

be of useful service. So after a year in the relative security of East Africa, the Beckers were back in Oicha to rebuild what the guerrillas had destroyed.

Becker was eighty-three before he agreed to return to the United States and retire. Art Buchwald, the well-known American newspaper columnist, wrote of him: “In all of Congo, the man who made the greatest impression on us was an American missionary doctor named Carl K. Becker.... We couldn’t help thinking as we left Oicha that America had its own Dr. Schweitzer in Congo.”<sup>18</sup> But the greatest tribute ever paid Becker may have been made by an African medical trainee: “Many missionaries had preached Jesus Christ to me, but in the *munganga* [doctor] I have seen Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

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## **William Cameron Townsend and Bible Translation**

Bible translation, like medicine, can be viewed properly as a twentieth-century missions specialty, but virtually all pioneer Protestant missionaries were Bible translators—even as they were amateur medical specialists. William Carey is remembered as one of the first and most prolific of these missionary translators, but more than a century earlier the dedicated and energetic John Eliot translated the Scriptures for the Algonquin Indians of Massachusetts. It was Carey who made Bible translation an accepted, integral part of missionary work. Other well-known Bible translators included Robert Morrison, Adoniram Judson, Ann Judson, Robert Moffat, and Henry Martyn.

Not until the twentieth century, however, did Bible translation take on a new image. This came about with the introduction of the science of linguistics—and the tireless efforts of W. Cameron Townsend and his twin organizations, Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe Bible Translators, which became the largest independent mission agency in the world. Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) was founded in an Ozark farmhouse in 1934 as Camp Wycliffe by Townsend and L. L. Legters, both of whom were concerned about linguistics training for prospective Bible translators. But as important as SIL was to the work of Bible translation, it soon became evident that with its secular nature, it was not suitable as a mission support organization. Thus, in 1942 Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT) was officially established for the purpose of receiving funds for the support of missionary translators and to publicize the ongoing field work. The twin organizations, though separate, had interlocking directorates and the same goals and philosophy, but different duties to perform.

Cam Townsend was born in California in 1896 during the difficult economic period following the Panic of 1893, and much of his early life was plagued by poverty. After high school he enrolled in Occidental College, a Presbyterian school in Los Angeles. During his second year there he joined the Student Volunteer Movement and was further challenged by missions when John R. Mott came to the campus to speak. Then, during his junior year, the Bible House of Los Angeles appealed for Bible salesmen for Latin America. Townsend volunteered and was assigned to Guatemala.

Accompanied by a college friend, he left for Guatemala in 1917. Selling Bibles in Central America seemed like a worthwhile ministry, but he soon discovered that most of the Cakchiquel Indians could not read Spanish and that their own language was yet unwritten. Some people seemed offended by his preoccupation with selling Spanish Bibles. “Why, if your God is so smart,” asked an Indian one day, “hasn’t he learned our language?”<sup>20</sup>

Townsend was taken aback by the blunt question—a question that changed his life. He dedicated the next thirteen years to learning their language, reducing it to writing, and translating the Scriptures. Without prior linguistic training, he faced tremendous obstacles. The language, for example, had four different “k” sounds that to him were barely

distinguishable, and the verb forms were mind-boggling. One verb could be conjugated into thousands of forms, indicating time, location, and many other ideas besides simple action. It all seemed like an impossible task until he met an American archaeologist who advised him to quit trying to force the Cakchiquel language “into a Latin mold,” and instead seek to find the logical pattern on which the language is based. That advice changed the course of his language study, and it led eventually to his forming a linguistics training program.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Townsend’s strong will and independence often clashed with the more conservative views of those around him. When his work as a Bible salesman ended, he joined the Central American Mission, only to realize that evangelism, not translation work, was what the mission expected of him—a factor that created strained relations. During this time, he married Elvira Malmstrom, who was also serving as a missionary in Guatemala, and her physical and emotional difficulties added to the strain with the mission—and to the marriage. Though she had at one point insisted that there was no problem “with my mind”—that rather “my problem pure and simple has been selfishness,” Townsend blamed her problem on “extreme nervousness,” during which time “she loses control of herself and says and does things painful to me and hurtful to our work.”

Whatever the cause, the mission board had censured her because her “condition is still causing considerable embarrassment to the work,” adding that “there is a difference of opinion as to the extent to which you are responsible for your actions.”<sup>21</sup> Despite the problems, Elvira continued on in the work until her untimely death in 1944.

After ten years of translation work, the Cakchiquel New Testament was finished, and Townsend was eager to translate the Scripture for other tribes. But the mission wanted him to remain with the Cakchiquels. Because of these and other philosophical differences, he eventually resigned. Working under the authority of others was difficult for him, and he had insisted that administrators from the home office should not be making decisions of strategy for missionaries on the field. In 1934, with L. L. Legters, he founded Camp Wycliffe in Arkansas—a disorganized and unimposing venture that grew into the world’s largest independent Protestant mission organization.

