

TRANSLATING

LESSONS

HOW TO SHARE YOUR FAITH

IN LANGUAGE

TODAY'S CULTURE

CAN UNDERSTAND

SHAUNA PILGREEN

TRANSLATING JESUS

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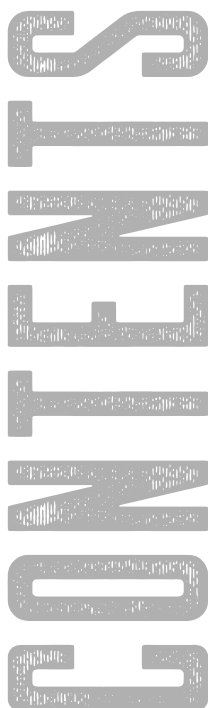
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*To Epic Church, San Francisco,
and to Alpha friends worldwide*



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Foreword

Shauna Pilgreen is one of my favorite writers. She's real. She's raw. And her books give me cause for pause. Not only is Shauna a wordsmith, she's a practitioner. She and her husband, Ben, lead an amazing church in San Francisco called Epic. That's how we first met. Ministry in the urban context is no joke! As someone who has pastored a church in the nation's capital for more than a quarter century, I have the utmost respect for leaders who play the long game. Ben and Shauna have done just that. They don't just talk the talk, they walk the walk.

In the pages that follow, you'll find real stories about real people. More than that, a real God with real solutions! Shauna's love for Jesus and His church bleeds through the pages. She's honest about the challenges we face. But this book is filled with hope. She takes us to the gate—the place where church and community cross paths. She takes us on a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross, where the ground is level. And she saves a seat at the table, the place where Jesus did so much of His ministry.

You'll find one-liners you need to underline: "The language of Christ is prayer," or "Strangers aren't that strange," or "Sundays are for swapping stories." Don't read right over those insights. Let them seep into your soul. Shauna also introduces spiritual practices, like double listening, that will prove to be game changers if you put them into practice. This book is a page-turner, but I would warn against reading too fast.

One last recommendation? Find a comfortable chair and pour yourself a cup of coffee. This book is like hanging out with Shauna at your favorite coffee shop. Her authenticity and vulnerability are disarming, just like Jesus.

Mark Batterson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor at National Community Church

Introduction

I'm not great at sharing my faith. Sharing other things? No problem. What I like to do on vacation. Our favorite restaurants in the city. The final play of the nail-biting game. The latest news circling the globe. Those I can talk about because others are interested, they care about the same things, or it affects their lives. But my faith? I hesitate as if my faith encroaches on their space, questions their beliefs, and makes conversations awkward. Who wants that?

But what if our faith in Jesus is what others are looking for?

I believe Jesus is real, and He loves every person around me. I've experimented and concluded that if Christ followers pay attention, we can speak to others about our faith.

We are communicating more than any generation before us, but is anyone listening? We are trying to be understood, but the people we talk to don't know our language. And what happens when someone does not understand what we are saying? We talk louder, as if that helps. Or we retreat to our own kind in hopes they will validate our values. We spend time-consuming hours

with people who believe what we believe, and therefore we think we're living rightly. This keeps us polarized, which is exactly the plan—but not God's plan. The devil likes sides and likes when we only see two colors, black and white. It's never been more apparent that we desperately need to be able to understand one another.

Yet our faith in Jesus needs to be explained. *You mean you believe this guy is still alive? He did what? When was this? Yeah. No.* Our belief doesn't make sense to the outside world. This is what I seek to help you with.

I define *Christianity* as practicing the teachings of Jesus. I define a *Christian* as those who take the gospel, the Good News, to people who do not know and have not heard, which is what those folks in Acts 11:26 were up to. Christians are those who live up to the intended name of “little Christs,” and I believe we can be respected by culture even if culture does not agree with us. I define *culture* as our part of the world and how it functions; the slice of the world we live in.

Oxford professor and theologian Alister McGrath wrote,

Christianity needs to be explained. The Bible needs to be interpreted and applied. And both involve us, as active agents, doing our best to translate the realities of the gospel into the categories of the contemporary—not to reduce the gospel to contemporary ideas but to allow it to gain access to people's minds and lives, so that it can begin its work of transformation and renewal.¹

I have non-Christian friends I do life with. I know their names, and they eat at our table and come to our church. We meet for coffee, sit beside each other in the baseball stands, give each

other rides, and visit each other in the hospital. We get each other's mail, take each other food, and keep watch of each other's kids around town. You don't have to know non-Christians to read this book, but you can't live this book without having any as your friends.

