

# Against the Theory of 'Dynamic Equivalence'

by Michael Marlowe

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<http://www.bible-researcher.com/translation-methods.html> )

Among Bible scholars there is a school which is always inquiring into the *genres* or rhetorical forms of speech represented in any given passage of the Bible, and also the social settings which are supposed to be connected with these forms. This approach is called *form criticism*, and it was developed largely by German scholars in the early twentieth century. Among these scholars, whether they be German or English-speaking, one constantly hears German phrases. The social setting is called the *Sitz im Leben*. The "oracle of salvation" introduced by "Fear not" is the *Heilszusage*, and so on. When I was in the seminary learning about all this, I at first wondered why it should be necessary to use these German words; but then I learned that the German words are used because they are recognized as technical terms, and the English equivalents are not. Students were expected to learn the terminology of the field, just as in any other field of study.

Likewise, there were many Greek and Hebrew words to be learned. These were the "technical terms" of the Bible itself. The professors often warned us students about the important semantic differences between various Greek and Hebrew words and their closest English equivalents. The Hebrew word *torah*, for instance, was not really equivalent to the Greek *nomos* or the English *law*, and the Hebrew *nephesh* did not quite mean *soul*, etc. Anyone who has been to a theological school knows very well how often points like this are emphasized by scholars.

I mention this at the beginning of this essay on Bible translation because I want the reader who has not been exposed to this kind of study to know how much is made of words and their precise usage in theological schools. Ministers in training cannot go through three years of seminary without being impressed with the undeniable differences between Hebrew, Greek, and English, and with the delicate problems of translating many key words of the Bible into our language. It is not a simple and easy task. Indeed, it is not fully possible, and that is why ministers are taught the biblical languages in seminary. And in addition to this, in the more advanced studies, one must also learn a whole set of technical terms in German. The student in this case might well ask why these German terms are

adopted rather than translated, but again, the scholarly culture of linguistic precision is such that the question would seem almost foolish. These are technical terms, and if they are adopted from another language, so much the better, because then they will not be confused with informal expressions used in our everyday language.

It is easy to get carried away with fine distinctions. Scholars are often accused of losing their common sense in a multitude of hair-splitting distinctions, and of using foreign words and difficult terminology merely to impress the unlearned. In some cases this undoubtedly happens. We also must be on guard against the elitist attitude taken by many in the Roman Catholic tradition, which in its extreme form caused the Roman Catholic Church to oppose the translation of the Bible into English in the first place. But I want to suggest here that those who are not used to careful study of the Bible may easily fall into an opposite error: the error of despising many distinctions which really do make an important difference in our understanding of the Bible, despising the role of trained teachers in the Church, and generally failing to recognize the bad effects that arise from vague and loose words on any important subject. The Bible is a very important book, and it deserves our utmost care. This is all the more true when we consider that the later portions of Scripture often dwell upon linguistic details in the earlier books. And if we believe that every word of the Bible is inspired by God, how can we be careless of these words?

I also mention form criticism, with its emphasis on the text's *situation in life*, for another reason: I believe that a translation of the Bible must take account of the "sociological setting" in which the Bible came to be, and in which it belongs: namely, the Church of Jesus Christ. The translator must remember that this book was given to the Church and it belongs to her. And this fact, this *Sitz im Leben* of the Bible as a whole, is not without some consequences for our methods of translation.

### **The Bible in the Church**

*And all the people gathered as one man into the square ... and Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform ... and Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the law of God, clearly*

<sup>(1)</sup> and they gave the sense, <sup>(2)</sup> so that the people understood the reading. — Nehemiah 8:1-8 (ESV).

This passage from Nehemiah gives an account of the day when Ezra and his fellow-ministers of the Word gathered the people together and began to teach them the contents of the "Book of the Law of Moses." It says that they read from it distinctly, and that they caused the people to understand the meaning of the words. Jewish tradition says that this was the beginning of those translations into Aramaic which are called *targums*, free renderings of the Hebrew which were used by Jews in later times to explain the meaning of the archaic Hebrew text. But it is unlikely that such a translation is referred to here, because farther on in the book we read of Nehemiah's indignation when he discovered that some of the children of the Jews who had married foreign women could not understand "the language of the Jews." <sup>(3)</sup> Nehemiah was not inclined to provide a translation for such, but rather, turning to their fathers, he "contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God ..." (13:25) Hebrew was not forgotten by the Jews so quickly during their short captivity in Babylon. At a later time they did forget their mother tongue, but in the days of Nehemiah this had not yet come to pass. This passage therefore describes a situation which is very familiar to us as Christians. The people come together. The Scripture is read to them in portions, followed by explanatory comments. We would call it "expository preaching." This is how most Christians in all ages have acquired a knowledge and an understanding of the Bible. But there are other ways:

And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. — Acts 8:27-35.

