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## THE LIMITS OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE IN BIBLE TRANSLATION — AND OTHER LIMITS, TOO

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Seventeen years ago I wrote an essay with a similar title: “The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation.”<sup>1</sup> At the time, the expression “dynamic equivalence” was still being used, though even then it was being superseded by “functional equivalence,” which, doubtless, is a better label for the translation theory to which both expressions refer. The article was reprinted in various places<sup>2</sup> and (I am told) has served students in many courses on translation in several parts of the world. At the suggestion of the editors of this *Festschrift*, and with the permission of the journal in which the essay first appeared, I shall in this essay incorporate most of what I said seventeen years ago but cast it in rather different terms, and in any case bring some of the discussion up-to-date.

### THE CHANGED CLIMATE OF DISCUSSION

The earlier draft was written at a time when the triumph of functional equivalence was largely applauded, even taken for granted in many circles. By and large, I concurred that the theory was fundamentally right and certainly useful. My essay was a modest attempt to offer a handful of warnings against abuses of the theory.<sup>3</sup> The most competent translators needed no guidance from me, of course, but some practitioners, picking up on some facets of the theory, were making decisions not demanded by the theory—decisions laden with problems that needed to be addressed. So when I spoke of the “limits” of functional (or dynamic) equivalence, I was not calling into question the significant gains that the theory had brought to Bible translators all around the world, but I was

merely trying to curb some of the less informed enthusiasm with a modicum of critical reserve.

Today, however, the climate of discussion has changed—rather differently, perhaps, in two groups: on the one hand, professional translators, and on the other, ordinary Christians who, after all, support Bible translation, directly or indirectly. The changes in the climate may usefully be summarized in three observations, namely, developments in translation theory, the rise of linguistic conservatism, and the debate over gender-inclusive language.

### DEVELOPMENTS IN TRANSLATION THEORY

Translation theory has continued to develop. One of the standard works for Bible translators a quarter of a century ago,<sup>4</sup> for instance, was substantially eclipsed just over a decade later by the volume that became the “bible” of functional-equivalence theory.<sup>5</sup> Since then there have been dramatic developments in diverse contributing fields—sociolinguistics,<sup>6</sup> relevance theory,<sup>7</sup> text linguistics (discourse analysis),<sup>8</sup> the application of various elements of linguistic theory to the Greek and Hebrew,<sup>9</sup> and the bearing of narrative criticism on translation technique,<sup>10</sup> to mention but a few.<sup>11</sup>

Almost no one pretends that Bible translation can be reduced to an exact science; almost all vocational Bible translators are eclectic in their appeal to various linguistic developments, not in arbitrary ways, but in ways that recognize the complexities of the challenge and that appreciate the varied contributions on offer. As a result, the vast majority of experienced vocational Bible translators, at least in my experience in various parts of the so-called Third World, are remarkably sophisticated about their business. What this means in practice is that they are not naive about the strengths and weaknesses of any translation theory. Even if they have not formulated such matters themselves, their actual experience in the work of translation and their exposure to complementary—and even competing—theories tend to make them attentive to problems. Nevertheless, it is true to say that functional-equivalence theory has a dominant place in the thinking of Bible translators around the world, especially those who work in receptor languages remarkably different from either the Indo-European or Semitic languages in which most people in the West have been nurtured.

### THE RISE OF LINGUISTIC CONSERVATISM

While these trends have been going on apace, in the last few years a linguistically conservative reaction has taken root in some circles deeply interested in interpreting the Bible accurately, though relatively few of the voices on this

front are vocational translators. The common thesis in these contributions is that many modern English translations—I say *English*, because almost all the protests of which I’m aware have to do with English translations of the Bible, with very little awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of translations into other languages (strengths and weaknesses, by the way, that often shed light on the challenges of translation)—have become too sloppy, too paraphrastic, too inaccurate. What is needed, it is argued, is more “literal” translation (many linguists would prefer to speak of more “direct” translation).

The observations these critics make vary in quality. Ironically, however, the best points they offer *have already been made by exponents of functional equivalence themselves*.<sup>12</sup> These exponents are for the most part acutely aware of the dangers of functional-equivalence theory and hoist their own flags of warning; but they are also acutely aware of the dangers of more direct translation. The linguistically conservative critics of functional equivalence, however, cite the dangers as though they were insuperable objections to the theory (rather than features of which the functional-equivalence theorists are thoroughly aware), while not, on the whole, treating evenhandedly the plethora of problems associated with more direct translation—problems that helped call functional equivalence theory into being.<sup>13</sup> And in some cases, it must be said, the objections advanced by those critics who prefer more direct translation are linguistically naive.

Consider, for example, a recent essay by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen.<sup>14</sup> Van Leeuwen excoriates many modern English translations, including the NLT, the NIV, the NRSV, the REB, and the TEV, and the functional equivalence that ostensibly lies beneath them.<sup>15</sup> Yet almost all the issues he raises have been discussed at length by defenders of functional equivalence, sometimes to make the same points. Moreover, it is not long before Van Leeuwen himself makes telling admissions: “Yet translation is a difficult and, in some ways, impossible task. Translations always compromise and interpret. . . . A translator’s first and most important job is to bridge the language gap. She seeks the best way of saying in English *what was said* first in Hebrew or Greek. But even this is not simple. No English word fully matches a Greek or Hebrew word.”<sup>16</sup> How true. But if these points had been borne in mind in the earlier part of the essay, it would have been difficult for Van Leeuwen to maintain his stance on the translation of various expressions with such unflinching firmness.

To come to examples:

FE [functional-equivalence] translations (again, most Bibles today) often change the language, images, and metaphors of Scripture to make understanding easier. But for serious study,

readers need a translation that is more transparent to the “otherness” of Scripture. We need a translation that allows the Bible to say what it says, even if that seems strange and odd to readers at first glance. If God is “other” than we are, we should be willing to work at the “otherness” of the Bible, in order to understand what the Lord is saying through his Word. The purpose of the Bible is not to make Jesus like us, but to make us like Christ. The Bible is designed to change us, to make us different, heirs of Abraham according to the promise fulfilled in Christ (Acts 2).

We need translations for people who are eager and willing to make the effort to overcome the difficulty of reading a book that is in fact foreign to us. Indeed, when we come to serious Bible study, whether in a church group, Sunday school, or college classroom, this type of translation becomes necessary, for we are trying to get as close as possible within the limits of our own language. . . . The danger of FE translations is that they shape the Bible too much to fit our world and our expectations. There is a danger that the Bible gets silenced because we have tamed and domesticated it.<sup>17</sup>

In the right context, much of this is well said. Indeed, I said similar things in my earlier essay on dynamic equivalence and shall say them again below. But I say them within the context of acknowledging converse dangers that Van Leeuwen does not recognize. For a start, Van Leeuwen confuses the “foreignness” of any text written in a “foreign” language with the “otherness” of God. This then becomes a tool to justify preserving more direct translations as a function of preserving foreignness and thus the otherness of God. But the question that must always be asked is whether the original text sounded “foreign” to the first readers and hearers. In other words, is the “otherness” of God and thus the “foreignness” of the Bible’s message concretized in the foreignness of the language itself? In some cases, that may be so (e.g., some forms of apocalyptic); in some cases, the language may be syntactically smooth and contemporary to the first readers but of difficult vocabulary (e.g., a few parts of Paul); in still other cases, the text may be linguistically contemporary with the first readers but essentially alien and even offensive in its content. These variations cannot all be preserved by the mere expedient of opting for a more direct form of translation. In fact, the more direct form of translation may draw attention to the foreignness of the original language to the modern reader (though it was not foreign to the first readers) and thus actually distract the reader from the

far more important “otherness” of God. In short, what sounds like high theological motivation becomes a blunt instrument that fails to recognize the subtleties of translation. One thinks, by analogy, of the brilliant recent translation of *Beowulf* by Seamus Heaney.<sup>18</sup> Within the constraints of terms and idioms that simply must be preserved, Heaney manages to bring to life an astonishingly “contemporary” translation that nevertheless pulsates with the life of ancient Scandinavian mythological heroes.

Moreover, Van Leeuwen does not at this point mention the opposing danger. Sometimes in the name of preserving more formally direct translation, linguistic conservatives are in fact merely preferring traditional expressions that sound natural to them—and are thus preferred because they are well-known to them. But that doesn’t mean they are necessarily the best forms for new generations of readers who are both biblically illiterate and less attuned to more archaic forms of English expression. The appeal to preserve the “foreignness” of Scripture, though it *can* be related in some instances to preserving the Bible’s distinctive outlook and God’s “otherness,” *may* be an appeal to preserve the inside-track traditional language that Christians love and to which they feel loyal. But none of this balancing challenge is introduced.

Translators have long talked about three criteria in translation: accuracy, naturalness, and clarity. These criteria bear on translation principles, linguistics, presuppositions, theology, communication theory, exegesis, and the like. But all of these criteria are tricky. In particular, “naturalness” is a desirable goal insofar as the original text is “natural” (linguistically?) to the first readers. Because the structures of two languages may be very different, however, a more direct translation, formally closely allied with the source language, may introduce an element of “unnaturalness” in the receptor language. One may better preserve naturalness, on occasion, by a less direct translation. On the other hand, where the original text is anything but “natural” to the original reader, owing perhaps to its message or to its vocabulary, then ideally the receptor language should convey the same degree of unnaturalness, and for similar reasons. That can be trickier than one might think. For instance, some of the parables of Jesus, though linguistically fairly simple, were doubtless stunningly shocking to the first hearers and readers. It is difficult to imagine that they could retain such shock value to regular Bible readers today, precisely because we are so familiar with them (at least at some superficial level).

It appears, then, that Van Leeuwen’s appeal is ducking some complex questions in defense of a linguistically conservative platform. The issue becomes even more tricky when one considers a fourth translation criterion that has been discussed in recent years, namely, perceived authenticity.<sup>19</sup> This

perceived authenticity is on the part of the intended audience, which may entertain a slightly different set of assumptions than the translators themselves. Moreover, initial readers may operate with a different set of assumptions from those of long-term, well-informed Bible readers. Inevitably good translation involves some compromise among the four basic criteria. Where one criterion takes over absolutely, however, other things are soon lost. It is perfectly acceptable to argue that one of the criteria has been shortchanged (e.g., accuracy), but informed comment will surely not wish to ignore equally sophisticated discussion of the other three. As one very sophisticated linguist wryly said after reading his way into this debate, perhaps one of the reasons that impel some people to lay more stress on accuracy (by which they usually mean a greater tilting to more direct translation, though in all fairness accuracy is a more complicated matter than that) is that what they really want is not so much a better translation as a “crib” on the original languages.

Under the banner of “other examples of FE translations’ obscuring the text,”<sup>20</sup> Van Leeuwen writes, “Similarly, Paul often refers to the ‘*pistis* of Christ.’ *Pistis* means ‘faithfulness’ or ‘faith.’ Was Paul saying here that we are saved by *our* ‘faith in Christ’ or that ‘the faithfulness of Christ’ in his life and death saves sinners? When translations decide questions like this for us, they may prevent us from a Spirit-led, fuller understanding of God’s Word.”<sup>21</sup> But this is positively cranky; it has nothing whatsoever to do with functional-equivalence theory or otherwise (as a perusal of more direct translations quickly discloses). English has no word that means both *faith* and *faithfulness*. The limitations of our language mean that we *must* choose, and with the choice of the word comes the choice of how to take the genitive of the person. We may, if we wish, include a footnote to provide the alternative. But translators have to make judgment calls on which passages are so doubtful that an alternative in a footnote is called for—and in this instance I know teams of translators on *both* sides of this issue who are convinced that the alternative is not worth including! In any case, this has nothing whatsoever to do with functional equivalence.

Consider another of Van Leeuwen’s discussions:

It is hard to know what the Bible *means* when we are uncertain about what it *says*. In class, teachers with Greek and Hebrew often find themselves retranslating a passage to show students more directly what the literal [*sic!*] Hebrew and Greek said.

The problem with FE translations (i.e., most modern translations) is that they prevent the reader from inferring biblical *meaning* because they change what the Bible *said*.<sup>22</sup>

The example that Van Leeuwen deploys at this point is Colossians 3:9–10, which he quotes from the KJV: “Ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new *man*.”<sup>23</sup> “The KJV,” he writes, “at this point offers a transparent or direct translation of the Greek.” He then adds parenthetically, “I prefer not to call it ‘literal’ because translations always add, change, and subtract from the original. The only literal Bible is written in Hebrew and Greek.”<sup>24</sup> I doubt if *literal* is the best word by which to refer to source languages, but I note that in the block quote above, Van Leeuwen says he is pursuing the *literal* Hebrew and Greek in the translation. Terminology aside, however, Van Leeuwen goes on to say that the paired expressions “the old man . . . the new *man*” “are simple and clear, like the Greek. What Paul *said* here is plain. What he *meant* is not, at least to most readers.”<sup>25</sup> Van Leeuwen argues that this does not mean what the NIV says: “You have taken off *your old self* with its practices and have put on *the new self*.” Such an expression may unwittingly lead the unwary away from what Paul meant (namely, “from Christ”) to modern individualistic notions of the “self,” which is surely “one of America’s greatest idols.”<sup>26</sup> Van Leeuwen points out, rightly, that the original is tied up with what Paul means by being “in Adam” and being “in Christ.” Thus “the old man” doubtless refers to Adam, the first man, while “the new man” refers to Christ, the last Adam, the true “image of God” (cf. Col 1:15; Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:45–50; Eph 4:22–23). All of this, I think, is exegetically responsible. Then Van Leeuwen concludes, “Today it might be better to translate the phrases as ‘the old Adam . . . the new Adam,’ to show that Paul preaches Christ in Old Testament terms.”<sup>27</sup>

I think this is an admirable suggestion. But it is not “direct” translation; it is, precisely, the fruit of functional-equivalence theory. Van Leeuwen’s suggestion is most definitely not a matter of preserving what the Greek *says* so that the contemporary reader can properly infer what the Greek *means*. Rather, Van Leeuwen has interpreted the Greek every bit as much as the NIV translators have interpreted the Greek. In this case, I think his interpretation better reflects the *original meaning*. But “the old Adam . . . the new Adam” is *not* what the original text *says*, even if it nicely catches what the original text *means*. Van Leeuwen’s own example, then, serves only to justify functional-equivalence theory, all his strictures and protestations notwithstanding.