Over the years, Townsend was embroiled in numerous controversies. The most often-repeated criticism was that he was attempting to gain an entrance in foreign countries under a false pretense, while at the same time being less than honest with supporters at home. To government officials, critics charged, the linguists claimed to be merely language specialists and literacy teachers, when in fact they were missionary Bible translators. To their mission supporters, their identity was reversed. So heated was the controversy that one veteran missionary returned from Central America to warn churches about the “dishonesty” and “fakery” of Townsend.<sup>22</sup>

Good relations with foreign governments was a top priority, but again critics cried foul—particularly when Townsend was perceived as serving the agenda of socialist regimes. He was also perceived as being too friendly with Roman Catholics. In Latin America the hostilities ran deep between Catholics and Protestants. The vast majority of evangelical missionaries believed that there should be no cooperation with Catholics, but Townsend was more tolerant. “It’s possible to know Christ as Lord and Savior,” he wrote, “and to continue in the Roman Church.”<sup>23</sup> The test came when Paul Witte, a Catholic scholar, applied to become a translator under Wycliffe. Townsend sent a letter of support to the entire Wycliffe membership: “We must not depart from our nonsectarian policy one iota if we are to keep entering countries closed to traditional missionary organizations.”<sup>24</sup> But despite his plea, Witte was denied membership by a two-thirds majority of the WBT voting delegates.

Roman Catholics were not the only unacceptable candidates for Wycliffe membership. In 1949, with the application of Jim and Anita Price, the issue of accepting Pentecostals flared into a heated floor debate. Most of the members, while not denying the sincere Christian faith of Pentecostal believers, felt that they would be incompatible with the non-charismatic evangelicals that filled the ranks of the organization. Again Townsend upheld the nonsectarian policy of Wycliffe, asserting that the theological issues involved were “nonessentials” and threatening to resign his position as general director if the Prices were rejected. This time he won the battle.

His tolerance also extended to race. During a time when many evangelicals were still defending segregationist policies, he appealed to blacks and other ethnic minorities to become involved in Bible translation work. He deplored race prejudice, and in a letter to the board in 1952 he wrote, “Our constitution has nothing that savors of discrimination. You won’t find it in the New Testament either. Please send along all the non-Caucasian workers you can, if they make out good in courses.”<sup>25</sup>

His call for equal opportunities for women was another issue that aroused controversy among members and supporters. Allowing single women to work with married couples was an accepted fact in mission circles, but permitting them to go in pairs into remote tribal areas was quite another issue. He himself expressed doubts when single women first requested tribal work, but he quickly agreed that there would be no restrictions on their service. Despite loud objections from protectors of the “weaker sex,” by the 1950s there were several pairs of single women translators in Peru alone, among them Loretta Anderson and Doris Cox, who served as his prime example in defense of women translators.

They initiated their work in 1950 among the Shapras, one of the most feared headhunting tribes of the Peruvian jungle, led by the infamous Chief Tariri, who had won his position by killing his predecessor. Though “scared most of the time during the first five months,” they were committed to “the agonizingly slow job of learning the language.”<sup>26</sup> Soon Chief Tariri began helping them as a language informant, and a few years later he turned away from witchcraft and murder and became a Christian as did many in his tribe. Years later he confessed to Townsend, “If you had sent men, we would have killed them on sight. Or if a couple, I’d have killed the man and taken the woman for myself. But what could a great chief do with two harmless girls who insisted on calling him brother?”<sup>27</sup>



*William Cameron (“Uncle Cam”) Townsend, founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics.*

Unlike some mission founders and leaders, Townsend avoided authoritarian leadership. When SIL was first organized, he proposed that he be under the executive committee and ultimately under the vote of the membership. This, according to James and Marti Hefley, “was something new in the history of missions—a founder-director telling a crew of young green members, some unhappy with past decisions, to take charge. But he believed it was dangerous for one individual to have control. It meant he would have to use persuasion and charisma in attempting to put across his policies.”<sup>28</sup> Because of this self-imposed policy, he was frequently stymied in carrying out his innovative plans. After one heated debate between him and his executive committee, one of the committee members commented, “Uncle Cam is probably right. He may be ten years ahead of the rest of us as usual.”<sup>29</sup>

Following the death of his first wife, he married Elaine Mielke, a former supervisor of special education in Chicago. The Townsends served for seventeen years in Peru, during which time their four children were born. They then moved on to conduct translation work in Colombia. Though he would become recognized the world over as a great missionary statesman, Townsend always thought of himself first and foremost as a Bible translator—with one more language to go.

