

COPYRIGHT AND THE KINGDOM

how restrictions on biblical content affect
the global Church (and what to do about it)

ufw.io/copyright



Have you ever considered how significantly the rise of digital technology has changed everything? It is now possible for more people than ever before to create and distribute massive amounts of content, at virtually no cost. This creates a tremendous opportunity for the advance of God's Kingdom all over the world.

Content, however, is directly affected by copyright law and copyright is an important matter. It raises some questions, like: How does copyright work? How does copyright affect world missions? What are the implications of restrictions on biblical resources for the global church? How do restrictions on translations of the Word of God affect believers in the nearly 7,000 languages of the world?

“Copyright and the Kingdom” is designed to provide a brief, visual overview of the world of copyright law and its implications for world missions.

This work is based on the book *The Christian Commons* – thechristiancommons.com.



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Copyright protection happens when the work is created—you do not need to register the copyright first.

happens automatically, at “fixation”

Except in some circumstances, copyright in a work is granted to its creator.

you create it, you own it*

If you own it, copyright grants you exclusive rights to the work.

default: “all rights reserved”

copyright law basics

requires a license

You must get permission (usually as a license) to use what someone else owns.

works the same worldwide**

Copyright law is remarkably similar around the world, though in some countries, infringement of copyright is a criminal offense punishable by fines and incarceration.

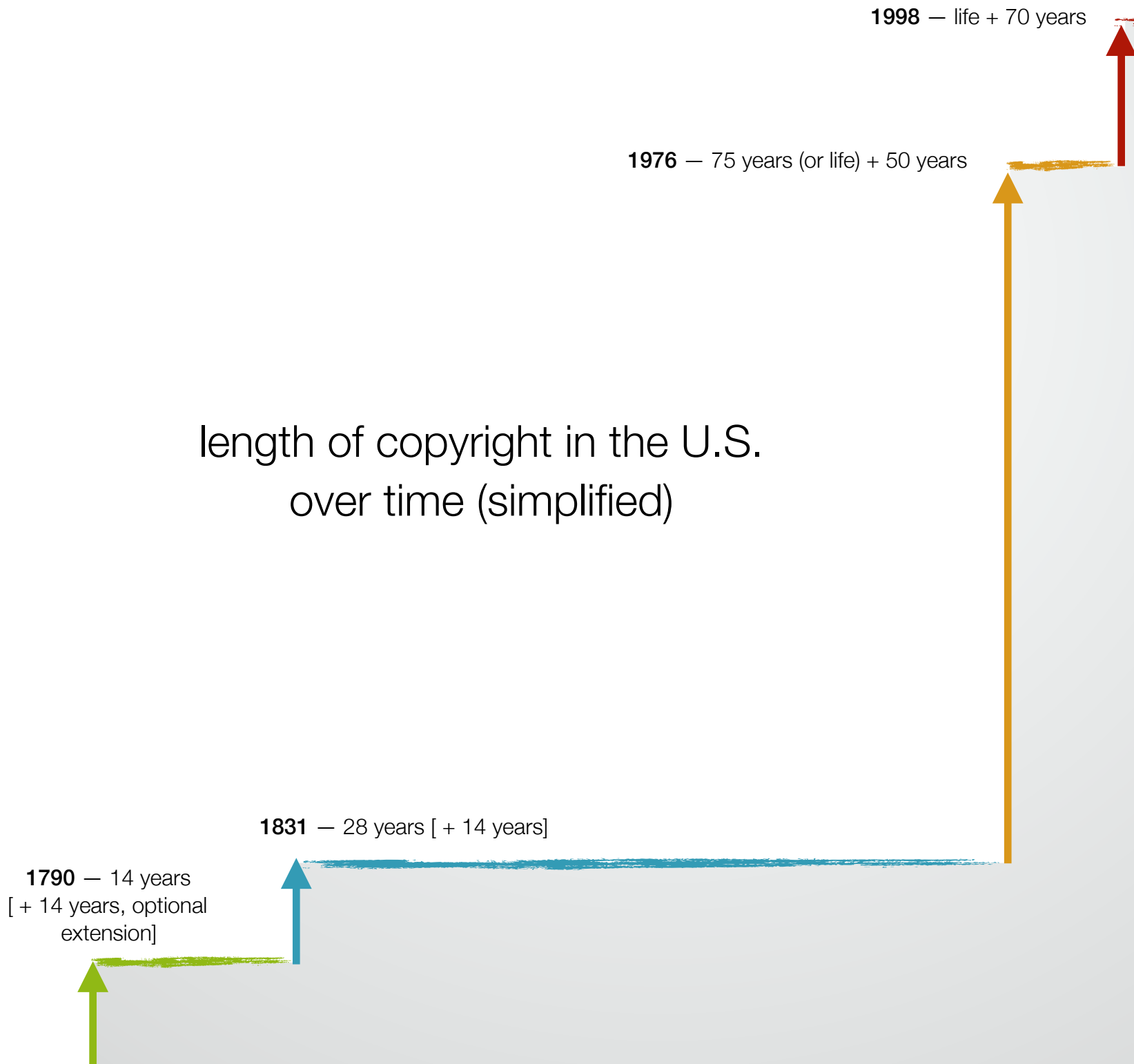
lasts for a lifetime (+ 50 years, or more)

By default, no one can legally do much of anything with someone else's content for many decades after the owner's death, unless they get a license from the owner (or the owner's heirs) to do so.

* with some exceptions, as in the case of a “work for hire” and scope of employment

** in general and for most, but not all countries

length of copyright in the U.S. over time (simplified)

