

## 8. TRANSLATE LIKE JESUS

The very best approach to translating is the one that Jesus Christ used. It was not a literal approach, not merely a meaning-for-meaning approach, but a much more realistic and comprehensive approach. The best description of it is the one he used himself: He called his method of translating “making students”. His goal was to produce students who understood his message well and were equipped to pass that message on to others ... by making students of them. (See *Appendix F: What it Means to be a Student.*)

*Making students* is the perfect phrase to use as a description of what real translating should be. The word *student* automatically includes the two aspects of translating that have to be brought together as a compatible unit: a body of information on the one hand, and a person who is supposed to understand it, use it, and exemplify it on the other.

There is no such thing as serious, substantial information that can simply be read to be learned. *Study* is the more complete label for what a person is supposed to do with information of this kind. *Study* implies a significant investment of time, effort, and commitment. This is the difference between a casual reader and a student.

Casual readers are like the people in the crowds who listened to Jesus. They maintained a certain distance. They didn't get too involved. The student of Christ, however, was the one who got up early in the morning and reported to his teacher, who concentrated on the words being said, and who struggled with what he was hearing throughout the day.

Making students may seem impractical as an approach to translating the scriptures for someone, but it only seems that way because of the traditional approaches to teaching that have been associated with Bible translations for too long. In all other areas of life where important information needs to be passed on in reliable and credible ways, the making of students is always the approach that is used. People don't become medical doctors by attending a medical class once a week. Pilots don't learn to fly 747's by subscribing to aviation magazines. Engineers don't learn their skills by attending engineering retreats once a year. Mathematicians don't gain their knowledge by listening to inspirational speakers.

Jesus expected his followers to be serious students of his words. He knew that the information he had to pass on was so entirely different from anything they knew, that it would take their whole effort, their whole desire, and their whole mind to grasp it. This is the first task of a translator, to recognize the demands the information in a text will make on a reader. Translating is not just a matter of preparing a text, but also of preparing a reader to handle the requirements of the text.

We have already seen how every text has a level of difficulty beyond which it cannot be simplified. (See page 139.) The writings of scripture are no different. The topics and the purposes of each individual writing of scripture make demands on the reader both in terms of what is required to read and understand it, as well as what is required to apply it. In other words, an active, learning, growing reader is the only kind of person who will ever be able to understand and follow the teachings of Christ.

What is the degree of difficulty of the writings of scripture? There are actually as many as there are writings. Each one has its own readership in view, and its own main topic and purpose. Some of the writings are aimed at people who know little about Christ and his message. These writings have very basic language codes that would be recognized and understood by most of the readers in the Mediterranean world of the first century. Other writings, however, are aimed at readers with specific problems stemming from cultural, religious, philosophical, and economic issues. These require a great deal of a reader today.

Two further challenges face readers in the quest to understand the scriptures. The first is the degree to which the teachings of Christ are so different from anything people are used to, and the second is the fact that the teachings in the scriptures go against the grain of the human spirit. Almost everyone mentioned in the scriptures struggled to understand Christ's teachings, and the scriptures testify to the great lengths to which Jesus had to go to get people to understand what he was saying. Good examples of this are two prominent men mentioned in the scriptures. They both struggled not only with the weight of understanding Christ's words but also with the consequences of them.

One was Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, and the other was Peter, one of Christ's closest students. Certainly neither of these two lacked the intelligence nor the learning to deal with the complexity of Christ's statements and explanations. Nevertheless, neither found it easy to understand and follow Christ's words.

If Jesus found it difficult to transport his message into the hearts and minds of men and women in the first century, then that alone should be enough to convince us that this message cannot be made understandable simply through translations that are printed and put in someone's hands. The point is that, in the minds of most people, translating is a word that is far too text oriented. The example of Christ makes it clear that involvement of the translator with the recipients is crucial.

