

Chapter 1

God Calls, Enables and Sends

Even as a child, John Gibbens could not understand why Christians didn't just go and tell everyone about Jesus Christ. That is, everyone in England. His zeal didn't stretch any further than his own country. In 1962 he was a schoolboy when his teacher said, "In some countries people have never heard about Jesus Christ." Earlier that day John had been reading an article about Mongolia in a National Geographic magazine, so he asked his teacher if Mongolia was one of those places. She responded that perhaps it was. Young John hated language study, gained only three per cent in French and the thought of going abroad had never entered his head, so he simply filed this information away in his inquisitive mind as an interesting fact.

In Bible College his attitude to what he called 'missionary types' was far from complimentary. But in 1968, the year he married an English girl, God spoke to John powerfully through the words of Romans 15:20: *'My ambition has always been to proclaim the Good News in places where Christ has not been heard of.'* John believed the Lord was telling him to go to Mongolia.

Typically, he went to the library and read all he could about that country. He also wrote to mission organizations asking about Mongolia. All the responses stated that there was no mission activity in Mongolia. It was not possible to gain entry and there were no known Christians in Mongolia. The country was firmly under communist control. That didn't mean God had thus far not sent any Christians to the Mongolian nation. Various studies and history books offer various perspectives. *Naming God* does not aim to discuss those differences. It is focused on the recent history of Christianity in Mongolia.

In 1924, after the death of Bogd Gegen (the Buddhist leader equivalent to the Dalai Lama) Mongolia became a Socialist

Chapter 2

In God's Time

The Soviet Union began to collapse in 1989. The Sydney Morning Herald published an article by Yvonne Preston, the Herald's correspondent in Ulaanbaatar, titled, 'Out of the bear's lair', subtitled '... the country which has always been the pawn between the Chinese dragon and the bear's lair.' She knew the situation well. Some excerpts:

Mongolian industry is at a virtual standstill. With Soviet disintegration went the oil, food and drugs on which the country was utterly dependent. The country's hospitals have no drugs. Poorer and poorer nutrition is taking its toll among children and the elderly, and Ulan Bator's big Russian-style shops are as bare of goods as their Moscow counterparts. Ninety-five per cent speak Russian. Two or three per cent know Chinese and only a handful has any English.

"During the transition period, the threat of colonization by China is real," says T. Batbayer, a Mongol from the Academy of Sciences. "The trouble is there is a vacuum in people's minds now there is no communist ideology. We should fill this vacuum by homage to Genghis Khan. He can unify our minds."

National salvation will take more than homage to Mongolia's long dead hero. Attempts to revive the national religion of lama Buddhism after years of suppression are made difficult by the fact that few Mongol lamas now understand the language of the traditional Tibetan ceremonial. Beijing's old enemy, the Dalai Lama, is worshipped here as much as in Tibet, another cause for Chinese concern.

Chapter 3

Conflicting Worldviews



In 1992, when I went to Mongolia, the only tourist book available was a small handbook: *This is Mongolia*, published by the Mongolian government. On the back cover is the statement: ‘This book will give you a glimpse into the soul of the people dwelling in the very heart of Asia.’ There is no chapter on religion, but within the book it’s easy to see references to much of what the people believed and/or continue to believe. In a description of parts of the Soyombo national symbol of Mongolia which appear on its red and blue striped flag, are the words:

Each element of this symbol has its own meaning. The three-tongued flame crowning the emblem symbolises the nation’s past, present and future prosperity: from time immemorial fire has meant the continuation of the family and the clan. Depicted under the flame are the sun and the crescent, both old Mongolian totems. “We are the people whose father is the new moon and whose mother is the golden sun,” say old Mongolian legends.

Chapter 4

Moving forward – and back

In 1991, in an effort to clarify the terminology used in the Mongolian New Testament (the *Shin Geree*) the United Bible Societies held the first ever Bible translation workshop in Mongolia. From April 26 to May 7, two highly respected translation consultants, Larry Allen, translation consultant of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), and Dr. Danny Arichea, translation consultant for UBS, explained Bible translation principles. The workshop participants were Mongolians, who were representative of all the ‘groups’ who had openly embraced Christianity following the fall of communism in 1989. Dr. Arichea’s report follows (bold emphasis added):

Report on Mongolian visit

The first week was spent in checking I Samuel; the whole book was checked by the end of the week.

On the weekend of the first week, Dr. Jen-Li Tsai, Regional Secretary, arrived together with Larry Allen, an SIL member located in the Philippines. It was good for Jen-Li to see firsthand the Mongolian situation. While he was there he had sessions with Altaa and John Gibbens, both individually and jointly.