Here is a situation which is also familiar to many of us. The man is alone and reading his Bible. Probably he is reading the Septuagint version. In any case, he is having a problem understanding the passage that he is reading. When Philip comes along he asks the man if he understands the passage, and the man readily admits that he is in need of help. It is for this purpose that the Lord has sent Philip to him, who explains the passage he is reading and several others besides.

What do these two situations have in common? Both of them involve a Bible, an audience or reader, and a teacher appointed for the purpose of explaining the Bible. It is taken for granted that the Bible is not self-explanatory, and that the common reader or hearer stands in need of a teacher. And in addition to this teaching ministry in the Church we encounter several statements in the Bible declaring that the Bible cannot be rightly understood by men who have not the Spirit of God. Jesus says to his questioners, "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word." (John 8:43) And Paul declares, "these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit ... we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God ... interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual." (1 Cor. 2:10ff). The relationship, then, between the Bible and its intended readers is not simple and direct. It is conditioned by the reader's relationship to Christ and to his Church. The Bible itself declares that it is not easy to be understood by all.

### **The Bible apart from the Church**

Our observation that the Bible is a difficult book to those who are outside the church does not sit well with many people these days. "On the contrary," they say, "the Bible is really quite simple: it is all a matter of translation. The old literal method of translation, which makes for such hard reading, is to blame. But if we will only put the Bible in simpler and more idiomatic English it will need no explanation. People who are unfamiliar with 'church jargon' might then read and understand it with ease." This is the basic presupposition of the new method of translation called "dynamic equivalence."

The theory behind this new method of translation was developed by a linguist named Eugene Nida in the middle of the twentieth century. Nida was for more than thirty years (1946-1980) the Executive Secretary of the Translations Department of the American Bible Society, and during this time he published a number of books and articles explaining and promoting the method. <sup>(4)</sup> At first the new method was not primarily concerned with English translations. It was developed as a method to be followed in translating the Bible into the tongues of primitive tribes who were at that time being reached for the

first time by Christian missionaries. This missionary orientation is conspicuous in Nida's writings on the subject. But Nida's conception of the task of the Christian missionary was also novel, for he believed that a missionary should not be much concerned with the planting of churches.

Our communication is primarily sowing the seed, not transplanting churches. It is lighting a spark, not establishing an institution. This does not mean that the communication of the full revelation of God is unconcerned with the church; but the indigenous church we are committed to, whether in central Africa or central Kansas, is not the church we have structured, but one raised up by the spirit of God... The development of an indigenous church will always be the living response of people to the life demands of the message. The source of the information ... is never more than a catalyst. <sup>6</sup>

From this and other similar statements we can see that Nida was concerned with producing versions of the Bible which might be used in primitive cultures and outside the context of an established church—outside of or prior to any teaching ministry, that is. Obviously, such a version could not be one which required explanations or any introductory preparation of the readers; the versions would have to be made as simple and idiomatic as possible, because the teaching ministry of the Church was simply left out of the equation. The Bible is simply delivered into the midst of a society, in such a form that it may be immediately understood by the common people. But we notice also the phrase "whether in central Africa or central Kansas" in Nida's paragraph above. It was not only the primitive tribes who were to receive the new versions, but all peoples everywhere. This is the attitude towards the Church and its ministry which underlies the "dynamic equivalence" approach.

The remainder of this essay will largely concern itself with the goals, effects, characteristics, and the presuppositions of this method, under whatever name it may be practiced. The [Good News Bible](#) (also called *Today's English Version*) of the American Bible Society may be taken as the best example of what Nida was proposing. The [Contemporary English Version](#) and the [New Living Translation](#) are other well-known examples.