Or consider two brief essays by Tony Payne, both written to promote the recent ESV over against the NIV, the former now being distributed in Australia by Matthias Media, with which Payne is affiliated.<sup>28</sup> The kinds of points he makes have often been made by those who defend functional equivalence (and

I will clarify some of them below). Unfortunately, however, not only is his selection lacking evenhandedness, but his argumentation sometimes betrays linguistic and even (in one particular) theological naïveté.

Payne criticizes the NIV in four areas, in each of which he finds the ESV superior:

1. *The NIV breaks up long Greek and Hebrew sentences into shorter, simpler sentences.* The price that is paid, Payne says, is the loss of a lot of connective words (such as “for,” “but,” “therefore,” etc.), whose absence makes the flow much less clear. Similarly, the NIV often renders participial clauses as new sentences. The gain is found in punchier English; the price is in the loss of the logical cohesion, so that it actually becomes harder to follow the thought of the original. To lose the “for” at the beginning of Romans 1:18 is to lose the connection with verses 16–17.

There is truth in what Payne is saying. Nevertheless, the issue is somewhat more complicated. For a start, Greek often resorts to long sentences, Hebrew much less frequently: though he mentions both languages, Payne’s strictures, insofar as they carry weight, apply only to the Greek. More important, stylish Greek loves not only long sentences but endless embedded subordination (i.e., hypotaxis); by contrast, contemporary English loves shorter sentences and parataxis.<sup>29</sup> The implication is that good translation, which tries to be as natural as is the source, must transform syntactical subordination into coordination—always assuming, of course, that one is not losing too much of something else of value. That is why translation always involves judgment calls and why focusing on only one criterion will always produce a poor translation.

Similarly, Greek loves to include a substantial array of particles (Attic Greek, of course, even more so than the Koiné); good English style tries to minimize them. Where English translations try to preserve most of these (in more direct translations), a very high percentage of sentences begin with “And”—as in the KJV. That is one of the reasons why the Book of Mormon, which apes the language style of the KJV, sounds so phony to many modern ears. The logical connections that are carried by such particles are often carried, in English, by the flow of thought or by other discourse markers.

Of course, in any particular instance, one may usefully argue that this or that translation does not have the balance quite right. On the whole, my own preference would be for the NIV to be a tad tighter here and there. But it is disingenuous to make too many sweeping statements, and this for at least two reasons. First, there is some variation regarding the force of such connectives in different New Testament writers, and often the meaning of a particle learned by a stu-

dent (usually culled from a lexicon) is in many of its textual occurrences something far more subtle. One thinks, for instance of the fine recent work by Stephanie Black.<sup>30</sup> To argue in such cases that one must render Greek particles by English particles is hopelessly naive. Second, precisely because particles are subtle things, one can always find instances where any particular translation has it wrong. In my view, the NIV’s “Yet” at the beginning of John 11:6 is indefensible. On the other hand, scarcely less defensible is the ESV’s rendering of 1 Corinthians 1:30: “... Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption”—as though Christ Jesus is “made” all four of these things in this context. The Greek’s *Christō Iēsou hos egenēthē sophia hēmin apo theou, dikaiosunē te kai hagiastosmos kai apolutrōsis* is better preserved in the NIV’s “Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” The flow of the context favors this rendering as well.<sup>31</sup>

2. *Payne objects that, while the original text carried a number of possible meanings, the NIV removes the uncertainty by fastening on one of the possibilities.* The advantage is clarity, but this “places the responsibility for interpretation into the hands of the translator rather than the reader.”<sup>32</sup> For instance, in Romans 1:17 the NIV uses the expression “righteousness from God,” while the original, Payne asserts, is actually “righteousness of God,” which could refer either to the righteousness that comes from God or to the righteousness that belongs to God (i.e., “God’s righteousness”).

Overspecification certainly is a problem in translation. This is probably the best of Payne’s four points. His grounding of it, however, is untenable. As noted above, he thinks that this practice places the responsibility for interpretation in the hands of translator rather than reader. Surely we are not to return to the astonishing naïveté that thought that translation could be done without interpretation? Consider, for example, the many languages that use either an exclusive “we” or an inclusive “we”—with no other alternative. That means that every time the Greek Testament uses a Greek form of “we,” which does not intrinsically specify whether or not the usage is inclusive or exclusive, translators into such languages *must* decide which way to render it—and of course this is unavoidable overspecifying.<sup>33</sup> Because of the differences between languages, translation always involves some instances of overspecifying and underspecifying. And once again, there is a judgment call to be made. In my judgment, NIV overspecifies a bit too often; RSV/ESV leaves things unnecessarily ambiguous a bit too often, with resulting loss of clarity. But Payne mentions only the former. And the notion that one can translate responsibly *without* interpretation is, quite

frankly, shockingly ignorant of the most basic challenges facing translators. Moreover, even in the example Payne cites (Rom 1:17), the Greek does *not* have, literally, “righteousness of God”; rather, it has *dikaïosunē . . . theou*, i.e., the genitive of the word rendered “God.” How to render this genitive is precisely the question. It *is* true to say that the English rendering “righteousness of God” preserves more ambiguity. But there are thousands of instances of the genitive in Scripture where Payne would agree that the context makes it abundantly clear that the genitive should *not* be rendered by an English “of . . .” phrase. Apparently the NIV translators thought this passage belonged to that set. One may criticize their judgment in this instance, of course, but not on the grounds Payne adduces.

3. *Payne criticizes the NIV for translating one Hebrew or Greek word by a number of different English words, depending on the context.* This, he says, is done to produce more stylish, flowing English, but one loses the connections that a reader of the original will be able to make. For instance, Paul says that Jesus was descended from David “according to the *flesh*”—and *flesh* is an important word in Romans that gets hidden in its first occurrence when it is rendered “human nature” in the NIV, and elsewhere in Romans “sinful nature.” Payne comments, “Again, these translations are defensible in themselves, but they remove the connection between the ideas. They don’t allow the reader to build up an idea of what Paul means by ‘flesh.’”<sup>34</sup>

There are two major misconceptions in these judgments, apart from the difficulty of rendering the Greek word *sarx*. The first is that for Payne’s argument to work, the word in the receptor language must have exactly the same semantic range as the word in the source language—and as has repeatedly been shown, this is rarely the case. That is why *all* translations use a variety of words to render one source word, or one word in the receptor language to render several words in the source language.<sup>35</sup> One can argue about whether any translation has got the balance of things right: Has the pursuit of smooth idiom in the receptor language introduced a higher percentage of different words in the receptor language than is strictly necessary? What is “strictly necessary”? Different translators will judge this matter differently. But Payne’s sweeping judgments on this point are linguistically indefensible. Second, they become even worse when he says that the translations he is condemning “don’t allow the reader to *build up* [emphasis mine] an idea of what Paul means by ‘flesh.’” This, of course, is to smuggle in “illegitimate totality transfer” through the back door, and that is inexcusable.<sup>36</sup> The *board* decided to *board* up the old boat with a piece of *board*, while the passengers climbed on *board*. Supposing those four uses were scattered through half a dozen pages of some writing or other, would it be useful or helpful to speak of “building up” an idea of what the author means by “board”?

I do not think that the NIV always renders *sarx* in the best way. But it is an extraordinarily difficult word. Here’s another author who takes the NIV to task over the same word:

Unfortunately, the translators of the NIV had a proclivity for settling exegetical questions in their translations, thereby becoming interpreters rather than translators. Among their most serious blunders resulting from this practice was the decision to translate the Greek word *sarx* (“flesh”) by the theological prejudicial phrase “sinful nature.” This is unfortunate, I say, because this obvious interpretive bias is *wrong*. The specialized use of the word *flesh* refers neither to man’s sinful *nature* nor to the sinful *self* that he developed, but to the sinful *body* (as Paul calls it in Romans 6:6). When Paul speaks of the body as sinful, he does not conceive of the body as originally created by God as sinful . . . , but rather the body plunged into sinful practices and habits as the result of Adam’s fall.<sup>37</sup>

Here again the NIV translators are being condemned for being interpreters rather than translators (!), but the “obvious” meaning they missed is one that Jay Adams thinks is correct but almost no one else does.<sup>38</sup> The kindest thing that can be said is that the language condemning the translators of a great breach of principle, instead of a *different* understanding of the text from that of the critic, is intemperate. But certain expressions are widely recognized as highly disputed and difficult (see the essay by Douglas J. Moo on “flesh” in this collection), and should breed a gracious humility rather than a condemnation of translators.

One more example may help to clarify things. In Ephesians 2:11 Paul speaks of (literally) “Gentiles in the flesh.” The NIV renders this “Gentiles by birth.” On any meaning, “Gentiles in the flesh” is not an English locution; moreover, I doubt that many would be bold enough to argue that this means “Gentiles in the body” or “Gentiles in the old nature” or “Gentiles in the old era,” or any of the other specialized meanings that *sarx* is alleged to have in other contexts. The NIV has the meaning of *the entire expression* right, even though it loses the word “flesh,” and even though Greek *sarx* never means “birth.” The RSV/ESV preserves “Gentiles in the flesh,” but even though this is a more “direct” translation, I doubt that it preserves greater accuracy than the NIV. It certainly does not contribute to a Pauline total notion of *sarx* (illegitimate totality transfer). And it loses the naturalness of the NIV rendering.

4. *Payne accuses the NIV of replacing concrete biblical expressions or metaphors with more abstract equivalents.* The example he provides is this: The Bible often

tells us to “walk in love” or “walk as children of light,” or not to “walk in darkness” or the like, and the NIV frequently renders such expressions by the more abstract “live a life of love” or “live as children of light” or the like. “‘Walk’ is not a hard English word to understand,” writes Payne, “nor is the metaphor a difficult one to grasp. Yet in changing it, the NIV removes some of the power of the word’s imagery.”<sup>39</sup>

In this particular case, I’m inclined to agree with Payne—though I confess I’m not quite certain whether or not my ease over this idiomatic use of the verb “to walk” is a reflection of my own familiarity with scriptural language rather than a fair reading of common usage in the contemporary culture. And I am not sure that the more direct rendering of “walk” is *always* the most helpful—e.g., ESV “let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25), since “to walk by something/someone” in contemporary English has a rather different meaning than what Paul had in mind! The NIV’s “let us keep in step with the Spirit” preserves the metaphor, though it does not use the word “walk,” and is certainly more contemporary and less liable to be misunderstood than the RSV/ESV rendering. And these are merely two or three caveats in an instance where I am sympathetic to Payne’s criticism of the NIV’s rendering of a particular idiom! Yet somehow Payne has elevated an observation—probably a correct observation, though possibly stretched too far—into a generic criticism without evaluating a host of other metaphors where the NIV’s approach might earn it high marks.

In short, Payne thinks the NIV philosophy of translation is this: “Better to have something simple, the NIV seems to think, even if it is not what the original text actually says.”<sup>40</sup> Wait a minute: this form of argument is deceptive and manipulative, for anyone with a high view of Scripture will always want to side with “what the original text actually says.” But the original text does not actually say “flesh” and “walk” and the like; it says *sarx* and *peripateō* and the like, and the issue is how best to render such expressions. Payne’s assumption seems to be that the more direct translation is “what the original text actually says.” In fact, what the original text actually says is in Aramaic and Hebrew and Greek, and the dispute is over when the more direct translation is the better translation and when a functional equivalent is the better translation. To write “Better to have something simple, the NIV seems to think, even if it is not what the original text actually says” is to displace reasoned discussion about translation principles by manipulative rhetoric.

It gets worse, and this is where the theological naïveté is introduced. After the sentence just quoted, Payne writes the following:

This betrays something of a lack of trust, in my view, in what has traditionally been called the “perspicuity of Scripture”—

that God’s word *is* clear and understandable for the person who reads it with a regenerate heart. Who are we, after all, to tinker with God’s words, just because we think we are doing God a favour in making them “easier”?<sup>41</sup>

Quite apart from the fact (once again!) that “God’s words” were in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek and that Payne presupposes that his preferred practice of more “direct” translation involves less tinkering with God’s words than any other approach—a claim sometimes true and sometimes patently false—this is a rather bad abuse of *claritas Scripturae*, the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. That doctrine has an interesting and complex history.<sup>42</sup> At the time of the Reformation, for instance, the issue turned on whether Scripture boasts an esoteric element that could only be unraveled by the inside knowledge or insight of the Magisterium. The Reformers insisted that it does not—that there is a clarity, a perspicuity, to Scripture itself, so that the special mediation of the Magisterium is by no means a criterion for understanding. All of this tied in very well with the Reformation insistence on the priesthood of all believers. But never, to my knowledge, was the doctrine used by responsible theologians to deny that some parts of Scripture are difficult to understand (see 2 Pet 3:16); still less has *claritas Scripturae* been used to defend a particular translation theory.