The second and third weeks (April 26-May 7) were devoted to the first ever translation workshop in Mongolia. About 30 people attended - mostly young people in their twenties, and all of them very young in the Christian faith. Not one of them was born in a Christian family; in fact only two of them have been Christians for two years. In spite of this, most of them were knowledgeable insofar as the New Testament is

Chapter 5

Sounding a Clear Call

In every battle there are two main protagonists. Rarely, if ever, has a battle begun over a single word. Figuratively speaking, a battle took place in Mongolia over the right ‘name’ for God in the Mongolian language. The two protagonists were the gifted translator and irascible Englishman, John Gibbens, and the ambitious, determined and equally irascible American missionary, Rick Leatherwood.

Under widely different circumstances, the two were responsible for two different translations of the Mongolian New Testament, one with a descriptive term for God, *Yertötsiin Ezen*, and the other giving God the well known title of Mongolia’s traditional deity, *Burhan*.

The preceding chapters covered the circumstances under which John Gibbens and his wife, Altaa, translated the first Mongolian New Testament, published by UBS in August 1990.

Rick Leatherwood’s book, *Glory in Mongolia* (2006) covers events during his time in Mongolia, including his selection of a team to translate and then publish the second Mongolian New Testament in 1996 using *Burhan* for God. Rick was not sent to Mongolia by a mission.

It’s important to note carefully the timeline of those early events, the references to God, and the subsequent results.

Rick went to Mongolia in October 1988, and has written about introducing God to a Mongolian, Mr Boiyo, who turned to Christ. Rick did not speak Mongolian, but Mr Boiyo spoke English, so Rick gave him an English New Testament. There was as yet no Mongolian New Testament.

In June 1990, Rick took a group of American Indians from four different tribes to Mongolia because ancient history

Chapter 6

The Receptor Language

Several reasons have been given for the rejection of the Bible Society of Mongolia's New Testament within the first few years of its publication. They included the rumour that John Gibbens had made up the term *Yertöntsiin Ezen*; the view that the Mongolian word *Burhan* is a proper noun which means God; the personalities of the two men responsible for the two NT translations; the persistent gossip among some missionaries about John Gibbens (despite the command to keep a tight rein on our tongues); the belief that nationalism played a major part in the choice of *Burhan* and the rumour that *Yertöntsiin Ezen* actually meant Satan. Regarding that final point, an American missionary wrote:

Mongolians in general had not even known the name or concept of *Satan*. When this archaic, wholly unknown usage of the term *yurtuntsiin ezen* in 2 Cor. 4:4 was discovered by certain opponents of the term *YE* for *God*, they circulated this information to advance their purposes. But it really was not a legitimate objection to the term *Yurtuntsiin Ezen* for *God* in the first place. It was instead an easy opportunity to slander the term *YE* for *God*.

Of all the reasons given for the rejection of the first NT, the unacknowledged yet most important and primary reason is that **the structure** of the Mongolian language is totally unlike the structure of written English. Missionaries had difficulties reading the Mongolian NT and therefore rejected it. Rick Leatherwood clearly told Ernie Pruitt that it was “a bad translation” and that was the reason for doing his own translation.

An obvious but key lesson for every missionary headed for a foreign mission field, is that scriptures that have been

Chapter 7

Copyright and the first Mongolian Bible

The fact that the Bible Society of Mongolia (BSM) held the copyright of the first Mongolian New Testament became a major problem when Rick Leatherwood's team prepared to translate the full Bible.

Before leaving England in 1989, John Gibbens had asked if the UBS wanted to hold copyright. UBS pointed out that copyright is held by a national Bible Society which is a member of UBS. At that time there was no Bible Society in Mongolia. Altaa and John therefore retained copyright until the Bible Society of Mongolia was established

When the second translation of the New Testament and then the full Mongolian Bible was proposed by Rick Leatherwood, UBS wanted to have access to the text of the first New Testament. BSM refused. Sharing the text was not an option, knowing that the computerized text of their translated work could be readily adapted for translations which would include what BSM saw as Buddhist/Shamanist related terminology.

As stated previously, it is UBS policy and the role of national Bible Societies who are members of UBS, to give the majority of churches what they want. The Associate General Secretary of the UBS Asia-Pacific Regional Office, who had previously endorsed the *Yertöntsiiin Ezen* terminology for God, indicated that financial and translation support could be available for the proposed new Bible project 'if it is initiated and owned by all the major stakeholders.' In Mongolia, the new terminology was what the majority of churches wanted.

