

PRINCIPLES FOR SELECTING TEXTS FOR SPECIAL AUDIENCES

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We are faced with a very practical task: to define principles by which to choose Old and New Testament passages for selections to be read by particular non-Christian audiences. The passages should be ones which proclaim the good news in ways faithful to the whole of Scripture.

The Bible Societies are responsible to provide selections which address readers with the basic message of the Scriptures. The proclamation presented in the selections must be recognized by the churches as being faithful to that message—first, as it is understood by the traditions of the Christian church and, secondly, as it is recognized in the present situation to be the means through which the Holy Spirit speaks anew.

Why should biblical selections be prepared for particular audiences?

Selections can be prepared in a size and form more easily read than larger Scriptures. This makes possible the choice of material which makes it easier for the reader to understand the message of the Scriptures than is generally possible when a person without any background or assistance is first confronted with a full Bible. Material for selections can be chosen which relate to the particular situation and needs of an audience.

There are two dangers which should be avoided, though, in the preparation of selections:

1. Content and design may be chosen simply to appeal to the target audience. (Note the warning of this danger given by Norman Mundhenk, *The Bible Translator*, October 1973.) It is not enough to have content which will attract buyers in order to increase sales and distribution. There needs to be a concern with the communication of the message of the Bible which will challenge thought, evoke a response, or be a means for change.
2. The very process of selection can distort the message of the Bible. Various groups create distortions of the message by choosing only particular passages or parts of the Bible on which to base their doctrines and practices. Even a casual selection of material and distribution of disconnected portions can give a harmfully twisted view of the message of the Bible.

Principles are needed to guide us in making selections which will maintain the integrity of the message of the whole Bible and present it in such a way that readers may respond to it as good news.

Principles

I would like to suggest three principles which will help us do this as we choose passages for selections designed for specific audiences:

1. Select materials according to *themes* traditionally recognized by the church as distinctive of the Gospel
2. Select materials in a way which maintains a *balance*, between such types of material as narration of events and teaching, description and exhortation, word from God and about God and to God

3. Select materials according to the *situation* of the audience to which the message is to be addressed and received as good news.

Let me illustrate these principles by indicating briefly how they might be applied to choosing materials from a particular gospel for a selection. I have chosen the Gospel of Luke because it proclaims to those outside the Jewish community that the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ can be received as good news by all people. We assume here that the essential message of the Gospel of Luke can be put into a shortened form which will heighten its ability to communicate to those outside the given tradition.

The *theme* chosen for a selection of materials is wholly consistent with the theme of Luke itself: the salvation of God is for everyone who responds.

This theme is appropriate for a general situation of audiences which have great uncertainty about salvation and believe it is only for those who can do the will of God through a devout and disciplined life.

Materials are identified in the Gospel of Luke which particularly convey this theme through a *balanced combination* of narration, teaching, words of God, and response of people to the message.

MATERIALS IN LUKE WITH CHOSEN THEME

<u>Reference</u>	<u>Content</u>	<u>Type of Material</u>
1.26-55	Announcement of birth of Jesus	Narration
	Mary's praise to God	Response
2.22-33	Presentation in the temple	Narration
		Response
3.1-5, 21-22	Baptism of Jesus	Narration
		Teaching
		Word of God
4.16-30	Sermon at Nazareth	Teaching
7.1-23	Healing of Roman Officer's servant	Narration
	Raising a dead man	Narration
	Answer to disciples of John the Baptist	Response
10.25-37	Parable of good Samaritan	Teaching
11.29-32	One greater than Jonah and Solomon	Teaching
17.11-18	Ten men healed	Narration
		Response
19.1-10	The tax collector	Narration
		Response
24.36-52	Resurrection appearance	Narration
		Response

The ten passages chosen from Luke particularly carry the theme of salvation for all people who respond. These can provide the basis for a selection with other pieces of Luke added to create a connected narrative. The choice of these ten passages has taken into account the general situation of audiences which need to hear the good news that God does assure acceptance of all in salvation through Jesus Christ.

The passages chosen combine to present variety and balance in a number of ways:

Six of the passages are primarily narration while four are primarily teaching.

Two of the passages describe the actions of Jesus. The actions in these sections relate to the teaching of Jesus in other sections, so that there is a

demonstration through the action of Jesus of what is spoken in words in the teaching. For example, the announcement of the mission of Jesus in his sermon at Nazareth (4.16–27) is shown in his actions in the presence of the disciples of John the Baptist (7.18–23).

Jesus' teaching in the passages is of several forms—teaching about the fulfillment of an Old Testament promise (4.16–21), a parable (10.25–37), exhortation based on examples from the Old Testament (11.29–32), and announcement of the significance of his own death and resurrection (24.44–49).

There are references to God—who speaks directly in the account of Jesus' baptism; to the son—in the same account; and to the Holy Spirit in several passages.

The passages selected consciously involve both men and women so that women will be seen as full persons who are accepted as such by the Gospel.

