

# insight



## Understanding the Bible for All its Worth

**Text and Context:** The Cross-Cultural Communication of Biblical Truth  
— David Harley

**The Bible in Full Colour:** Encouraging Scripture Engagement in the Heart Language  
— Lynette Teagle

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A Journal for International Student Ministry in the UK

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## A Word From the Editor



**Peter Teagle**

Peter is Head of Events Speaking at Friends International. He has been with the organisation since 2001 and is based in Oxford. He is married to Lynette, and they have three young adult children.

We used to live near the old Cadbury chocolate factory in Birmingham. With my seriously sweet tooth and easy access to their factory shop, my *daily* intake of Cadbury Creme Eggs grew to five. Yes, five. Not quite what the government health watchdogs meant when they suggested the ‘five-a-day’ diet!

I couldn’t see the problem at first, as I remained thin and had no problems with my teeth. Then my wife began to notice that my appetite for *real* food was diminishing. So, I went cold turkey on the chocolate. As soon as I did so I started enjoying good home-cooked food again, which was certainly much better for me!

There is, however, a sweeter diet still, but one that is not only a delight to taste, but is nourishing in the very best sense (my apologies to all those from cultures where ‘sweet’ and ‘delight’ don’t always go together when thinking about food!).

Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, is *about* the Bible, using not only words like ‘delight’, ‘sweet’, ‘love’ and ‘comfort’, but also ‘awe[some]’, ‘righteous’, ‘true’ and ‘trustworthy’ to describe God’s word.

Some months ago I responded to the Lord’s prodding that there were whole sections of the Bible I had neglected for some time. As I rediscover books like 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, I have been moved to say once more, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103 NIV).

It has also renewed my confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit to change us

through His word. We fear for each student who returns, do we not? Will the seekers continue to seek? Will new believers persevere? If it is about our ability to teach and train, then we should rightly fear for their future. But instead they have the incredible word of God to sustain them and enable them to grow in Christlikeness *if we can teach them to use it*. God can and will continue to speak to them long after our voices diminish to an occasional WhatsApp.

That is why I am delighted that Dr David Harley, our own teacher from Bible college days, has written to show us how the *whole* Bible speaks so well to cultures not our own, not just the Gospels; how the culture of ancient Israel has surprising parallels with many of today’s non-Western cultures. We felt his work was too good to divide or edit down, so please persevere with this longer than usual article, using the added discussion questions to help you use this rich material.

Lynette Teagle also writes out of her current PhD material and further research to answer questions we have all had about encouraging students to read the Bible in their own ‘heart language’. What is really going on when students seem reluctant to do so? How should we help them when we don’t even know what translations there are? Is it even an issue as long as they can read the Bible in English?

So, as we grasp these concepts for ourselves, let our faith not be found wanting that God can and will speak to our international student friends through His word.



## Text and Context: The Cross-Cultural Communication of Biblical Truth



### David Harley

David and his wife Rosemary are veteran cross-cultural missionaries with experience teaching and preaching all over the world. David was Principal at All Nations Bible College in the UK, as well as the Discipleship Training Centre in Singapore. He also served as the General Director for OMF International from 2001-2005.

A Chinese Christian, living in Singapore, used the Four Spiritual Laws<sup>1</sup> as an effective means of evangelism for many years, and saw many people come to Christ. He then went to live and work in China, using the same approach in his witness. After seven years he concluded that his use of the Four Spiritual Laws communicated entirely the wrong message in that country. He was starting with belief in God in a society that denied the existence of God. He talked about sin, which in Mandarin meant “committing a crime” (犯罪). He spoke of prayer which was interpreted as ancestor worship. His whole approach appeared to be too aggressive in a society where building relationships was regarded with great importance. He had failed to contextualise his message and his method.

Another enthusiastic Christian shared John 3:16 with a Thai Buddhist who misunderstood almost everything he said. The Buddhist did not believe in God and assumed that the Christian was talking about some lesser being belonging to the world of gods and spirits that had not reached the blessed state of Nirvana. The Christian spoke of God’s love, but to the Buddhist, emotions like love or desire

do not provide the solution to the human condition. He believed that all our problems come from our desires. The Christian spoke of God’s son and the Buddhist assumed he meant a son of God and Mary. The Christian spoke of eternal life, but the Buddhist did not think this was good news, since he wanted to escape from life and the never-ending circle of reincarnation.

The task of the church in every part of the world is to communicate the message of the gospel in terms that are culturally appropriate. It is to share the text in context – to communicate biblical truth faithfully so that people of every culture can understand it, see its relevance and respond to it. It may be argued that if the gospel is not preached in context, the gospel is not preached.

This article utilises an overview of Old and New Testaments to identify patterns of contextualisation that may inform and guide us in our own communication of biblical truth. I begin with the writers of the Old Testament, under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, who sought to communicate truth about God within the context of the Ancient Near East, highlighting aspects of teaching in the OT that may find little resonance in the West but may be very meaningful within other cultures.

<sup>1</sup> Based on the well-known booklet (1952) written by Bill Bright, founder of CRU (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), which outlines four points for sharing the gospel message.

Turning to the New Testament, I then consider how Jesus communicated to people from differing religious and social backgrounds; how the apostles in the book of Acts adapted the gospel message according to their audience; and how Paul, in his letters, was bold and creative as he sought to explain the meaning and significance of Jesus' death.

**STOP AND THINK: How have you seen students fail to connect (partly or wholly) with techniques, resources and approaches commonly used in ministry? What contextual factors led to this failure and how would you seek to do things differently?**

### CONTEXTUALISATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The writers of the OT wrote within their own cultural and historical framework, seeking to communicate God's message in terms that could be understood in that context. They describe God in anthropomorphic language so that the people of God can gain some idea of what He is like.

Although they recognise that God is a spirit and has no body, these writers depict God as if He has a body, face, arms, etc., so that his people can relate to Him as a person. They speak of Him being pleased or being grieved, because these terms are readily intelligible, even though they are inadequate to describe the One who is transcendent.

Yet, there are limits to the extent to which they will describe God in these terms. They never resort to portraying God in the kind of terms used of the many Ancient Near Eastern deities, which were often pictured as eating too much, getting drunk, losing their temper and making love. The writers of the Old Testament are prepared to go a long way in depicting God in human terms, but are careful not to provide a distorted view of God.

One of the most striking examples of contextualisation in the OT is found in the term "covenant", used to convey the idea of a special relationship between God and his chosen people. In Genesis 15, the covenant ceremony between God and Abraham reflects a contemporary pattern for the signing of a treaty between two parties, where

the signatories passed between the divided carcasses of dead animals. While it was normal for both signatories to take part in the ceremony, here only a blazing torch, symbolising the presence of God, passed between the divided pieces (Genesis 15:17). The symbolism was striking and obvious – it was God who made this covenant. It was a unilateral declaration of His will. This covenant was initiated by Him and depended wholly on His grace for its fulfilment.