Maybe you're frustrated with culture. Your heart has become callous toward people who just don't get it. Why bother trying to understand where they are coming from? Why take the time to listen to their different point of view? Why try to figure out your local context? **Because while you and I had our backs to God, He came near to us** (Rom. 5:8). He knocked on the door of your heart just like He is still knocking on other heart doors in this non-believing world. Jesus still finds them worth it. Do you? Now is not the time to turn your back on others. There are things we cannot do for anyone, but I've read my Bible; there are things we *can* do. We can invite God's presence into darkness. We can speak with courage and gentleness. Your non-believing friend might seem like the least likely person to come to Christ, but don't let that hold you back. Love them as Christ has loved you. Lay down your life—starting with your awkwardness, your discomfort—for your friends. This is how you translate Jesus.

So let me ask you, Are you burdened for your non-believing friends?

- Do you leave Christian gatherings excited about your faith, only to enter cultural contexts timid about your faith?
- Do you see things or have conversations where you wish you had the clarity and courage to bring up Jesus and how He's changing your life?

- Does your heart break over the unnecessary evils happening around you?
- Have you ever wanted to share your Jesus story?

If you answered yes to even one of these, you're in the right place, and you're going to learn a new way to share Jesus. Christianity is best explained when it's lived out. We, as we live, are the best way to translate Jesus. If you want people to know Jesus, be open for them to know you. We'll start by practicing two languages: Christ and culture.

Learn two languages.

You've been in these conversations before. Someone doesn't feel confident in their second language and continues to ask you to forgive them for having to stumble through their broken words to understand them. From your point of view, they're doing great, all things considered. This person, in the process of becoming bilingual, is a great model for us that it is better to practice than to shy away and neglect trying. This is how Christ taught us—speaking to His culture in ways they could relate to yet speaking the truth in love. As disciples of Jesus, we are to become bilingual.

These are learned languages. The language of Christ is *prayer*. In this book I'll talk about how to speak to Him, speak on behalf of others, pray on the spot, and teach this language to others. The language of culture is *attention*. This is the way every piece of society relates, sees the world, and talks with one another. It can be a spoken or unspoken language. Culture languages are generational and dialectic. Our teenagers have a way of speaking

to their peers that we can't understand, and our teenagers don't always understand what their Southern grandmother is talking about! I'll help you learn how to pay attention, start conversations, tell your personal stories, and make friends with strangers.

Learning the language of Christ and culture to become bilingual mandates humility. This learning is fluid. It lacks walls and structure and echoes through one's being, boomeranging all over the senses, bringing kindness this world craves. Be open to discovery, to practice!

Be in three places.

We're going to three places where Christ spent time: the gate, the cross, and the table.

The gate represents today's communal spaces. It is everywhere we go when we are out and about. It's where we learn the language of culture. With our attentiveness and the Spirit's guidance, we are going to find companionship in unexpected places here.

The cross represents today's sacred spaces. When we are at the cross, we are at church, in Christian community, and having our personal time with Christ. It's where we engage in the language of Christ. We must come often and meet with other disciples. The life of a disciple is communal at its core. If we calculate the hours of His life on earth, Jesus spent the least amount of time at the cross, but our time at the gate and the table are powerless without the cross.

The table represents a collective of those we meet at the gate and the cross. We are in common places having intentional conversations with believers and non-believers. The table is where

we become bilingual as we practice the language of Christ and the language of culture. We'll find ourselves having conversations where love leads and the Holy Spirit shows up.

The Jesus-disciple life is an active life. We'll begin to see one another and hear one another as we engage in all three places. It's also a back-and-forth life, and we'll live at all three places and pay attention to all three places. We were never intended to live only at one and not be attentive to the others. Together we will travel the two-way street between the gate, the cross, and the table, following Jesus into an overlapping, nonlinear life.

We don't just go from one stage to another in a single series of steps. While one of our friends is at the gate, another could be at the cross or the table. We meet them where they are. We might not be comfortable or fluent with the dominant language at that place, but we can be open-minded and openhanded at each stop.

You can become bilingual.

When I go to my favorite Italian restaurant in our city, I try out my best Italian while ordering. I always hesitate—a clear indicator to the server I'm a work in progress. As the choppy stutter comes out of my mouth, I am immediately hopeful the server can understand what dish I want and help me place my order. And he or she is always glad to help me and smiles because I'm trying. I've never gotten kicked out of the restaurant for practicing my Italian.