We have already brought under discussion the first, and, I believe, the most fundamental presupposition of the method: the idea that the Bible precedes the Church. This is an alluring idea for us Protestants, because it agrees with our idea that the Church is founded on the Scriptures, not the other way around, as in Catholicism; but in fact Nida's idea represents an extreme position which does not comport with other elements of Protestant ecclesiology. Strictly speaking, the Bible as we have it did *not* precede the Church. The Church was founded by the oral ministry of the prophets and the apostles, which is

incorporated in the Bible; but the writings which we have in the Bible in their present form are addressed to the Church as already founded. This is evident even on a superficial level, in the forms of address used throughout the Scriptures; and it is true at much deeper levels also, in the many things that go unspoken or unexplained in the Bible. There is much in the Scriptures which cannot be understood—not even in a "dynamic equivalence" version—without preparation of some kind.

Historically, at least, Protestants have recognized that the gospel must first be *preached*, and that people must be introduced to the Christian faith and the Bible by various summaries and explanations, whether they be written out in the form of catechisms, or conveyed from the pulpit, or included in editions of the Bible. The early Protestant translations of the Bible included a good deal of explanatory material in prefaces and marginal notes. Tyndale said he intended to cause "the boy who drives the plough" to know the Scripture better than his Popish adversaries did, but to this end he supplied the ploughboys with prefaces and footnotes. His preface to the Epistle to the Romans (largely taken from Luther's Bible) was longer than the epistle itself! The makers of the Geneva Bible included thousands of explanatory marginal notes. These early versions were in fact "study Bibles." Luther and Calvin gave much of their time to writing commentaries, catechisms, and theological treatises. The Protestant Reformation came about through much more than the mere circulation of copies of the Bible. No, the Church does not spring from the Scriptures in the simple manner that Nida envisions, and God did not intend for it to do so. The Bible is not a rack of cartoonish tracts, to be picked up willy-nilly by mildly interested individuals who are unwilling to give time and effort to understanding it.

Undoubtedly the reductionistic view of Scripture and the casual denigration of the Church that we see in Nida and other champions of "dynamic equivalence" has much to do with the extreme *individualism* which has been destroying all sense of community in Western societies for the past century. We are now assumed to be reading the Bible at home alone. And so of course the idea comes that the Bible must be made free of difficulties, easily understood throughout. It should be unambiguous, simple, and clear even to the "first-time reader" who has not so much as set his foot in a church. But however much these versions may smooth the way for such a lonely reader on the sentence level, they cannot solve the larger questions of interpretation which must press upon the mind of any thoughtful reader, such as question asked by the Ethiopian in Acts 8:34. After all the simplification that can be done by a translator is done, there is still the need of a teacher.

## The Language of the Bible

Now as we have chiefly observed the sense, and labored always to restore it to all integrity, so have we most reverently kept the propriety of the words, considering that the Apostles who spake and wrote to the Gentiles in the Greek tongue, rather constrained them to the lively phrase of the Hebrew than enterprised far by mollifying their language to speak as the Gentiles did. And for this and other causes we have in many places reserved the Hebrew phrases,<sup>(6)</sup> notwithstanding that they may seem somewhat hard in their ears that are not well practiced and also delight in the sweet-sounding phrases of the Holy Scriptures. — [Preface to the Geneva Bible](#) (1560).

So said the makers of the Geneva Bible in their preface. It is very interesting that the Puritans who gave us this version would find in Scripture itself their guidance for a method of translation. The Apostles themselves were translators, after all. They did not give us a complete translation of the Old Testament, choosing rather to use the familiar Septuagint in their ministry to the Greek-speaking nations; but in a number of places where they quote from the Old Testament they do not use the Septuagint, and give us their own rendering. From these examples we can see readily enough that the inspired authors of the New Testament favored literal translation, with Hebrew idioms and all carried straight over into Greek. And why? Undoubtedly they believed that there was something significant in every word of the Scripture, as do some of us today.

I do not think that the promoters of simple everyday language in Bible translation have any appreciation for the important conceptual differences which uncommon "biblical" phrases and words often serve to convey. In the [Good News Bible](#) at 2 Cor.12:2 we read, "I know a certain Christian man." The expression "in Christ" is often rendered "Christian" in this version. But they are not really equivalent expressions. The phrase "in Christ" conveys a whole package of meaning. It implicitly teaches the relationship of the man to Christ, and emphasizes Christ himself over the man. It makes a metaphysical statement: the man *is in* Christ. They are in vital union with one another. The man is not merely one of a category of people who go by the name of "Christian" as a descriptive adjective. This is important. It is not trivial. The language teaches us something that cannot be translated into banal newspaper language. This is the kind of thing that is always being discarded in "dynamic equivalence," and the cumulative effect of so many changes like this is that it prevents us from entering fully into the concepts that are unique to the Scriptures. We are allowed to remain in the newspaper-world of twentieth century America, and this is not for our benefit.