Later in the book of Exodus, when God formally adopts the Israelites as His people, He does so by again establishing a covenant. The wording of that covenant (Exodus 20-24) and the ceremony by which the covenant was confirmed (Exodus 25) bear striking similarities with contemporary treaties in the Ancient Near East. God is depicted as the supreme king who has graciously rescued a people and now demands faithfulness to His sovereign rule. Here is biblical truth being communicated within a specific historical and cultural context.

There are also examples in the OT when the writers will *not* use language or ideas from the contemporary culture, if the language or ideas will give the wrong impression of what they wish to communicate. A good example of this is in the concept of 'king' or *melek*. The idea of God as king is prevalent in the whole of the OT, and lies behind the term 'covenant' discussed above. However, the specific term *melek* is not used in the early periods of Israel's history for the simple and obvious reason that the word *melek* could easily be confused with the term *molek*. *Molek* was a particularly nasty Canaanite deity who required the sacrifice of children as part of his worship. It is only later in the history of Israel, when the danger of this confusion had subsided, that we find several references to God as king or *melek*. William Dyrness writes: "Exodus 15 speaks of the Lord reigning forever but ...there is some reticence to speak of God simply as king."<sup>2</sup> Eichrodt argues that once the inherent defects of the term had been overcome through its association with Canaanite worship, something new is made of the term 'king' and it is particularly associated with the idea of the Lord as King of all the earth."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, p.47

<sup>3</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament Vol I*, p.199



As we seek to communicate biblical truth from the OT, it may be helpful for us to observe how the writers of these books sought to convey truth about God in their cultural context. We see how far they were prepared to go, what images they were prepared to use, what terms they were willing to employ and what terms they wanted to avoid. As we seek to pass on the teaching of the OT to others, we must consider its message within the context in which it was given, explaining terms and images that may be less familiar in our own cultural context. We can also follow the example of the OT authors in seeking to avoid using terms that will be misunderstood or completely unintelligible.

The OT was written for people living within a cultural context that was probably far closer to many cultures found in the majority world today than in the West. As you share from the OT with people who come from a different cultural context from your own, you will discover that there are many aspects of its teaching that will be particularly meaningful to them. These may include the idea of a king, the understanding of covenant, the role of sacrifice, the place of dreams, the importance of genealogies, and the significance of curses.

On one occasion, I was preaching on the call of Abraham in Tanzania, and spoke about God's call, God's command and God's blessing. After the sermon, the bishop criticised my sermon on the basis that I said nothing about cursing. "We take curses very seriously in Africa," he said. "There are over three hundred references to curses in the Bible. If you are in Africa and are preaching from a text like Genesis 12, you must say something about curses."

The book of Leviticus may not be the favourite devotional reading for Western Christians, but in many parts of the world where sacrifice is still practised, it can be a powerful vehicle for communicating the gospel.

In the West, dreams may be put down to overwork or eating too much cheese. Yet, in many cultures, dreams are taken most seriously and are understood in terms of divine or ancestral communication. In fact, I am currently supervising a doctoral student who has written a thesis on the significance of dreams among the Sgaw Karen of Southeast Asia.

Similarly, genealogies may seem fairly meaningless to most Western Christians, appearing to be just a lot of unpronounceable names. However, I have known of at least one African who came to faith because reading the genealogy of Jesus convinced him that Jesus was a real historical figure, and not the creation of Western authors.

**STOP AND THINK: How might a better understanding of the cultural and religious contexts of international students strengthen our communication of the gospel? Since some aspects of OT cultural context resemble those of non-Western cultures today, how might highlighting these (with care and sensitivity) help students engage more effectively with OT teaching?**

### CONTEXTUALISATION IN THE GOSPELS

Christians believe that in the Old Testament God spoke through His prophets, but in the New Testament He has spoken through His Son. The incarnation is the ultimate example of contextualisation. The Son of God came in person to reveal the character of God and to give His life as the Saviour of the world. He was born into a particular cultural context and, in His teaching, He has provided us with a supreme example of effective communication.

Jesus adapted all that He said, not just to the context but also to the person He was addressing. He spoke in a way His hearers could understand and that was appropriate for them, using the kind of words they would use, and ideas that they could comprehend. Compare his conversations with Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan woman (John 4). He is talking to two people who differ in gender, culture and social standing.

Nicodemus was a Jew, a highly respected theologian, a professor, a Pharisee and a politician. In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus speaks appropriately using theological terms, in the language of the OT Scriptures. He speaks of the kingdom of God, the work of the Spirit of God, the need for spiritual rebirth. He refers Nicodemus back to the Hebrew Scriptures. "How is it that you are a teacher in Israel and do not understand these things?"<sup>4</sup>

The woman was a Samaritan, a social outcast even within her own community. She had lived with six

<sup>4</sup> John 3:10

different men and it would appear that the only reason she came to the well in the hottest part of the day was that there would be less people around, who could abuse her for being the sort of person she was. Jesus talks to her about finding fresh water, that mundane task which occupied much of her daily life.

In both cases He preaches the gospel. In both cases He offers eternal life, and calls for a response. He tells Nicodemus he must be born again. He challenges the woman to repent of her lifestyle. The message is the same, but the way it is presented is very different.

In His desire to communicate effectively Jesus made constant use of stories. Matthew goes so far as to say that Jesus never taught anything without using a story (Matthew 13:34). Jesus was well aware of the power of stories because they both catch people's attention and are easily remembered.

The former principal of Singapore Bible College, Dr Albert Ting, told me that if he was speaking to a group of students in China he would expound a passage, bringing out the salient points and unpacking key biblical doctrines. If he was speaking in a village, he would tell stories. Villagers would struggle to cope with abstract theories, he said. They wanted to know what it meant for them to be Christians and they needed illustrations to show them how to live. As we seek to communicate biblical truth, we must contextualise not only the message but also the method of communication.

Jesus also made use of questions. As you read through the gospels, you will observe that even when Jesus was asked a question He rarely gave a direct answer, responding instead with another question. While wanting to communicate effectively, He also wished to make people think. He did not spell everything out. Speaking in parables, He made His hearers reflect on the implications of what He was saying. The parable of the Prodigal Son is a good example – we never hear the end of the story but are left with unresolved questions: Did the older brother listen to the father? Did he come to the party? Was he

reconciled to his younger brother? Did they then divide what was left of the inheritance? Jesus left those questions unanswered, precisely because He wanted his audience to see themselves in the story and to decide for themselves how they would respond to God's gracious invitation, both to them and to those they might regard as sinners.

There is a great deal we can learn from Jesus' example: the manner in which He spoke to people, His use of stories, the way He adapted what He said to His audience and challenged them to think about what He was saying. He provides us with a perfect example of how to communicate effectively within a given cultural context.