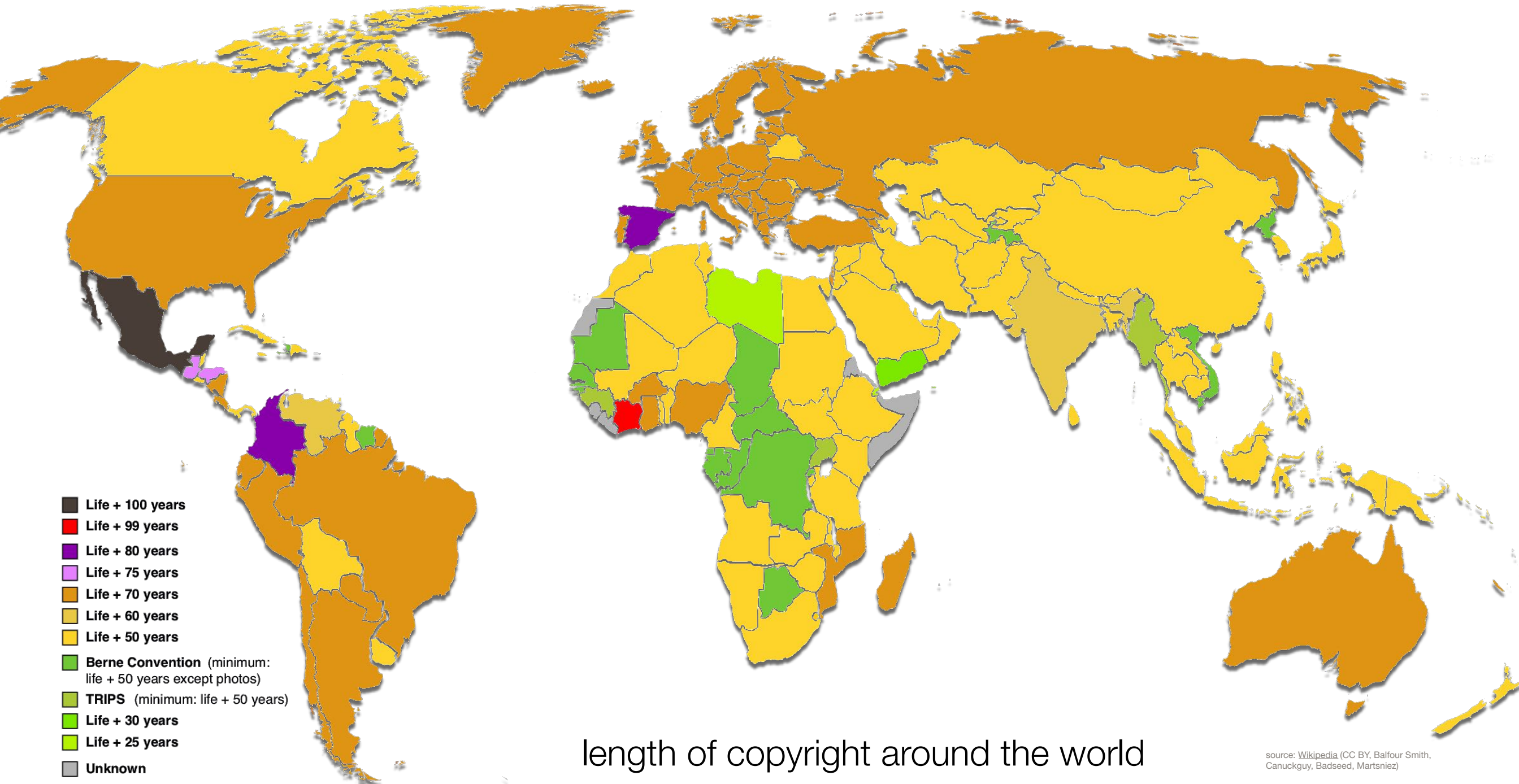


Modern copyright law was invented over 300 years ago to maximize the economic value of a creative work by restricting access to the work and granting specific rights to the creator of the work. Once these rights expire, the work passes into the public domain, where there are no copyright protections.

Copyright originally only lasted for 14 years (with an optional 14-year extension). Over time, however, the length of copyright has been extended repeatedly. This lengthening of copyright has been embraced by the Church with little discussion on the implications for ministry or the theology of intellectual property ownership and biblical content.

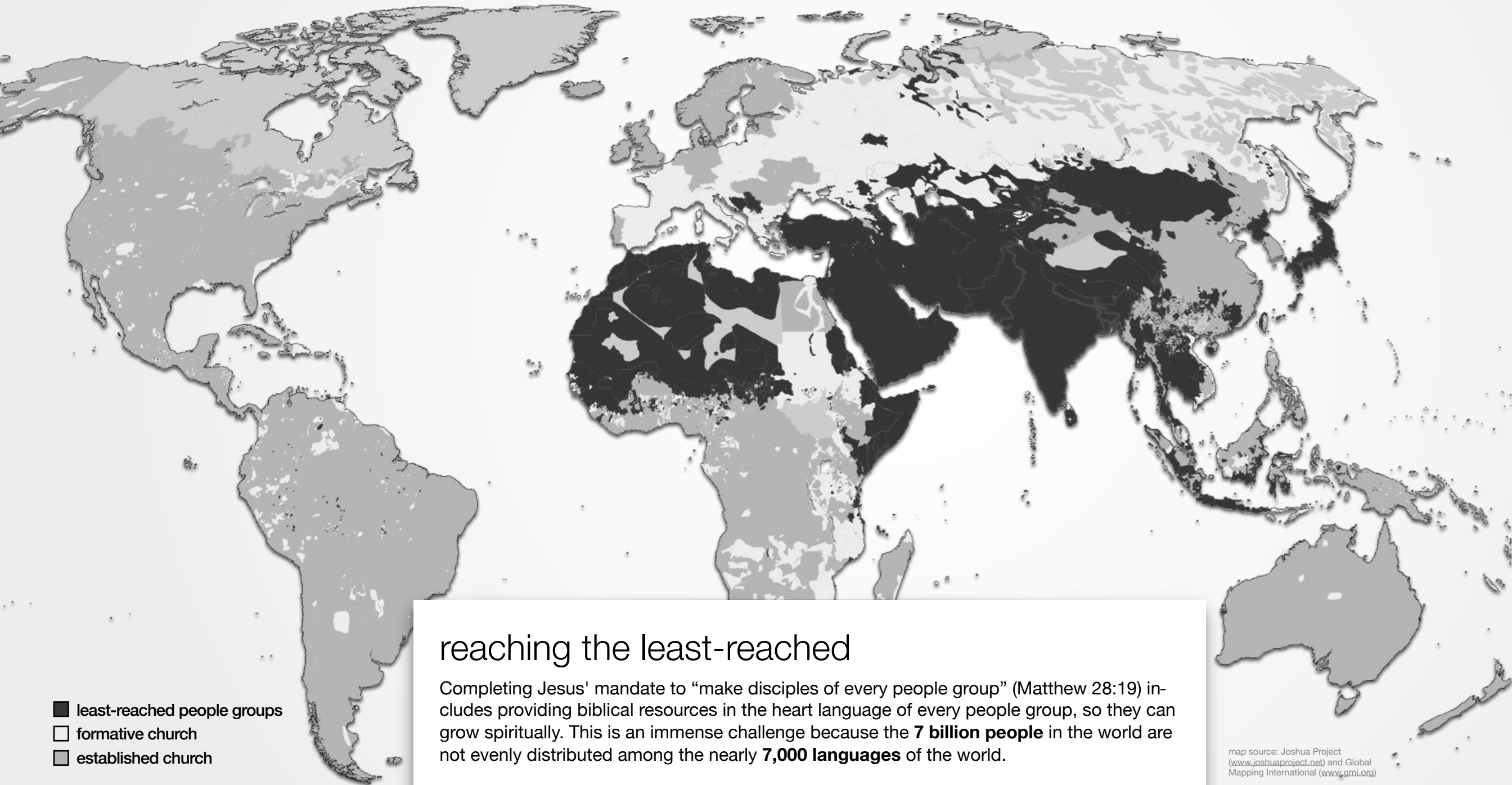
Many works have little (if any) commercial value within only a few years after they are published, but they are still under copyright for over a century: the life of the author + 70 years (or more, in some countries). As a result, many works of the 20th century are “orphan works”, which makes it nearly impossible to use those works since they may still be under copyright. Further, many old works that no longer have commercial value may have tremendous ministry value, particularly if translated into a minority language.