Jesus' method of translating was what should be the ideal for every translator. His communicative task was surely the most formidable of all time. His commission was to take the message of the Kingdom of God to the world of men. That was the biggest cultural barrier that could possibly be crossed. It was undoubtedly the most difficult translating job of all time. The steps he took to accomplish these tasks are most instructive.

Christ began to translate his message by first leaving his own comfort zone and entering the world of the people with whom he wanted to communicate. He then learned to express and exemplify his message in that new environment. One of the eyewitnesses wrote of that preparatory time that *Jesus grew in wisdom and experience, and in the approval of God and men.* (1 Theophilus 2:52)

Jesus then targeted individuals from a select linguistic and cultural group. All of his closest students were Galileans, a people quite distinct from Samaritans, Judeans, Idumeans, Greeks, Romans, or any of the many other groups in the area with different ethnic, cultural, political, and linguistic roots. Then he set about doing everything in his power to train them to be serious and courageous students of his message. He taught it to them. He demonstrated it to them. He encouraged them, corrected them, reminded them, and tested them.

We also observe him using a common language with them. We have absolutely no evidence that he spoke a “classical” Greek or Hebrew. All the documents we have that record his teachings are written in the Koine (common) Greek of the day. We see too that he constantly combated the influences of tradition that came from the religious environment in which all his students had grown up. He didn’t ignore or sidestep those traditions or the religious leaders who represented them. Finally he passed his own task of communicating his message on to his students, and the very heart of that task was to repeat the process—to make students of his teachings.

Christ’s approach to communicating his teachings was not to put together written documents so he could have them copied and distributed. Instead, over a period of several years, he made students of his words. They are the ones who ultimately wrote the scriptures, but only after they had proved to him that they understood his message and had begun to exemplify it. That was the final proof that they had understood him. This is similar to the result that every translator should desire—that the recipients of the message themselves be able to express it, live it, and teach it.

Translators of the scriptures today should incorporate much of this process into their approaches to translating. They should first become students of the scriptures themselves, learn to take them seriously, know them well, incorporate them into their own lives in word and action, and then enter the world of the people with whom they have chosen to communicate the teachings of Christ. Translators should live among the people for whom they are translating, analyze their language, express the scriptures in their words, and be an example of that message. The translator’s goal should be to make students among these people—teaching, encouraging, testing, reminding—and do it until the students show that they have understood the writings of scripture through both their words and actions. Then those students should repeat the process with others.

Were we to follow this example, there would be more scripture translators producing many reader-specific translations of the writings of scripture. Contrast this to our present situation in which we have a few “experts” who represent various traditions of Bible translating, and who do little more than periodically produce slight revisions of their own particular translation and put it on the market for sale.

Is it unrealistic to suggest that following Christ’s example would be possible today? If so, then only because present practices of Bible translating have become so accepted that not even the example of Christ can make a dent in them. The fact is, however, that translating the way Christ practiced it is not only practical but the only really effective approach to communicating information of a crucial nature. Even in the world at large, where business has to get done, patients have to be treated, and products have to be engineered, this is recognized.

Medical professors work closely with future medical personnel of every kind, demonstrating, testing, correcting, observing, and often doing this over a period of years before they are satisfied that the learners have truly understood. This is effective translating. The same is true with almost any endeavor where understanding and reliability are expected to go hand in hand.

To reiterate: Jesus exemplified two important commitments of a good translator. First, he took seriously the message he had to communicate. He never forgot the source of it, never compromised it, and never failed to please the One who was the source of the message. And secondly, he took seriously the people to whom he was communicating the message. He went to extremes on their behalf to make sure that they understood the message, that they had begun to exemplify it, and that they were committed to repeating the process.

These are all excellent commitments for translators today: To take the original writings seriously, never straying from the source of them, and taking the readers seriously by going to great extremes to make sure that they have the writings of scripture in their own language. Then a translator should not quit until the readers understand, until they begin to exemplify the message, and until they are ready and willing themselves to continue the process with others.