Just over half the passages describe the responses of people to events. These responses suggest a variety of ways in which persons may react positively to the good news—through offering praise and glory to God (in the cases of Mary, Simeon, the crowd who witnessed the raising from the dead, and the disciples after the resurrection); through faith (seen in the centurion); through thanksgiving (expressed by the Samaritan leper); and through repentance and a changed life (apparent in Zacchaeus). Such responses suggest models for the reader today who feels ready to accept what has been read as good news.

SELECTION FROM THE WHOLE BIBLE

These principles can also be used for the selection of appropriate materials from the whole of the Bible.

The **first principle** stated is to select materials according to themes traditionally recognized by the church as distinctive of the Gospel. This principle is essential in order that we may maintain the integrity of the message of the Bible, without distortion, as we select passages.

The biblical and historical creeds of the church help us to identify the themes generally recognized by the church as distinctive of the Gospel. In both the Old and New Testaments there are events which are recognized in various statements of faith as being significant acts of God which particularly reveal God and are received as good news:

In the Old Testament are included

1. The call of the patriarchs
2. The exodus experience (and, through it, an understanding of creation—for, in the exodus, a people and nation was formed from nothingness by a God who surely formed everything that exists)
3. The making of the covenants between God and his people in the time of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David
4. The possession of the promised land, with both its blessings and curses
5. The establishment of the kingdom and government of Israel
6. The Babylonian exile and the restoration of Israel after the exile

In the New Testament special significance is given to

7. The life

8. The death

9. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ

The significance of these events is summarized in the creeds through such phrases as forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, communion of the saints, life everlasting, salvation, justification, sanctification. All these concepts become part of the Bible's expression of its theme, which is always tied to the events through which God has made himself known in ways that allow people to reflect upon them.

The events themselves and the church's reflection and proclamation of the meaning of these events become the basis for themes to be chosen for a selection. Maintaining this discipline ties us to the essential message of Scripture. We can select other stories or teaching material that emphasize clearly the significance of these events, through themes found in both the Old and New Testaments. Once we have determined the theme for which we wish to find materials, many resources are available for finding related passages, including concordances, Bible dictionaries, books of biblical theology, personal knowledge of the Bible, and our own creative, imaginative thinking.

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According to the **second principle** the choice of a variety of materials is important to prevent distortion of the message and to maintain a balanced presentation. Some years ago I attended a group at which a booklet containing only the teachings of Jesus was used as a Bible; it was the only biblical resource the group ever used. As a result, the group only believed in some vague moral and ethical principles. The hard reality of sin that produces death and the amazing love of a God who brings reconciliation in the face of this had never been seen in an actual life—in the life of the man Jesus. The fullness of Jesus' teaching is found only in his words *and* his works. Both are needed for a balanced view of preaching lived out in a life. In the same way, it is necessary to have both the words and works of God—the words of God to the prophets and disciples and accounts of the works of God as described by others together with their reflections on the significance of those words. It is also important to have materials which indicate the responses made by the hearers and witnesses of these words and works—the responses of faith and worship and dedication, responses generally addressed to God.

Other kinds of balance are also important:

A variety of images, especially in language about God, should be included. Any one analogy or image of God is an imperfect attempt to express what is beyond human experience and understanding. Various, God is seen as shepherd, father, mother, judge, rock, for example.

Selections need to include women as well as men at all times.

Within a total series of selections, something of the breadth of the variety of themes in the Gospel message needs to be represented.

A variety of literary types can be pleasing to the reader and can be important where other types of balance have already been considered, for example, narrative, poetry, parables, wisdom sayings.

It is sometimes possible to find blocks of material which combine such variety in a short enough scope to be usable as a selection. We used such an

example from the Gospel of Luke. But, for the most part, materials will need to be chosen from a variety of places throughout the Bible and connected together through introductory materials or appropriate linking verses. It is important that whatever passages are chosen be used with sufficient context or introduction to be faithful to the original meaning.

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The third principle I have given is to select materials according to the situation of the audience to which the message is to be addressed and received as good news. Several aspects of the situation should be considered by those who check the suitability of materials chosen for selections:

1. **Occasion.** Sometimes a particular thing in the life of an audience provides the occasion for a special selection—a holiday, a national event, some special regional or international concern about which there is high interest. The occasion should not be regarded as the theme of a selection, for the themes give priority to distinctive Gospel motifs. But the occasion can provide an opportunity to ask what is the situation and need of the target audience.
2. **Community.** The experiences of each particular community—past and present—are an important consideration in the choice of materials for selections. It is the universal human experience that we must take each new experience and relate it to something from the past known to us by personal involvement or study or hearing. Thus, the background of the community partially determines what will be understood by the new experience of reading a selection.
3. **Culture.** We can consider a great many things in the discussion of culture. Particular needs vary from place to place. Knowledge, sensitivity, and perception are required of those choosing materials. It is important to recognize the various settings in which particular audiences live. Some live as a religious minority community; others live as a religious majority community. The type of setting profoundly affects the cultural situation of any particular group. Each major type requires special consideration in preparing selections.
4. **Religion.** A knowledge of the religious views and traditions of a particular community is essential for the preparation of selections. The interpretation of particular Christian concepts by a particular audience is often determined by its own religious views and understandings. Thus, there must be a conscious effort to take into account those views when selecting Scripture materials. It is also very important to have some basic understanding of the meaning of religious words and concepts for a particular audience.
5. **Emotions.** Members of any audience share with all people common personal emotions of happiness and sorrow, love and fear. Experiences of birth, marriage, and death are universal, as are the emotions of joy and sorrow which accompany them. Warmth at being accepted and guilt for wrongdoing are common to all. These may be expressed and dealt with in different ways by various groups, and this must be kept in mind in the choice of materials for selections. The ways for speaking about death, for

