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The Costly Legacy of Faithful Bible Translation

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1. Introduction

A dangerous thing

'The translation of the text of Holy Scripture out of one tongue into another is a dangerous thing ...'. This was an official pronouncement by Archbishop Thomas Arundel ratified by the Provincial Council at Oxford in 1408. It implied it was spiritually dangerous to produce a translation of Scripture because souls could be endangered by either translator or reader misunderstanding Scripture. No doubt there is a sense in which translation can be dangerous if it is done in a way that significantly corrupts the truth, deliberately or otherwise, but the authorities appeared to believe that it was really something dangerous in and of itself. Now they were about to make it very dangerous in another sense as they went on to decree the following prohibition.

> Therefore we enact and ordain that no one henceforth do by his own authority translate any text of Holy Scripture into the English tongue or any other by way of book, pamphlet, or treatise. Nor let any such book, pamphlet, or treatise now lately composed in the time of John Wicklif aforesaid, or since, or hereafter to be composed, be read in whole or in part, in public or in private, under pain of the greater excommunication ... Let him that do contrary be punished in the same manner as a supporter of heresy and error ...[1]

The consequence of translating or even reading a translation was made the greater by excommunication. Excommunication meant being denied access to any church rites (e.g. baptism, mass, confession, marriage, last rites). The same document makes clear that it would also involve being denied 'all communion with Christian people', access to any court, and being imprisoned and tried for heresy if they did not recant. If convicted and they refused to repent, their property would be confiscated. Ultimately heretics were handed over to civil government for punishment, usually execution such as burning at the stake.

Tyndale's motivation

This was the context into which William Tyndale emerged a century later: the most draconian prohibition of translation of the Scriptures in Europe hung over his life's work. It may be bewildering to contemporary Christians to think of something they take for granted coming under such a ban. It was bewildering to Tyndale also; 'I do marvel greatly ... that ever any man should repugn or

speak against the Scripture to be had in every language, and that of every man'.

Tyndale continues with incredulity against such opposition to giving the Scriptures to everyone possible. 'I thought that no man had been so blind to ask why light should be shewed to them that walk in darkness, where they cannot but stumble, and where to stumble is the danger of eternal damnation'. For Tyndale the danger was not in translating, but rather in denying translation. How was it possible that anyone could be so blinded as to think that providing God's Word was something dangerous in itself? It was like affirming that 'good is the natural cause of evil' or that falsehood was somehow based on truth, rather than the complete opposite. The reality is of course that truth drives away falsehood and error.[2]

Tyndale's translation has been described as 'the most dangerous book in Tudor England' and only because it would bring the truth to light.[3] In so doing, it threatened the domination of the church authorities over the consciences of the people. Tyndale appealed to the latter directly in introducing the translation of the five books of Moses:

> They be all agreed, to drive you from the knowledge of the Scripture, and that ye shall not have the text thereof in the mother-tongue, and to keep the world still in darkness, to the intent they might sit in the consciences of the people, through vain superstition and false doctrine, to satisfy their filthy lusts, their proud ambition, and unsatiable covetousness, and to

> exalt their own honour above king and emperor, yea, and above God Himself.[4]

John Foxe famously describes an encounter where Tyndale's zeal in this cause surfaced with great vigour against a learned theologian. Struggling to maintain his point in the debate, the theologian burst out into these blasphemous words, 'We were better be without God's law than the pope's'. Tyndale hearing that, answered him, 'I defy the pope and all his laws', and said, 'if God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough, shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest'.[5]

The real danger

Tyndale's concern was the danger to which souls were exposed without a knowledge of the truth in the Lord Jesus Christ. His delight on bringing the Scriptures to English readers for the very first time from the original Greek is evident:

> Now can the wretched man (that [knoweth himself to be wrapped] in sin, and in danger to death and hell) hear no more joyous a thing, than such glad and comfortable tidings of Christ; so that he cannot but be glad, and laugh from the low bottom of his heart, if he believe that the tidings are true.

Tyndale knew that receiving the Gospel depended on the ability to see plainly what Scripture teaches. The ability to read Scripture was vital to the progress of the Reformation in the British Isles.

> I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to stablish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text.

The result shaped the English language. 'Tyndale's gift to the English language is unmeasurable' David Daniell writes; 'Newspaper headlines still quote Tyndale, though unknowingly, and he has reached more people than even Shakespeare'.[6] David Norton is able to say that 'more of our English is ultimately learnt from Tyndale than from any other writer of English prose'.[7]

Through his translation Tyndale not only influenced the Reformation and all that followed, he also established an approach to translation that would be completed in later revision work. Further than this, he indicated the way in which Scripture ought to be translated not only into English but also into other languages. What was that approach, and what can we still learn from it today in relation to faithful Bible translation?