You speak a language at work. Whether it's coding or real estate or banking or medicine, there is a distinct language that helps those in your work culture understand one another.

When we sing at church about graves being turned into gardens, chains breaking, and no longer being slaves, we are using biblical language in a worship culture.

You follow Jesus, and He makes a lot of sense to you, but now that you have faith, it's as if you've forgotten how to talk! Who would understand you anyway? What you believe about Christ and your local context seem worlds apart.

As Alister McGrath wrote in *Mere Discipleship*, "Someone who is bilingual does not need a translator."² My hope and prayer as you read through this book is for Colossians 4:2–6 to come alive:

Continue steadfastly in *prayer*, being *watchful* in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ . . . that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (emphasis added)

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The limits of language means the limits of my world."³ Are you ready to learn the languages of culture and Christ and enlarge your world? If you can pay attention to culture and participate with Jesus in prayer, you can become bilingual.

Try saying these three sentences out loud:

Jesus loves you.

Love Him back.

Love one another.

I believe you know these statements are true, or you wouldn't have picked up this book. You want your friends and family to understand these words from Jesus as well. I've been waiting for this moment for you. You are not alone in wanting to share your faith. We are a part of the Good News kingdom! Let's learn how to practice the languages of culture and Christ.

Practice.

In every chapter I will give you an actionable idea to practice. I'll also provide some prayers as promptings for your own. I want you to be confident in all your conversations to bring up Christ in a winsome way that enlightens culture. You will become bilingual as you practice paying attention and prayer.

Let's start our practice right now. Who are your people at the gate, the cross, and the table? Write down a few names right here, or somewhere you'll see them often. Think of them as you read this book.



THE GATE

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

1 John 4:19

I was jolted from my work by the sound. There had just been a car accident right outside my house. I didn't see it happen, but I heard the impact and ran out to the intersection in front of my house. I guess I could have chosen to ignore it or leave it to the police or first responders, but we've all got some Good Samaritan in us, no matter our faith. When I arrived, I was shocked to see I knew the driver who was hit, a woman named Lee, who walked out of her car with minor injuries to her hand. Our sons had gone to elementary school together, but that was five years ago. Lee remembered enough about me to recall my beliefs and our vocation, so we caught up on the rest of life while waiting for everything to get reported at the scene. I was able to take care of her hand and give her water and a granola bar. She asked that I call her friend to pick her up, and before she left, I mentioned our church services online that might be encouraging as she rested and healed at home. Over the next

few weeks, I checked in on her and sent her and her son food delivery.

This is the gate. We do life with people at the gate because of how much we are all loved by Jesus. Jesus loves me. Jesus loves you. This propels what we do and who we are at the gate. And this truth, alive and at work in and through us, will translate Jesus to others at the gate.



Learn the Language

You and your friend are both Christians. You believe in the same Jesus, yet you vote differently, get your news from different media, have different friends, and engage in different social lifestyles. You both have different church experiences and yet have Christ in common. One of you has little engagement with non-Christians and the other has a world full of them. How can you relate to one another? Do you even understand each other?

You are a Christian and your friend is not. You love the church. She is indifferent to it. You both vote the same and work to raise kind kids. You take your cues from Christ. She takes hers from culture. You have different social lives, different values, and different beliefs, and yet you have local culture in common. Can you be friends? Can you learn from one another?

We are at the gate, the cultural hub, where the language of culture is spoken around us. The gate is where people experiment with everything, where our self-inflicted definitions divide us. Where we go into situations in which we don't agree with one another's political views, parenting style, or poignant remarks, and then we share our unfiltered opinions.

The gate is where we go home for the holidays with a new faith in Jesus and get swallowed up with family values contrary to the Jesus we're following. The family thinks we've lost our mind. We think they have! We're not speaking the same language; we call the other side "confused" and then retreat to our bubble of People Who Get Us.

What if there is a better way? What if we could become bilingual? Let's start by learning what our culture is saying, feeling, and believing in real time by paying attention.

Meet me at Babel.

Humankind began with one language. Genesis 11:1 tells us, "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech" (NIV). Then, in an effort to make a name for themselves, people came together to build something better and higher and greater than God. Ironically, they did this so they could all stay together as one independent human force.

I don't know how far they got or how much they perspired, but in God's kindness and for our sake, He confused humankind. He did this so that we don't put all our earthly efforts into making our names great but rather thrive in His greatness. Our ancestors would shake their heads as humanity continues to say, *Let's make ourselves famous so we won't have to be scattered.* God says, *Scatter and make My name famous.*

God is the reason we have many languages today. This place on the map and moment in history is called the tower of Babel, "because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world" (v. 9 NIV). *Babel* is Hebrew for "confusion." Being thrown into confusion, the people then scattered, not understanding

one another fully to this day. Because of our selfishness, we have to work hard to learn each other's languages.