example, are very circumscribed by custom and tradition. Sexual matters are likewise handled in a set form in most situations.

6. **Personal development.** All people go through certain stages of development in relation to the world. These are valuable to know, from an educational point of view, in making decisions about appropriate materials for certain groups. An early stage is conformity to the standards and expectations of other people. Most people reach a stage of becoming more independent and develop their own standards and values. This stage is reached in the teenage years at the earliest. It is not possible for a person to decide individually to stand over against his own faith community until this stage has been reached. Some people enter another stage in which they recognize interdependence with others and seek to share with others on a reciprocal basis. We need to be aware of the particular stage of development of personal life in which the majority of readers of any particular selection may be found.

Special help in examining the situation of the audience can come from those among us who are members by birth of a non-Christian community and who have responded to the message of the Bible as good news. Their testimonies help to identify the particular needs to which the gospel came as good news and the Scripture passages which carried that message. Related to this is the awareness which the Bible Society in each country should have of the approaches being made to particular audiences by the Christian community in that place. It is helpful to plan selections which can relate to those approaches, as resources to be used by the churches.

Applying the principles together

We must try to apply all three principles together when choosing the actual materials for a selection. That is, there must be attention given at the one time to theme, balance, and reader situation.

As an example, some passages for a selection have been chosen showing the application of the three principles. These have been chosen for an audience consisting of young adults who are in an independent stage of personal development. They are part of a religious tradition in which fear of judgement for a person's sins is strong. Their religious group has been oppressed throughout most of its history.

The *theme* of God's love, particularly to sinful and disobedient people, has been chosen. This basic theme of the Bible is appropriate for the particular situation in which there is fear of God's judgement. Passages were selected which fit the requirements of the theme.

MATERIALS WITH THEME OF GOD'S LOVE

<u>Reference</u>	<u>Content</u>	<u>Type of Material</u>
Deuteronomy 7.6-11	God's love in the choice of Israel	Words of God
2 Samuel 11 and 12	God's love to David when he sinned	Narration
Nehemiah 9	God's continuing love for Israel despite repeated disobedience	Response
Psalms 86	God's love to those in need	Response
Psalms 103	God's acts of love to all people	Response
Ephesians 2.1-10	God's love for sinners shown through Jesus	Teaching

In terms of *balance*, there are four types of material: words of God (Deuteronomy), narration (2 Samuel), response (Nehemiah and Psalms), and teaching (Ephesians). Literary forms include description, prayer, and exhortation.

There are references to women in 2 Samuel and Psalm 86.16.

God is portrayed as creator, preserver, and deliverer in Nehemiah; as judge, father, and king in Psalm 103; and the one who raises from the dead in Ephesians. Jesus is referred to in Ephesians as the one through whom God works. The Spirit of God is mentioned in Nehemiah.

In terms of the *situation* of the target audience, there is a special appeal to the community's experience with oppression (Dt, 2 Sam, Neh, Ps 103), to the human emotions of guilt and bereavement (2 Sam), to those at an independent stage of personal development of the need for repentance and individual decision (2 Sam, Eph), and to those with a religion of law and works of the possibility to grace (Eph).

Conclusion

A selection of texts for a specific audience needs to be chosen according to themes which are distinctive of the Gospel, according to the situation of the audience, and in a way which maintains a balance among different types of material. Each text chosen needs to be tested in terms of the specific situation of the target audience to determine its appropriateness. Help should be requested for this process from a translation consultant and from those who have a special understanding of the target audience. It is important to test in advance the response to the selected texts by a small group of persons from the target audience. Only when all three principles converge and each text is appropriate to the situation of the audience should a particular selection of texts be considered for publication.

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AN ANNOTATED WEST AFRICAN PSALM

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The translation of Psalms into West African languages usually requires a three-step procedure:

1. Studying the exegesis carefully and translating the meaning accurately.
2. Studying the form of the text and finding a West African equivalent and making the necessary adaptations.
3. Adjusting the West African form to its appropriate drumming rhythm.

Translating for meaning. At this stage the translators try to understand each phrase of the text and to translate it as accurately as possible. This will make it apparent if the parallelisms of the text mean more or less the same thing or if the repetition contains additional information. At this stage all the doublets, triplets, and so on are translated without any consideration for their final West African form.