of Mary,” she was nevertheless a virgin (19:20-21). Thus, when the Qur’an uses the words “son of,” Muslims choose not to interpret this sexually.

Muslim misunderstandings of the titles like “Son of God” or “God the Father” are not based on limitations or special problems inherent in Arabic or other target languages. It is a problem of interpretation. This problem is properly addressed through education and explanation not by obscuring divinely inspired truth claims and titles or by randomly substituting some alternative terminology that is more compatible with Muslim theology.

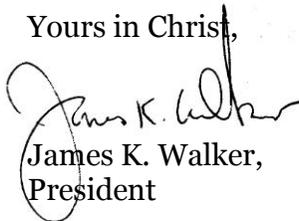
Unintended Consequences

Islam teaches that the “people of the book” (Jews and Christians) have altered the Bible making it untrustworthy (Qur’an 2:75-77; 105). Wycliffe’s current policy inadvertently gives fuel to those charges. Muslim scholars are not fools. They are well aware that ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ literally means “the Son of God.” Muslim apologists will go viral with this. They will try to use this as evidence to prove their case that the “people of the book” cannot be trusted. They will say, “Here is the evidence that Christians indeed do change the Bible from what it *actually* said to what they *want* it to say.”

In 2010, I participated in a two-hour debate comparing the teaching of the Qur’an with the teachings of the Bible with Khalil Meek, president of the Muslim Legal Fund of America. I do not look forward to my next debate when I must try to explain or defend the actions of Christian translators who suppress the original wording and invent brand new titles for God out of whole cloth that have no connection to the words in the original Greek. While one may make a case for choosing an *accurate* translation over a *literal* translation, in this case you have neither.

I understand the translators are motivated by a desire to reach more Muslims with the message of the Bible in a way that does not unnecessarily offend. I am convinced, however, that this strategy will have the unintended consequences of compromising important truth God has chosen to reveal to humanity concerning His divine nature. It will also weaken confidence in the inspiration and preservation of God’s word. Muslims *will* find out and publicize this as evidence that the Bible and Christians cannot be trusted. I fear this will do incalculable damage to Muslim evangelism.

Yours in Christ,



James K. Walker,
President

P.S. As a past donor of Wycliffe/SIL, I greatly respect the mission and legacy of Wycliffe USA and its partners. I pray for God’s continued blessing on each translator and staff member. Please accept this letter as it was intended – as a respectful but passionate plea from a brother who cares.

¹ In June I polled about 10,000 of our supporters and ministry partners concerning this issue and have received (so far) over 600 letters and emails expressing alarm over this development and asking me to share these concerns directly with you.