Note: leveraging copyright for financial gain is not immoral or unbiblical. It is a legitimate approach to funding ministry, albeit one with limitations.



length of copyright around the world

source: Wikipedia (CC BY, Balfour Smith, Canuckguy, Badseed, Martsniez)



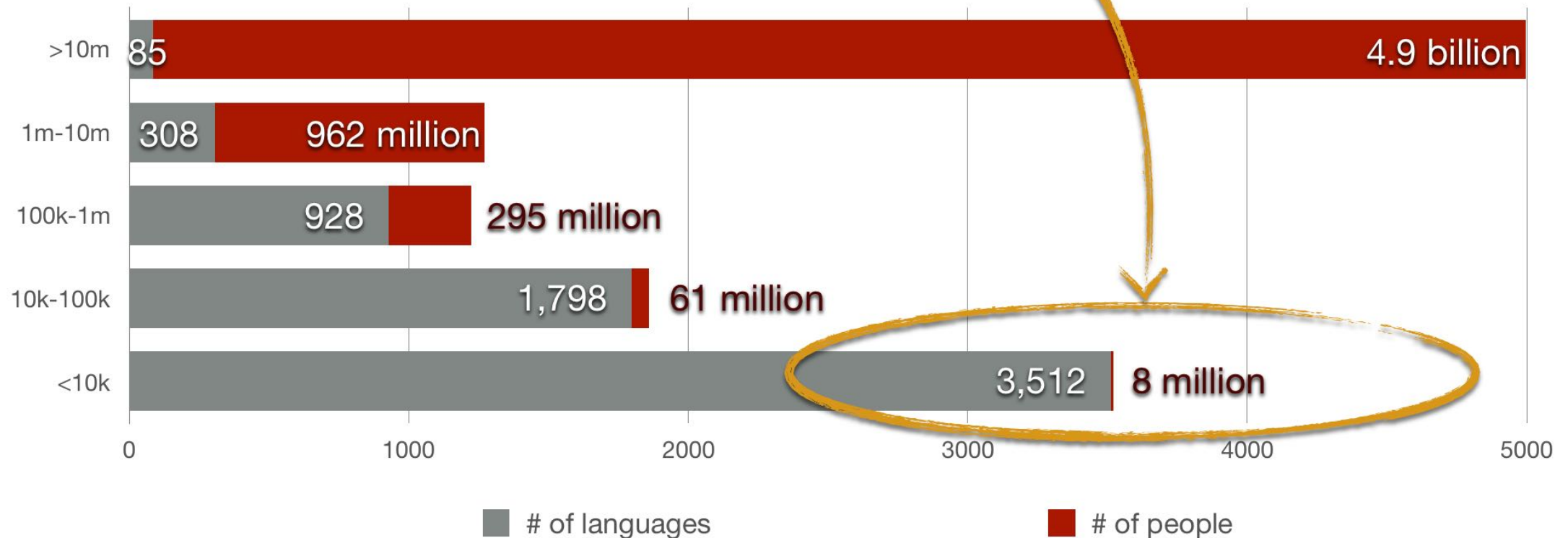
- least-reached people groups
- formative church
- established church

reaching the least-reached

Completing Jesus' mandate to "make disciples of every people group" (Matthew 28:19) includes providing biblical resources in the heart language of every people group, so they can grow spiritually. This is an immense challenge because the **7 billion people** in the world are not evenly distributed among the nearly **7,000 languages** of the world.

map source: Joshua Project (www.joshuaproject.net) and Global Mapping International (www.gmi.org)

the linguistically “least of these”



