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## Gained in Translation: A Review of the First Nations Version

Justin Bailey

*Dordt University*, [Justin.Bailey@dordt.edu](mailto:Justin.Bailey@dordt.edu)

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## Gained in Translation: A Review of the First Nations Version

### Abstract

"Every translation lives in the tension between fidelity to the source material and intelligibility for the audience."

Posting about the book *First Nations Version* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/gained-in-translation-a-review-of-the-first-nations-version/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, First Nations Version, indigenous, translation, New Testament, Terry M. Wildman

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# Gained in Translation: A Review of the First Nations Version

Justin Bailey

October 20, 2021

**Title:** *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*

**Author:** Terry M. Wildman

**Publisher:** IVP

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**ISBN:** 978-0830813506

I have always loved learning other languages. Part of this surely owes to my having grown up in a family where I heard my mother speaking another tongue with my aunts and uncles. In high school, I studied French and German, Russian in college, and Hebrew, Greek, and Korean in seminary. I'm still trying with Spanish. I wish I could say that studying other languages has resulted in fluency in all these other tongues.

But what has always captivated me is the way that learning another language requires a certain posture, that of a beginner: the willingness to try, the willingness to fail, the willingness to surrender and submit to another cultural logic than your own. It lets you know that there are other ways of seeing and being in the world, accessible through learning other words.

In describing the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Luke identifies numerous diverse people groups who are present for the miracle. The Spirit empowers the believers to speak in other tongues, and each immigrant and pilgrim hears about the mighty works of God in *their own language*. Notice, the gift in this passage is not a universal language. No, each person hears their own native language. This means that the cultural backgrounds of those present are taken up and grafted into the story of the Jesus. The gift of the Spirit reframes but does not replace our cultural histories.

Whose language matters? Whose voice matters? Pentecost is the answer. Every tribe, tongue, and nation will be represented in God's kingdom (Rev 5:9). Missiologist Lamin Sanneh has called Christianity "a vernacular translation movement," in which no one culture can claim for itself sole possession of the adjective "Christian."

Christian mission requires the affirmation of the dignity of human language, translating God's words into native tongues. At least that is the way it should be, according to the

vision of Scripture. History shows us another side to the story. Joining other cultures has too often led to the replacement of one culture with another.

The *First Nations Version* is unique because it is a translation of the New Testament into English. And yet it is a translation done by representatives from the indigenous peoples of North America, for native peoples whose native languages have been all but replaced and forgotten. And so, the First Nations Version seeks to render the biblical text in the cultural logic and forms of meaning that resonate deeply with native peoples. The result, for both native and non-native readers—and I say this as a person who has tried to do my regular Bible reading out of this version for the last month—is illuminating, thought provoking, and moving.

No translation is perfect, as any translator will tell you. Every translation lives in the tension between fidelity to the source material and intelligibility for the audience. The goal is to convey the meaning of the text in appropriate cultural forms, without altering the underlying material of the source material. The First Nations Version team worked with One Book Canada and Wycliffe Bible Translators, employing these organizations' time-tested methods. One Wycliffe principle is that native speakers should be the ones making the decisions about the final form of a translated text. As non-indigenous readers encounter this version, we might wonder about some of the decisions. For example, we might wonder whether there are some concepts (such as the biblical category of "kingdom") that need to be retained and retaught rather than rendered in a different form ("good road").

But hopefully, for non-native readers, something else will happen first. The best way to become aware of your own cultural lenses is to look through someone else's lens. There are many cultural biases that we carry into the biblical text, and it is always easier to perceive "syncretism" in someone else's faith than to find it in our own. Perhaps, before we question the decisions of the indigenous translation team, this new version will call our cultural assumptions into question. New translations force us to wrestle with the way we understand key phrases in Holy Scripture: sin, salvation, church, kingdom. What do these words mean, really? What claim do they make on us? This is a conversation for the whole church, and we must take time to listen to voices long neglected.

For my part, I found the First Nations Version to be humbling and heartening. The fact that these native brothers and sisters have found Christ beautiful and believable—despite the grievous history of harm by Christians—fills me with hope. Their efforts, not just to decolonize their own faith but then to offer it back as a gift to the larger church, fills me with gratitude and joy. I am deeply thankful for the labor of love that this translation represents.

So may the vernacular translation movement continue. And perhaps, as we learn to speak the good news of Jesus in other words, it will open up other worlds.