Another area of study worth pursuing is the way in which each of the gospel writers contextualise the story of Jesus for the particular audiences they have in mind. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote for specific groups of people and this shaped what they included and what they emphasised.

**STOP AND THINK: How are stories used in our evangelism? How do we connect the biblical world to that of the students we work with using modern parables or examples?**

#### **CONTEXTUALISATION IN THE BOOK OF ACTS**

Jesus commanded His disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. To fulfil this command the disciples had to cross numerous geographical, cultural and religious barriers: first going to the despised Samaritans, then spreading the gospel among a multitude of cultural and religious people groups across the Greco-Roman world, and even reaching out beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Each stage of that evangelistic task presented the disciples with fresh challenges in cross-cultural communication.

Initially, they were preaching to Jews who were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and the history of Israel. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter was able to quote extensively from Old Testament history and the Hebrew Scriptures. But when

<sup>5</sup> For more on this topic, read Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: patterns for theology and mission* (2005), chapter 8.



Peter preached to a group of Gentiles in the home of the god-fearing centurion, Cornelius, he could not assume they were very familiar with Israel's history or religious books, so he makes only brief reference to them.

Paul faced similar challenges when he began his missionary journeys. As a Diaspora Jew, familiar with Greek language and culture, and as a Hebraic scholar who was also a Roman citizen, Paul was ideally suited for the task of communicating across the cultural and religious barriers which dominated the known world. In Pisidian Antioch he preached in the synagogue and was able to establish common ground with his audience by speaking of their shared history and by quoting from the Scriptures. In Lystra he had to take a totally different approach, since the people there knew nothing of Jewish history or the Jewish Scriptures. Unable to use a shared history as his starting point, he spoke of their shared humanity. He explained that he and Barnabas were only human beings just like them. They had come to tell the people of Lystra about the true and living God who created the whole earth and continued to provide for the needs of all human beings. Paul knew that with their polytheistic worldview the citizens of Lystra would be willing to recognise the existence of such a being even if they did not concern themselves with worshipping him.

A further challenge faced Paul when he arrived in Athens (Acts 17). Athens was the intellectual, cultural and religious capital of the world, the home of some of the greatest poets, philosophers and historians. The city was full of beautiful buildings and sculptures. Yet, the thing that struck Paul more than anything else was not the grandeur or the sophistication of the city but its idolatry. It was, in the words of Acts 17:16, "full of idols", "smothered in idols" or "swamped by idols" or "a veritable forest of idols".<sup>6</sup> Xenophon referred to Athens as one great altar, one great sacrifice. There were countless temples, shrines and altars dedicated to every imaginable deity.

Paul may have been impressed by the beauty of these Temples, but he was appalled by what they represented. The Athenians, renowned for their skill and sophistication, were worshipping not the Living God but lifeless idols. How was Paul to communicate the good news of Jesus in such a context? What should he say? What would make sense?

In the event, Paul did not go around tearing down statues or loudly criticising those who worshipped idols. He started talking with people. He engaged them in conversation. He talked with people wherever he could find them, in the synagogue, on the streets and in the agora, the great venue in Athens for debate and discussion.

As a result of his engagement he was invited to address the Areopagus, the supreme council of Athens. This was a unique opportunity to speak to a highly sophisticated audience in a new cultural context. Here he was engaging with a group of intellectuals and philosophers, people who loved a good debate (v21). This was more like speaking at the Oxford Union! It was a great privilege that posed an extraordinary challenge.

Luke provides us with a summary of Paul's address, and includes this sermon as one of three examples of Paul's preaching to differing audiences. There is no hint of criticism by Luke about the approach or content of what Paul said. Rather, Luke appears to hold this sermon out as a model of cross-cultural communication.

So, how did Paul approach this opportunity? This was very different from speaking in the synagogue or preaching on the street corner – a different approach was called for. So instead of using quotations from Jewish Scriptures, which characterised Paul's sermons to Jews, he followed the style of a Greek orator. He drew from the language and culture of his audience. He demonstrated considerable rhetorical skills and sensitivity, and he quoted from their poets.

He began by building a relationship with his audience: "Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are deeply religious." This was probably not criticism or sarcasm, merely an observation. Paul had noticed an altar dedicated to an unknown god and he wanted to tell them about this God, who had created and sustains the world. His audience included Stoics, who believed in a supreme God who was creator of the world, and Epicureans, who also accepted the idea of a supreme god, but did not believe he was at all interested in what happened in our world.

Paul argued that God made the world and doesn't live in Temples. He does not need our sacrifices. He is not dependent on us. On the contrary, we are dependent on him. He is our Father. He is close to us and wants us to know him. Paul then

<sup>6</sup> Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.277

quoted from two Greek poets, who said: “In him we live and move and have our being” and “We are his offspring.”<sup>7</sup> Paul did not necessarily agree with everything those poets said but aimed to build an effective bridge between their worldview and his own. He wanted to show that it is true that God is close to us and longs that all might enjoy a personal relationship with Him.

This approach carried a considerable risk – Paul could be accused of syncretism, of leaving his hearers with the impression that he accepted their beliefs. Yet, he was prepared to take that risk for the sake of effective communication. His desire to preach Christ was greater than his fear of falling into heresy. The same challenge remains for us in whatever context we minister. It poses the question as to how creative we are prepared to be in our desire to communicate the good news.

Paul concluded his address by stating that God had given proof of what he had said by raising Jesus from the dead. It is reasonable to assume that if Paul talked about the resurrection of Jesus he must also have spoken about his death. A person has to be dead before they can be raised from the dead! John Stott writes: “How could he (Paul) proclaim the resurrection without mentioning the death which preceded it? How could he call for repentance without mentioning faith in Christ which always accompanies it?”<sup>8</sup>

Some say that this sermon was a failure because he did not talk about the cross and that, in consequence, when Paul reached Corinth he decided only to speak of the cross. We simply do not know everything Paul said in Athens and it is difficult to argue from silence. Luke does not record this sermon as an example of what not to do, but as a model for how to relate the gospel in such a context. While it is true that there wasn't a revival, and we don't hear of hundreds converted, some quite significant people did believe, while others wanted to learn more. I would be pleased to have such a response if I spoke at the Oxford Union!

In Athens, Paul was in a totally new cultural milieu, with people who had their own fixed ideas

and philosophies, who had never heard anything about Jesus or the gospel. Desperate to communicate biblical truth in a way that his audience could understand and that related to their cultural context, he provides a model for us to emulate. Flemming describes this sermon as “perhaps the outstanding example of intercultural witness in the New Testament”.<sup>9</sup>

**STOP AND THINK: Many of our seekers' Bible studies start and end with Jesus in the Gospels, but such an approach may not address more fundamental assumptions about the existence and nature of God. How does Paul's example help us to 'start at the beginning'? What other Bible passages should we consider using in our studies?**

### CONTEXTUALISATION IN PAUL'S LETTERS

Paul has rightly been described as a pastoral or contextual theologian rather than a systematic theologian. This is especially evident in his letters, which are the natural product and continuation of his itinerant ministry. His deepest concern was that new believers would continue in the faith. As he wrote to each emerging church, he sought to address the particular issues each congregation was facing and to demonstrate the relevance of the death of Jesus on the cross in that context. He also knew that an increasing number of believers were Gentiles. He was well aware that the gospel, which had emerged from strong Jewish roots, had to be translated into the language and culture of the Hellenistic world. As a Diaspora Jew who had grown up in the Greek-speaking world, he was ideally suited to this task.