The Scriptures say in several places that God spoke his words *through* the prophets. For example, in Hebrews 1:1 "God spoke to our fathers through the prophets." (Greek εν τοις προφηταις) This manner of speaking carries a tremendous freight of meaning. It is not equivalent to the expression, "God's prophets spoke his message to our ancestors" as in the [Contemporary English Version](#), because this does not convey to the reader the emphasis on God as the initiator and author of the prophetic message, and it does not convey the concept of mere instrumentality on the part of the prophets. The word "through" is a little preposition which carries a lot of meaning here.<sup>(7)</sup> But the literal translation was avoided by the CEV translators because they thought it too difficult. Barclay M. Newman explains, "The use of *through* with persons or abstract nouns has been rejected by the CEV translators because doing something "*through* someone" is an extremely difficult linguistic concept for many people to process."<sup>(8)</sup> Indeed this manner of speaking may seem strange to someone who is unfamiliar with the concept of inspiration which it expresses, but in such a case would not this verse and several others like it, as literally translated, serve well as a means of *explaining* inspiration?

Now consider Acts 5:30, which in the [New Living Translation](#) is rendered, "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by crucifying him." Literally Peter's words are, "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree." This expression as literally translated ought to give some pause to the reader. Why does Peter say "hanging him on a tree" (επι ξυλου) instead of "crucifying him"? Anyone who has read Galatians will know where the unusual phrase comes from, and what it means. It is from Deuteronomy 21:22-23, quoted in Galatians 3:13-14, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree." See also 1 Peter 2:24 and Acts 13:29. And so by this phrase "hanging him on a tree" Peter evokes the whole theology of the cross! But apparently the translators missed it, or found this to be unimportant. By flattening out and simplifying the language they have caused the reader to miss this thought-provoking allusion.

Many further examples could be given. Thousands, in fact. But let these three examples suffice for now. The point is, the reader of these versions has not been invited to enter into the conceptual framework of the Bible as it is expressed over and over again in its phraseology, and he has been deprived of the opportunity to perceive the network of allusions and verbal associations which give the Bible such richness of meaning. The reader is left in his own familiar and everyday world of thinking. And this is the whole purpose—and the explicitly stated purpose—of those who are promoting "dynamic equivalence" in Bible translations. The whole idea is to present nothing to the reader which is strange. Nothing evocative. Nothing



which requires a pause for reflection, orientation, and discovery. <sup>(9)</sup> I submit that this theory of translation is not only unscriptural, but self-defeating and perverse.

### The Language of the Church

"We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees." — Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). <sup>(10)</sup>

Now we are going to descend to a very basic level of linguistic science, where the presuppositions of "dynamic equivalence" are also radically flawed. The quotation above, from the eminent linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, sets forth what is known to linguists as the "principle of linguistic relativity." In a nutshell, the principle means that because we use words to think, we cannot *think* like the biblical writers unless we use their *words*. We can keep the cognitive distortion to a minimum if we become habituated to literal translations of the biblical texts (i.e. formal equivalence), but if we try to put everything in an idiom which is perfectly natural English, we will *inevitably* distort the meaning of the original. The more natural it is made in English, the more distorted is the meaning. The validity of this principle is accepted to a greater or lesser extent by nearly all modern linguists.<sup>(11)</sup> Some scholars of linguistics and comparative literature have been very much impressed with the differences between languages and the close connection between languages and world-views. Whorf is one of them. Others are Edward Sapir,<sup>(12)</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt,<sup>(13)</sup> Walter Benjamin, George Steiner,<sup>(14)</sup> and Stephen Prickett.<sup>(15)</sup> But others are less impressed with these differences—Eugene Nida being one of them (although his writings show that he acknowledged this principle to a limited extent). Obviously, this principle presents serious problems for the whole concept of "dynamic equivalence." The principle is all the more relevant to Bible translation because it comes into play in proportion to the dissimilarity of languages. Closely related languages (such as

Dutch and English) are not greatly affected, but the differences between ancient Hebrew and modern English are very great indeed. The idea that the ancient Hebrew language could be translated into perfectly idiomatic English without significant loss of meaning is simply preposterous. But the claim made by many proponents of "dynamic equivalence" is that their method produces a translation which is really more accurate than a literal translation, because it can be understood better. This claim not only defies common sense, but it also flies in the face of linguistic science. The simplified "dynamic equivalence" version is easier to understand only because *there is less in it to be understood*.