Despite the bad press received by the second New Testament in the media and by secular Mongolian scholars and many Mongolians, the whole Old Testament was also translated and completed within four years by the same team led by Rick Leatherwood.

Chapter 8

The Scene in a New Millennium

In the year 2000, Patrick Johnstone estimated in *Operation World* that over 400 missionaries sent by 55 agencies from 22 countries had arrived in Mongolia to share the Good News.

In the year 2000, after arguing that everyone has the right of access to the Bible, the Bible Society of Mongolia received full registration from the government.

In the year 2000, after 10 years of freedom from Communism, the Mongolian nation elected a communist Government in their general elections.

In June 2000, an announcement beamed around the world that the first draft of the human genome had been assembled. The scientist and Christian, Francis Collins, subsequently wrote a book, titled *The Language of God*.

In July 2000, the entire Mongolian population was once again solemnly dedicated to 'Munh Tenger' (Eternal Sky) the Shamanist pantheon of 99 deities which were venerated by Genghis Khan.

On July 23, the Mongolian Bible Translation Committee, led by Rick Leatherwood, published the first translation of the whole Bible in the Mongolian language. It referred to God as *Burhan*, the title of Buddha known to every citizen of Mongolia. At a celebration service, 2,400 Bibles were sold that evening.

The Bible, called the *Ariun Bibli* (Holy Bible) had not been submitted to any internationally recognised Bible translation organisation such as UBS or Wycliffe so that the normal checking procedures for any reputable Bible translation could be carried out. As stated previously, there is evidence that a consultant from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) went to Mongolia to check the work. He is said to have

Chapter 9

A Term and a Name

Mongolia's new leader was a well-educated, cultured man who was also a gifted translator. So you could book into a Mongolian hotel room and find two significant books in a hotel drawer, one skillfully translated into the Mongolian language titled, 'The Teachings of Buddha (*Burhan*).' The other book the unprofessionally-translated Mongolian Bible which begins with the words: 'In the beginning *Burhan* created the heavens and the earth.'

The two scripture books for children shown on the next page were also available in Mongolia.

The book on the left, published in 2004, bears the photograph and signature of D. Choijamts, the leader of Buddhism in Mongolia. It is titled: "What do you know about *Burhan's* religion?"

Page 9: There are 400 million of *burhan's shashintan* (*burhan's* religionists), and 100,000 of those are in England.

Page 10: In 400 BC Buddha or *Burhan* teacher in the twilight years of having reached the age of 81...

Page 12: Dharma is *Burhan's* book or Buddhist doctrine.

Page 18: Buddhists do not believe in any creative, supernatural power which created the universe, watches over mankind, is personal, supernatural, or governs. Although on one hand Buddha was *Burhan*, on the other he was a person who attained enlightenment.

Page 32 answers the question: What are the holy records of *Burhan's* religion?

Chapter 10

Mission and Donor Responsibility

The Gospel Coalition website includes an article by Darren Carlson dated April 2017, titled '4 ways Satan uses Christian generosity for evil.' Christians would be wise to read the article. It included the statements:

Western Christians today are the wealthiest Christians in history, and many of them are very generous. It's estimated Christians around the world will give \$57 *billion* to global missions in 2017. While we can argue over whether Christians are generous enough, for now let's agree a lot of money is donated in the name of Jesus, and much of it comes from believers in the West.

Christians want to see their money used for good. Yet too often their donations have an unintended effect.

A journalist who is a Christian and who reports on what is or isn't done on the mission field, would firstly be seen as a Christian and secondly as a journalist. If the report is a negative one, Bible verses re being critical or judgmental would quickly be applied. If no names are mentioned and the negative reporting is done using 'a broad brush', it would inevitably cause the reader to think or say, "That would not be done by the mission(s) I have supported for decades".

Christian journalists/writers who are donors to missions are in an awkward category. Like thousands of others, we place implicit trust in missions and are usually quick to defend them if there is the slightest hint of criticism. We willingly give to a mission that is sending missionaries into a mission field, believing as we give and pray that what the missionary says and does honours God and is for the benefit of the unsaved.

Chapter 11

Good and Bad News

In 2007 some good news arrived in the following email from Altaa and John:

Right now the translation consultants working with the Mongolian team by email have checked more than 95% of the Bible.