We see therefore that every effort was made in his letters to use language and illustrations that would readily be understood by his readers, drawing on a vast range of illustrations taken from daily life, from the home, the farm, and the market, to the classroom, the sports field, the business community, and the law courts.

Paul also used language from the Temple and even from non-Christian cults, for instance, the term *mysterion*<sup>10</sup> (μυστήριον) which was used by

<sup>7</sup> Epimenedes and Aratus

<sup>8</sup> Stott, *ibid*, p.289

<sup>9</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, p.72

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Romans 11:25, 16:25, 26; 1 Corinthians 4:1, 13:2, 14:2; Ephesians 1:9-10



Mystery cults to refer to the secret knowledge that was only available to those who had been initiated through cultic ritual and sacrifice. Paul, however, applied it to the mystery which God has finally revealed in Christ. This was a term that could have given a totally wrong idea of the nature of the gospel but is a remarkable example of his willingness to use any term that might form a bridge between biblical truth and the thought world of his hearers.

Further, he co-opted words and ideas taken from Greco-Roman philosophical and religious circles, words like “wisdom” and “conscience.” Like those philosophers, he encouraged his readers to behave in a way that was morally and ethically correct. He advised the Philippians: “Whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”<sup>11</sup> Such a list of ethical behaviour was typical of Stoic religion. Paul did not expect Christians to live in a holy ghetto separate from an evil world. Rather he wanted them to play their full part in civil society. He often referred to cultural institutions and conventions, encouraging Christians to obey the law and to pray for their rulers. They were to “do good”<sup>12</sup> and “be kind to everyone.”<sup>13</sup>

We see too Paul’s adaptation of a Greek rhetorical style when he sought to persuade his readers to heed his advice. Following a pattern laid down by Aristotle, Paul referred to his own character and credibility, appealed to the emotions of his readers and to the logic of his argument.

That is not to say that Paul approved of everything he found within Greco-Roman or even Jewish culture. There were aspects of both cultures which he felt should be challenged and transformed by the gospel. But he was aware that the gospel of Jesus, which had emerged out of an Aramaic-speaking context, had to be translated so that it could be understood within the worldview of the Greek speaking world.

However, in his desire to communicate the Christian message in differing cultural contexts, Paul was conscious that the essence of the gospel must not change. The message was always about Jesus and the cross, and Paul’s objective was to make the message of the cross relevant in each context.

He was amazingly flexible in his desire to communicate biblical truth, willing to adapt pictures from the secular as well as the religious world to explain what Jesus had achieved on the cross. Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for us – a picture from the Temple. He paid the ransom to set us free – a picture from the slave market. He was the Passover Lamb who died to protect us – a picture from Jewish history. He bore our guilt – a picture from the law court. He paid the atonement for our sins – a picture from the Jewish religious calendar. He reconciled us to God – a picture of friendship. He won the victory to set us free from our enemies – a picture from an Emperor’s triumphal procession. He has washed away our sin – a picture of cleansing. He took our shame – a picture of broken relationship.

In his doctoral dissertation ‘*Saving God’s face: a Chinese Contextualisation of Salvation through Honour and Shame*’, Jackson Wu argues that Western theologians have tended to focus on law as the primary metaphor for understanding the meaning of the cross. The doctrine of penal substitution is undoubtedly a wonderful truth that lies at the very heart of the Christian message. It is also, Wu argues, a metaphor which appeals to the Western minds that have been so influenced by Greek thought. He goes on to state: “Many people who hear this gospel need first to think like Westerners in order to receive the message and become Christians.”<sup>14</sup>

Wu points out that Christ not only took our guilt. He also bore our shame and brought honour and glory to the Father. The twin themes of honour and shame are, in his words, “pervasive in the Bible and throughout the world, especially in a Chinese context”.<sup>15</sup> Wu contends that in Asian, and particularly in Chinese, contexts the proclamation of the truth that Christ has borne our shame on the cross may resonate more immediately with those who listen to the message than a focus on the fact that Christ bore our guilt. We may not agree with everything Wu says, but he does help those of us who are from the West understand biblical images of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ that are under-emphasised in traditional Western theologies.

His thesis is a salutary reminder that the gospel

<sup>11</sup> Philippians 4:8

<sup>12</sup> Romans 13:3

<sup>13</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:15

<sup>14</sup> Wu, *Saving God’s Face*, p293

<sup>15</sup> Op.cit.p.294

is like a multi-faceted diamond. At the heart of the diamond is the central truth that Christ died for our sins, in our place. But just as a diamond has many facets, so the gospel is multi-faceted and in any particular cultural context there may be one facet of gospel truth that appears to be more immediately relevant. To nomadic tribal women in Tanzania, who are regarded as little more than chattels, the initial truth that draws them to Christ is the message that because He died they can become daughters of God.<sup>16</sup> To traditional religionists who live in constant fear of the unseen power of ancestral spirits, it is the truth that Christ has rescued us from the dominion of darkness that draws them to put their faith in Him.<sup>17</sup> To those who cannot find any purpose or reason for life, Jesus declares that He is the way, the truth and the life.<sup>18</sup> To those who feel what they have done has left an indelible stain on their lives, the Scriptures declare: "Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."<sup>19</sup> To those who are overcome with a sense of shame, because they are overcome with a burden of guilt, Hebrews says that Jesus has carried that shame for them.<sup>20</sup>

Paul views aspects of the gospel from different perspectives depending on the situation faced by his readers. In Galatians, he concentrates on the present effect of Christ's death in delivering us from slavery to the law. In Ephesians, he demonstrates how, through his death, Christ has delivered us from the power of evil. In Philippians, he encourages his readers to follow the example of Jesus' humility and submission to the will of God. In Thessalonians, he stresses the future dimension of Christ's saving work. These facets of the significance of Christ's death are not contradictory but complementary.