Towers are still being constructed by us today. A famous one is the tower of social media. This is where personal towers get built. Rent is cheap. Megaphones are free. You can buy friends and followers. Post anything without a filter or accountability. Pick and choose from all religious and political views. Scroll and compare your world to others' worlds and expect the same results with apparent ease. When it falls flat, we wonder why it works there but not here. *Hint: it's not the language of the people around you.*

There are other towers at the gate where people work hard to make a name for themselves. The tower of consumerism is being built by what we wear, carry, and possess to determine our status and position in our circles of influence. We build our image by buying the latest, newest, hottest, most up-to-date products, shoes, and clothing. The moment anyone thinks they've made it to the top of the tower of consumerism, the style changes. The tower of labels is adorned with stickers of political parties, sports teams, brands, universities, and more. *Who I know and who I associate with will make my name great. My kid goes to this school. I give to this nonprofit. I am affiliated with this party.* You can't see the tower for all its labels.

God confused our languages back at the tower of Babel, and we're still confused. The devil is at the tower of social media, yet we act shocked that criticism reigns. The devil seeks to disrupt language learning. Theologian John Stott describes the Christian landscape as

strewn with the wreckage of derelict, half-built towers—the ruins of those who began to build and were unable to finish. . . . The

result is the great scandal of so-called nominal Christianity . . . enough to be respectable, but not enough to be uncomfortable.¹

We are building ourselves imaginary worlds, making things sound worse or look better than they really are.

We have other media towers as well. When was the last time you were able to get clarity from only one news source? We don't know what is true nor who to believe because we can't understand one another. It's why we go for second opinions and double-checks. Miscommunication wars and false narratives battle it out alongside truth, and we're left confused. The media channels have maxed out their volumes. Has not all humanity become deaf to every sound except the self-made one on repeat in the quietest cracks of our day? And what does the self-made one say? It speaks in a mash-up of whatever voices we have consumed, subconsciously and consciously. Media is a gate to culture but not the table to community. So how do we approach those at the gate without succumbing to the great tower-building activity present there?

First, we remember God is ahead of all of us. Society will never get ahead of Him. Look back to the historical tower of Babel as proof that it's humanly impossible. Yet what is possible is God revealing Himself to us in creation, science, literature, and humanity, giving us glimpses of who He is, what He is like, and what He wants to reveal to us about Himself and His love for us. Johannes Kepler, a German mathematician and astronomer, was well known for his three laws of planetary motion. He incorporated his belief in God into his work and is known to have said,

I was merely thinking God's thoughts after him. Since we astronomers are priests of the highest God in regard to the book

of nature, it benefits us to be thoughtful, not of the glory of our minds, but rather, above all else, of the glory of God.²

Second, we come with our curiosity instead of our building tools. We're not here to build. We don't need a strong tower to draw people to us. We're here to live life at the gate, and also at the cross, and also at the table. Our curiosity helps us learn the language of culture right where we are, a location that varies in its dialect and demographics.

Culture is telling us something.

I don't use rideshares often, though Ben, my husband, does. One Sunday, several of our kids were going early to church so it made more sense for Ben to take them in our van and for me to take a Lyft. My driver, Aaron, picked me up in his Camry, and conversation started immediately about where I was headed. I mentioned church and he went there, both in his car and in conversation. He shared how he put humanity ahead of religion and taught his children to do the same. I shared how the love I get from God affects how I better love humanity. We both agreed that people practice evil in the name of religion, and we wanted no part of it. Then Aaron shifted the conversation as he pointed out an Airbnb billboard on the freeway that read, "Help us host Afghan refugees."

"That's where I'm from," he said. It was a proud and solemn acknowledgment. "I'm overwhelmed with the stressful paperwork of trying to get my parents out of there," he added.

I sympathized with him and asked if I could pray for peace and for his family. He was receptive, and my only request was

that he keep his eyes open! “God . . .” I began, for we both believed He existed. I finished praying as we arrived at my church, and I reached into my bag for a church invite card. While I was doing so, he told me that one, no one had ever prayed with him in a rideshare before, and two, he felt an overwhelming peace.