Moreover, the way Payne has cast his argument it is difficult to see why we still need teachers in the church. Transparently, however, the New Testament documents insist on the role of teachers. This is not because they have some sort of inside track, some key to understanding, some special endowment of the Spirit unavailable to other believers. But they do have understanding, and some are more knowledgeable and insightful than others (otherwise, how shall we understand Galatians 2:11–14?). All things being equal (and they never are), those with a good grasp of Hebrew and Greek will grasp what Scripture says better than those without a good grasp of those languages. At no point does *claritas Scripturae* vitiate such distinctions. And at no point is it fair to accuse those who translate Scriptures, using a slightly different balance of translation theory, of jettisoning *claritas Scripturae*. Such rhetoric is both uninformed and misdirected.

The purpose of these observations is not to bad-mouth the ESV or to defend the NIV or TNIV against all comers. Translations have various strengths and weaknesses; further, they serve various constituencies. Clearly there are “better” and “worse” translations according to a particular set of criteria. Some translations may be fine for private reading but somehow seem less appropriate as pew Bibles. I shall return to this observation one more time after the next section. For the purpose of this essay, however, my point is that before talking about the limits of functional equivalence, it has become necessary to warn against the

reactionary wing that demonizes functional equivalence with occasionally insightful rhetoric, but is more often linguistically uninformed, is rarely balanced, and is sometimes shrill.

### THE DEBATE OVER GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

The third change in the climate springs from debates on gender-related issues in Bible translation. The debates have become overheated and highly politicized, primarily, I think, not because many on the linguistically conservative side insist that those who disagree with them are wrong (after all, that is what debaters do, and each side thinks the other is wrong), but for two other reasons: (1) Many on this side insist that their opponents are not only wrong in their linguistic judgments but that they are compromising the truthfulness of Scripture, and inevitably that gets a lot more attention; and (2) the same people are organizing politically, inviting many high-profile evangelical leaders, whether or not they know anything at all about Greek, translation theory, or any language other than English, to sign on to the agenda. Entire denominations have been torn asunder in debate. In quieter moments, one wonders if any conceivable damage that could be done by the NIV or TNIV could be any worse than the division, bitterness, and strife stirred up by those who have made this a dividing issue.

The history of the debate is now so well-known that it need not be repeated here. Moreover, some contributions from all sides have been thoughtful and informed and have advanced the discussion. From the linguistically conservative side, the volume by Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem patiently explains its authors' position and deserves careful reading<sup>43</sup>—as do some of the most thoughtful reviews.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, those who are, theologically speaking, complementarians (such as Grudem and Poythress), but who are convinced on linguistic grounds that some revisions of contemporary English translations are mandated by changes in contemporary English, are well represented by Mark Strauss.<sup>45</sup>

This is not the place to rehash all the issues that have been raised. My purpose here is to mention a selection of translation issues that the gender-issue debate has put on the table. This is only a small sampling. I include them because they have in some measure changed public perceptions as to the legitimacy of functional equivalence, and so some of them should be aired again before turning, finally, to a review of the limitations of functional equivalence.

#### *Various Approaches to Translation*

One of the themes of the book by Poythress and Grudem (to which reference has already been made) is that linguistics teaches us that texts carry not only

large-scale meanings but countless fine “nuances” (one of their favorite words). In particular, of course, they are interested in the “nuances of meaning” that are lost, they aver, in inclusive translation. They speak of four different levels on which people approach translation:<sup>46</sup>

- *The naive approach*, adopted by the general public (at least the monolingual general public), which assumes that translation is nothing more than a matter of replacing words in one language with words in another language, *ad seriatim*. It assumes that the structures of language are identical and that the semantic ranges of both the source word and the receptor word are identical. Poythress and Grudem rightly assert that such a view of translation is simply wrong.
- *The theoretically informed approach*, which displays a basic understanding of linguistics with respect to form and function. People working at this level will recognize, for instance, that one Hebrew word in Ezekiel 37 must variously be rendered “breath,” “wind,” and “Spirit” (37:5, 9, 14 respectively). And it is at this level, Poythress and Grudem assert, that their opponents in the gender-inclusive language debate are operating.
- *The discerning approach*, which uses native speakers' intuitive sense of the subtleties. Here, the native speaker would recognize the three different meanings of the Hebrew word in Ezekiel 37 but would also recognize the subtle interplays between them that a reader of a translation will miss.
- *The reflective approach*, the fourth and highest level, which analyzes and makes explicit all the subtleties and complexities that the native speaker might well intuit.

Much of this, of course, is correct. But the question is whether an ordinary translation normally *can* get much beyond the second level. If the *meaning* of the one Hebrew word in the different verses is variously wind, breath, and Spirit (in English!), those are the words the translation will have to use (second level). A translation could, doubtless, preserve one English word for the one Hebrew word (say, “wind”), but the preservation of formal equivalence would entail an indefensible semantic loss. Footnotes can of course draw attention to the presence of one Hebrew word behind the three English words (drawing attention to the third level), but most translations will not resort to such niceties except in cases where the meaning is totally lost unless the wordplay is grasped. As for analyzing and explaining the subtle connections and complexities (fourth level), that is what commentaries and preachers do.

Of course, it is possible to construct a Bible with various layers of footnotes, which in effect lift the translation pretty close to level 3, with occasional insight



at level 4. That is now being done in the rather remarkable NET Bible.<sup>47</sup> But observe that it is not the translation per se that is being lifted to a higher level. Rather, it is the complex system of notes that lifts the discussion. In other words, the NET Bible is not simply a translation, but a translation-cum-explanation-cum-commentary. It is, in effect, a fine crib for those who don't know their Hebrew and Greek very well. But so far as the actual translation goes, although the notes explain a little more of what goes into the decisions, one is still left with level 2, occasionally rising to level 3.

In other words, Poythress and Grudem rightly explain some rudiments in linguistic theory and then abuse their own theory by not admitting that basic translations really cannot frequently rise much beyond level 2. While the goal is certainly to preserve as much meaning as possible, translation is an inexact discipline, and something is invariably lost in any basic translation. One is constantly forced to make decisions—which is one of the fundamental reasons why there are commentaries and preachers. But somewhere along the line, Poythress and Grudem start referring to any loss of any meaning at any level as a “distortion” and an “inaccuracy,” finally challenging the integrity of those who admit such things. But *all* translators, including Poythress and Grudem, are inevitably bound up with making choices about the “nuances” they get across. In that sense, *all* translations are driven by choices, and all presuppose interpretation and an assumed grid of what is most importantly preserved.

New Testament scholar Daniel Wallace provides an interesting example of the complexity of competing principles, of the difficulty of making decisions.<sup>48</sup> While working on the NET Bible, he and his co-translators struggled with the sentence, “I will make you fishers of men” (KJV, RSV, NIV, and many others). The Greek phrase rendered “fishers of men” is *halieis anthrōpōn*, and, unwilling to give the impression—to some contemporary readers—that the disciples were to be fishers of adult males only, they were unsatisfied with “men.” Further, although “fishers of men” is a common expression among many churchgoers, in fact the word “fishers” is archaic. It is no longer used except in that expression. The NRSV resolves these two problems by rendering the clause, “I will make you fish for people.” But Wallace rightly points out that this sounds as though Jesus will *force* his disciples to “fish for people,” which is scarcely what is meant. Moreover, the shift from noun to verb (“fishers” to “fish”) might be thought to signal a shift from a new occupation to merely a new activity. The NLT and the TEV avoid the first problem but not the second, with, respectively, “I will show you how to fish for people” and “I will teach you to catch people.” But both “show you” and “teach you” introduce nuances that are not quite faithful, either—and still we are left with verbs. Some have suggested, “I will make you

fishermen of people,” which solves several problems and removes the archaism, though most would acknowledge that the expression sounds thoroughly awkward and cumbersome. Still, it is better than “I will make you fishers of mankind” or “I will make you fishers of humankind,” since these renderings give the impression that the mission includes Gentiles, which is certainly not what the disciples would have understood at that point in redemptive history—and probably not quite what Jesus himself meant at that point in redemptive history, either. As Wallace comments, “This text illustrates the clash of translational objectives of accuracy, readability, and elegance. At bottom, we believe that the great value of the NET Bible is its extensive notes that wrestle with such issues, for the footnotes become a way for us to have our cake and eat it too.”<sup>49</sup> The NET scholars finally opted for “I will turn you into fishers of people,” thus choosing to stick with the archaism because the alternatives struck them as worse.

The point of this discussion is not to commend or condemn the NET decision. It is to point out that the NET scholars implicitly agree with Poythress and Grudem when they acknowledge that translation is an inexact discipline that involves compromise—give and take—and that there are subtleties in the source text that demand the most careful evaluation about how best to preserve them without introducing too many extraneous notions. The difference, of course, is that the NET scholars, recognizing these tensions, work them out the best they can and by their system of notes provide some indication of their wrestlings and reasonings. By contrast, Poythress and Grudem articulate reasonably sound theory, but every time a decision goes against their favored “nuance,” they accuse their opponents of distorting Scripture and introducing inaccuracies. At some point, one begins to suspect that it is *their* argument that is ideologically driven.

### *Issues of Changes in English Usage*

Part of the debate turns on whether there has been sufficient change in English usage in the West, especially in America, to warrant more sensitivity in our translations to gender-inclusive issues. Valerie Becker Makkai, an associate professor in linguistics at the University of Illinois (Chicago), wrote the foreword to the book by Poythress and Grudem. There she devotes no small part of her space to arguing that the large-scale empirical studies have not been done to provide the hard evidence that would answer such questions. Doubtless she is correct. Large-scale empirical studies have not yet been done. But that does not mean that large-scale changes have not taken place; it simply means that the large-scale empirical studies have not yet been done to prove with hard numbers that such changes have (or have not) taken place. Rather more scathingly, in their sixth appendix Poythress and Grudem argue for the continuing usability of generic

“he.” Certainly it’s easy enough to find sectors of society where inclusive language has made relatively little impression. For various reasons I move in quite different sectors, and, although I’m relying on what I personally observe rather than on large-scale empirical studies, I cannot help noting that generic “he” is more acceptable in culturally conservative sectors of the country than in culturally liberal sectors. But I have been doing university missions for thirty years, and in such quarters inclusive language dominates. Not to use it is offensive.

Implicitly, of course, Poythress and Grudem recognize that English usage *is* changing, since even the Colorado Springs Guidelines, to which they subscribe, allow for some accommodation in this regard. In fact, a recent essay by Mark Strauss documents how many inclusive-language changes the ESV has introduced to the RSV.<sup>50</sup> Some are changes from “men” to “people” (e.g., Matt 5:15). Sometimes, however, the ESV changes “men” to “others” (e.g., Matt 5:11–12 RSV: “Blessed are you when *men* revile you . . . for so *men* persecuted the prophets who were before you”; ESV: “Blessed are you when *others* revile you . . . for so *they* persecuted *the* prophets who were before you”). To change “men” to “others” is entirely acceptable to me; it is a bit strange to find it in a translation prepared by those who argue that translation should rise to what they call the third and fourth level. There is certainly some change in nuance from “men” to “others”—not least in contemporary culture where the word “others” is increasingly taking on an overtone, a nuance, of outsider that is not found in “men” (unless, I suppose, written by some “women”!). This change is far from rare (e.g., Matt 5:16 RSV: “Let your light so shine before men”; ESV: “let your light so shine before others”). Other changes include

- Matthew 7:9 RSV: “what *man* of you”; ESV: “which *one* of you”;
- Matthew 16:24 RSV: “If *any man* will come after me”; ESV: “If *anyone* will come after me”;
- Matthew 19:11 RSV: “Not *all men* can receive this saying”; ESV: “Not *everyone* can receive this saying”;
- Matthew 22:16 RSV: “care for no *man*”; ESV: “you do not care about *anyone’s opinion*.”

I am not arguing that any of these translated phrases are wrong, still less that they’re wicked. Some are better than others. But I am certainly saying that there are changes of “nuance” in such pairs as men/you, any man/anyone, men/others, and so forth—and the presence of such changes in the ESV, where Grudem has had such a strong hand, show that there is an implicit recognition of a change of English usage in the land. And I am saying that in countless passages they themselves implicitly recognize that translators *ought* to be aware of contemporary

usage and that in basic translations (i.e., translations without cumbersome footnotes), it is difficult to operate beyond the second level, with occasional forays into the third. They are making such changes—I would not call them distortions or inaccuracies—all the time, and the changes certainly carry slight differences of nuance. But when others make similar changes with respect to the pronoun “he,” Poythress and Grudem condemn them for distorting the Word of God.