Paul's passion to contextualise the message does not come at the expense of the basic truth of the gospel. Flemming comments: "Paul's contextualisation does not take place at the level of the basic content of the gospel."<sup>21</sup> The central message of the gospel remains the same. It is only as Paul seeks to articulate and interpret that truth

in particular contexts and to make it relevant to the lives of those he addresses, that he is willing to lay greater emphasis on one aspect of the message of God's saving activity in Christ. As evangelist, pastor and teacher, he walks a narrow line between being "contextual without becoming changeable, audience sensitive without being audience driven."<sup>22</sup>

**STOP AND THINK: What experience have you had in using different metaphors of the atonement (such as honour, shame and other examples given above)? How confident are you in articulating the gospel accurately in these ways?**

### CONTEXTUALISATION IN THE MODERN WORLD

The task of the world church today is to communicate the message of the gospel in culturally relevant terms, to share the text in context, to communicate biblical truth faithfully, so people of every culture can understand it, see its relevance and respond to its truth. Missionaries, evangelists and theological educators from the West need to make sure they do not focus exclusively on biblical passages which speak to a Western mindset, while ignoring those which speak more powerfully to people of other cultures. We need to take care lest we impose a way of reading and interpreting Scripture conditioned by our own culture. We need to listen carefully to authors like Jackson Wu, learning from him and others how we may share the gospel more effectively with those from non-Western cultures. As we discover hidden blind spots in our own reading of the biblical text, we will begin to realise that what Christ achieved on the cross is not less but far more than we had understood.

Many evangelicals are afraid that in the process of contextualisation we may move away from biblical orthodoxy. The fallacy lying behind this

<sup>16</sup> John 1:12

<sup>17</sup> Colossians 1:13

<sup>18</sup> John 14:6

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 1:18

<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 12:2, 13:13; Isaiah 53:3

<sup>21</sup> Flemming, p.112.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit. p.116.



fear is the assumption that we in the West have an exclusive and comprehensive understanding of biblical truth which we must pass on to the rest of the world. The truth of the matter is that we need the insights and perspectives of Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America both for our own enrichment and to enable us to share with them the task of making the gospel relevant in the whole world.

This does not mean that every statement made by any non-Western theologian is acceptable. Many of the foremost theologians in Asia, Africa and Latin America have been trained or heavily influenced by liberal Western scholars. In consequence they may place less importance on the teaching of the Bible and have given greater emphasis in the development of their contextual theologies to tradition, culture, personal experience or the contemporary socio-political context. Stephen Bevans has pointed out ways in which theological orientation impacts approaches to contextualisation.<sup>23</sup> Those who give primacy to Scripture as the final authority in all matters of doctrine will not be prepared to accept contextual theologies which give a lesser role to God's word.

John Stott argued that we need to avoid the extremes of total fluidity and total rigidity.<sup>24</sup> We do not want the church to descend into theological chaos or heresy, nor do we want to fall into the trap of presenting a reductionist gospel that is more immediately intelligible in the West but may appear incomprehensible or irrelevant in China. Stott argues both for a commitment to the fact of God's revelation and a commitment to the task of contextualisation.

As we see billions of people around the world with little or no knowledge of the gospel, we face the challenge as to how we can communicate the wonderful message of what Christ has done for us on the cross in terms they will understand. We must learn from the writers of the OT. We must observe the supreme example of the Lord Jesus. We must examine how the first Christians shared the gospel across cultural barriers. We must emulate the boldness and creativity of Paul as he sought to proclaim the full meaning and significance of the death of Jesus. Finally, we must listen to the fresh insights into biblical truth which are emerging from the majority world.

**STOP AND THINK: How has this article challenged your thinking on contextualisation? We depend on the Holy Spirit and not on clever techniques to convey the gospel, so why is it important to consider carefully our listeners' cultural contexts?**

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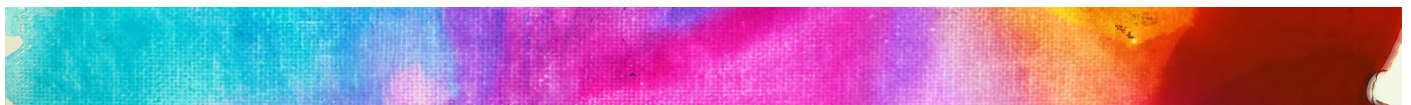
<sup>23</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextualization*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004

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## The Bible in Full Colour: Encouraging Scripture Engagement in the Heart Language



**Lynette  
Teagle**

Originally from Singapore, Lynette joined Friends International in 2001 and serves as Head of Learning and Development. Married to Peter and based in Oxford, she is currently researching for a PhD.

For many years, as I discipled new believers from a range of nationalities, the litmus test of genuine conversion and growth as a disciple of Christ was their desire to read the Bible in their heart language. It seemed to me that anyone who preferred reading the Bible solely in English could only have made a superficial commitment. I was also concerned that this might be an indicator that the new believer was in some way trying to keep God ‘at arm’s length’.

Having recently conducted in-depth interviews with international students who have come to Christ in the UK<sup>1</sup>, it seems the picture is more complex than we assume. Increased globalisation and changing student profiles mean that students are ever more confident and fluent in different languages and cultures, less likely to fit rigid stereotypes, and thus our own ‘boxes’ may be inadequate to describe the nature of their faith in Christ and sense of identity. More than that, there are clear benefits in the opportunities available to read the Bible in English. We may need to realise that to make the most of these God-given gospel opportunities, we have to develop a more nuanced

approach as we encourage international students to engage with Scripture in a meaningful way.

### ENGAGING THE HEART

The question of language use in evangelism and discipleship is a central concern of ministries like the Wycliffe Bible Translators. Most of us involved in international student ministry would probably agree with Dye’s assertion that “(e)ven when people understand the Bible in a second language, the truth often loses its impact because hearers perceive God as distant and Christian faith as of little relevance to their daily lives. Good Christian living is about interpersonal relations, about emotion, about the deep springs of human life”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, internal spiritual growth happens most deeply in one’s heart language. An Asian pastor described two decades of reading the Bible in a regional language translation as “reading in moonlight”, whereas in his heart language was “like bright sunlight”<sup>3</sup>.

We see this clearly in the Bible itself, where language played a vital role in effective communication, as listeners responded differently depending on the tongue used. These include the Holy

<sup>1</sup> Due to my research focus, primarily East Asian students.

<sup>2</sup> Dye, T.W. *The eight conditions of Scripture engagement*, p89, International Journal of Frontier Missiology 26:2, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, R. *Like bright sunlight – the benefits of communicating in heart language*, p85, International Journal of Frontier Missiology 26:2, 2009.

Spirit's descent at Pentecost (Acts 2) and Paul's experiences in Jerusalem (Acts 22). The fact that the Bible can speak in an individual's heart language bears witness to the fact that the whole of Scripture is God's revelation of Himself to humanity, culminating in Jesus, the Word who became flesh. It is also no coincidence that in His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke and taught predominantly in Aramaic, the everyday language of the ordinary people, rather than Hebrew, like the religious leaders, or Greek, like the scholars.