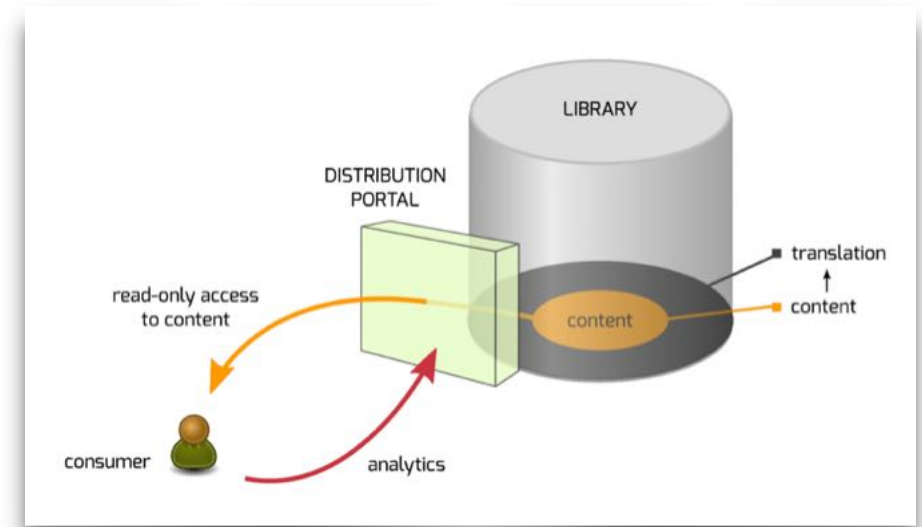
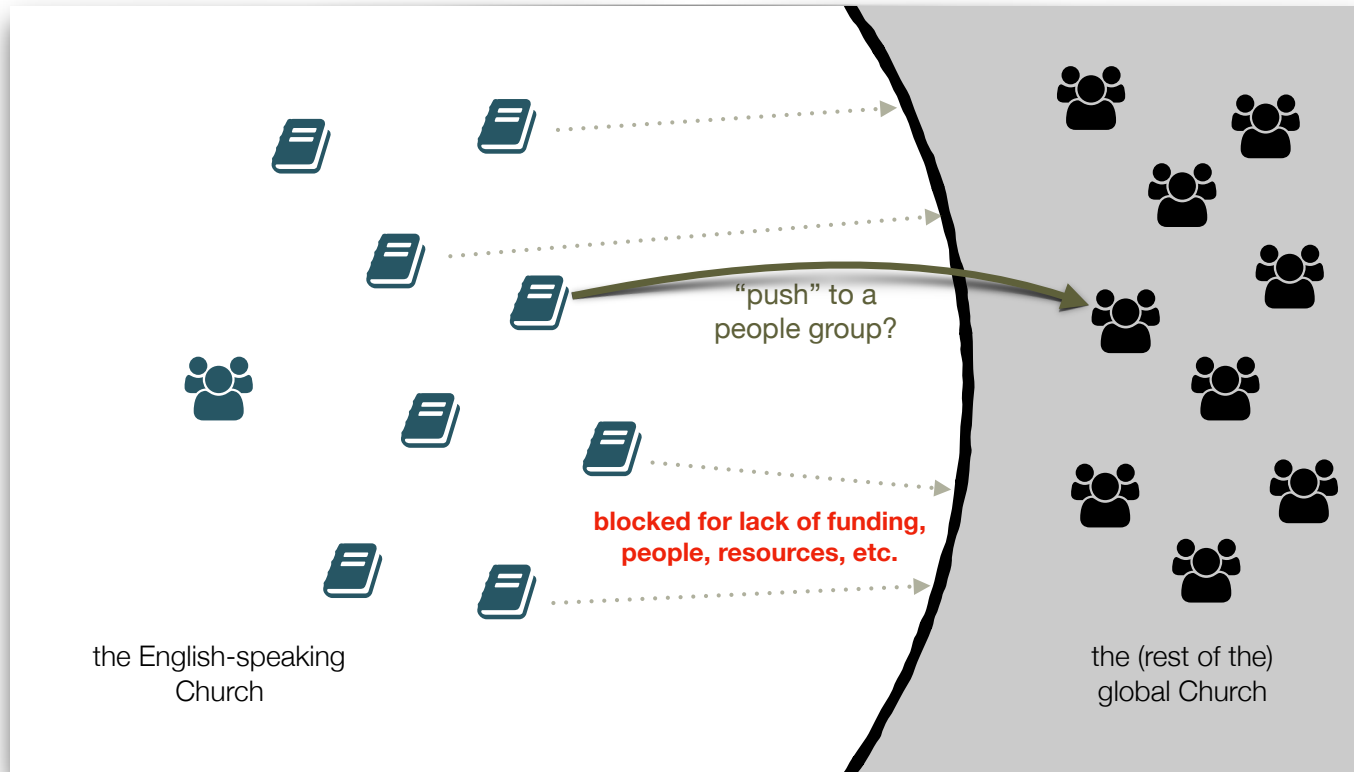
source: ethnologue.com

The linguistically “least of these” include the millions of people who speak a language having less than 10,000 speakers. They speak half the world’s languages but comprise less than 1% of the world’s population and so tend to be forgotten or left for last. Many believers

who speak these languages are ready to start translating existing biblical resources for effective use. Copyright restrictions, however, prevent them from legally doing so, because **translation of content requires permission.**

Permission is virtually impossible for them to acquire because of massive legal, financial, cultural, linguistic and technical obstacles.

They are locked out.



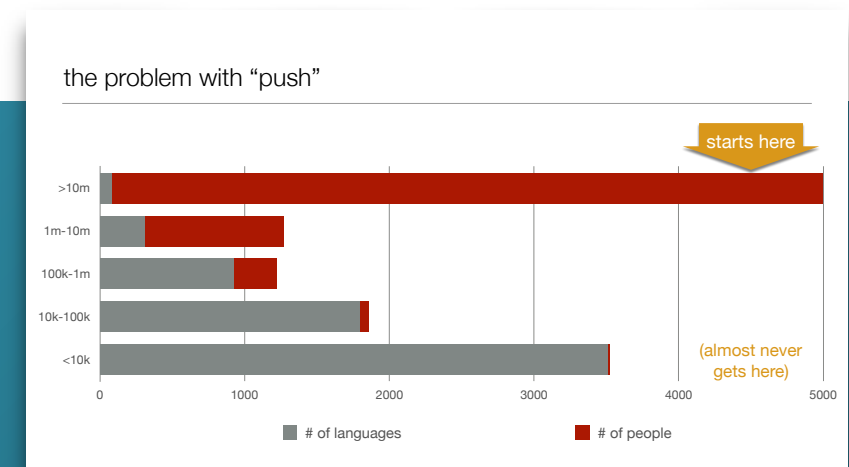
The classic model is used by libraries, and has been imported into the digital world as well (e.g. Amazon's Kindle library). It works well for its intended purpose: to provide read-only, controlled access to copyright-restricted content for a small number of people in a limited number of (usually) large languages.

But it does not scale well as a model for reaching everyone, everywhere, in every language with urgently-needed biblical resources.

