

Our Beekman Lectures are in Memory of Dr. John Beekman

John Beekman was certainly one who kept his mind open to “Creative Strategies and Practical Steps” not only for communicative translations of Scripture but also for improved physical health for himself.

John was born in 1918 and was termed a “blue baby”. A stenosis (narrowing) of the aorta just outside his heart limited the flow of blood back into the heart, resulting in inadequate oxygen throughout his body. Later he learned that his aortic valve did not function properly. John could have been an invalid, but God had given him an indomitable spirit to use his life for the spread of the Gospel and find creative ways to do that.

After graduating from Moody Bible Institute, John, with his wife, Elaine, went in 1947 to work among the Chol Indians in southern Mexico. Many times John hiked 26 miles of mountainous trails into and out from their village home. He spent necessary “resting time” interacting with the local people, making notes on their use of language and its context, and ministering to their medical needs. The people loved that he would sit and interact with them. Within a year other workers took over the Beekman’s literacy work and freed John to pursue his primary goal of translating the Scriptures into the Chol language.

As each Scripture portion was being worked on, he would engage a group of eager young men to go over the text with him. These sessions developed into preacher-training classes. Week after week these young men took the gospel message in Chol to unreached villages. After seven years, in cooperation with Wilbur and Evelyn Aulie and two literacy workers, the Chol New Testament was completed. By the time it was printed and dedicated in 1960, the number of believers among the Chols had risen to 5,000.

Right after the completion of drafting and checking the New Testament, John’s heart went into failure. In 1955 he took a daring step in regard to his heart and looked to a new technology—he was one of the first artificial heart valve patients in history. As the third one to survive the procedure out of the first five patients, doctors said it should give him five more years of life—God gave him 25.

John had a gift for recognizing translation trouble spots and helping translators handle them well. In 1957 he was the first SIL translator asked to be a consultant for a co-worker’s translation. By 1959 he was gathering SIL translators in a “workshop” setting where more experienced translator-exegetes could provide guidance to an entire group of projects at one time. As translators in other countries gained experience, they came to Mexico to be trained as consultants by him. He was named SIL’s first International Translation Coordinator in 1962 and led translation workshops in twelve field situations around the world. Ever seeking “Creative Strategies and Practical Steps” to help translators in the field, he initiated the commentary compilation series *Exegetical Helps* in 1969. In the mid-1970’s he took the developing insights of discourse analysis and taught translators to apply them to the Greek texts. That led to the *Semantic & Structural Analysis* series of translation helps.

Because most field translators worked in remote locations and for whom regular travel to training sites was impractical, John sought other creative, practical ways to continue in-service training for the growing body of Bible translators around the world. So he began to share his insights regarding Bible translation theory and practice out of his own years of translating, training and consulting. As early as 1952 it was through articles in *The Bible Translator*, including the need to consider cultural background (*TBT* 13:180-81) for relevant translation. Then in the late 1960s he began the quarterly publication *Notes on Translation* so even more translators could share their new understandings with colleagues worldwide. His insights became a text for training translators—*Translating the Word of God* (co-authored with John Callow, PhD, 1974). *TWOG* is full of examples of how a culture’s viewpoint affects translation. One of John’s last published articles (*NOT* 80:32-42) was itself concerned with the critical need to understand the local culture: “There should be no question that a good understanding of the culture of a people is essential for good translation work. Its significance influences the quality of a translation at every level....” (*NOT* 80:33)

The Lord called John home in 1980 after thirty-three years of advancing Bible translation into the heart languages and lives of peoples around the world.

