

Words Fitly Spoken

by Robert F. Turner

How does one explain church to people who have no concept, or a completely erroneous concept of the body of God's people? Well, this problem is multiplied many times for those who translate the Bible into the languages and dialects of the world.

I felt you might be interested in some examples, from *God's Word in Man's Language*, by Eugene A. Nida; Harper & Bros., N. Y., 1952. And – in the struggle to accurately express faith for some remote tribes of the world, our enlightened civilization might learn a few things.

The **Shipibo Indians** in Peru say that *to believe on God* is **to be strong on God**. This phrase does not mean precisely what it might appear to mean from the literal rendering in English. It actually means that there is no strength at all without Him. That is to say, we are strong only in reliance upon God. One cannot be spiritually strong except by dependence upon God. For the Shipibos, spiritual strength is a completely derived strength. There is no place for spiritual pride about one's personal power. This is ruled out by the language itself, for strength is on God.

The **Piro Indians**, who live to the south of their Shipibo neighbors, say that *to believe* is literally to **obey—believe**. For them the verb *believe* is too weak to express belief in God, since such a faith could be about the mere truth of occurrence – just admitting that something did or did not happen. This type of intellectual belief has always been found insufficient to describe the faith in Jesus Christ, which includes not only the intellectual assent to certain facts about the Lord but the opening of the heart to communion and fellowship with one whose Lordship demands complete obedience. Accordingly, the Piros, by means of a compound word, have tried to express this union of faith and works – believing and obeying, without which there is no reality to Christian experience and no message in the Good News.

The **Timorese people of Indonesia** have emphasized another aspect of faith. They describe it in the words **to conform with the heart**. The essential meaning of this phrase would push the reality of faith just a step further than some expressions. It not only implies *acceptance* of truth, but *conformance* to truth *by the one whose heart responds to its claims*. This is in very essence the Christian concept of faith, for without conformance there is no faith. Furthermore, this conformance must not be purely a matter of external practices, but of the heart. The heart determines action and not action the heart.

The **Huichol Indians** on the western slopes of central Mexico describe faith in somewhat similar terms, but their expression emphasizes the *objective* more than the *subjective* aspects of conformity. They say that *to believe* is **to conform to the truth**. This is not very different from the Timorese idiom. In fact, the truth of faith might be defined as a blend of both these ideas; conforming to the truth with the heart.

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