In a rather heated review, Vern Poythress insists that both Mark Strauss and I are not sensitive enough to the fact that “feminists pay attention to generic ‘he’ and load it with connotations because [feminists] can thereby use it as a means of detecting ideological resistance. Once offenders are located, [these offenders] are persuaded to conform, or else labeled insensitive or chauvinistic.” He adds the following:

They [Carson and Strauss] could not frankly discuss the ideological connotation of generic “he” because it represents a land mine capable of exploding the illusion that the issue is merely clear communication. The central issue is ideology. It is a modern ideology that makes generic “he” unacceptable even though it is intelligible. Ideological influence heats up the whole issue. Messrs. Carson and Strauss want people on all sides to cool down. The desire for peace and sanity is admirable. But the ideological conflict will not go away. And God’s Word does not change in order to appease modern feminists’ ideas about language.<sup>51</sup>

Reviewers should be careful about what authors could or “could not frankly discuss,” because they are extending a challenge that constitutes an invitation. I am more than happy to discuss it. Such a discussion could easily take up a chapter, but I shall restrict myself to the following points:

1. I acknowledge that much of the demand for reform of the English language on this point is from active feminists. Much of the push for change is ideologically driven. I don’t think all of it is, but certainly much of it is.
2. Would Poythress want to say that *everything* that feminists and their forebears have introduced is bad? Would he like to disavow, say, universal suffrage? Granted that a fair bit of feminist rhetoric is overheated and mean-spirited, is it not fair to say that there have been countless abuses of women and that anything Christians can do to rectify injustice is a good thing, so long as we adhere to biblical perspectives on what justice is? I think that Dr. Poythress would agree. The implication, surely, is that it is important, in the face of feminist demands, not to tar the entire movement with one broad brush. One must try to assess where.

in the light of Scripture, feminist agendas make telling points, where their demands make little difference (from a biblical point of view), and where they seem to fly in the face of Scripture. That is why I, and Dr. Strauss, too, for that matter, are complementarians and not egalitarians. But this is a far cry from saying that there is nothing to be learned from feminist cries and from feminist writings. It is never wise to build a fence around Torah and try to become more righteous than Torah; it is always wise to discern where one should draw a line and where one should not draw it. By contrast, linguistic conservatism in the name of warning people against the “slippery slope”<sup>52</sup> discourages Christians from thinking through where the real issues are.

3. Although (as we have seen) the matter is disputed, my best guess is that, regardless of the motivations driving at least a good part of the push for reform of English usage, increasingly that push will prove successful. If so, increasing numbers of people who themselves will not be driven by an active feminist agenda will take on the English usage that was in substantial measure fomented by feminists. In other words, regardless of the reasons for change in the language, the language is changing. Implicitly, even the ESV acknowledges the point by allowing some changes that accommodate inclusive-language concerns.<sup>53</sup>
4. It is true that “the ideological conflict will not go away,” as Poythress puts it. But that is merely another way of saying that the confrontation must take place at the right points. There is, for example, a growing and admirable literature that gives many good reasons why it is inappropriate to change the language of Scripture so as to address God as “our heavenly Mother” or the like. Meanwhile, I know not a few complementarians who are becoming unwilling to stand up for their beliefs, not because they are intimidated by feminists, but because they do not want to be associated with the increasingly shrill polemic that so roundly condemns fellow complementarians for not drawing linguistic lines where Poythress and Grudem draw them!<sup>54</sup>
5. I entirely agree with Poythress’s last sentence, namely, that “God’s Word does not change in order to appease modern feminists’ ideas about language.” God’s Word, after all, was given in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, and it does not change. But the *translations* change as the receptor languages change, *regardless of the motivations that some entertain for those changes*. The proof, as we have seen, is the ESV itself. Where the line must be drawn is where a translation is domesticating God’s Word such that the truth of Scripture is distorted. Translators may sometimes

differ as to when that is happening; certainly we need one another, so as to foster honesty and integrity in debate. But the countless minor accommodations and choices that *every* translator has to make in just about *every* sentence, demanded by the fact that the source language and the receptor language are different, should not be confused with such matters of substance.<sup>55</sup>

### *Issues of Varied Gender Systems around the World*

In my book on inclusive-language translation, I devoted quite a bit of space to outlining the gender systems of various languages, showing how different they are in many instances from the conventions used both in the biblical languages and in English for that matter. Poythress and Grudem dismiss the argument:

The underlying assumption in this objection is that *only what can easily be conveyed into all languages is worth conveying in English*. When we draw this assumption out into the open, it refutes itself. . . . Of course, we agree that some languages in the world may not have all the capabilities for expression that English does, and in those cases translators will have to do the best they can with those languages. . . . But all of those considerations are simply changing the subject, which is how to translate the Bible into English today.<sup>56</sup>

But here Poythress and Grudem are ascribing to me views I have never held and are not listening fairly to what I actually wrote. I have never held the view that “only what can easily be conveyed into all languages is worth conveying in English.” Nor did that notion form any part of my assumptions. Rather, my discussion was responding to constantly repeated arguments to the effect that where we have the masculine pronoun in Hebrew, the English must have a masculine pronoun or else we are betraying the Word of God. By showing how varied are gender systems around the world, I demonstrated that in some receptor languages, preservation of a masculine pronoun may not even be an option, and that even in the move from Hebrew (or Greek) to English there are differences in their respective gender systems that make this sort of appeal to formal equivalence not only impossible (in some contexts), but nonsense. I provided many examples. Poythress and Grudem tackle none of them. This is not to say that preservation of formal equivalence is *always* a bad thing, of course; it is to say, rather, that appeal to loyalty and faithfulness toward the Word of God as the ground for preserving formal equivalence is both ignorant and manipulative, precisely because the significance and range of use of a masculine pronoun in Hebrew are demonstrably not the same as the significance and range of use of a

masculine pronoun in English. A great deal depends on the gender systems of the respective languages and then on the individual contexts. Poythress and Grudem appear on occasion to have taken the argument on board, and then when someone disagrees with them over the exact force of a particular context, very quickly they resort to an appeal to Scripture's truthfulness and authority, as though the other party were abandoning it. Popular journalists have merely followed their lead, sometimes with even more inflated rhetoric. This stance, more than anything else, is what has heated up this debate.

### *Issues of Distinctions between Singular and Plural Forms*

Although the ESV (which Poythress and Grudem favor) introduces, as we have seen, hundreds of changes (such as the change from "men" to "others") to accommodate the concerns of inclusive language in our changing culture, Poythress and Grudem are especially resistant to certain *kinds* of changes. They do not seem troubled by changes in nuance or the failure to meet "fourth level" translation theory when it comes to *their* approved changes, but their wrath knows few bounds when the TNIV deploys a plural instead of a singular. For instance, in Revelation 3:20 the NIV reads, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." The TNIV reads, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me." In one circulated e-mail message, Grudem comments, "The TNIV mistranslates the masculine singular pronoun *autos*, substituting plural pronouns, thus losing the teaching that Jesus has fellowship with the individual believer. This type of change was made frequently (e.g., Luke 9:23; John 14:23; Romans 14:7)."

What shall we make of this reasoning? Certainly in some passages, the distinction between the singular and the plural *is* crucial and should be preserved. That is why generic solutions to translation problems must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. But the significance of the plural, in many contexts, must not be overstated or the comprehensiveness of the Greek generic *autos* overlooked. That is one of the reasons why they can sometimes be put in parallel: e.g., "You have heard [plural] that it was said, 'Love [singular] your neighbor and hate [singular] your enemy [singular].' But I tell you: Love [plural] your enemies [plural] and pray [plural] for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43–44). Jesus' quotation takes over the singular form used in the LXX, but precisely because that singular form is recognized from the context to have generic force, we recognize that the OT command was not restricted to an individual but extended to everyone to whom the command applied. Even the singular "enemy" does not mean that

believers only have one enemy. The utterance has a proverbial ring, with the force "your enemy, whoever that enemy may be." Jesus' commands, in the plural, certainly do not mean that he is removing the responsibility of the individual, mandating only corporate love without regard for the obligation of the individual disciple to love.

In other words, a plural command or a plural prohibition *may* signal a group activity, but it may not—the context must decide.<sup>57</sup> A prohibition against lust, written in the plural, certainly does not mean that the only thing that is prohibited is group lust (whatever that is). It means, rather, that all within the group addressed face the same prohibition. If the prohibition had been in the singular, but written in a context of moral constraints for a general audience and not to a named individual, then the singular form nevertheless applies to all who fall within the general audience. Yes, there is a small shift in nuance, but the application in the two cases is exactly the same.

As in the case with "I will make you [?] fishers [?] of men [?]," decisions have to be taken as to how best to get things across. Grudem prefers "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with *him*, and *he* with me"; TNIV offers "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with *them*, and *they* with me." But with the best will in the world, it is difficult to see how this change loses "the teaching that Jesus has fellowship with the individual believer," precisely because the preceding "anyone" is preserved in both instances.<sup>58</sup> And meanwhile, if for the envisaged readership of TNIV the pronouns "him" and "he" have the effect, whatever the ideology that has produced such changes in linguistic associations, of excluding approximately half of humanity, one could responsibly argue that the TNIV is, for such a readership, a *more accurate, more faithful* translation than the NIV or the ESV. As Craig Blomberg puts it in his review in *Denver Journal of The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, "It is doubtful if most modern American listeners will interpret 'blessed are those who . . .' (whether in the Proverbs or the Beatitudes) as a corporate reference that excludes individual application, but on more than one occasion I have add [sic] well-educated adults in churches that use the NIV ask me why the Proverbs were only addressed to men or sons and not applicable to women or daughters."<sup>59</sup>

### *Issues from Chapter 2 of Hebrews*

Other theological errors have been ascribed to the TNIV. For convenience, it may be useful to focus on two verses from the Epistle to the Hebrews—Hebrews 2:6 and Hebrews 2:17.

## Hebrews 2:6

What is *man* that you are mindful of *him*,  
the *son of man* that you care for *him*?"

HEBREWS 2:6 NIV, italics added

What are *mere mortals* that you are mindful of *them*,  
*human beings* that you care for *them*?"

HEBREWS 2:6 TNIV, italics added

The charge is made that the TNIV obscures the quotation from Psalm 8:4, mistranslates three words by turning them into plurals, and loses the messianic application of "son of man" to Jesus Christ. I have probably said enough about the use of the plural. Whether the TNIV obscures the connection with Psalm 8:4 will depend a bit on how it translates Psalm 8:4, which has not yet been published. The serious charge, in my view, is that this loses the messianic application to Jesus Christ. Yet here, too, the charge is less than fair. The expression "son of man" in the Old Testament *can* have powerful messianic overtones, of course (see Daniel 7:13–14), but it is far from being invariable: about eighty times it is used as a form of address to the prophet Ezekiel, without any messianic overtone whatsoever. So whether the expression has messianic content or not must be *argued*, not merely asserted. In Psalm 8, the overwhelming majority of commentators see the expression as a gentile, parallel to the Hebrew for "man" in the preceding line. (Incidentally, gentile nouns in Hebrew are often singular in form but plural in referent—which may also address the indignation over the shift to the plural.) In the context of the application of Psalm 8:4 to Jesus in Hebrews 2, one should at least recognize that the *nature* of the application to Jesus is disputed. Scanning my commentaries on Hebrews (I have about forty of them), over three-quarters of them do not think that "son of man" here functions as a messianic title but simply as a gentile, as in Psalm 8. If this exegesis is correct (and I shall argue elsewhere and at length that it is), Jesus is said to be "son of man," not in function of the messianic force of that title in Daniel 7:13–14, but in function of his *becoming a human being*—which all sides recognize is one of the major themes of Hebrews 2. If one wishes to take the opposite tack—that "son of man" here is a messianic title—there are competent interpreters who have taken that line. But it is *not* a matter of theological orthodoxy, since understanding the text one way does not mean that the translator (or the commentator) is *denying* the complementary truth but is merely asserting that the complementary truth is not in view here.

One could even imagine a more subtle argument, one with which I would have some sympathy: It is possible to see in "son of man" in Psalm 8:4 a gentile,

rightly preserved in Hebrews 2, and then wonder if, owing to the frequency of "son of man" as a messianic title in the Synoptic Gospels, early Christian ears might have picked up an additional overtone, without reading a messianic interpretation into the entire passage. This is possible, though hard to prove. The possibility could be accommodated by a footnote cue after "human beings" in the TNIV, the footnote itself reading "Or, *son of man*." But at the level of actual translation, it is difficult to find legitimate reasons for condemning the TNIV rendering in such absolutist terms.

## Hebrews 2:17

For this reason he had to be made like his *brothers* in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

HEBREWS 2:17 NIV, italics added

For this reason he had to be made like his *brothers and sisters* in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

HEBREWS 2:17 TNIV, italics added

This, it is said, is doubly bad: In this context, the Greek word cannot mean "brothers and sisters," since Jewish high priests were exclusively male, and of course Jesus himself is male; and worse, the notion that Jesus was "made like his . . . sisters in every way" is unthinkable, or conjures up the specter of androgyny, which the text certainly does not support. Once again, however, the charges are easy to make, yet not quite fair.

First, even the NIV's translation, "brothers in every way," must be read in its context. This does not mean that Jesus must be like each "brother" in every conceivable way—as short as all of them, as tall as all of them, as old or young as all of them, as married or unmarried as all of them, as heterosexual or homosexual as all of them, and so forth. The context imposes a couple of strong foci. Already verse 14 states, "Since the children [mentioned in the previous verse] have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death." In other words, Jesus must become thoroughly human; he must take on "flesh and blood" and in that sense be "like his brothers in every way." But if the focus is on *being human*, then for Jesus to become "like his brothers and sisters in every way" is not contextually misleading. The second constraint is found in verse 16. There we are told that "it is not

angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants." It is surely a cause for wonder and praise that there has arisen a Redeemer for fallen human beings, though not for fallen angels. But now the human focus becomes narrowed by the historical context of Jesus' incarnation: he did not become a generic human being, but a descendant of Abraham. The purpose of his coming was that "he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17)—which surely shows that his identification is with "the people," and not only with males (unless we are prepared to argue that only the males had atonement made for them?).