2. Faithful to the Form of Scripture

Perhaps the most famous association anyone has with Tyndale and translation is his aim (as we have seen already) to make 'a boy that driveth the plough' to know Scripture. There is a persistent assumption on the part of some that this means that Tyndale's goal was to translate into the everyday speech of the ploughboy. A

further assumption that builds from this is that Bible translation after Tyndale, particularly in the Authorised (King James) Version, suffered a corruption of this colloquial ideal that has only been rectified in modern translations. Eugene Peterson claims that the Authorised Version (AV) translators tried to make the colloquial in Tyndale elegant and so 'desecrated language upwards'.[8] R. T. France asserts similarly,

> The colloquial language employed by Tyndale so that the Scriptures would be accessible to the ploughboy has thus become, with the passing of time, the esoteric language of religion, and the more remote it becomes from ordinary speech the more special and holy it seems.[9]

If Tyndale was translating into the everyday speech of the ploughboy, which regional dialect was this? After all, there was a considerable variety of very different dialects in England at the time. Street English in Gloucestershire villages could be very different compared to Kent, with similar words meaning different things or different terms for everyday objects. And what context of speech was it, the speech he

used with other boys, his parents, his master, the local landowner, or priest? Had Tyndale just used the style and wording of much contemporary printed writing, it would soon have been as quickly outdated as those productions have been. Had he chosen to write in informal, everyday expressions, his work would have quickly passed into oblivion. Instead, his translation achieved a lasting clarity that has endured for centuries.

An accurate translation

Those who have extensively studied Tyndale's use of language have concluded that he translated 'into a register just above common speech'.[10] Tyndale's primary goal was to make the Word of God accessible to ordinary people in their own language, but this never came at the expense of accuracy. In reality, he did not translate the Bible into casual, everyday speech. Instead, Tyndale prioritised faithfulness to the original text with the confidence that the Holy Spirit could use what He had originally inspired. David Norton points out that for Tyndale's original readers, his English 'did not seem as natural and easy as we are inclined to think'. This was particularly the case because no standard English existed, so anything aiming at this was bound to present difficulties.

The assumption that Tyndale was aiming at a colloquial style is in fact easily rectified by closely reading his translation. In calling this assumption a fallacy, Leland Ryken has pointed out:

> The statement about the plowboy is not a comment about Tyndale's preferred style for an English Bible.

> It is not a designation of teenage farm boys as a target audience for a niche Bible. Those misconceptions are the projections of modern partisans for a colloquial and simplified English Bible ...

Alan Jacobs points out that Tyndale did not share the modern idea that a translation must be something 'in which clarity manifests itself fully and immediately'. As he points out, only in 'an assertively egalitarian, democratizing, and anti-elitist culture like our own today' could an approach develop that tackles 'difficult passages in the original text not by translating them but by interpreting their obscurities out of existence'. 'It is noteworthy that Tyndale never thought to adopt such a strategy, despite his concern that the boy at the plow know the Bible'.[11]

A representative language

Foxe's account of Tyndale and the ploughboy does not even mention translation of the Bible into English. Instead, it was about knowledge of the Bible and the ordinary person's right to know and judge for themselves. Ryken draws attention to the fact that the debate centred on papal authority versus the sole authority of Scripture. It is not about the style of translating the Bible. As he points out, Tyndale is using the ploughboy as a representative. 'He was using a particular example to make the general point that he wanted the whole cross section of the English population to have access to the Bible'. It is not about style, but about how widely knowledge of the Bible should permeate society: it should reach right down to the rural working class.

This is clear when we understand that Tyndale was echoing a very long tradition in referring to the ploughboy. It goes all the way back to Jerome in the late fourth century speaking of how the labourer at his plough in the land of Israel at that time would sing the Psalms. At the same time, Chrysostom referred to Christ's words being addressed to the ploughman amongst others with a lower level of education.[12] Tyndale would have known of these instances from his wide reading of the Church Fathers. It was Desiderius Erasmus, before Tyndale, who took up this language, expressing a desire for the Scriptures to be translated into all languages. In his preface to the New Testament in Greek and Latin (1516), Erasmus wrote that even if people could not read the Scriptures, they might learn portions of them and 'the farmer would sing parts of Scripture at the plough'. He believed that 'things should not be written in such a way that everyone understands everything, but so that they are forced to investigate certain things, and learn'.[13]

Therefore, in referring to ploughboys, Tyndale is actually speaking about the knowledge of Scripture. He wanted ordinary people to

know more of the Scriptures than the priests did. A survey only decades later tells us that priests could be ignorant of the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, and where they were found in Scripture.

A breathtaking aspiration

The assumption that Tyndale was translating into everyday, colloquial language altogether misconstrues what Tyndale was conveying. Instead, he was announcing a breathtaking aspiration, not simply because of the official opposition to this task, but also because the ploughboy, like the majority of the population, was illiterate. But more importantly still, even if the ploughboy could read or knew someone who could read, they would have to be learned in Latin, as at this point Tyndale had not commenced translating the Bible into English.

Some seek to bolster the fallacy that Tyndale was translating into the everyday speech of the ploughboy by pointing to a few expressions in his translation that they identify as colloquialisms, such as the word 'tush' in Genesis 3.4 or the word 'lucky' in Genesis 39.2 (the word at the time also meant blessed). However, we have to remember that Tyndale was pioneering in translating the Biblical languages into English, and he was also working quickly in circumstances where he was watching for potential captors. The New Testament was completed and sent to print in just over eighteen months, but was further revised and republished with over five thousand changes in 1534. As Ryken points out, many of these revisions are 'of exactly the same type as the small

touches that the King James translators introduced. For example, Tyndale changed "O ye endued with little faith" to "O ye of little faith"'.