Firm Foundations

The following statement was released in 2007 by Jeanice Connor, a member of New Tribes Mission and a missionary to Mongolia who speaks Mongolian. Jeanice is an accomplished linguist and lecturer in linguistics at the Summer Institute of Linguistics training schools for Bible translators. (Bold emphasis added to the statement):

The following is a copy of the “first draft” of the Preface to the New Tribes’ Mongolian translation of the world famous publication “Firm Foundations”. The author (New Tribes linguist Jeanice Conner of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia) wishes to make known that while it may no doubt be subject to stylistic editing prior to publication, the research information of course will not change.

PREFACE to the Mongolian translation of FIRM FOUNDATIONS: Creation to Christ.

It is the desire of New Tribes Mission around the world to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ and to establish New Testament churches in areas where the gospel has never been clearly preached before. Our experience has been that people who understand the whole of the Bible have a far better understanding of who Christ is, and, whether

Chapter 12

Do Names Matter?

Today God is being referred to as *Burhan* by the majority of Mongolian and missionary church members. But the controversy over a term for God is not forgotten history. I asked for a comment for this book from Hugh Kemp, now Academic Dean at Redcliffe Theological College, UK. He sent this response:

The church in Mongolia is using the word *Burhan*. That's the reality. They've decided this themselves. There are only maybe 5, no more than 10 congregations would use the terminology of *YEzen*, and there are well over 100 separate churches throughout the country now. Some pastors use both, but '*Burhan*' is now the generic word for the God of the Bible. The church in Mongolia is now 26 years old, many of the pastors have Masters and Doctorates, are fluent in English, and understand and argue well for the path they've chosen. I regularly meet with 29 Mongolian pastors.

From Mongolia, Lynn Suchy's response to that statement follows:

Hugh's statements reveal several underlying assumptions. For instance, is 26 years really that long? If one looks into the history of Bible translation in Asia, controversies over terms for *God* lasted decades and sometimes centuries (e.g. China).

Next, is it really inappropriate for foreigners to question what has happened and what is happening now? That opinion has certainly become popular. But it is at the same time ironic. It can be credibly argued that it was primarily

Chapter 13

The 2015 Mongolian Bible

The small guide book to Mongolia which I bought in 1992, published by the Mongolian government, contains the following paragraph:

European style books appeared in Mongolia shortly before the 1921 revolution. Books published in the first post-revolutionary years had excellent leather bindings. They were produced with great taste and skill. Later, however, a drive for quantity to the detriment of quality began to dominate in book publishing. Our duty today is to restore the erstwhile beauty and fame of Mongolian books.

On August 2, 2015, the Bible Society of Mongolia, established just after the collapse of communism in 1989, added to the ‘erstwhile beauty and fame of Mongolian books’ by producing a leather bound, high quality Mongolian edition of the Bible, the world’s most famous and treasured book. The translation of this Bible is based on the text of the biblical languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. It was fully approved by Wycliffe Bible Translators and the United Bible Societies translation consultants.

Just one year earlier, the entire Bible text needed typesetting, but software was not available to BSM. A prayer letter from Altaa and John asked supporters to pray for a solution. John knew nothing about making his own software, but they did it ‘from scratch’. He wrote, ‘It’s like we’ve been told to make bricks, but we only have straw. With tons of prayer, we began to do it.’

The all-Mongolian Board of BSM is glad to now offer a beautifully presented book with no hint of syncretism between its covers. Translation work had begun in the 1970’s and after a litany of difficulties it is at last available

Chapter 14

God calls and Enables

In April 2016 the sermon series at the church I attend was on the Lord's Prayer. The words of Jesus in the phrase, '*Hallowed be your name*' has often led me to think about what happened in Mongolia.

In May 2016 I received a copy of the Bible Society of Mongolia's new Bible, published in 2015. I held it with reverence, filled with gratitude to God as I thought of the prayer letters written, and the people in several countries who have prayed for decades through the whole process of translation; through many extraordinary difficulties; through the seemingly endless checking procedures, until finally, unbelievably, the funds had all been donated and the Bible was being printed – and is now available to all who have longed for a good translation of the Bible in Mongolian.

On May 29, 2016 as part of our next sermon series, the Bible reading in church was from Revelation 2:12-17. Verse 13 includes the words: '*I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.*'

The history of the Mongolian Bible is all about being true to God's name. Having received the Mongolian Bible nine days earlier, I thought sadly that the history should have been written down.

On June 19, 2016 the Bible reading in church was Revelation 3:7-13. Included in that passage are the words that God had spoken to John Gibbens in 1978: "*See I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.*"

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you