It is therefore right that we seek to maintain the same priorities in our ministry to international students today. That use of heart language makes a qualitative difference is perhaps best described by Ngoc\*, who says, "After I got familiar with the Vietnamese Bible, I really enjoyed reading it. It was like I was given the Bible in full colour when I started to understand everything – even some small details in my own language. For example, with Bible stories about King David, Queen Esther, Prophet Elijah... though I read them in English before, I hardly paid attention to detailed information (and ignored some English words that I didn't understand if I assumed that they didn't really affect my understanding) and only focused on important events. But when I read the stories again in Vietnamese, I realised that they were much more interesting, detailed and informative."

### THE ATTRACTION OF READING THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH

There's no denying that international students are drawn to opportunities to study the Bible in English. The positive attraction of learning about the Bible in the English language has opened the door for evangelism and is core to our ministry, as evidenced by Bible studies and Bible-based language classes up and down this country, filled with students from all over the world.

At the most superficial level, students have the opportunity to find out about British culture and practise spoken English with friendly native speakers. It is an easy form of intercultural exchange – learning a foreign book in a foreign language. At a deeper level, there is the chance to discover a book whose teachings lie at the moral and ethical foundation of Western society. An understanding of the Bible is sometimes perceived as an integral part of being in the West and identifying with Western ways.

If students are only interacting with the Bible on this basis, they may lack the imaginative experience to relate the Bible to themselves and thus may never move much deeper, even after extended periods of 'Bible study'. It is worth asking what they perceive the Bible to be. Some take it to be merely an ancient volume of literary fiction or mythology, with no more value for life than the Harry Potter novels. To others, it is a religious book or source of ethical and moral teaching. Some have a sense of its innate value without being able to articulate it: "The English Bible seemed to teach me good things about life."

Going deeper still, a more subtle attraction of studying the Bible in English is the freedom to engage with spiritual truths in ways they might not be able to do in their heart language. A number of those interviewed told me that when they participate in English Bible studies, they can put aside the constraints of their more reserved culture, together with its inhibitions and obligations. Alice\*, a Japanese postgrad observed, "I think many Japanese students prefer reading the Bible in English, because it is much easier to ask questions. In Japan, people tend to avoid asking direct questions in conversation as it is not our cultural behavior... sometimes it is hard to open up deep conversation, which is very important when reading the Bible."

A Taiwanese student who came from a Christian family said that he grew tremendously through seeker studies in the UK "because I could attend an English Bible study, and nobody expected me to know anything. I felt free to learn and discover more."

Conversely, religious beliefs and identity from home could be the very reason why a person might avoid reading in their own language. Alice\* commented that "many people in Japan believe that religion is dangerous and people tend to avoid talking about faith in Japanese." Ngoc\* told us that when she first tried reading the Bible in her heart language, certain words were a constant reminder of unhelpful religious pressures from her home country. In fact, it seemed to her that "God was closer via the English translation. Jesus seemed to be described as a friend to me. With the Vietnamese translation, we need to address Jesus as "Lord



Jesus" (not like "I" and "you") which makes Him a bit more distant. And because English is not my first language, I accepted the gospel more easily than in the Vietnamese language.”

There are therefore clear advantages – particularly in evangelism – to engaging with the Bible in English. However, the issue becomes more urgent when a person professes faith in Christ and needs to grow in their understanding and knowledge of God. This is when regular and deep scriptural engagement become non-negotiable. In addition, if a new believer is unable to read the Bible meaningfully and pray in their heart language, there will be an inherent limit to the depth of their spiritual growth and participation in fellowship upon their return home. A current Bible translation project in Madagascar was begun for precisely this reason – that new believers were observed to not grow in their faith when they could only read the Bible in Malagasy, the language of education and commerce. Discipleship had to take place in the heart-language of the people.

In order to understand why some students might seem reluctant to read the Bible in their mother tongue, it is helpful to ask three questions:

### **1. WHAT DO THEY BELIEVE ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE?**

One key reason for new believers' lack of interest in reading the Bible in their heart language might be that they lack an accurate understanding of how Christians view the Bible, known as our doctrine of Scripture.

Many students approach the Bible primarily as a source of culture or language learning, and over time, move from knowing about Jesus to knowing Him personally. Students I have interviewed describe how learning about Jesus' teaching and character challenged their worldview. Most describe additional factors which led them to a saving faith in Christ: some were impressed by the lifestyle and values of Christians around them, lending validity to the truths taught in the Bible. Others tried praying for God's miraculous intervention in their lives, as they had read in the gospel accounts, and having experienced

answered prayer, became convinced of the existence of God and went on to put their faith in Jesus.

A belief in God, and a believing faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, however, are not the same as understanding the role of the Bible in the Christian faith. There are two main reasons for this:

#### **The absence of a sacred text in many cultures.**

Many cultures around the world do not have a sacred text, even if there are strong religious influences. Where a sacred text exists, it might play no part in everyday life. In contrast, most British people are aware of the Bible and its central role in the nation's life. Even if they do not agree with the Christian faith, the majority recognise the ceremonial function of the Bible as a sacred book, in the law courts, for example, as well as at important state occasions such as the opening of Parliament or certain royal events.

Students who have never had a sacred text may lack the understanding that Christians hold the Bible as more than a cultural or religious textbook. They have no knowledge of it as 'Scripture', defined by Habermas as the "linguistification of the sacred"<sup>4</sup>.

#### **The Christian doctrine of Scripture is unique.**

Even those who have some sort of religious background may not initially understand the uniqueness of the Christian doctrine of Scripture. Dharamraj, an Asian theologian, describes how Asian Christians have had to develop a doctrine of the Bible in conversation with the sacred texts of their neighbours: Hinduism, for example, has the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhism has the sutras and Islam, the Qur'an. All these major world religions would agree on the four key features of Scripture<sup>5</sup> and refer to their texts as the self-disclosure of deity to humans<sup>6</sup> or "revelation". But here, it would seem, the similarity ends. As Dharamraj describes, for Hindus, revelation comes either through the "sacred hearing" of their scriptures, allowing hearers to "penetrate the realm of the divine", or through the teaching of a person who is 'spiritually awake', or guru. Performance or recitation of the gitas is held to

<sup>4</sup>Habermas, 1984, quoted by Dharamraj, H, "On the Doctrine of Scripture – an Asian Conversation", *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, Langham Global Library, 2019:39.

<sup>5</sup> Four typical features of scripture in any religion: 1) Authoritative oral or written texts, 2) Believed to be of divine origin and therefore, sacred and powerful, 3) Canonical and normative for a certain community of faith, and 4) Appropriated and perpetuated as a "touchstone for religious thinking". Smith, 2008, quoted by Dharamraj, p40, *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup>Detweiler, 1985, quoted by Dharamraj, p45, *ibid*.

“set power into motion”. Hearing, memorising and reciting their scriptures verbatim is thought to bring spiritual or material gain.