Tyndale's first efforts at translating Hebrew would have been similarly revised if he had had the opportunity before his death. The AV translators also came a long way after Tyndale's contemporaries John Rogers and Myles Coverdale completed his work, refined it and the Geneva, then reviewed it once more. As David Daniell notes, the 'makers of the Authorised Version ... had the wisdom to pass on Tyndale's New Testament as they had received it'. One study has estimated that about 76 per cent of the Old Testament and 84 per cent of the New Testament in the Authorised (King James) Version is Tyndale's work.[14]

Clarity and simplicity

Nevertheless, Tyndale does indeed pursue clarity and simplicity. As David Daniell points out, Tyndale prefers short, simple words with few syllables rather than Latin with its many syllables. These are 'simple Saxon words'[15] not Latinised English. He uses 'high' rather than 'elevated'; 'gift' as opposed to 'donation'; 'many' not 'multitudinous'. Many of his phrases have become proverbial: 'the salt of the earth'; 'let there be light'; 'the signs of the times'; 'a law unto themselves'. Yet this clarity and simplicity was not imposed on the text. Rather, it arose from a transparent and faithful rendering of the original. Tyndale renders the Greek phrase 'answered and said' faithfully, yet it was not a way of speaking in English in the sixteenth century any more than it is now.[16]

David Daniell quotes Tyndale's translation of the start of John 14, 'And he said unto his disciples: Let not your hearts be troubled ...' 'That is the Greek in English', he observes. What makes Tyndale's translation clear and straightforward is not an aim to be colloquial but rather to be literal. The Greek itself is simple and direct, and Tyndale generally preserves even the word order of the original where possible, with the added effect of providing a beauty and rhythm to the language. In Genesis 47.4 Joseph's brothers tell Pharaoh, 'for to sojourn in the land we are come'.[17] No ploughboy then or now speaks like this in English. Those who highlight the serpent's 'Tush!' ignore the Hebrew structure and word order of the phrase he responds to, 'of the fruit of the trees in the garden we may eat'.

Crafting a Biblical English

Was Tyndale striving for a more colloquial style in rendering the thoughts more than the words of the original? He tells us himself that his ideal is as literal as possible, even preserving the word order where that is possible.

> The Greek tongue agreeth more with English than with Latin. And the properties of the Hebrew tongue agreeth a thousand times more with the English than with the Latin. The manner of speaking is both one, so that in a thousand places thou needest not but to translate it into English word for word, when thou must seek a compass in the Latin ...

Tyndale tells us he is well aware of 'the Hebrew phrase or manner of speech left in the Greek words' of the New Testament. It was for this reason that having begun to translate into Hebrew, he made so many revisions to the New Testament in 1534.[18] Just as the New Testament was in a Greek shaped by the Old Testament, so Tyndale crafted a Biblical English that would reflect the original Hebrew and Greek transparently. Gerald Hammond notes that the Reformation Bible translator like Tyndale 'saw half of his task as reshaping English so that it could adapt itself to Hebraic idiom'. He also notes that 'his knowledge of the Hebrew original was sufficient for him to respond sensitively and effectively to the peculiarities of Hebrew vocabulary and style'.[19] This is supported by a study of Tyndale's translation of the first few books of the Old Testament which concludes that, in reproducing Hebrew phrases literally, it achieves something 'as easily understood and more vigorous than paraphrase'.[20]

We are so familiar with some of these translated forms from Tyndale because they have been in the English Bible and in common use for so long. For example, it is often pointed out that the 'noun-of-noun' form is Hebrew not English e.g., 'son of man', 'man of God', 'kingdom of God', 'the beasts of the field', 'the gods of your fathers'. In English

we would say 'your fathers' gods' or 'God's kingdom' or use a single word rather than a phrase.

Another way that Tyndale faithfully renders the original is when the same word is echoed or repeated in a related form to intensify the expression in Hebrew. 'Ye have sinned a great sin' (Exodus 32.30). 'When thou hast vowed a vow unto the Lord thy God' (Deuteronomy 23.21). It is not how we would normally express things in English. We would speak of making a vow, but there is an added solemnity and intensity in the way it is expressed in Hebrew.

Furthermore, he persistently translated the small Hebrew word *waw*; usually 'and', even though it can be translated using other words at times (it is common for modern translators to leave many instances untranslated). According to Hammond, Tyndale 'seldom ignores the Hebrew *waw* and rarely translates it other than as "and" thus creating an "unsophisticated sequential narrative"'.

'Words not commonly used'

Gerald Hammond refers to 'the English biblical tradition of resonant obscurity', by which he means that both Tyndale and the translators of the Authorised Version 'accepted that fidelity in translation would inevitably mean local ambiguity and obscurity—and, further, that such places should not be disguised, but made attractive and resonant'. In the Prologue to his 1526 Testament, Tyndale recognises that his translation contains 'words which are not commonly used' and acknowledges that 'Scripture useth many words which are otherwise understood of the common people'. He

promises that a future edition will provide 'a table to expound the words which are not commonly used, and shew how the Scripture useth many words which are otherwise understood of the common people, and to help with a declaration where one tongue taketh not another.'[21]

Tyndale did not tether his translation to the limitations of English idiom but coined new words: passover, scapegoat, atonement, long-suffering, peacemakers. He also enriched the language with other new words such as beautiful, fisherman, seashore, stumbling block, taskmaster, zealous, modesty, mediocrity, industrious, brokenhearted, busybody, and ungodly.

Few appreciate that there are significant correspondences between Tyndale's wording and that of the earlier Wycliffite translations.[22] Tyndale was also ready to use archaic forms of English if they served the purpose of rendering the original Hebrew and Greek. The scholars Nikolaos Lavidas and Elizabeth Bell Canon point out that Tyndale deliberately used 'syntactic archaisms' particularly in relation to pronouns. This was preserved in later English Bibles including the Authorised (King James) Version.