Second, all sides recognize now, I think, that sometimes Greek *adelphoi* can refer to a crowd of both men and women, making the rendering "brothers and sisters" in some contexts admissible, especially if being read by some who think that "brothers" automatically excludes women. But despite the connections with all of humanity, and then with all of the Jewish race (and not males only) that the context affords, it remains true that Jewish high priests were invariably men. The TNIV expression does not deny that point, of course, but it does not clarify it either. Jesus is not like a Jewish high priest in every respect, anyway—this epistle will go on to show many parallels between Jesus and Jewish high priests (e.g., 8:3) but also quite a few differences. The point here is not that Jesus is like a Jewish high priest "in every way" but that he is like those he comes to redeem "in every way." Still, the TNIV is vaguely awkward—though whether that awkwardness is worse than the awkwardness felt by those for whom "brothers" is a restrictive expression may be debated.

Third, in any case the charge that the TNIV text says Jesus is "made like his . . . sisters in every way," opening up the possibility of androgyny, is inept. The dots of the ellipsis are important, because the expression "brothers and sisters" is a unified pair that must be taken together, like "flesh and blood." Verse 14 should not be rendered, "Since the children have . . . blood, he too shared in their humanity"—for it is the paired expression "flesh and blood" that indicates humanness.

Other passages have been highlighted by Poythress and Grudem and by journalists who have followed them, but they are, quite frankly, no more convincing than these. I am not always persuaded that the TNIV has taken the best option. But that is rather different from saying that the TNIV is theologically compromised.<sup>61</sup>

There is an array of other matters that could be raised. Most of them have little to do with translation theory in general or functional equivalence in particular, so I must not pause long to explore them here. Still, I am uncertain why such animus has been raised against the NIV/TNIV, and not against, say, the

TEV, NLT, and a host of other Bible versions. *World* magazine has invested a lot of polemic in critical comments about the money that is involved in the NIV and TNIV—but this is true, of course, of all Bible publishers, and even of the publishers of *World*, who doubtless sell more copies when a debate heats up.<sup>61</sup> Would it not be good to recognize that there are people of good will on both sides of this debate? Both sides are trying to be true to Scripture, and to make their understandings known; and both make money in the process.<sup>62</sup>



Since I wrote my little essay on the limits of dynamic equivalence a couple of decades ago, these, then, are the three changes that have taken place in the climate of discussion—the continuing development and maturation of translation theory,<sup>63</sup> the linguistically conservative stances being adopted in some quarters, and the rising tide of agenda-driven responses to even the most confessionally faithful inclusive-language translations.

The first of these three developments means that some of my early articulation of the limitations of functional equivalence is now less urgent, since the best-informed translators have matured in various ways. The second and third developments adopt stances that are so critical of functional equivalence that their adherents will think that what I have written in the past is, if anything, too mild. But that is why I have thought it necessary to review some of the limitations on more direct translation in the first part of this essay. Too many of the linguistic conservatives can detect problems with functional equivalence (both real and imagined) but cannot detect problems with more direct translation. The changed climate means that such limitations have to be spelled out so that the strengths of functional equivalence are understood, at least in measure, before some of the limitations of the theory are reviewed. But now it is high time to turn to the latter.

## THE LIMITS OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

For the vast majority of people actually engaged in Bible translation, the importance of functional equivalence is a given—and rightly so. Its victory is hailed by numerous pieces of evidence. There is widespread recognition of the inadequacy of merely formal equivalence in translation, buttressed by thousands and thousands of examples. Undergirding such recognition is the awareness that expressions such as "literal translation" and "paraphrase" are steeped in ambiguity and, in any case, belong, not in mutually exclusive categories, but on the

same spectrum:<sup>64</sup> A “too literal” translation can be as bad as a “too paraphrastic” translation, if for different reasons. Few translators of any competence would today deny such fundamental priorities as the following:

1. Contextual consistency has priority over verbal consistency (or word-for-word concordance).
2. Dynamic equivalence has priority over formal correspondence.
3. The aural (heard) form of language has priority over the written form.
4. Forms that are used by and acceptable to the audience for which a translation is intended have priority over forms that may be traditionally more prestigious.<sup>65</sup>

Functional equivalence displays its triumph in the publishing houses—in the continuing parade of helps,<sup>66</sup> front-rank research,<sup>67</sup> manuals of problems,<sup>68</sup> reflective textbooks,<sup>69</sup> assorted popularizations,<sup>70</sup> and sane assessments of recent translations.<sup>71</sup> Missiologists are now comfortable with classifications of languages based not on their roots (e.g., Indo-European, Semitic) but on their use (or nonuse) in literature and education (primary, secondary, tertiary, quaternary), and they have become sensitive to the differences between translating the Bible in an “overlap language” (one in which the colloquial and the literary forms of the language overlap significantly, e.g., English) and translating the Bible almost exclusively at a literary level (e.g., Arabic).<sup>72</sup> As they have been sensitized to the kinds of readers, so they sympathize with the very different linguistic needs of diverse readers within any particular language or dialect. There is a new appreciation for the work of the receptor-language stylist in the translation process;<sup>73</sup> and in the best seminaries, lecturers in Greek and Hebrew take extra pains to convey a literary feel for the biblical languages and to introduce the rudiments of discourse analysis and aspect theory, no less than the rudiments of the grammar produced in the rationalistic period. Even unreconstructed grammarians such as myself, thoroughly convinced that a profound and growing knowledge of the source languages is a great desideratum in Bible translation, are no less concerned to expose their students to the elements of modern linguistic theory and practice. At least in part, all of this has come about because functional equivalence, rightly understood, is essential for good translation. Only the linguistically incompetent would argue today that the translator needs facility in the languages with which he or she is working but not an understanding of the content of the text. At its best, functional equivalence, far from jeopardizing good translations, is essential for fidelity in translation—fidelity in

conveying not only meaning but also tone, emotional impact, naturalness/awkwardness, and much more.<sup>74</sup>

Inevitably, some have abused “dynamic equivalence” and “functional equivalence” to justify poor translations, or even to justify entire theological agendas. I hasten to add that the most careful scholars in this field do not err in such ways. What is still one of the finest books in the area—*The Theory and Practice of Translation* by Eugene Nida and Charles Taber—abounds in wise and sensitive caveats. For example, translators are carefully warned against trying to get behind the biblical writers, or ahead of them,<sup>75</sup> and are cautioned not to confuse linguistic translation with “cultural translation,” transforming the Pharisees and Sadducees, for instance, into present-day religious parties.<sup>76</sup> In other words, the historical particularity of the text must be respected.

Sadly, though, similar care is not shown by all. The caveats and restrictions that protect a responsible use of functional equivalence and make it such a useful way of thinking about translation are sometimes overlooked or abandoned. This route has become easier to follow, as professional missiologists have come to think of contextualization in highly diverse ways<sup>77</sup> and as the theoretical developments that have fed into postmodern epistemology generate their own pressures on translators and their art. Such developments are so complex I dare not broach them here, except tangentially. But it may be useful to offer a number of reflections on functional equivalence and related matters, reflections that may help translators avoid the pitfalls inherent in some of these developments.

### LIMITS ON THE EQUIVALENCE OF RESPONSE

The most common descriptions of functional equivalence, and certainly all the early descriptions of dynamic equivalence, as insightful as they are, laid so much stress on the equivalence of response that they invited abuse. For example, in the classic treatment, Eugene Nida describes dynamic equivalence translation as the “closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” and insists it is “directed primarily toward equivalence of response rather than equivalence of form.”<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere he writes the following:

Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose.<sup>79</sup>

Or as Norm Mundhenk remarks, “In the final analysis, a translation is good or bad, right or wrong, in terms of how the reader understands and reacts.”<sup>80</sup>

I have no quarrel with these quotations, all three of which stress equivalence of response, *as long as they are referring to linguistic priorities alone*. Clearly, a translation is poor if by preserving formal equivalence in word order or syntactical construction or the like it obscures the meaning of the original text or transmutes it into something quite different or remains completely opaque to those whose tongue is the receptor language. Moreover, selecting appropriate linguistic priorities requires a sensitive knowledge of the receptor culture, since there may be cultural associations between linguistic constructions and cultural values such that an entirely false impression is conveyed by a more direct translation—false, that is to say, as measured by what was originally conveyed. “Blessed is the man who does not . . . stand in the way of sinners” (Ps 1:1 NIV) is a shockingly poor rendering of the Hebrew, because to stand in someone’s way in English means “to hinder someone,” whereas the thought in Hebrew is “to walk in someone’s footsteps,” “to walk in someone’s moccasins,” or, less metaphorically, “to adopt someone else’s lifestyle and values and habits.” There are far more difficult cases discussed in the standard texts; and, as pursued by those with genuine expertise, functional equivalence in such cases is surely an eminently worthwhile goal that no one competent in two or more languages would wish to gainsay.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on equivalence of reception is open to abuse. If translators begin to think that what is referred to lies at the level of the receptor’s epistemology, then of course it is impossible to measure. Moreover, the passion to communicate well may begin to overlook *what* is being communicated, for we have already seen that there are several goals the translator must bear in mind, including both accuracy and comprehensibility. To focus all one’s attention on the former (understood in the fashion of the most “direct” translation theories) at the expense of the latter is no virtue; to focus all one’s attention on the latter at the expense of the former is betrayal.<sup>81</sup>

There are several other ways in which the emphasis on equivalence of response is open to abuse. Perhaps it is best to provide illustrations of several kinds of abuse. To focus discussion, I shall draw them from the writings of well-known linguist, anthropologist, and missiologist Charles Kraft.

Kraft argues that the “response” element of functional equivalence may usefully be extended somewhat further to take into account the peculiar social location of the receptor culture. At the extreme, the resulting “versions” may be called “transculturations” (to use the language of Kraft).<sup>82</sup> He writes, “In a translation it is inappropriate to give the impression that Jesus walked the streets of

Berkeley or London or Nairobi. But a transculturation, in order to reach its target audience more effectively, may do exactly that.”<sup>83</sup> These transculturations “dare to be *specific to their audiences and free to be true to God’s imperative to communicate rather than simply to impress*. In this they demonstrate the deep concern of their authors for the total communicational situation, not simply for one or another aspect of it.”<sup>84</sup> Kraft then goes on to suggest (as he does elsewhere) that those who disagree with his diagnosis and who react negatively against “proper transculturation” are the modern equivalents of the “orthodox” retainers of the old cultural forms against whom Jesus “waged a running battle for culturally relevant transculturation,” or of the “orthodox” Judaizers of Acts 15.<sup>85</sup>

These assessments raise a host of issues. A glimpse of them may be afforded by a series of questions:

- Did Jesus primarily or even marginally set himself against the Jewish religious leaders of his day out of concern for the transculturation of an *agreed* message, or out of a fundamental break with his opponents’ understanding of Scripture? How much of his disagreement stemmed from their failure to perceive the new developments on the salvation-historical plane—his claims to fulfill Old Testament expectations concerning the coming of the Messiah?
- How valid is the constant disjunction Kraft raises between his own approach to “dynamic-equivalence transculturation” and a kind of incompetent fixation on mere content devoid of desire and/or ability to communicate? Is the disjunction essentially fair, or does it approach caricature?
- To what extent do the questions that Kraft insists on putting to the biblical text—and making the biblical text answer in his terms—domesticate the text so that the message of the text is essentially lost? To what extent must interpreters allow the text, progressively, to raise the right sort of questions—questions it is prepared to answer in its own terms?

More broadly: When we say that we aim to generate the same response in the readers of the receptor language as in the readers of the source language, what do we mean? Suppose the readers of the original New Testament documents were largely alienated by the truth of what, say, Paul, wrote. Should we aim to reproduce similar alienation today in order to preserve “equivalence of response”? What does “equivalence of response” mean when we compare the response of urban, secularized, twenty-first-century readers of Leviticus or Romans and the response of their respective first readers or hearers? Is it not better, if we are going to define functional equivalence in terms of equivalent



response, to understand equivalence in linguistic categories, i.e., in terms of the removal of as many as possible of the false linguistic barriers (along with the associations each linguistic category carries) that actually impede the communication of the content of the text?

Each of these questions could easily generate its own paper, and one or two of them will reemerge in subsequent points. It is clear, however, that the hidden fallacy against which many of these questions are directed is the unwitting assumption that “response” is the *ultimate* category in translation. Strictly speaking, this is not true; theologically speaking, it is unwise; evangelistically speaking, it is uncontrolled, not to say dangerous. Of course, the concerns Kraft is feeling are real ones that constantly need addressing. Nevertheless my criticism is fundamental: his solution, the elevation of response above truth, fails precisely in the areas where it claims to be strong, for the response is *not* rendered equivalent by such means as he advances. The aim of a good translation is to convey the total content, or as much of it as possible in roughly equivalent compass—informational, emotional, connotational, etc.—of the original message to the reader (or hearer, where the translation is publicly read) in the receptor language.

In the same ways, to speak of “dynamic-equivalence theologizing”<sup>86</sup> and “dynamic-equivalence churches”<sup>87</sup> is misleading and even dangerous, because the categories are not linguistic. Once again, the concerns behind these labels are real. For example, biblically faulty and/or culturally myopic ecclesiastical structures may be imposed on a mission church as though the entire blueprint were handed down from heaven, complete with robes for the choir and Roberts’ Rules of Order.