In Islam, revelation is believed to have been directed at Muhammed alone, such that the Qur’an contains the words dictated to him by an angel and disclose the will of Allah verbatim directly as it exists in heaven, so that humans can live according to his will. Thus the Qur’an guides the God-fearing, providing direction on conduct for both individual and state. There is also believed to be power in the Qur’anic verses themselves, such that the inscription of the text on buildings or vehicles, or memorised recitation of the text, invoke powerful effects. It is all too easy for Christians to underestimate the immense esteem in which the Qur’an is held in Islam: “God’s mystery and wisdom, His power, depth and perfection, His divine mandates and prophecies, all synergistically inhabiting the physical pages of a book, vivifying it with the very essence of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Both these approaches to religious texts contrast with our theology of Scripture, which holds that both Old and New Testaments are written by people inspired by the Holy Spirit and contain the direct revelation of God Himself, culminating in Jesus as God incarnate, the ultimate revelation. The Bible is therefore entirely different in that it is uniquely relational. We describe the Bible as God’s word to us, “living and active” (2 Timothy 3:15-17), spiritual food (Deuteronomy 8:3), and we not only search the Scriptures for truths to live by, but so that we can come to Christ Himself (John 5:39). Thus we expect God to speak to us directly from the Bible, not by human wisdom, but by His Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words (1 Corinthians 2:13).

Unless new believers understand this, they are not likely to see the need to go beyond reading for the intellect.

## 2. WHAT PLACE DOES THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HAVE WITHIN THEIR SENSE OF IDENTITY?

It is increasingly understood that those who have lived in other cultures for an extended period of time may not only become assimilated into the new culture, but develop what is known as a

‘hybrid identity’, which, simply put, is a fusion of elements of their personal identity along with traits they have absorbed from adopted cultures or countries.

Language is, of course, closely linked with identity. For international students in Britain, therefore, English is not just the language they use for a time in daily life and academia, but an intrinsic part of their new hybrid identity. Speakers of second or other languages have even observed that their personality changes subtly with each language they speak (I am definitely more of an extrovert in Mandarin!). As one Masters student said, “After this I am forever a little bit English, as well as my own birth nationality.”

This, of course, has wider ramifications, including their approach to the Bible. If, as previously suggested, they lack a rigorous understanding of why we should read the Bible, if they have no expectation that God should speak to them each time they read, then it is understandable that they might approach it as they would a textbook or a favourite work of fiction in their second language. After all, most international students are not only able to understand the basics of biblical teaching; many become conversant in it, expressing their thoughts and opinions with some confidence in English Bible studies. It then becomes difficult for us to explain the need for a deeper understanding of biblical truth in their heart language, especially if they can write a dissertation of several thousand words in English.

Fundamentally, Bible reading in the truly Christian sense is more than a solitary activity – it has to be corporate and social. Lest we think that this is limited to listening to Bible teaching in church or small group Bible study, the Old Testament reminds us that the corporate recitation and learning of Scripture was a powerful act of consecration and verbal assent to faith in God (Deuteronomy 31:11, Nehemiah 8:1, 8, also Colossians 4:16). Reading the Bible, in unison with others, therefore, plays a key role in providing those gathered with a common spiritual identity, and even more so among those who speak the same language. It works both ways: it might be about fitting into British church culture

<sup>7</sup> Qureshi, Nabeel, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Zondervan, 2014: 228.



as an overseas visitor, participating in worship and listening to sermons, all in English. Conversely, the ability to read the Bible alongside co-nationals can help hasten a returnee's ability to fit into a local Christian community when they leave the UK. I know returnees whose struggle to settle was directly linked with an inability to use the translation commonly used by the local church<sup>8</sup>, as well as one who only worships in the international church because she cannot get used to reading the Bible in her home language. The implications are wide-reaching.

### 3. HOW WELL DO THEY UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE?

Apart from the theological and sociological issues, a very practical factor to consider is the potential lack of good translations and resources in the student's heart language. Even where the Bible has been translated several times, none of these may be easily understood. A Japanese student commented, "In my first language, the Bible contains a lot of words which people do not use in their daily lives or some of the words might be out of date, especially in the use of traditional (Chinese) script<sup>9</sup>."

In addition, "easy to read" does not always mean "accurate". As in English, not all translations are adequate. We may need to discuss misunderstandings of Scripture based on an erroneous use of language. Being willing and able to go back to the original biblical language is helpful, as this avoids an "English versus others" mindset. Use of language can also simplify or complicate theological arguments. Ngoc\* has found that "the English can be more helpful with passages or books that address theological issues (like Romans)... it offers greater help in understanding them in a logical way. The Vietnamese version can be very confusing. If the English version is not being used, my Vietnamese friends find it hard to understand many points in Paul's letter to the Romans. Some sentences like '*We are no longer slaves of Sin, but slaves of God*' (Romans 6:6) are really vague in the Vietnamese translation." We must not, of course, forget that Millennials and Gen Z students are more likely to read digital formats than in print. Online resources can be useful, but are not always easy to access, especially if WiFi is patchy. A surprising finding

from my interviews, though, was that some millennials reported feeling "unable to read well from a screen" – this is a problem especially when print versions of modern translations can be impossible to obtain except at exorbitant cost.

### FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

Given the potential and pitfalls, one might be tempted to say that there is no way to resolve this issue. The process of helping a new believer to read, treasure and apply the Bible for themselves is not a one-size-fits-all process, but there are things we can do to make the process easier and more fruitful, while seeking to accommodate each person's linguistic background and identity.

With all this in mind, I suggest that a "both-and" approach might work more effectively than simply despairing over our friends who seem to reject anything other than Bible reading in English. Instead, it is helpful to know that there are stages in the spiritual lives of new believers as they grapple with handling the Bible well in two languages.

**1. Lay a foundation in English:** Students who have come to Christ in the British church milieu will often find it more difficult to transition to their heart language, especially if they don't know any Christians from their home country. In the early stages, it is important that we teach a solid doctrine of Scripture which helps new believers move from reading the Bible as a book about Christianity or stories about Jesus, to approaching it with the expectation that within the canon of Scripture, God will speak and teach them about Himself. "Reading in English gave me an overview about the Bible, and some basic understanding about God. It made me comfortable as I was reading something easy to understand (so that I could apply what I read in my life). The English language seemed to be clearer as I mainly studied the Gospels (stories about Jesus' life)." (Ngoc\*)

At this stage, it helps if we actively encourage use of the Bible in English, and realise that this is as much a part of the transition process for returnees as their physical move home. "I still depended on my English Bible a lot when I first came home. At first the English Bible seemed to be more understandable and I trusted it more than the translation in Vietnamese." (Vu\*)

<sup>8</sup> For example the Chinese Union version (和合本) is the predominant translation used by Protestant churches in China, but students have found the language complex and old-fashioned.

<sup>9</sup> Referring to *kanji*, the use of traditional Chinese characters for nouns, place names, etc., in modern written Japanese.