> One such example is the use of the early/archaic second person singular and plural pronouns in Tyndale's texts: the second person *plural* pronoun had begun to appear in *all*, singular and plural, contexts in Early Middle English. Tyndale used the verbal forms for second singular and plural number productively, as well as the distinction between the subject pronoun *ye* and the

object pronoun *you*, following earlier texts. However, the first attestations of the nominative *you*, instead of *ye*, appeared in the 14th century and was productively used in the literary language by the 1540s.[23]

It is also relevant to point out that by the time of 1611 the singular pronoun *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine* had mostly passed out of conversational English. However, because it preserved an important distinction in the Biblical languages, the translators still used this slightly archaic form which remained available to written English. In the 1534 preface Tyndale explains some of the difficulties of Hebrew grammar such as that the 'preterperfect [past] tense and present tense is often both one, and the future tense is the operative mood also', besides other things. 'This may seem a strange way to address a ploughboy', observes Daniell ironically. 'Yet the ploughboy, like anyone else deserves the

best, and Tyndale the scholar and craftsman is going to give every reader that'.

If we want to know what Tyndale was aiming for in his translation we need to get past the ploughboy fallacy and listen to his own words. He was endeavouring to present the original as transparently as possible for the ordinary person, to have Scripture 'plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text'. Today we would call this method of translation 'formal equivalence'. Tyndale's approach is well summarised by Gerald Hammond,

> Tyndale's translation is marked by a willingness to be as literal as is reasonably possible within the bounds of producing a readable English version. Tyndale's chief concerns were to achieve fullness of translation and to convey some of the alien nuances of Hebrew style. Fullness of translation is a matter of neither taking away from, nor adding to, the original.

Every word of Scripture was important to Tyndale, and, as Foxe records, he was not willing to compromise that for any reason or motive.

> For I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, to give a reckoning of our doings, that I never altered one syllable of God's Word against my conscience, nor would this day if all that is in the earth, whether it be pleasure, honour or riches, might be given me.

3. Faithful to the Text of Scripture

Tyndale's first edition of the New Testament in English was published early in 1526. Its uniqueness lay not simply in being the first English printed New Testament, but also in the fact that it was based on the Greek text. Where the Wycliffe Bible had been translated from the Latin, Tyndale was able to translate from the original Greek. A printed Greek New Testament text had only been available for ten years by the time Tyndale published his translation. By the 1520s the text produced by Desiderius Erasmus in 1516 had reached a third edition (printed in 1522). This included a Latin translation which clearly indicated the errors of translation in the Vulgate through lists of deficiencies. Erasmus tells us in his Preface to the New Testament, that his aim was 'to lead the way back to the original source of God's Word instead of drawing it from conduits of stale water'.[24]

Perhaps something of Tyndale's experience of first encountering this pure fountain was identical to that of the reformer Thomas Bilney who was martyred before Tyndale in 1531. In the period following Luther's publication of the Ninety-Five Theses Bilney was a fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Like Luther, he saw the deep depravity of his sinful nature and the great guilt of his sin. He also thought that fasting and other penitential works would bring relief to his conscience until he read Erasmus's Greek New Testament. Foxe records Bilney's testimony for us.

> But at the last I heard speak of Jesus, verily when the New Testament was set forth by Erasmus, which

when I understood to be eloquently done by him, being allured rather for the Latin than for the Word of God, (which at the time I knew not what it meant) I bought it, even by the providence of God, as I do now well understand and perceive. And at the first reading as I remember, I chanced upon this sweet sentence of Saint Paul, in his first Epistle to Timothy and first chapter. 'It is a true saying and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of which I am the chief and principal.' This one sentence through God's instruction, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly, to feel such a comfort and quietness, as I myself would not discern and judge, in so much that my bruised bones leapt for joy. After this the Scripture began to be more pleasant unto me than [sic] the honey or the honey comb, wherein I learned, that all my travails, all my fasting and watching,

> all the redemption of masses and pardons, being done without trust in Christ, which only saveth his people from their sins.

The Greek New Testament brought great light and clarity to Bilney's understanding so that he was able to embrace and teach the Gospel. Reformers like Hugh Latimer, Robert Barnes, and others came to faith under his preaching. We can well imagine that Tyndale too experienced the thrill of this enlightenment as he found a new world of truth opened in the original words of the New Testament.

Erasmus and his text

In order to understand more about the Greek Text which Tyndale used in his translation, it is helpful to know more about Desiderus Erasmus and his Greek New Testament. The fact that Tyndale was translating from the Greek text is fundamentally the most important and radical thing about his translation.

> Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) was the king among scholars in the early part of the sixteenth century. He combined native genius, classical and biblical learning, lively imagination, keen wit, and refined taste. He was the most cultivated man of his age, and the admired leader of scholastic Europe from Germany to Italy and Spain, from England to Hungary.[25]

Although he was not himself a Reformer, Erasmus 'had in common with the Protestant Reformers their great principles of appeal

to the Scriptures as the source of theological truth and Christian life'.[26] His work was vitally used during the Reformation: 'from Desiderius Erasmus came a printed Greek New Testament which, swiftly translated into most European vernaculars, was a chief cause of the Continent-wide flood that should properly be called the Reformation'.[27]

Erasmus was a truly remarkable scholar and James Tracy observes that in the *Novum Instrumentum* (1516) alone 'Erasmus had done enough to rank as one of the great pioneers in the history of scholarship'.[28] That should be clear when we reflect on how such an accomplishment was achieved. Pfeiffer observes:

> We can hardly imagine how difficult it was to explore the world of manuscripts at that time and to make careful collations. Later editors usually complain that Erasmus did not make sufficient use of manuscript readings, but relied too much on conjectures. Few modern scholars have taken the trouble to consider Erasmus' actual intentions and to examine his editing in detail ...[29]

Despite this, many myths about the early editions of Erasmus are still being repeated by standard books about Reformation Bibles and textual transmission. For example, they include the idea that a supposed rush to print meant that his work was done hastily. This, together with other myths, have been easily refuted.[30] Another argument is that it is sometimes said that Erasmus had access to only a small number of manuscripts of a late date to prepare his

first edition. Yet Erasmus himself tells us of the careful approach that he took.