After fifty years of ministry, rather than contemplating retirement, he was preparing to go to the Soviet Union with Elaine. Having learned that there were some one hundred languages spoken in the Caucasus, many of which had no Bible translation, he was determined to become involved at the grassroots level once again. So at the age of seventy-two, with Elaine at his side, he found himself in a hotel overlooking Red Square in Moscow, studying Russian several hours a day. After their initial period of study was completed, they traveled into the Caucasus to confer with linguists and educators.

Throughout his life one single philosophy motivated him more than any other: his high view of the Bible. “The greatest missionary is the Bible in the mother tongue,” he was fond of repeating. “It never needs a furlough, is never considered a foreigner.”<sup>30</sup> But among the greatest missionaries of the twentieth century was Cam Townsend—a missionary who ranks alongside William Carey and Hudson Taylor in the nineteenth century. When he died in April of 1982, Bernie May emotionally spoke for the entire organization:

When the word came that Uncle Cam was gone, I had the feeling I’ve had on several occasions when flying a twin-engine airplane and one engine suddenly goes dead. All at once your goal becomes very important. You instantly turn to your guidance system. You keep on flying, but with a new intensity of reaching your destination as quickly as possible.... There are still 3,000 languages without the Bible.... This is our challenge. This is our call.<sup>31</sup>

During his lifetime and following his death, many of Townsend’s protégés effectively carried on the work. One of those was Kenneth Pike, who served for many years as director and president of SIL. Recognized the world over for his contributions to linguistics, he was the author of numerous scholarly works and was a professor at the University of Michigan. But he was also a missionary Bible translator in Mexico and other underdeveloped areas of the world where the Bible was unavailable in the native tongue. He felt as comfortable talking with an illiterate Mixtec Indian as he did with a distinguished French university professor; and with all his contributions to linguistic science, he remained first and foremost a missionary, eager to share the gospel with those who had never heard.

After graduating from Gordon College, Pike applied to the China Inland Mission but was rejected for missionary service due to his nervous disposition and his language difficulty. He then applied to other missions, but the only one to accept him was Wycliffe Bible Translators. When he arrived for training in 1935, Legters reportedly lamented, “Lord, couldn’t you have sent us something better than this?”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to translating the New Testament into the San Miguel Mixtec language, Pike helped other translators solve difficult linguistic problems, and every summer he taught at SIL. Making courses practical was always a top priority, and sometimes his lectures were as entertaining as they were scholarly. Even more entertaining than his lectures, however, were his language demonstrations that were often given to large public audiences—demonstrations showing how quickly an unknown language could be learned without an interpreter. On stage with Pike, along with several blackboards and a few props (sticks, leaves, and simple objects of various sizes), would be a stranger whom Pike had never met and whose language he did not know. Before the session was over, however, the two would be communicating amazingly well with each other.<sup>33</sup>



*Kenneth and Evelyn Pike*

Few linguists in history have received more honors and awards than did Dr. Kenneth Pike. With his first book, *Phonetics*, he “revolutionized the thinking of the field,” according to Professor Eric Hamp of the University of Chicago. And that was only the beginning, continues Hamp:

It is fair to say that something like one-half of all the raw data from exotic languages that has been placed at the disposal of theoretical linguists in the past quarter century can be attributed to the teaching, influence, and efforts of Kenneth Pike.... The boyish enthusiasm of Pike in all his studies and his modesty in attacking every fresh problem would scarcely suggest to the unprepared onlooker that he is in the presence of one of the few really great linguists of the 20th century.<sup>34</sup>

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## Clarence W. Jones and HCJB

At the beginning, missionary radio was not seen as a tool to be used independently of traditional missionary outreach. But though some missionaries were skeptical at first, they soon realized the value of having radio pave the way for them. “It has given traditional missionary effort a tremendous weapon and means to spread the gospel,” according to Abe Van Der Puy of World Radio Missionary Fellowship. “Until recently, in many parts of Latin America, missionaries had a very difficult time getting people to talk with them about the gospel. These people, however, have been willing to listen in the privacy of their own homes.... Many times when personal workers are dealing with individuals about the gospel, the person being dealt with will say, ‘Oh, that means you are like those of HCJB.’” “In recent decades, with the increasing size of transmitters and the greater affordability of transistor radios, Christian broadcasts are reaching more people than ever. According to Barry Siedell, “There is virtually no square foot on earth that isn’t reached sometime during the day by a gospel radio broadcast.”<sup>35</sup>

Like other specialized areas of missions, missionary radio had to fight its way into acceptance with the Christian public. Clarence W. Jones was a pioneer in this field who was not afraid to use the “tool of the devil.” People from his home church termed it “Jones’s folly.” Only a fool would go off to a foreign land to set up a radio station when there were only six receiving sets in the whole country. But Jones was convinced that