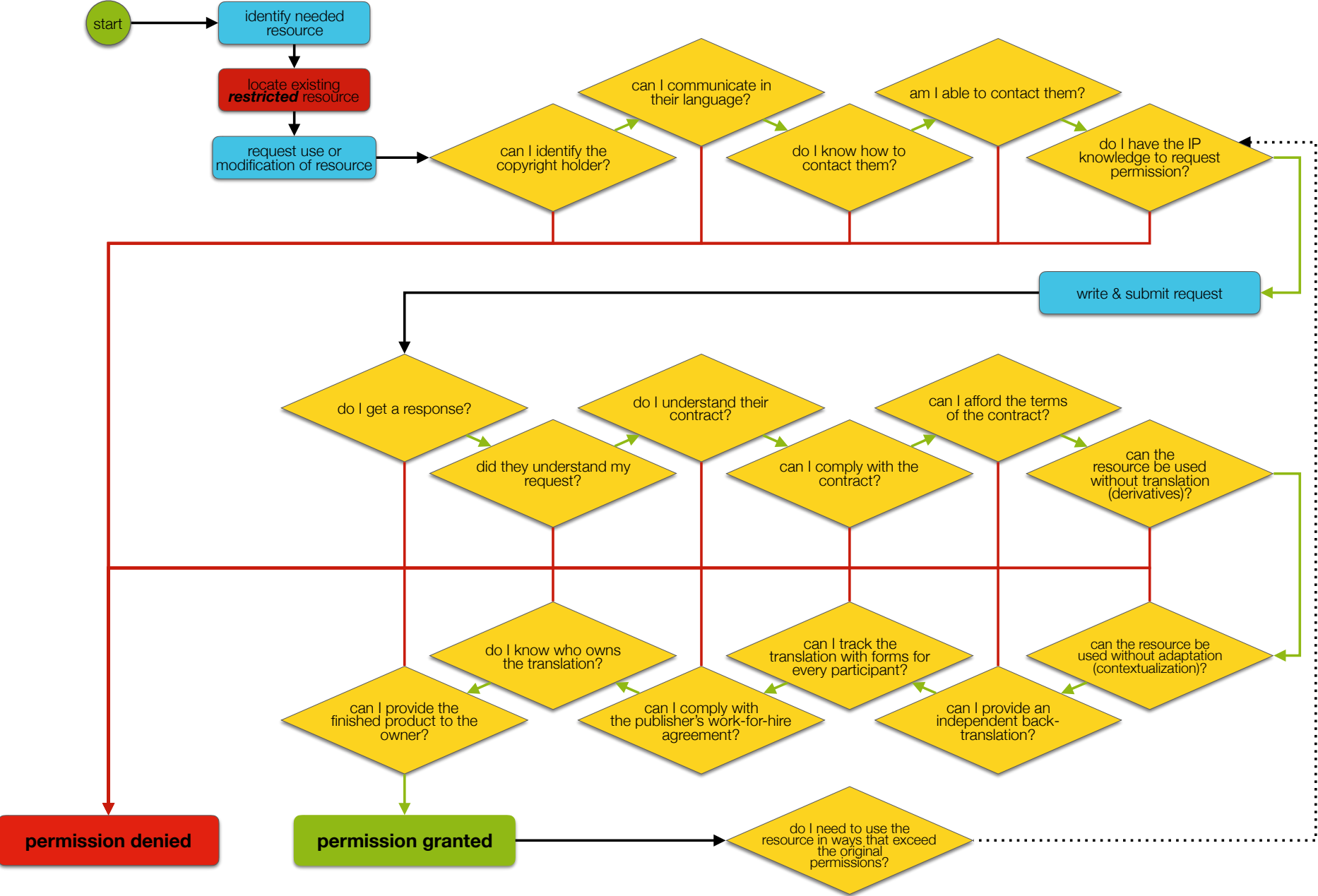
the classic model for equipping the global Church

The traditional approach to meeting the need for discipleship resources in the world's thousands of languages has not changed significantly since the invention of Gutenberg's printing press, over 500 years ago. It works like this:

- ▶ Content is created and (usually) translated.
- ▶ The content is stored in a "silo" that functions as a controlled-access library.
- ▶ A distribution portal makes the content available in a read-only manner to the consumer.
- ▶ The consumer consumes the content and provides analytics back into the system.



getting legal permission — the “classic” way



Just Ask?

In the world of “all rights reserved” the gracious intent of many content owners is to freely give permission if they are asked. The challenge is that the process of obtaining legal permission to use a restricted biblical resource can be time-consuming and inefficient for the global Church. This chart shows a simplified overview of the steps that must be taken to use a biblical resource restricted by a license that prevents use without explicit permission from the owner. The process is so complex, time-consuming and prone to failure that it frequently is not completed or fails partway through.



“Inasmuch as it is manifest from experience that if the Holy Bible... be indiscriminately allowed to everyone, the rashness of men will cause more evil than good to arise from it, it is, on this point, referred to the judgment of the bishops or inquisitors, who may... permit the reading of the Bible translated into the vulgar tongue... to those persons whose faith and piety they apprehend will be augmented and not injured by it; and this permission must be had in writing... Regulars shall neither read nor purchase such Bibles without special license from their superiors.”

—Pope Pius IV, 1584

(well-intended) restrictions on the Bible, then & now



Ecclesiastical Restrictions

Institutional church leaders were opposed to everyone having unrestricted freedom to access and use a Bible in their own language, so they tried to protect it by restricting access and use.

- ▶ **the issue:** the Bible “indiscriminately allowed to everyone”
- ▶ **the concern:** bad things will happen if the Word is not protected (“...the rashness of men will cause more evil than good to arise from it...”)
- ▶ **the solution:** a discrimination policy, where only those who are considered worthy are granted permission to handle the Word of God (“...bishops or inquisitors, who may... permit...”)
- ▶ **the implementation:** a gatekeeper in authority over the Church makes the decision (“...special license from their superiors...”)
- ▶ **the paper trail:** the permission must be had in the form of a written license (“...this permission must be had in writing...”)



Copyright Restrictions

Some Bible publishers today are also concerned with the need to protect the Word of God and the people of God from bad people doing bad things to the Bible.

“You are permitted to reproduce the [Bible] text solely for personal, noncommercial use... For these uses, the [Bible] text may be quoted in written format, up to and inclusive of 50 verses [500 for churches], without express written permission from [the owner], provided the verses quoted do not amount to a complete book of the Bible nor do the verses quoted account for five percent (5%) [25% for churches] or more of the total text of the work in which they are quoted. This limited license may be revoked and/or modified at any time by [the owner] at its sole and absolute discretion.

Any use beyond the permission granted above, including but not limited to reproduction, modification, distribution, transmission, republication, display, performance, publication, or creation of derivative works of any [Bible text], is strictly prohibited without the express written consent of [the owner]...”

does the Bible need to be protected?

Is it necessary for publishers to function as “gatekeepers” who allow good people to do good things with the Word of God, but to forbid anyone who could bring harm to God’s Word (at least the version that has their name on it) and thus to God’s people who read it? On the surface, this may sound like a good approach. There are, however, at least four significant shortcomings with it.*

1. It Doesn’t Work

There is a fundamental problem with the logic of the central proposition of the “gatekeeper” strategy: copyright law does not prevent bad things from happening to the Bible. People violate the “all rights reserved” licenses governing copyrighted content all the time, including Bible translations. Copyright law merely provides the owner of the resource with a legal platform from which they can take infringers to secular courts and sue them for financial recompense.