> I was as circumspect as I could be. I collated the most ancient and reliable manuscripts in both languages, and indeed no small number of them. I investigated the commentaries of ancients and moderns, both Greek and Latin. I noticed the various readings they furnished. I weighed the meaning of the passage and only then did I pronounce what I thought. No, I did not even pronounce; rather I informed the reader, leaving everyone free to make up his own mind.

Erasmus and textual criticism

It is also a mistake to think that Erasmus only drew upon manuscripts that he had immediately to hand. He knew of many other manuscripts and gathered information on them. He had consulted manuscripts in his time in Cambridge amongst others as he 'began studying and collating NT MSS [New Testament manuscripts] and observing thousands of variant readings in preparation for his own edition'.[31]

> It is well known also that Erasmus looked for manuscripts everywhere during his travels and that he borrowed them from everyone he could. Hence although the Textus Receptus was based mainly on the manuscripts which Erasmus found at Basel, it also included readings taken from others to which he had access. It agreed with the

> common faith because it was founded on manuscripts which in the providence of God were readily available.[32]

Due to the consensus of the many manuscripts that had been preserved in the Greek-speaking church the number consulted was not such a significant issue. This is acknowledged even by those who have been opponents of the Textus Receptus.

> The manuscripts which Erasmus used differ, for the most part, only in small and insignificant details from the bulk of the cursive manuscripts. The general character of their text is the same. By this observation the pedigree of the Received Text is carried up beyond the individual manuscripts used by Erasmus. ... That pedigree stretches back to a remote antiquity. The first ancestor of the Received Text was at least contemporary with the oldest of our extant manuscripts, if not older than any one of them.[33]

It is strange that this criticism of only using a limited number of manuscripts is brought against Erasmus. Modern textual critics may have thousands of manuscripts available to them, but they have not collated all their readings, and the reality is that their method and assumptions make them discount and disregard the majority of those manuscripts. This is because they prefer those that they call the oldest and most reliable, the number of which is not significantly greater than those to which Erasmus had ready access.

Erasmus was not ignorant of these 'oldest' manuscripts. He first heard of Codex Vaticanus in June 1521 when one of Erasmus's closest

friends, Paolo Bombace, curator of the Vatican Library, informed him of two specific passages that differed from the majority. It was used by Roman Catholics like Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda to champion the Latin Vulgate and attack the Greek editions Erasmus had produced based on the manuscripts preserved by the Greek-speaking church. Sepulveda appears to have sent him 365 select readings from Vaticanus.[34] Despite this information, Erasmus did not amend his text at these points. Rather than being persuaded of its excellence, he believed that it was an example of Greek manuscripts where the text had been adapted to conform to the Latin Vulgate. The fact that the same manuscript could be viewed by one set of scholars as of little value for establishing the right text, and then by a later set of scholars as foundational for establishing the text, shows that it is a question of the criteria used rather than the nature of the manuscript itself.

Erasmus discussed the variants represented by these 'oldest manuscripts' in his notes, showing that he was thoroughly aware of the different readings. It is not that he knew less or because he did not have access to more modern discoveries; most of the readings that are affected by these were well known already. Edward F. Hills offers the following observation.

> Indeed almost all the important variant readings known to scholars today were already known to Erasmus more than 460 years ago and discussed in the notes (previously prepared) which he placed after the text in his editions of the Greek New Testament. Here, for example, Erasmus dealt with such problem passages as the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:13), the interview of the rich

> young man with Jesus (Matt. 19:17–22), the ending of Mark (Mark 16:9–20), the angelic song (Luke 2:14), the angel, agony, and bloody sweat omitted (Luke 22:43–44), the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), and the mystery of godliness' (1 Tim. 3:16)

Tyndale's use of Erasmus's text

The full inclusion of 1 John 5.7 indicates that Tyndale used the 1522 edition of Erasmus making a clear choice in this matter rather than following blindly. Of course, Tyndale was also able to make use of Luther's translation in German and thus had access to other options. That was not the limit of his linguistic skills; he was fluent in at least eight languages by the time he died.[35] However, Tyndale was a preeminent Greek scholar, perhaps (according to Daniell) 'a greater scholar even than Erasmus'. His preface to the 1534 New Testament certainly indicates that his unique proficiency in Hebrew gave him exceptional insight into the Hebraic forms of the Greek used in the New Testament compared to classical Greek.

> But if Erasmus was cautious in his notes, much more was he so in his text, for this is what would strike the reader's eye immediately. Hence in the editing of his Greek New Testament text especially Erasmus was guided by the common faith in the current text. And back of this common faith was the controlling providence of God. ... Although not himself outstanding as a man of faith, in his editorial labors on this text he was providentially influenced and guided by the faith of others.[36]

The text would be further clarified by Reformers such as Theodore Beza and was ultimately the basis for the translation of the Geneva Bible and then the Authorised (King James) Version. Sadly, since 1881, the overwhelming majority of translations published have departed from the Received Text family for a reconstructed, ever changing, and never finalised modern Critical Text.