Nevertheless, all such evils are better addressed without talking of “dynamic-equivalence churches” for at least a couple of reasons: First, as the expression is used by its inventor, social custom becomes so controlling that the Scriptures are not permitted to reform society. Kraft appeals to the Kru of Liberia who state, “You cannot trust a man with only one wife,”<sup>88</sup> concluding that Kru church leadership need not be monogamous, despite the strictures of Paul (and Jesus!) on this point. Kraft thinks that eventually polygamy would likely die out among the Kru, “just as, through God’s interaction with the Hebrews, polygamy died out in Hebrew culture—over the course of a few thousand years.”<sup>89</sup> Until then, polygamy should be tolerated. There seem to be, from Kraft’s treatment, few things the Bible clearly demands of church structure—or even of morals—that could not be jettisoned in favor of “dynamic-equivalence churches.” Second, and more important, the extension of the expression “dynamic equivalence” (or the more recent “functional equivalence”) to areas far removed not only from linguistic priorities but also from translation itself reflects

back on problems of translation and muddies otherwise clear distinctions. In Kraft’s hands, all the emphasis is on “dynamic”; the “equivalence” has pretty well dissolved. Applied to translation, almost any distance from the source text could be justified.

### LIMITS ON THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN MEANING AND MESSAGE

Whereas dynamic equivalence and functional equivalence started out belonging to the realm of translation and were set in opposition to various kinds of linguistic formalism, the extension of their use to far broader issues has been facilitated on the one hand by a variety of faddish theoretical constructs that do not stand up to rigorous scholarship but are cited with ill-deserved authority as though the subjects with which they deal were closed—e.g., the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,<sup>90</sup> the new hermeneutic,<sup>91</sup> and some communication theory—and on the other hand by the epistemological relativism endemic to postmodernism. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in its crudest form, makes human beings the determined captives of their language, and their language becomes a guide to their “social reality.”<sup>92</sup> In its extreme form, the new hermeneutic calls into question the possibility of objective knowledge as text and interpreter progressively “interpret” one another, round and round without *terminus*, lost in profound relativity. Some forms of communication theory, conjoined with structuralism, insist that there is a rigid dichotomy between meaning and message. And the various strands that have fed into postmodern epistemology conspire to convince many contemporaries that knowledge of objective truth is not possible for finite human beings, and this opens the door to individually determined or communally determined “meaning” whose distance from a theoretical “objective” content of a text is as impossible to calculate as the “objective” content is to know.<sup>93</sup>

All four of these notions lie not far from the surface of the following quotation (whether or not the author intended to make the connections):

Contemporary understandings contend that a major difference between messages and meanings lies in the fact that messages can be transmitted in linguistic form while meanings exist only in the hearts and minds of people. Contemporary communicationologists [sic] see communicators with meanings in their minds that they would like to transmit to receptors. Communicators take these meanings and formulate them, usually in linguistic form, into messages which they then transmit to receptors. Receptors then, listen to the messages and construct within their minds sets of meanings that may or may not correspond with the meanings intended by the communicator.

Meanings, therefore, do not pass from me to you, only messages. The meanings exist only within me or within you. . . . The messages, then, serve as stimulators rather than as containers. Receptors, in response to the stimulus of messages, construct meanings that may or may not correspond to what the communicator intended.<sup>94</sup>

There is considerable insight here, of course. No finite knower ever understands anything substantial *exactly* as some other finite knower understands it, and the point needs reiterating from time to time. Each person is finite in understanding, and the potential for misunderstanding increases when the message is translated. Communicators do not always say exactly what they mean, and the best communicators will try to encourage the feedback necessary to discover whether their meaning has been absorbed by the receptors, at least to some substantial degree.

Nevertheless, the above quotation puts the case far too disjunctively. Doubtless *some* contemporary understandings contend that there is “a major difference between messages and meanings,” but others, while recognizing that any individual communication may be imperfectly grasped, insist that the message/meaning disjunction, taken absolutely, is one form of the intentional fallacy; that human beings cannot entertain in their own minds complex meanings without propositions, and that therefore meaning and message, though not identical, cannot be divided absolutely; that the commonality of our creaturehood in the image of God makes verbal communication less problematic than some think; that even participant knowledge can be verbalized among those who share common participant experience (whether sex or knowing God); that individuals can in measure “distantiate” themselves from their own “horizon of understanding” and “fuse” their horizon with that of the communicator in order to assure *true* understanding of the message, even though it may not be *exhaustive* understanding; that meanings can and do pass from one person to the other (as judged by the ways many authors are upset when they think that reviewers have not understood what they have said and have misrepresented it); that messages are neither mere stimulators nor mere communicators, but the very stuff of the meaning, insofar as the two individuals share semantic ranges and the like and insofar as the communicators say what they mean.

As virtually always in the arguments of postmoderns, the passage presupposes that *either* one person can understand the meaning of another person exhaustively, omnisciently as it were, *or* one is forced to the sorts of disjunctions introduced here between meaning and message. If this antithesis is accepted, the

postmodernist invariably wins, since it can always be shown that no finite human being can ever know the thoughts or meanings of another finite human being perfectly, exhaustively, omnisciently. But the antithesis is, of course, a false one. One may know something *truly* without knowing it *exhaustively*; I may understand a great deal of the meanings of, say, Paul, without knowing Paul's thought—even his recorded thought—exhaustively or perfectly. In other words, the *absolute* disjunction between meaning and message has in fact bought into an epistemological framework that thoughtful Christians will avoid. To seek to justify “dynamic-equivalence theologizing” on such doubtful epistemological premises is unsafe. In any case, such discussions, as important as they are, have removed dynamic equivalence and functional equivalence so far from the linguistic domain that more confusion than clarity has been added.

#### LIMITS ON THE EQUIVALENCE BETWEEN BIBLICAL HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Functional equivalence must not be permitted to override the historical particularity of the Bible. There is a sense in which any text is historically conditioned, of course, in that it was written in a certain language at a certain time by a certain individual (whether or not that individual's identity is known). But the accurate understanding (and therefore accurate translation) of some literary forms depends rather more acutely on recognizing their historical particularity than is the case for some other literary forms.

Even in the case of proverbs and aphorisms, which are among the most timeless of literary genres, some will prove more easily translatable than others. “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov 26:12) is likely to be coherent in most languages; “better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife” (Prov 25:24) presupposes flat roofs frequented by humans, not snow-shedding sloped roofs never visited except to replace a gutter or a satellite dish. Still, it does not take a huge amount of explanation to render coherent the flat roof, whether to a mud-hut dweller in an equatorial jungle or to a high-rise apartment dweller in an urban jungle, and the preservation of the form, though not in this instance theologically urgent, has the advantage of reminding the reader that all of these things took place in a foreign land, a specific culture, and an historical time and place.

The challenges become more difficult when we leave aphorism for narrative. The problems of equivalence can be grouped under the headings (1) ecology, (2) material culture, (3) social culture, (4) religious culture, and (5) linguistic culture.<sup>95</sup> The problems are highly diverse, and there is no simple way to categorize

the possible solutions. An Eskimo tribe reads a Bible that speaks of desert and lions; a Mexican tribe in Yucatan has never experienced the four seasons typical of temperate zones (cf. Mark 13:28). If we follow TEV's "police" or NEB's "constable" in Matthew 5:25, are we not unwittingly fostering, for many Westerners, images of a gun-toting officer in a squad car or of an English bobby? Perhaps these cases do not matter; perhaps "police" is acceptable. But many cases have stings in the tail. If, for instance, we replace "recline at food" or "recline at table" with "sit down to eat," we are going to have a tough job imagining how John managed to get his head on Jesus' breast—Leonardo da Vinci notwithstanding. Preservation of descriptions of what is to us an alien custom, reclining at tables, makes it possible to understand a later action, in this case John placing his head on Jesus' breast.

I am not now dealing with such obvious and domesticating distortions as "this is the essence of all true religion" (Matt 7:12 PHILLIPS) for "this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (NIV), or "then a diabolical plan came into the mind of Judas" (Luk e 22:3 PHILLIPS) for "Then Satan entered Judas" (NIV). Rather, what is of interest at this juncture is that God has revealed himself to people in time-space history—to particular men and women, spatially and temporally and linguistically located. If we are not very cautious about the way we treat the historical particulars, we may introduce such substantive anachronisms that the story becomes intrinsically unbelievable—the more so as the receptor people grow in understanding and historical awareness. And certainly we lose the enormous theological implications of the truth that, according to Scripture, the personal-transcendent God has disclosed himself in real history.

There are ways of overcoming the obscurity intrinsic in references to customs and experiences unknown on receptor soil. Footnotes may be part of the answer (see discussion below); teachers are certainly part of it. But always we must at least ask how much we are losing when we remove too many indicators of historical and cultural "distance." How such problems are resolved may depend to some extent on the literary stage of development of the receptor group, but even if the group is coming across the printed page for the first time and enjoys virtually no comprehension of cultures other than their own, it must be remembered that this receptor group will likely use this new translation of the Bible for decades to come, maybe for a century or two. During all of that time, an increasing number of this receptor people will be exposed to new cultures and education. How well will the Bible translation serve them then? Christianity is a religion whose roots are deeply embedded in the particularities of history, and our translations must not obscure that fact.

### *LIMITS ON THE DISTORTION (WITTING OR UNWITTING) OF SALVATION HISTORY*

An extension of the third point brings us to a fresh observation. Functional equivalence must not be permitted to mask the development of and internal relations within salvation history. Suppose, for instance, that a tribe has a long tradition of sacrificing pigs but has never so much as heard of sheep. Is it in that case justifiable to render John 1:29, "Look, the swine of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"? I would argue strongly for the negative, not only because of the importance of historical particularity, the importance of which was defended in the previous point, but because of the plethora of rich allusions preserved in Scripture across the sweep of salvation history.

In what sense could it be said that Jesus "fulfills" the Old Testament sacrificial system if that system typically sacrificed lambs at Passover, all the while proclaiming that pigs are ceremonially unclean, whereas Jesus is portrayed in John 1:29 as a swine? How then will John 1:29 relate to Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the fourth servant song, or to images of the warrior lamb in the Apocalypse (e.g., Rev 5:6)? Shall we change *all* such references to pigs ("We all, like swine, have gone astray . . .")? And if so, do we then make the biblical "pig references" clean, and designate some other animal unclean? No; it is surely simpler and more faithful to preserve "lamb" in the first instance. If this involves inventing a new word in a receptor language whose users have never heard of "sheep," so be it. A brief note could explain that the word refers to an animal frequently sacrificed by the people of the Bible, along with a succinct description of its relevant characteristics.

There is a second way in which appeal to functional equivalence must not be permitted to mask the development and internal relations of salvation history. We have witnessed a negative example in Charles Kraft's appeal to polygamy under the old covenant. What Kraft never struggles with is the nature of the continuity/discontinuity pattern when moving from the old covenant to the new. One can no more make legitimate appeal to the Old Testament to support polygamy among Christian leaders in Africa than one can appeal to the Old Testament to defend continued Christian maintenance of all dietary laws. The fact that Christians disagree over certain elements of the continuity/discontinuity pattern is no justification for the failure to wrestle with the issue when dealing with something as sensitive in parts of Africa as is polygamy. In any case, my point is more general: One cannot hide behind "functional equivalence" to justify the obliteration of salvation-historical distinctions that are fundamental to the most elementary understanding of the Bible as a cohesive document.

### LIMITS ON THE PURSUIT OF COMPREHENSIBILITY

One of the entirely salutary emphases of functional equivalence is its passion to make the Bible as comprehensible in translation as possible. But sometimes that entirely worthy goal can lose sight of the fact that some passages in the Bible are obscure. One recalls the shrewd remark of Bishop Stephen Neill: "I remember once exploding angrily in the Tamil Bible translation committee, when we had so smoothed out the complex passage Galatians 2:1–10 as to conceal completely the tensions and confusions which underlie the apostle's twisted grammar. This we had no right to do."<sup>96</sup>

In other words, faithfulness to the text should compel us to try to avoid making the translation a great deal easier to understand (in the receptor language) than the original is to readers of the source language.

### LIMITS ON THE AUTHORITY OF STYLISTS AND OTHER RECEPTOR-LANGUAGE SPECIALISTS

In the light of the argument so far, I am inclined, somewhat hesitantly, to call into question the judgment of Eugene Nida and others, who argue that good exegetes and grammarians make poor translators.<sup>97</sup> Increasingly, they argue that translation projects should begin with stylists who enjoy some marginal knowledge of Greek and Hebrew but who are thoroughly competent in the receptor language, and then permit the specialists their say only at the cleaning-up stage.

Quite clearly, the gifts and training of the stylists, or, more broadly, of the receptor-language specialists, are vital. But I wonder if grammarians and exegetes are dismissed too rapidly. Most field translators for such organizations as Wycliffe Bible Translators (or SIL) and the American Bible Society have one theological degree, perhaps two—i.e., two or three years (i.e., four to six semester courses) of Greek and perhaps half that of Hebrew (or no Hebrew at all). Their problem, it may be, is not that they have too much Greek to be good translators, but too little. I would go further and suggest that even many teachers of Greek and Hebrew in colleges, seminaries, and universities do not enjoy much facility in the language they are teaching. These are precisely the kinds of people who are least likely to be sensitive to the demands of functional equivalence. How often, for example, have I taken second-year Greek students aside and explained at length how rarely a Greek participle should be rendered by an English participle, how many of the Greek connectives must find no formal equivalent in a specific English word but survive in the flow of the English sentence, and so forth. And I have learned that it is my *best* students in advanced exegesis and advanced grammar courses who learn such flexibility most thoroughly. To

be good translators, they would benefit from further study in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and literary style; but at a guess, advanced competence in the source languages will not prove a hindrance but a strength in most cases, *provided the teacher is aware* of the linguistic complexities and subtleties that surround translation. It is the student of Greek and Hebrew who has a mechanical view of language who will have most difficulty grasping these elementary points and who in the name of fidelity will defend more "direct" translations, even when the result is largely incomprehensible to the target readers and hearers.