People need Jesus. They hurt. They search. They experiment. They still haven’t found what they are looking for. We know this, because only Jesus meets our needs. Why did you say yes to Jesus? What needs of yours does He meet? The humans around us created by God need the gospel and want to experience the love of Christ, so we need to know how to best share it with them. As we become bilingual in the language of Christ, which is prayer, and the language of culture, by paying attention, we can converse successfully about God’s love in our present-day contexts.

We don’t have to fully understand or agree to be great at listening and caring. If we genuinely care, we will get people’s attention. It catches everyone off guard these days. The people at the gate want to experience the love of Jesus, and we can show it to them. Pay attention to needs, patterns, lifestyle choices, and decisions people in your local context are making. As you observe how culture reacts, responds, and receives knowledge and experiences, you will begin to see their longings, pain points, and desires.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me” (1 Cor. 14:10–11). If we are to be effective disciples of Christ, we’ve got to learn to listen to our people, the ones who live, work, and breathe beside us.

Jesus knew culture. Yes, He's God, but His people—the Jews (national), the Galileans (regional), and the Nazarenes (local)—raised Him, and He grew up speaking their cultural dialect. In His ministry He used what they were accustomed to and familiar with to engage them. We'll explore in more detail later how Jesus was a listener to His culture, spending time with a divorced woman at a well, a demon-possessed man on the outskirts of town, tax collectors, fishermen, and others at the gate. Also, the apostle Paul didn't walk with Jesus literally and was not one of the original twelve disciples; however, as a missionary, when he got to a place, he paid attention before he began to speak.

We can also be cultural learners. It's not the 1980s. Let us work with intention to stay updated and be cultural learners. That doesn't mean we have to follow culture. It means we learn, are curious, and pay attention.

I suggest you find a bench and people-watch. Put down the phone that supports the towers and observe the people.

What are people doing around you? What do you think is being discussed? How do you perceive they're doing emotionally?

Let's learn culture with the mindset of Christ. When we participate in culture with Christ, we do so without the pressure to alter our standards just because culture does. This is our task: to place the mindset of Christ in front of culture and before any political party and affiliated news channel. If we don't, we will filter Scripture and culture through that lens instead of the reverse.

We learn culture subconsciously through movies we watch, places we go, words we hear, and things we buy. Learning Christ takes more intention. While the twelve disciples learned subconsciously as they lived with Jesus for three years, we have to consciously learn Christ. He's not physically living with us.

We are to seek to understand this world by the light of Jesus so that we can find a piece of common ground with others. It is here we take a moment of their stories, of our shared conversation, and speak a truth. Not just any truth that we grab from the cloud but one that we've personally experienced with God.

Learn the art of double listening.

Not everything we hear is true. I was at an event and therefore had firsthand experience of it, and then I read a newspaper account of it the following day. The harsh reality was that the reporting just wasn't true. We listen so we can hear what culture is also hearing—but we are to double listen.

What does that mean? Pastor and author John Stott coined the term:

I believe we are called to the difficult and even painful task of “double listening.” That is, we are to listen carefully (although of course with differing degrees of respect) both to the ancient Word and to the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other with a combination of fidelity and sensitivity. . . . Only if we can develop our capacity for double listening, will we avoid the opposite pitfalls of unfaithfulness and irrelevance, and be able to speak God's Word to God's world with effectiveness today.³

Christ helps us listen to this world and to His Spirit. He is the One and the reason we become bilingual. Let's put double listening into practice using Aaron's story.

What Aaron said: “I'm overwhelmed with all the paperwork.”

What he was telling me: “I’m stressed and need peace.”

What I heard the Spirit say: “Pray and speak peace over him.”

You don’t have to be great at sharing your faith to share your faith. You do need to believe Jesus loves you and has called you to love others. Do you believe these truths? You cannot fully be living out these two truths and not be thrust into conversations about Jesus. You have this love from Jesus that others want. This book will lead you into conversations with this truth and your story in order to introduce others to His love.

We practice double listening at the gate, the cross, and the table. This leads to what we say and how we pray. We pay attention to what is being said (culture) but pay even closer attention to what’s already been said (God’s Word). Jesus loves you. That’s a truth to rest in, not a task to accomplish. Let this truth affect how you double listen today.

To those who can speak culture but are learning the language of Christ, consider getting the Spirit’s point of view while you’re out and about today. Pray, *Holy Spirit, I want to hear from You as I also listen and discern the noise around me.*

Jesus loves you—and this good news is just as much for others as it is for you.

Practice.

Start by paying attention to people around you. If you are unsure about culture but confident in Christ, skip your traditional quiet time today and move it to the coffee shop or a place already on your calendar. Ask God to give you listening ears to those around you.