4. Faithful Translation of Scripture Rejected

Thomas More (1478–1535) set himself against Tyndale's translation. In a book condemning it he asserted that 'there were found and noted wrong and falsely translated above a thousand texts'. As examples he can only give 'two or three' words.[37] More believed, for instance, that πρεσβύτερος should be translated as 'priest' not 'elder', μετανοέω 'do penance' rather than 'repent', and ἐξομολογέω 'confess' rather than 'acknowledge'.[38] More therefore defended the burning of the New Testament.[39] Thus, 3,000 copies of the New Testament in the English

language were burned over three days in 1526 by the authority of the Bishop of London. Ten years later the same enmity wreaked itself on Tyndale himself in the ultimate rejection of his translation. He was first strangled by the hangman and then burned to death. His last words at the stake were uttered with 'a fervent zeal, and a loud voice'; famously they were: 'Lord open the king of England's eyes'.

However, Tyndale's work did not die. Within a few years the whole Bible (much of it Tyndale's work) was published with royal authority. So it continued by being passed on, and sometimes refined, through the various English Bibles of the Reformation, with the same approach and the same Greek text. The whole English Old Testament was first available directly from the Hebrew in 1560, when the Geneva Bible was published. Up until then the work that supplemented Tyndale's translation of the Old Testament books had been drawn from translations rather than the Hebrew itself.

Eventually Tyndale's work ended up in the capable hands of the translators of what came to be known as the Authorised (King James) Version. These took up the task of 'diligently comparing and revising the former translations', as they put it on the title page. In most cases, that meant keeping what Tyndale chose, but in other cases they could see the merits of what the Geneva Bible offered. As one writer has said, 'they put the finishing touches to, a Bible which took ninety years to make'.[40] And so they passed on as the standard English Bible, the beauty and the accuracy of translation that Tyndale bequeathed to us through the Authorised Version.

Thus, Tyndale's translation penetrated our language entirely. Tyndale's influence and legacy were most remarkable, and it didn't stop there. Wherever English speakers went this Bible accompanied them across the globe. The task of Bible translation began to extend itself to Asia and Africa through missionaries like William Carey, Robert Moffat, Robert Morrison, and others. These men used Tyndale's text and translation approach, meaning that the legacy of Tyndale branched out across the world as translation work expanded into a multitude of languages. As the nineteenth century progressed it could have been said that the translation legacy of Tyndale looked set to sweep across the globe and embrace all nations.

But sadly this was not to be. From 1881 onwards the text that Tyndale used began to be abandoned. This was when F. J. A. Hort and B. F. Westcott published *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, a critical edition compiled from different sources which firmly rejected the Byzantine tradition of the Received Text. This would be the underlying text for the revision of the Authorised (King James) Version known as the Revised Version (New Testament, 1881; Old Testament, 1885). Then, in 1904 the British and Foreign Bible Society replaced the Received Text with the critical text Eberhard Nestle published as *Novum Testamentum Graece*. This became the standard for their translation projects throughout the world, and the majority of other Bible translation organisations followed suit.

The modern approach to Bible translation

Since the very beginning of the early Church period classical options for looser translation had been studiously avoided in translating

Scripture. From the Reformers onwards, the standard of faithful and accurate translation continued to be measured against the degree to which it reproduced the form of the original. William Whitaker writes, 'For translations of Scripture are always to be brought back to the originals of Scripture, received if they agree with those originals and corrected if they do not'.[41] After all, every word was inspired and it was not like any other book, it was the Word of God written. As Michael Marlowe points out, 'The Bible is a very important book, and it deserves our utmost care. And if we believe that every word of the Bible is inspired by God, how can we be careless of these words?'[42]

The faithful approach, derived from Tyndale, prevailed as the proper way of translating Scripture until in the twentieth century when another standard was erected and Tyndale's more literal approach to translation was rejected. The new modern approach has been called dynamic or functional equivalence. Instead of measuring accuracy primarily against the Biblical-language texts it was now principally measured in relation to the intended reader: the translation should communicate exactly as if it was part of the culture and everyday expression in the target language. The goal is to reproduce both the thoughts of the original and the same effects that the original readers would have experienced; it is as though the ideal of a dynamic translation is to provide language that is like everyday conversation. The intended reader should then understand this cultural approximation completely and immediately without needing to understand the cultural context of the original. To achieve this, the forms of the Biblical languages would have to be altered and it would need to be rewritten as if originally written in the time, culture, and language of the reader. It is important to understand that written translation is altogether different from simultaneous

oral translation in which an interpreter will struggle to give a word-for-word translation.

Since we only have the words of the original, guessing the original thoughts and the widely varying impressions of the original readers is an entirely subjective and speculative process.[43] We must translate the Word of God written not the Word of God as thought. Scripture is, by definition, the writing. It carries a fulness and richness of meaning that God intended; it must be translated as such.

The difference between these two approaches to translation can be demonstrated in the following verse, 'Blessed *are* they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled' (Matthew 5.6). In the Good News Bible this is rendered, 'Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully!' The net result is to remove the metaphors and narrow the meaning of the word 'blessed' to merely 'happy', and 'righteousness' to 'doing what God requires'. The meaning of 'they shall be filled' is narrowed and even altered to 'God will satisfy them fully'. While few evangelical Christians may read the Good News Bible, it has been held up as the gold standard for translation by many translation organisations across the world. Frequently that version is the very source text that is translated into Asian languages rather than the original Hebrew and Greek.