2. It Hinders the Church

The threat of legal action is frequently a deterrent for those who seek to honor God, but the likelihood of people who are antagonistic or ambivalent toward the Word of God being dissuaded from misusing it due to the presence of an “all rights reserved” statement is unproven. The existence of a “gatekeeper” strategy for protecting Bible translations severely hinders the Church from effectively using translations of the Word of God every day.

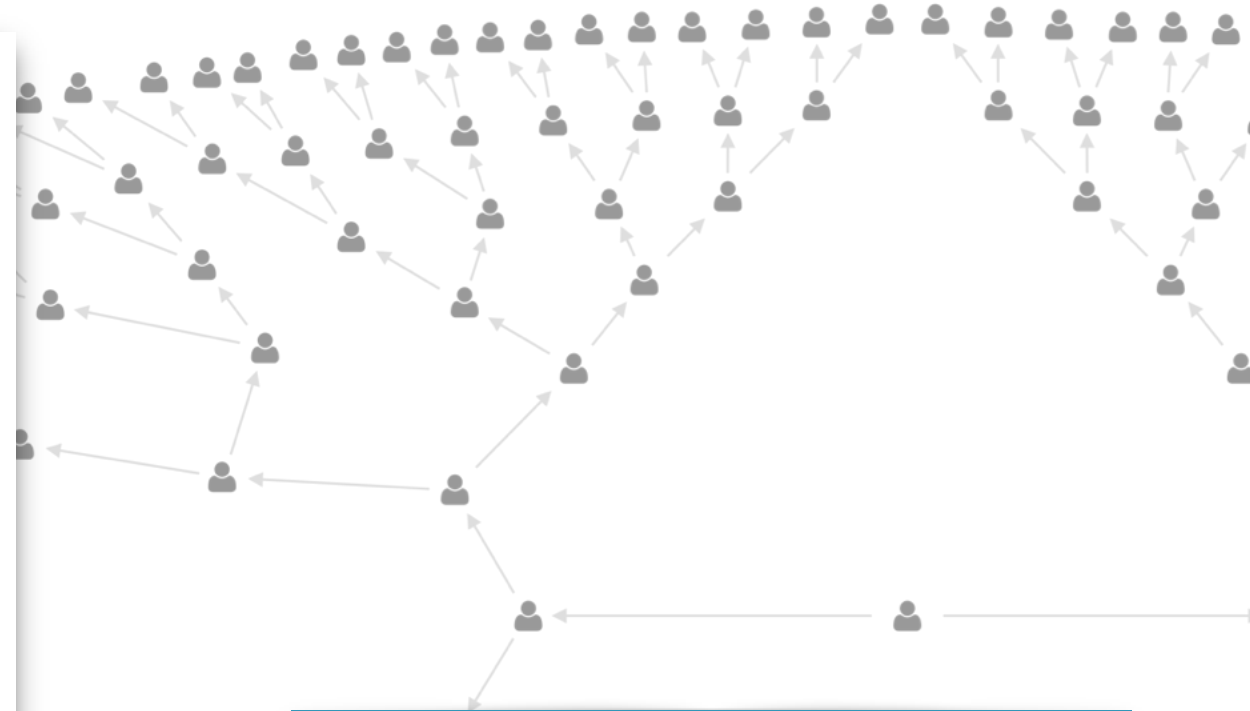
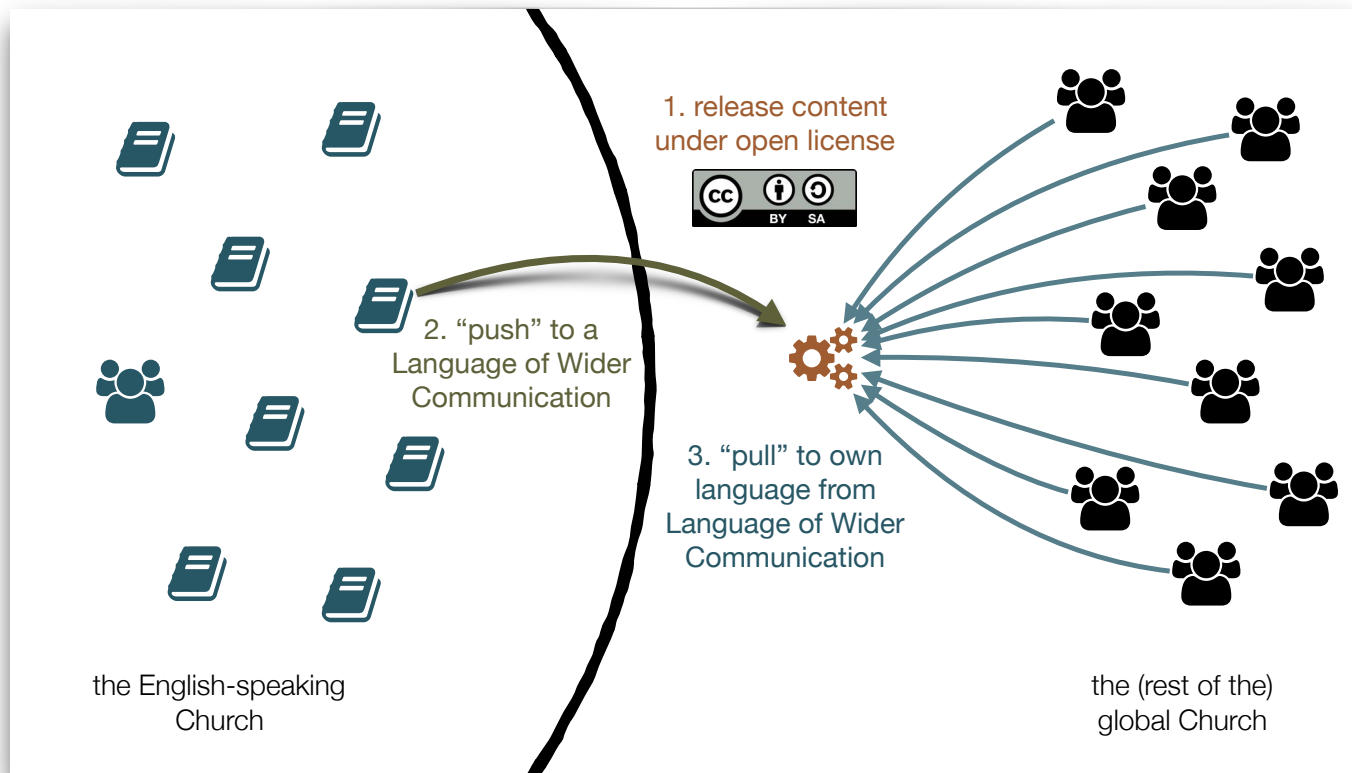
3. It Reproduces Errors that the Reformation Corrected

The degree of similarity between the strategy for “protecting God’s Word” used by the Popes of the Dark Ages and the owners of many Bible translations today is remarkable. Given the Reformers’ unanimous stance in favor of “free and open” access by all people to the Word of God in every language, one might wonder on what side of the same issue they would be today.