**2. Introduce the use of heart language as early as possible, in parallel with English:** While we might start with English, it is vital to continue to encourage and where possible, model Bible reading in different languages. “(With another Chinese Christian) we did our one-to-one in Chinese and that happened very soon after I became a Christian. At first I felt slightly unfamiliar with the Chinese words but it wasn’t a big deal. Reading in Chinese has been very helpful in terms of reaching a deeper level in understanding the word of God.” (Ping\*)

I have led numerous discipleship Bible studies where we were simultaneously reading in English, Vietnamese, Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese, as well as other groups where we read and compared the Scriptures in English, Russian and Farsi, and another in English, Korean and Japanese. In each case it was exciting to see the members of the group grow in their appreciation of the Bible in their heart language; more than that, I always gained a fresh understanding of how the nuances of language can communicate familiar truths in fresh ways. Even if you are not bilingual, it is possible to enlist the help of a mature believer who can model Scripture engagement in a different language.

**3. Work towards an increasing fluency in the heart language, with English as a backup:** All my interviewees reflected that it took time and perseverance to gain a love for the Bible in their heart language. Strikingly, the returnees who were doing well reading bilingually were actively involved in their local church and were motivated by the desire to serve and be fully committed to their church community:

“I often read the Japanese Bible and attend the service at the local church... there are many children and I wanted to help run the Sunday School. After returning home I feel that God is calling me to serve the younger generation.” (Alice\*)

“In order to catch up with my friends (in the sense that I need to learn to communicate to them at church), I need to learn a lot of Vietnamese words that Vietnamese Christians use at church. For example: fellowship, spiritual food, faith... My friends at church (mainly from a Christian background) don't know that these words are only used at church – not in daily life. I have to learn them in order to be able pray in Vietnamese.” (Ngoc\*)

**4. Encourage ongoing interaction in both languages for deeper study:** As I interviewed students, I was challenged to hear of their devotional use of Bibles in different languages, as well as the lengths some of them would go to in order to understand what they were reading: “When the Bible talks about the Holy Spirit (for example, in John 15 and Romans 8), I feel the message in English is more straightforward. But sometimes I feel the Japanese message is deeper. It is hard to explain in words, but when I use my bilingual Bible, I prefer reading in English first and then in my first language.” (Alice\*)

“I normally have to read at least 3 versions for whatever passage I read: The 1925 Vietnamese translation, the Modern Vietnamese Translation, the NIV and the AMP in order to make sure that I don't have a misunderstanding of the passage. It's still hard – especially for someone who doesn't come from a Christian family background like me. As I look at one passage, I need to seek for the passage context in order to understand the whole concept. Sometimes I need to read the whole chapter in order to get the picture of what is happening, then re-read them in different versions. This makes me slower than other people when we open the Bible and study together. But at the same time, it has given me a habit of reading different Bible versions to get a better understanding, instead of only reading one.” (Ngoc\*)

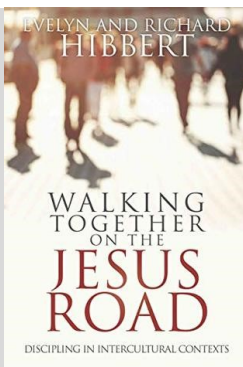
**Finally**, sustained in-depth spiritual growth is more important than using a ‘correct’ Bible version or language. If a new believer is consistently in community, learning and gaining maturity, we can trust that the Holy Spirit Himself will create a hunger and longing for spiritual truth that comes from an increasing understanding of God’s word. And likely as not, for most, deep engagement with Scripture will come via the mother tongue, the language used for cries of the heart, the language in which our dreams and emotions are expressed. This is best conveyed by Ping\*: “I personally value more highly reading the Bible in my first language because ultimately, the aim is that God’s word will be rooted deeply in my heart rather than intellectually. Maybe English helps me to understand in my head, but Chinese definitely means something more in my heart.”

*\*Names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.*





## Book Reviews



### **Walking together on the Jesus Road: Discipling in Intercultural Contexts**

by Evelyn Hibbert, Richard Hibbert. Published September 2018 by William Carey Publishing.

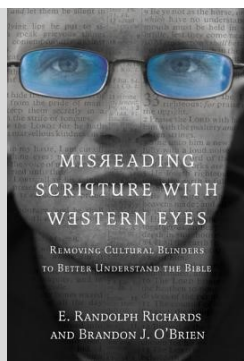
The Hibberts ministered among Muslims in Bulgaria for 12 years before going on to train missionaries at WEC International and Sydney Missionary & Bible College. *Walking Together on the Jesus Road* reflects this wealth of experience – both their own and that of thirty other intercultural disciplers, whose experiences range from Germans discipling Turks, to Australians discipling Chinese, to Koreans discipling Africans.

I think this is an exceptionally insightful exploration of discipling interculturally, full of real life examples which unpack the nitty-gritty of what the task entails. As the title suggests, discipleship is not a quick process, something one person does to another, but a deeply relational journey taken together.

The book highlights the danger of premature judgements and the difficulty of discerning where a disciple is at spiritually when working interculturally. It exposes our tendency to think of our own church culture as the biblical culture, over the culture of those being disciplined. For EDG (English, Dutch, German) background disciplers, for example, it might mean an unbalanced prioritising of values such as time-keeping, efficiency and individuality, and focusing on Bible studies as the primary (sole?) method of discipleship.

Helpfully, the book also shares principles and practical steps to overcome barriers, thus helping others follow Jesus more fully, in ways suited to their culture.

– Kah Foon Gillespie, *Friends International Staff Worker*



## Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible

by E. Randolph Richards, Brandon J. O'Brien. Published July 2012 by IVP Books.

*Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* is an excellent introduction into the way that we often filter scripture through our cultural biases. What 'goes without being said' in our culture is different from that which isn't said in the biblical culture. The problems arise when we fill in the silences from the biblical cultural context with the assumptions of our own. There is a lot that is covered in a short amount of space and it is both easy to read and listen to (I use audiobooks a lot). Most of the examples of non-Western perspectives came from the mission field as one of the authors, E. Randolph Richards, has spent time working in Indonesia.

The book aims to redress the imbalance that is often found in Western churches to make set rules and propositions when the Bible uses relationships, metaphors and parables. There are many challenges throughout such as, "Leadership is a Western virtue; submission is a biblical virtue" and "Our tendency to emphasise rules over relationship and correctness over community means that we are often willing to sacrifice relationships on the altar of rules." Some of the challenges can be taken with a pinch of salt—depending on their relevance to our British context—but they are worth thinking through. The main takeaway is that we in the West need to be humble and teachable; our culture is not superior to any other. To help us self-reflect and find our cultural blind spots, we should aim to read the Bible with others and hear their perspectives.

Overall, this is a worthwhile read to help us better understand 'what goes without being said' in the culture of the Bible as well as the cultures of the international students with whom we interact with.

– Phil Duncalfe, Friends International Staff Worker in Guildford





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