In contrast, the translators of the Authorised Version were careful in their work as we see in Hebrews 5.7. The Greek phrase τῆς εὐλαβείας in context could mean fear, reverence, or piety. The Greek word ἀπὸ before it could mean from, after, out of, because of. The translation

'in that he feared' allows the interpretation that Christ was heard in the expression of His fears, so as to be saved from His fear, or that He was heard because of His reverential Godward fear, which is offered as an alternative by the marginal note 'or for his piety'.

Conveying meaning in Bible translation

Too often in debates about translation the contrast is made between more formal translations that focus on words and others that focus on meaning. This is a false dichotomy since a greater fulness of meaning is in fact discarded in translations that impose one particular interpretation on the original. Dr Stefan Felber argues that functionally equivalent approaches to translation risk prioritising the translator's understanding of the text over the inspired original.[44] He says that, 'Relating the translation to the receptor—to his presumed understanding and response—thus takes priority over its relation to the original. Only that which truly reaches the receptor, i.e., that is understood and elicits a response appropriate to what has been conveyed, is considered to have been communicated'.[45]

We can see an example of how the loss of meaning includes loss of doctrinal meaning in Romans 3.24, 'Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (AV/KJV) which becomes, 'But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free' in the Good News Bible.

Should we translate 'he' or 'man' when that is the accurate translation of the original languages, or should we render these words with more

'gender inclusive' terms, perhaps using the plural pronoun 'they' even though the original is singular, so as not to offend the prejudices of some readers? Many translations replace the wording of Scripture that is specific in relation to gender with something that is neutral because they do not want to offend those who assume this may exclude women. This makes it no longer possible to see what the original said.

Is it not self-evident that the Scriptures are different from anything else? They have an 'otherness' through their historical character, but much more so by virtue of Divine verbal inspiration. Translators must seek to get as close to the original languages as they possibly can, rather than interpret and modify the Word to suit the reader. It is not the function of the translator to explain the meaning of the text. He must present what was written, rather than interpret or paraphrase it.

Meaning is conveyed by all the forms chosen by the Holy Spirit in the original. The ideal is a kind of transparency that helps us see as much as possible of the original in the target language. Thus, translation should reproduce as much of those forms as possible and simply seek to state the text as it is in the inspired original. This is to respect inspiration so that, as much as possible, it is God that is speaking not the translator. Verbal inspiration therefore limits how translation should be done.

A different view of inspiration

Eugene Nida, the main proponent of dynamic equivalence, admitted that this method favoured a view of inspiration in which

the thoughts rather than the words were inspired.[46] It is of course possible to translate using dynamic equivalence while holding to the full verbal inspiration of Scripture, but the point is that it has various implications that are inconsistent with full verbal inspiration. Nida's view rests on secular theories of culture and communication that assume languages are merely a human cultural construct and that language, even in the Biblical languages, is always limited by culture. It implies for instance, that forms and words are incidental to the underlying meaning, and they can be dispensed with as mere 'labels'. But we know from the way that Scripture quotes Scripture that the words (e.g. Matthew 22.43-45) and grammar (e.g. Galatians 3.16) are important; its mode of expression is never irrelevant or accidental. God was able to use individuals and language to fully communicate His Mind and Truth so that we do have the Word of God written. He was able to do this in such a way that they can be understood adequately by all cultures and generations through careful effort and the help of the Holy Spirit.

One of the effects of Nida's approach was to shift inspiration from the original text to the translated text. This follows if a translator is using their 'creativity' to rewrite Scripture as if it had been written in their language and culture with the same thoughts and responses as it originally had. It is as though inspiration is happening all over again, and the inspiration event of the original is not unique. Dr Stefan Felber argues that the 'Word of God within the ideology of dynamic or functional equivalence is diminished to a passive carrier of information; it is no more a living, powerful word, rather, it is some kind of malleable material, it must be 'made life' by human activity'. We must, however, hold to the historic

view that the translator does not receive Scripture by Divine inspiration; they are only translating what is written into another language.

Muslim idiom translation

The impact of this theory on the inspired words of Scripture can also be seen in the development of Muslim Idiom Translations which intentionally use wording that upholds the teachings of Islam. This is based on the idea that the message of Scripture can be adapted to the language and culture of Muslims. This includes abandoning Father-Son terminology as merely metaphorical and offensive to Muslims. There are also four Arabic New Testament translations that contain the first part of the Islamic profession of faith (and means of conversion to Islam) called the *shahada* which says, 'There is no God but Allah'. This is also being followed in other languages where there is a majority Muslim population. As Pierre Houssney points out, such translations are counterproductive because they support Muslim claims about Christ and that the Bible has been corrupted, and are seen as a way of deceiving naïve Muslims.[47] It should be clear how they undermine the inspiration of Scripture: if the title Son of God is dispensable in relation to Christ, then any metaphor and doctrine is equally superfluous. The controversy around this has been said by some to have been settled by the 2013 Report to the World Evangelical Alliance but this is not so. The recommended guidelines provided only generalised best practices while failing to address existing problematic versions or key translation issues beyond the Father-Son terminology.

We may diminish the Bible's authority in practice if we do not translate it accurately. The Scriptures are a 'treasure' (Matthew 13.52); literally in Greek they are a *thesauros* or treasury of knowledge. If, however, Scripture is not accurately translated and some parts are omitted, the value of that treasury has been diminished for making the believer 'throughly furnished unto all good works' (2 Timothy 3.17).