4. It is Disproven by History

Not only is there remarkable clarity in the identification of derivative translations created in the pre-copyright era of Bible translation, we still have virtually all the original translations completed during the Reformation and even earlier than that. The originals have been preserved with virtually perfect fidelity, but the corrupted derivatives have all but vanished from the scene. And this all happened long before copyright law was established.

*In addition to the rationale presented here, there is an important logical factor to consider: if the Word of God itself really did need our protection we would be in a desperate situation, because this implies the need to protect all the Bibles ever translated, including those in the Public Domain where there is no copyright. The King James Version would be under dire threat, as would the American Standard Version, and dozens of others, to say nothing of the original manuscripts in the museums. Clearly, such a notion is illogical.



The unrestricted biblical content in the “free & open” model can follow an **exponential growth** pattern. The global Church is able to collaborate together without hindrance, using any technology and distribution mechanism to cover the entire planet with biblical content in every language.

see “The Gateway Languages Strategy” for this model at a scale that covers 100% of the world — ufw.io/gateway

the “free & open” model for equipping the global Church

What do Wikipedia, the Linux operating system, and Open Street Map all have in common?

1. the content in each of these “open collaboration” projects is released from copyright restrictions under an open license
2. the thousands of people who create the content in each project do so for a purpose they

consider greater than making money from the product.

What if the church adopted this new model of “open collaboration” as a means of equipping believers in every language with adequate discipleship resources? By working together as the body of Christ all over the world, we can collectively create a core of quality discipleship resources in

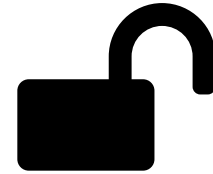
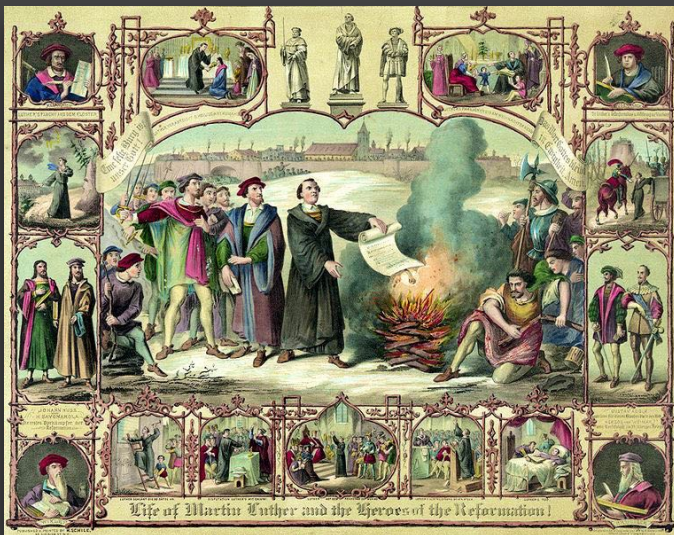
every language, more rapidly and at far less cost than would otherwise be possible. Three things are needed for this to happen:

- ▶ open-licensed biblical resources (content)
- ▶ open-source tools (software)
- ▶ a willingness for people and organizations to collaborate openly (process).

a license for freedom

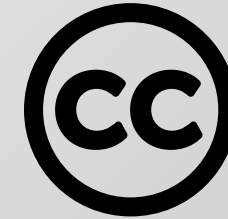
What if a content creator wants to remove everything that hinders and allow the global church to freely use and build upon a biblical resource they have created, for their unhindered spiritual growth? What is the best way for that to happen?

Instead of requiring each person who wants to use it in their language to contact them for each and every use of the resource, they could pre-clear the entire global church to use it in any way they need. This would remove the legal bottleneck and open the door for effective ministry without any obstacles.



By releasing a biblical resource under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License, anyone can translate, adapt, build on, redistribute, and use the resource without any restrictions. They only need to agree to the two conditions of the license: **give credit where credit is due** (identifying the original source) and **release anything they create from it under the same license**. In this way, the resource gets “locked open” and what was released by the creator of the original resource as free and unrestricted, stays free and unrestricted forever, for everyone.

*Why not include a “non-commercial use only” restriction? While it seems that such a restriction would be a good thing for free content, it critically hinders the reach of a biblical resource. In addition to being too restrictive, it prevents good things from happening, is ambiguous, unnecessary, and makes the global church work for nothing.



Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

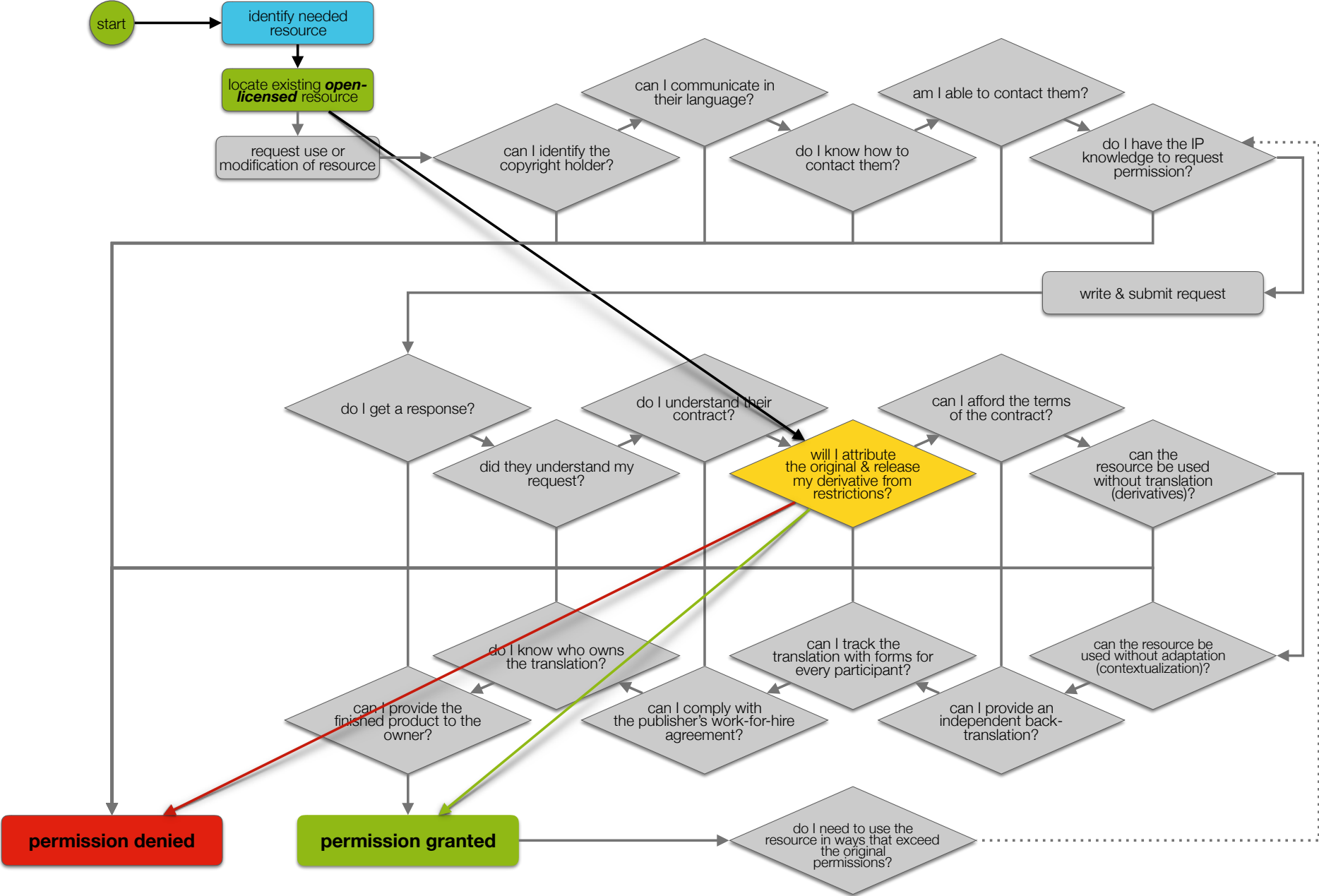
You are free to:

- ▶ **Share** — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- ▶ **Adapt** — remix, transform, and build upon the material
- ▶ for any purpose, even commercially.*

Under the following terms:

- ▶ **Attribution** — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- ▶ **ShareAlike** — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

getting legal permission — the “free & open” way



Yes.

In the “free and open” world, biblical content has already been pre-cleared by the legal owner of the resource. The license permits the redistribution and creation of derivative works from the original. These derivatives rise or fall on their own merit and are not associated with the original in any way that suggests endorsement.

“By their [derivative works] you shall know them.”

two models for equipping the global Church

	classic model	“free & open” model
content licensing	“all rights reserved”	“some (or ‘no’) rights reserved”
limitations of use	nothing is permitted without explicit, written permission	anything is permitted, right now (with some conditions)
metaphor	limited-access library	unwalled garden (i.e. the “Christian Commons”)
use of content	read-only (“consume”)	read-write (“consume + create”)
end goal	distribution of pre-packaged content	derivatives built from content
content creation	closed, insider-only	open collaboration of self-selecting individuals
sphere of control	every aspect of content creation, distribution and use	source of original content, identity of content creators
cost	extremely expensive	extremely inexpensive (built by open collaboration)
reach	top down, no comprehensive plan for smallest 1/4th of languages	any & every language, no matter the size
management overhead	massive, centralized, generally less efficient at scale	minimal, distributed, generally more efficient at scale
biblical foundation	“If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” — 1 Corinthians 9:11 ESV	“Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” — 1 Corinthians 9:12 ESV

The **classic** model for world missions generally has as its final goal a finished product, like a book. The product is generally created by a small group of “experts” with limited direct involvement in the project by others. Every aspect of the project tends to be closely monitored and highly controlled, from the creation of the content to the distribution of the finished work. This tends to incur a high degree of overhead, driving cost of production up, and often limiting the reach of the content. The model tends to “give a fish” (i.e. a finished product licensed only for consumption), but often does not extend beyond that.

The **“free & open”** model is built on open-licensed content that legally permits a large, self-selecting, and geographically-distributed group of intrinsically-motivated people to work together toward a common objective. The identity of each content creator is preserved but the content is available without restriction. Creation of derivative works is encouraged and they are evaluated on their own merit—as they were before copyright was invented (like during the Reformation) and are still, for works not under copyright (the public domain). The end goal is both a product (like a translated book) and a process (the continued revision and maintenance of the content over time). In this regard, the focus is “teaching them to fish” (and giving them the tools to build their own fishing tackle, without restriction).

building a Christian Commons

Nearly 2,000 years ago, some Christians faced a significant problem: they were in great need and had no means of meeting those needs. The Church's solution to the problem was gracious, voluntary, sacrificial, and extremely effective:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything **in common**... There was not a needy person among them... — Acts 4:32,34 ESV

Today, the Church faces the same problem in the spiritual realm: believers urgently need biblical resources to foster their spiritual growth. Voluntarily releasing biblical resources under open licenses effectively puts them perpetually into a “Christian Commons.” The global Church has unrestricted access to this unwallled garden of content, with the legal freedom to translate, adapt, revise, re-purpose, redistribute, and use the content—without restriction and without needing to ask anyone for permission.

Anyone, anywhere can help translate and make these “open” discipleship resources effective in any language, in less time, with less expense, and without any restrictions.



unfolding**Word**

Open-licensed biblical content, including Bible translations, Greek & Hebrew resources, Bible study resources, Bible stories, and more information about the “free & open” movement.

<https://unfoldingword.org>



An open platform for creation, translation, publication, and distribution of open-licensed biblical content in any language.

<https://door43.org>

find out more!

Want to find out more about the “open” approach to world missions? A detailed overview is provided in the book *The Christian Commons*, available in print and (free) ebook formats, at thechristiancommons.com. On the website, you can also find ways to connect with others who are part of the “open” world missions community. Join us!