One of the reasons I have suggested this alternative—that front-rank Bible translators need a good deal *more* training in Greek and Hebrew, not less—is to combat the drift in many academic circles toward less training in the source languages and toward so great a flexibility in translation that, as we have seen, "communication" becomes an ideal abstracted from the message to be communicated. New voices loudly insist there is an impregnable wedge between the meaning of the source and the meaning of the receptor. To provide at least some safeguards, we must encourage translators to pursue studies not only in linguistics and style but also in the languages, history, culture, symbolism, genre, and theology of the biblical documents. Only then is it possible to "fuse horizons" with high reliability and counteract the growing tide of relativism and arbitrariness.

### LIMITS ON OUR EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT THE BIBLE BY ITSELF WILL USUALLY ACHIEVE

This way of making the point must not be misunderstood. It is certainly not a demand that limits be placed on the Bible's truthfulness, authority, and so forth. We have all heard stories of people who have simply read the Bible and been wonderfully converted. I know of one fascinating conversion brought about when the person in question, a Muslim student studying in the West, stole a Gideon Bible from a hotel nightstand, read it through, and was converted. In the hands of God, the Bible is a powerful book.

Yet sometimes translators give the impression that doing their job right is all that is needed. Although functional equivalence is an important—indeed, essential—component of good translation, we should tone down our claims for what it can achieve. Precisely because functional equivalence is so often described in terms of equivalent response, we are in danger of giving the impression that, provided we get our translations right, we can practically guarantee a massive turning to Christ, revisiting Acts 2, perhaps (even if no one is so gauche as to put it that way). But this means we have no place for an Ethiopian eunuch who needed an explanation of a grammatically clear text (Acts 8:26–40), no place for

the hardness of the human heart (1 Cor 2:14), no place for the work of the Holy Spirit, no reflection on the diversity of worldviews that various readers bring to the text and therefore the diversity of faithful responses needed to confront these worldviews (compare the sermons of Acts 13 and Acts 17).<sup>98</sup> The Scriptures themselves encourage us to multiply the number of evangelists, pastor/teachers, and other workers, thereby discouraging the notion that the *entire* task depends exclusively on the quality of the Bible translation used. This is not to justify obscure translations on the basis of, say, total depravity: If people do not understand the Word of God, it is said, it is not because we retain the Elizabethan English of the KJV, but because their hearts are hard. The element of truth in the claim is that, even with the most contemporary and most readable translations, conversion is finally a function of the work of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the Spirit uses means, and appeal to the work of the Spirit does not justify our preference for traditional formulae and archaic language if we claim to be witnesses to *this* generation and the *next* generation. But having again established these checks and balances, in our defense of functional equivalence we should, especially at the popular level, curb our exuberance, lest we jeopardize our credibility by the extravagance of our claims. The proper use of functional-equivalence translations decreases the likelihood of misunderstanding arising from poor translation, but it is not a universal spiritual panacea.

#### LIMITS ON THE USE OF STUDY NOTES

At several points in this essay I have suggested that it is better in many cases to preserve the historical distance of the original text and provide an explanatory note than to make the “translation” so contemporary that the historical particularity is lost. This raises the question of the place of study notes and study Bibles. For there are converse dangers. It is possible to deploy so many “direct” translations that a great number of notes are required to make the text understandable to those with a good working knowledge of the receptor language but with no knowledge whatsoever of the source language. Eugene Nida and Charles Taber offer several wise observations in this regard, the best of which, perhaps, is their judgment that “it is best at least to make sense in the text and put the scholarly caution in the margin, rather than to make nonsense in the text and offer the excuse in the margin.”<sup>99</sup>

But my purpose here is to offer a further caution. Because I do not think that, by and large, functional equivalence should override the distancing that stems both from historical particularism and from the history of redemption (however much it may demand transformed linguistic structures), I favor a

fairly liberal use of notes explaining cultural, religious, ecological, and linguistic points, especially in Bibles designed for groups made up largely of first readers who thus have very little knowledge of the biblical world. But great pains should be taken to make such notes as theologically neutral and objective as possible. Theological notes, hortatory comments, notes explaining the theological flow, homiletical hints—in my view all such things should be relegated to separate books.

I recognize that I am out of step with current publishing practices when I write this. The impetus for the judgment is both theoretical and experiential. At the theoretical level, surely it is desirable to avoid giving the impression that the authority of the notes has the authority of Scripture itself—a confusion easy to fall into when both are printed on the same page. Experientially, I learned some lessons from my boyhood in Quebec. At the time, if Roman Catholics read the Bible at all, they had to read a Bible approved by the Roman Catholic Church, one with approved notes (such as the Léger version of the New Testament). I witnessed firsthand how such notes could reinforce the theological biases of people such that it was hard for readers to listen to what the text was actually saying. Even when theoretical allowance is made for the distinction between text and note, the constant rereading of both on the same page blurs this distinction and shapes the theological convictions of many readers.

What applies to the Léger version applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the New Scofield Reference Bible, the Ryrie Study Bible, and a dozen others.<sup>100</sup> A few years ago I was asked to assume a major role in producing a new study Bible. Consistency demanded that I decline. It is better, I think, to reserve such study helps and comments (which are, in fact, sorely needed) to separate publications.

It would be good to avoid transmitting our mistakes in this area to places where Bibles are appearing in new languages for the first time. Equally, it would be salutary to remember that the God of the Bible ordained that there be evangelists and teachers in the church. Translation of the Scriptures is not the only thing needed for adequate communication of the gospel. God has equally mandated the training and deployment of evangelists and pastor/teachers. Failure to account for this aspect of our task may unwittingly encourage a “translation” that is to some degree a perceived *replacement* of human agents or, worse, a mere crib for those with little more than a smattering of the original languages.

Having said this, however, a fairly liberal use of notes that are as theologically neutral as possible—notes that focus on historical, linguistic, and cultural matters—may not only prove to be a good thing but may also remove some of the pressure to de-historicize biblical texts.

In short, there are limits to be imposed on any Pollyannaish enthusiasm for unconstrained functional equivalence—just as there are limits to be imposed on the dour warnings of linguistic conservatives.

## NOTES

1. D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (1985): 200–213.
2. See, for example, *Notes on Translation* 121 (October 1987): 1–15.
3. Some further refinements along the same line found their place in my essay celebrating the 175th anniversary of the American Bible Society: "New Bible Translations: An Assessment and Prospect," in *The Bible in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Howard Clark Kee (New York: American Bible Society, 1993), 37–67.
4. Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).
5. Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986).
6. See, for example, Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*, 2d ed. (London: Penguin, 1983); Johannes P. Louw, ed., *Sociolinguistics and Communication*, UBS Monograph Series 1 (London: United Bible Societies, 1986). For easy access to the subject, see M. Paul Lewis, "Of Sociolinguistics, Bible Translation, and Dancing," *Notes on Translation* 15, no. 2 (2001): 55–61.
7. See especially Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
8. See, among other things, Robert-Alain de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (Longman Linguistics Library; New York: Longman, 1981); E. A. Nida, J. P. Louw, A. H. Snyman, and J. v. W. Cronje, eds., *Style and Discourse: With Special Reference to the Text of the Greek New Testament* (Cape Town: Bible Society, 1983); and, worked out in a study of a concrete biblical text, see George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
9. One thinks of the considerable advances, for instance, in semantics, phonemics, aspect theory, functional syntax, lexicography, and the like.
10. Well illustrated, though overdone, by John A. Beck, *Translators as Storytellers: A Study in Septuagint Translation Technique* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).
11. Extraordinarily helpful is the reference work of Mona Baker, ed., assisted by Kirsten Malmkjær, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). One of the best places to find up-to-date bibliography is in *T-I-C Talk*, the new sletter of the United Bible Societies Translation Information Clearinghouse, available both in hard copy and on the Web at <http://www.ubs-translations.org>.
12. See, for example, the important work by Eugene A. Nida and William D. Reymann, *Meaning Across Cultures* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).
13. As a fine example, see the book by Robert L. Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Translation: Making Sense of the Proliferation of Bible Translations* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2000).

14. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "We Really *Do* Need Another Bible Translation," *Christianity Today* 45, no. 13 (22 October 2001): 28–35.
15. I say "ostensibly" because, gender questions aside, the NRSV tends to belong to the more "direct" end of the translation spectrum.
16. Van Leeuwen, "We Really *Do* Need," 33.
17. *Ibid.*, 30.
18. Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).
19. Cf. T. David Anderson, "Perceived Authenticity: The Fourth Criterion of Good Translation," *Notes on Translation* 12, no. 3 (1998): 1–13. Iver Larsen, "The Fourth Criterion of a Good Translation," *Notes on Translation* 15, no. 1 (2001): 40–53, prefers the term "acceptability," but on the whole I prefer the older expression.
20. Van Leeuwen, "We Really *Do* Need," 32.
21. *Ibid.*, 32–33.
22. *Ibid.*, 30.
23. Quite correctly, Van Leeuwen points out that the word *man* in its second occurrence in this quotation is merely presupposed in the original by the context. The KJV italicized all such words—a practice rightly dropped by modern translations.
24. Van Leeuwen, "We Really *Do* Need," 30.
25. *Ibid.*, 31.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Tony Payne, "Is this the English Bible we've been waiting for?" *The Briefing* 278 (November 2001): 13–15; idem, "FAQs on the ESV," *The Briefing* 283 (April 2002): 23–24.
29. This is why teachers of beginning Greek often give their students the Gospel of John to read. Like English, it deploys much more parataxis and fewer long sentences than the more stylistic Greek of Paul (let alone the Greek of Hebrews and Luke-Acts!).
30. Stephanie L. Black, *Sentence Conjunctions in the Gospel of Matthew: kai, de, tote, gar, oun and Asyndeton in Narrative Discourse*, JSNTSup 216 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). Her careful compilations are worth the price of the book; her analysis is superb. Not least important is her demonstration that in Matthew the sentence conjunctions function as "multiple-purpose tools with low semantic content" (p. 332; she is quoting the words of S. C. Dik, *Coordination: Its Implications for the Theory of General Linguistics* [Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1972], 269). There follows a summary of the contribution made by each conjunction.
31. There is also an interesting textual variant here that serves to draw attention to the rare (for Paul) *te*. I am indebted to Peter T. O'Brien for drawing my attention to this passage.
32. Payne, "Is this," 14.
33. On these and related problems, see chapter 3 of my book *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
34. Payne, "Is this," 15.
35. Any student who has spent a few minutes with the old Englishman's bilingual concordances has some idea of the challenges, even in the KJV.
36. The subject has been extensively discussed. See, for instance, my *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 53, 60–61.

37. Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* (Phillipsburg, Pa.: Presbyterian and Reform ed, 1979), 110.

38. Interestingly, some modern proponents of nouthetic counseling—or “biblical counseling,” as it is more widely called today—are, rightly and wisely, distancing themselves from Adams on this point: see Edward Welch, “How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams’s View of the Flesh and an Alternative,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 16–25.

39. Payne, “FAQs on the ESV,” 24.

40. *Ibid.*, 23.

41. *Ibid.*

42. See my brief discussion, “Is the Doctrine of *Claritas Scripturae* Still Relevant Today?” in *Dein Wort ist die Wahrheit*, eds. Eberhard Hahn, Rolf Hille, and Heinz-Werner Neudorfer (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1997), 97–111. The doctrine is in need of recasting to face some of the pressures from postmodern epistemology. In this regard it is linked with the sufficiency of Scripture, on which see especially Tim Ward, “Word and Supplement: Reconstructing the Doctrine of the Sufficiency of Scripture” (Ph.D. diss. Edinburgh University, 1999).

43. Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000).

44. See especially the insightful review by Heinrich von Siebenthal, *Trinity Journal* 23 (2002): 111–118; and the review by Craig L. Blomberg in *Denver Journal*, available on the Web at <http://www.gospelcom.net/densem/dj/articles01/0200/0204.html>.

45. I am thinking not only of Strauss’s earlier book *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) but also his article in this volume (“Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate”) and several recent papers, such as “The Gender-Neutral Language of the *English Standard Version* (ESV) and “Examples of Improvement in Accuracy of the TNIV over the NIV When Following the Colorado Springs Guidelines.”

46. Poythress and Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, the excursus on 82–90.

47. The New English Translation (NET) is available online at [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

48. Daniel B. Wallace, “An Open Letter Regarding the Net Bible, New Testament,” *Notes on Translation* 14, no. 3 (2000): 1–8, esp. 2–3.

49. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

50. See Strauss, “The Gender-Neutral Language of the *English Standard Version* (ESV).”

51. Vern Poythress, “Searching Instead for an Agenda-Neutral Bible,” *World* (21 November 1998): 24–25.

52. So Poythress and Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 186–87.

53. I cannot help remarking, rather wryly, that in the light of the ESV the argument of Poythress and Grudem sounds a bit like this: “The language is not changing, so we do not need to respond to the demands of inclusive language. But if it is changing, the changes are driven by a feminist agenda, so they are wrong and must be countered if we are to be faithful to Scripture. Because of the changes, we will make some minor accommodations in our translations, but if others make any other changes, they are compro-

misers who introduce distortions and inaccuracies and should be condemned, because changes aren’t necessary anyway!”

54. I am tempted to say that I have not seen Poythress and Grudem address this point, but I would never be tempted to assert that they “could not frankly discuss” the matter. I’m quite sure they could—and probably will.

55. The FBA (Forum of Bible Agencies), whose members account for 90 percent of all Bible translation, initially responded to this controversy by issuing a statement about the TNIV: “It is the consensus of the FBA that the TNIV falls within the Forum’s translation principles and procedures.” (This, the Forum has been quick to insist, does *not* constitute an endorsement of the TNIV, not least because the Forum does not endorse any translation.)

Ellis Deibler, a leading Bible translator and linguist who worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators, offers a penetrating review of the Colorado Springs Guidelines (on the Web at <http://www.tniv.info/resources/evaluation.php>). Among other things, he writes, “The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) has issued a paper entitled ‘Translation Inaccuracies in the TNIV: A Categorized List of 904 Examples.’ I should like to make a few comments on its contents. First of all, the word *inaccuracies* is totally misleading. Every one of the examples cited is a case of *differences in opinion on how a certain term ought to be translated in English*, but none of the examples is an inaccuracy. Calling them *inaccuracies* is a gross distortion of the truth.”

56. Poythress and Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 202.

57. The tendency to read too much into a plural is not restricted to linguistically conservative translators. It is fairly common and is often theologically driven. For example, many commentators insist that Philippians 1:6 (“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”) says nothing about the security of the individual believer, since the “you” in the quotation is plural: The one who began a good work in them will continue it in the group *as a whole*, without saying anything about the individual Christian (similarly in 2:13).

58. English purists may object to the move from the singular “anyone” to the plural pronouns. Those of us who love the cadences and structures of older English entertain an innate sympathy for that perspective—in precisely the same way that we still prefer “It is I,” preserving the nominative pronoun, even though popular usage has driven the experts to concede that “It’s me” is now grammatically acceptable. On the long haul, usage shapes grammar, no matter what the purists say. And in the present case, current usage is increasingly sanctioning the usage of the TNIV in this regard. The examples are legion, but not to be missed is the example provided by Scott Munger in his letter to the editor of *Christianity Today* 46, no. 6 (12 May 2002): 8: “Shaking a baby can cause brain damage that will affect them the rest of their lives”—an example drawn from James Dobson, who, presumably, did not phrase himself this way because he was succumbing to feminist ideology, but because he is in touch with current English usage. Munger’s original letter, though not the CT-edited form of it, provided the reference—“Child Welfare and Parental Rights,” CT284/24848, © Focus on the Family, July 18, 2000. As Craig Blomberg points out in his review, “[Poythress and Grudem] say nothing about the fact that in spoken English only a tiny handful of people ever still complete a sentence like ‘No one brought \_\_\_\_\_ book to class’ with any pronoun other than ‘their,’ and

that the Modern Language Association has since the late 1980s authorized such usage for standard printed materials" (see note 44).

59. See note 44.

60. Perhaps I should mention one more criticism of the TNIV. I relegate it to this footnote, because it has nothing directly to do with the inclusive-language debate, which is the subject of this section, though it illustrates the kind of criticism that is at issue. In a circulated e-mail message, Grudem criticizes the TNIV for its rendering of John 19:12, which reads in the NIV (italics added), "Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but *the Jews* kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar.'" and in the TNIV (italics added), "Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but *the Jewish leaders* kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar.'" The charge is that by inserting the word "leaders" the TNIV arbitrarily absolves other Jews from the responsibility for Jesus' death (with a lot of references then provided). But it has long been shown that in John's gospel, the word *Ioudaioi* can variously refer to Jews generically, to Judeans (i.e., to Jews living in Judea), and to Jewish leaders. A great deal depends on context. That is not how *we* use the word "Jews," but it was how the first-century word was used, at least at the hands of some authors. Again, then, Poythress is appealing to formal equivalence. But in this case, no less than in the debate over inclusive language, there is a cultural component that has arisen during the past century. We live this side of the Holocaust, and a great deal of sensitivity has arisen regarding anti-Semitism. Some of the literature goes over the top, trying to make out that *no* Jew had *any* responsibility for the death of Jesus, that it was all the plot of nasty Romans (who aren't around to defend themselves). But thoughtful Christians will admit, with shame, that more than a few Christians *have* been guilty of anti-Semitism (in the same way that, even when feminist literature goes over the top, thoughtful Christians will admit that more than a few Christians *have* been guilty of abusing women). Most emphatically this does *not* give us the right to change what the Bible actually says, as though the agendas of contemporary culture could ever have the right to domesticate Scripture. But this *ought* to make us eager to avoid miscommunication, to appear to be saying things to some readers and hearers that we do not intend to say, and which the text is certainly not saying (whether misogyny or anti-Semitism, or anything else). Some of the clarifications will be in the hands of the preacher and teacher, of course. Nevertheless, I would argue robustly that precisely *because* I am committed to accurate translation, to render *Ioudaioi* invariably by "Jews" is to translate poorly, both because there is a great deal of evidence that the referent is often more restricted than that and also because the failure to make some of those restrictions clear (as they were, implicitly, to the first readers) is to invite charges of anti-Semitism that are as unfair as they are unnecessary.

61. It is possible that some of the ire directed against the publishers of the NIV and the TNIV stems from two related facts: (1) The NIV is the closest thing to a "standard" English Bible for Evangelicals, so any modifications have the potential for upsetting a huge number of people. (2) Some journalists are claiming that by publishing the TNIV the publishers are going back on the promise *not* to change the NIV. Without being privy to private discussions, I would make three observations. First, since its initial publication the NIV has undergone many minor changes. An ongoing committee assesses criticisms, changes in contemporary linguistic usage, and allegations of mistakes. An

updated NT appeared in 1978 (when the OT was added to the 1973 NT) and a revised edition of the whole Bible was released in 1984. Earlier editions were no longer printed. That is one of the reasons why the NIV has retained a contemporary feel. Second, it was the anticipation that the next round of changes would include more sensitivity to inclusive-language issues that propelled the eruption a few years ago. The Bible of forty million people was being "changed," and it was easy to rally indignation. Realistically (in retrospect!), doubtless the changes being contemplated were more numerous and more substantive than earlier changes, so the outrage, though largely misinformed, was understandable. Third, as far as I am aware, the publishers, under pressure, eventually promised to make no more changes to the NIV, including changes of an inclusive-language sort. What this means, of course, is that the NIV will eventually become dated. But nowhere did the publishers promise, so far as I am aware, never to produce *any* translation that would be sensitive to issues of gender in contemporary usage. I do not see how they could make that promise. But I thought at the time, when I read the published reports, that the careful wording of the publishers, which left them plenty of room to publish inclusive-language versions under some rubric other than the NIV, was going to raise hackles when they did so, as well as many charges of deceit. And that, of course, is exactly what has happened—see, for instance, the article "Hypocritical Oath," in *World* 17, no. 9 (9 March 2002), and related essays in *World* 17, no. 7 (23 February 2002).

62. Because my views have been repeatedly dismissed on the grounds (it is said) that I was a translator for the NIV and therefore benefit financially from my arguments, I suppose I had better set the record straight. I did a bit of *pro bono* consultation for the NIV, making comments on the translation of one New Testament book about thirty years ago at the request of Dr. Edwin Palmer. I was not paid a cent. I have worked on a couple of other (non-NIV-related) translations. Why this should invalidate my arguments any more than the fact that Dr. Grudem worked on the ESV should invalidate his, I have no idea.

63. On this point, I have neglected to mention, as well, the increasingly sophisticated analyses of the translations of others. In particular, current analyses of the LXX as a translation are far more sophisticated than similar works two or three decades ago and typically reflect on a far greater number of variables. For one recent example (of which there are many), see Robert J. V. Hiebert, "Translation Technique in the Septuagint and Its Implications for the NETS Version," *Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* 33 (Fall 2000): 76–93.

64. On the spectrum of translations, see, for instance, John Beckman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 19–32; and Eugene H. Glassman, *The Translation Debate: What Makes a Bible Translation Good?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 23–34.

65. Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 14.

66. We may think, for instance, of the growing list of handbooks and commentaries for translators published by United Bible Societies (UBS).

67. It is risky to single out individual items for special praise. In addition to several items already mentioned, however, and representing quite different achievements, one may think of recent developments in the arena of discourse analysis, such as George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, NovTSup 73 (Leiden: Brill,



1994); of sophisticated and creative individual essays such as that of Kenneth L. Pike, "Agreement Types Dispersed into a Nine-Cell Spectrum," along with other contributions to *On Language, Culture, and Religion*, eds. Matthew Black and William A. Smalley (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 275–86; of continual developments in computer software that provide lexical, grammatical, and functional searches; and much more.

68. See, for example, Mildred Larson, *A Manual of Problem Solving in Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).

69. In addition to the works cited at the beginning of this essay, see Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*; William L. Wonderly, *Bible Translations for Popular Use* (London: UBS, 1968); and many others.

70. The list is so long that it cannot usefully be included here. Many articles in *The Bible Translator* fit into this category; those in *Notes on Translation* are generally semi-popular.

71. Once again, the list is becoming lengthy. The current round of books was perhaps kicked off by Sakae Kubo and Walter Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth-Century English Versions of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981). Useful is the recent essay by Steven Sheeley, "Re(:) Englishing the Bible," *Review and Expositor* 97 (2000): 467–84. Because of their relevance to one section of this essay, one should perhaps also consult some of the lengthier reviews of the NRSV: in particular, Sakae Kubo, "Review Article: The New Revised Standard Version," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 29 (1991): 61–69; and D. A. Carson, "A Review of the New Revised Standard Version," *Reformed Theological Review* 50 (1991): 1–11.

72. See the popular summary by Eugene A. Nida, "Bible Translations for the Eighties," *International Review of Mission* 70 (1981): 132–33.

73. Nida, *ibid.*, 136–37, goes so far as to recommend that Bible translation teams consider adopting the procedure of United Nations and European Union translation departments, whose first drafts are produced by stylists of the receptor language, the specialists then checking their work as a second step (instead of the inverse order).

74. Cf. Beekman and Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, 33–44.

75. Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 8.

76. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

77. See, among other things, D. A. Carson, "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon," in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1987), 213–57, 342–7; Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Daniel Carro and Richard F. Wilson, eds., *Contemporary Gospel Accents: Doing Theology in Africa, Asia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 1996).

78. Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 166.

79. Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 24.

80. Norm Mundhenk, "The Subjectivity of Anachronism," in *On Language, Culture, and Religion*, 260.

81. This is one of the points raised by Anthony Howard Nichols, "Translating the Bible" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1997), *passim*. I have questions about some of his work, but his trenchant criticism of the way in which many non-Western versions are being created today less from the original Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek texts and

rather more—indeed, almost entirely—from English versions, especially the GNB, is well deserved. (One of the problems of Nichols's work, I think, is that his critique of dynamic-equivalence theory is primarily leveled against the GNB. But the GNB is an example, I would argue, for a rather more extreme deployment of dynamic-equivalence theory than is, say, either the NIV or the TNIV—in exactly the same way that the NASB is a more extreme deployment of direct-translation theory than is, say, the KJV. The critique that one may usefully offer of a method or an approach is somewhat limited if one focuses on only one result of that method.)

82. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), 276–90. Note that Kraft titles this chapter "Dynamic-Equivalence Transculturation of the Message."

83. *Ibid.*, 284.

84. *Ibid.*, 286 (emphasis is Kraft's).

85. *Ibid.*, 287.

86. This is the title of chapter 15 of Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*.

87. Cf. Charles E. Kraft, "Dynamic-Equivalence Churches," *Missiology* 1 (1979): 39–57.

88. *Ibid.*, 54.

89. *Ibid.* One marvels at Kraft's biblical chronology.

90. A useful place to begin is Harry Hoijer, "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis," in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, eds. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1972), 114–23.

91. In some ways discussion of the new hermeneutic has been eclipsed, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, by discussion of postmodern epistemology. On the new hermeneutic, the most sophisticated place to begin, perhaps, is A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

92. Those informed by postmodernism cannot help but compare Michel Foucault's "totalization."

93. I have tried to wrestle with some of these questions in *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) and in several subsequent essays.

94. Charles H. Kraft, "Communicating the Gospel God's Way," *Ashland Theological Bulletin* 12 (1979): 34–35.

95. See Eugene Nida, "Linguistics and Ethnology in Translation: Problems," *Word* 1 (1945): 196.

96. Stephen Neill, "Translating the Word of God," *Churchman* 90 (1976): 287.

97. See especially Eugene Nida, "Bible Translation for the Eighties," *International Review of Mission* 70 (1981): 136–37.

98. See William D. Reyburn, "Secular Culture, Missions, and Spiritual Values," in *On Language, Culture, and Religion*, 287–99.

99. Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 30.

100. I view with unmitigated horror the multiplication of Bibles with notes designed for narrower and narrower groups. It will not surprise me if we soon have Bibles designed for left-handed athletes from Nebraska. These trends merely serve the idolatrous notion that God and his Word exist primarily to serve us in all our self-focused individuality.