Scripture evidences itself to be the Word of God by various characteristics which it possesses. We can speak of its Heavenly subject matter, the power of its teaching, the majesty of the style, the harmony of all its parts with each other, its overall purpose and tendency (which is to give all glory to God), the full declaration it makes of the only way of man's salvation, and its complete perfection.

These intrinsic marks of authority must not be obscured in translation. If a translation obscures the majesty of the style of the original and debases its sacred character by paraphrasing it in altogether different wording, there are serious consequences. Or if the connections between words, phrases and themes are not preserved then we fail to see the harmony and something of the authority is also lost.

Scripture is the highest authority and Scripture testifies to itself, and so in understanding one part of Scripture we must compare other parts with it (1 Corinthians 2.13–14). Translators must not take away from God's people the ability to interpret Scripture for themselves by imposing only one interpretation. When translators

use functional equivalence to produce a looser translation, they often only allow one particular interpretation of a verse over all other alternatives. Their choice may not be correct, however, and then they actually mislead people about what the Bible is saying. Formal translations allow you to interpret the meaning for yourself as much as possible and seek to protect the reader from the opinions and bias of the translator. A very simple example is as follows. Many translators substitute names where the Greek or Hebrew text has a pronoun—'he', 'she', or 'it'. Yet this denies the reader the opportunity of interpreting the Bible for themselves without the subjective opinions of translators.

Sometimes words must be added in so that it makes proper grammatical sense in the receptor language (the language being translated into). The Trinitarian Bible Society seeks to follow the historic principle of using italics for supplied words. This helps ensure that the reader is aware of any words or phrases which were added to the text. These words would include both the words which are demanded or implied by the original language and context and also other 'helper' words which complete the sense of the text.

God carefully chose every word to convey precisely what He wanted and how He wanted to teach us. We must reject the dynamic or functional equivalent method of translation as not consistent with Scripture and what the Bible says about itself. Why should we be indifferent to the very form of words by which God has revealed Himself and His will for us? We do not need to rewrite Scripture; we need simply to translate them faithfully and accurately.

5. Faithful Translation of Scripture Continued

In conclusion, we can see that formal equivalence translation gives people something which is far more faithful to the words of God. This is an approach that seeks to translate every word as literally as possible and only as freely as necessary—one that strives to preserve the idioms, figures of speech, and challenging vocabulary of the original text, while making them accessible to readers in the receptor languages.

Formal equivalence is the approach that has been used by Bible translators for centuries. It was the approach that Tyndale used to fulfil the mission of ensuring that English-speaking people would have in their hands the inspired words of God in their fulness. By the grace of God, the Trinitarian Bible Society seeks to continue the work of William Tyndale today. There are Bible translators across the world labouring in translating languages spoken by over a billion people, such as Chinese, down to those spoken by tribes of several thousands. For all of them, the same text and the same approach are used with the same diligent care.

Like Tyndale, some of these translators are working with languages that have never before had the Scriptures. We have many such projects, and like Tyndale they are often working in the context of persecution, adversity, or turmoil. Thus, his work continues to influence translators who adhere to his principles and use the same original Biblical texts. Other languages have not had the Scriptures in their fulness, or based on inferior texts, and Bible translators are dedicated to revising them for the glory of God and the salvation

of many. Providing accurate copies of the Scriptures for the nations of the world is a truly daunting task but, depending on Divine enabling, we seek to press on to the best of our ability, and above all, to the glory of God.

William Tyndale's life and work exemplify the power of perseverance and faith. His dedication to translating the Bible laid the foundation for countless others, spreading the light of the Scriptures to every corner of the world. His costly legacy of translation can still be honoured, continued, and extended today. The Society pursues its aim of having the Word of God among all nations in a similar way. We need such God-honouring, literal, idiomatic, trustworthy translations from the original languages. Sadly, few organisations are careful to follow this approach. If Christians believe in a literal approach to translation, they ought to support the Trinitarian Bible Society, whatever their other views.

The real legacy of faithful translation is illustrated by Tyndale's work and also appropriately summed up in the Principles of the Trinitarian Bible Society: 'A faithful translation will convey the very words that God has given, without omission or alteration, thus preserving the integrity of the message and ensuring that the truths of Scripture are passed down accurately to future generations'.

The task of translating the Bible into every language remains vast. Let us remember Tyndale's legacy and pray for those who continue his mission, keeping alive his dream of making the Scriptures accessible to all in their own language.

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Further Information

The Society has published a documentary at tyndalefilm.com.

This article accompanies its main themes.

The Society has also published two other articles about William Tyndale.

William Tyndale—The Apostle of England by Dr David Allen

'The Fugitive Translator: William Tyndale's Dangerous Work'

by Adrian Stoutjesdyk

The aims of the Society

- To publish and distribute the Holy Scriptures throughout the world in many languages.

- To promote Bible translations which are accurate and trustworthy, conforming to the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament, and the Greek Textus Receptus of the New Testament, upon which texts the English Authorised Version is based.

- To be instrumental in bringing light and life, through the Gospel of Christ, to those who are lost in sin and in the darkness of false religion and unbelief.

- To uphold the doctrines of reformed Christianity, bearing witness to the equal and eternal deity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, One God in three Persons.

- To uphold the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God.

- **For the Glory of God and the Increase of His Kingdom through the circulation of Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God.**

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