Where does this leave us? Must we all learn Hebrew? No. The answer was given above, in the preface to the Geneva Bible. Concerning the Hebrew idioms, the Genevan translators wrote: "they may seem somewhat hard in their ears that are not well practiced." In other words, those who have no familiarity with the biblical idioms will of course find it hard to read; but let them become used to it! This is the language of the Bible, and it ought to be the language of the Church. All professions and subcultures in our country have their jargon, which members pick up readily enough. Why should it be otherwise with the Church? Why should the Church alone have no right to a set of technical terms and distinctive expressions? Shall we instead be dragged along by every linguistic trend of a society which is hostile to our beliefs? I think not, if we know what is good for us and for the truth of God. Recently we have seen a great fuss raised in the churches over "[inclusive language](#)," which is an ideologically loaded linguistic trend if ever there was one. And the expectation of our more "progressive" brethren was that the Bibles we use in the Church should promptly be conformed to this new-fangled style of speech. Does anyone really think that "inclusive language" represents no particular world-view, and has no semantic freight of ideology? And if it does, on what grounds do we refuse to use it, if we have already accepted the principle of "dynamic equivalence"? They stand and fall together. It is no accident that gender-neutral language was first seen in "dynamic equivalence" versions. Such versions will as a matter of principle be conformed to the world. *That is the whole idea of them.*

### **The Bible for Children**

Much of the support for paraphrastic Bible versions has been due to the desire of some to provide a version which children might be able to understand. This is well-meant, but I think it should be obvious to anyone who is really familiar with the Bible that it was not written for children. Let us be realistic. We have always had catechisms and Bible story books for the children, and anyone who has been involved in teaching the children knows very well that these supply more than

enough material for young minds; and they are far better suited for the education of children than any simplified version of the Bible can be. There is only so much one can do with the Bible to make it clear or interesting to children, and in the end a selection of passages is going to be made anyway—which, if it is a good selection, will differ little from the selection in the old Bible Story books. I remember that when I was a child in Sunday school we did have copies of the "Good News for Modern Man" New Testament on hand (I still have the copy that was presented to me one "promotion Sunday"), but I also remember that we did not use it. The catechism took up all of our time. The truth is, there is no good reason why the Bible should be adapted for this purpose. And there is a danger in it. The danger is, *the Bible simplified for children will become the Bible of adults*. I have seen "Good News" Bibles in the pews of mainline churches. The American Bible Society had removed the cartoons for this "pew bible" edition. And then there is the case of the [Living Bible](#), which Ken Taylor originally meant for children, and yet Billy Graham quickly made it into one of the most popular versions for adults. This was bound to happen, given the mental laziness of so many people, both in the pew and in the pulpit.

The publishers of the "dynamic equivalence" versions have at any rate been very aggressive in promoting these versions as if they were suitable for everyone, young and old, Christian or non-Christian. The New Living Translation now is making much headway in our churches as a version for the whole congregation, being used in the pulpit and in Bible study classes. I wonder how superficial the preaching and teaching must be in such churches, where this simplified version is thought to be adequate or necessary. What if a man who has been under such a steady diet of pabulum happens to open an exegetical commentary and read there the comments of a scholar, or visits a church where the Bible is explained in some detail? He will not be long in seeing what a false impression has been given by his easy-reading version. It is not at all as he was led to suppose. The main ideas of the Bible are indeed simple enough, *in any version*; but it is very far from being true that every verse of the Bible is simple. Moreover, if he reads any moderately detailed treatise of theology he will find that the great theologians of Protestantism habitually call attention to linguistic details that are simply absent from his Bible version. If a man knows the Bible only through such a version, and has been encouraged to think that it is just as accurate as any other, how well has he been served? He has been treated like a child or a simpleton. Is it any wonder that many educated people scoff at Christianity when even our Bibles have been so dumbed down that they offer nothing above the level of a ten-year-old child? Is it any wonder that we have such problems getting the interest of the men (who ought to be the spiritual leaders of their households) when

everything is designed for children? In regards to this, perhaps the words of the old Scottish preacher, James Stalker, bear repeating.

Not unfrequently ministers are exhorted to cultivate extreme simplicity in their preaching. Everything ought, we are told, to be brought down to the comprehension of the most ignorant hearer, and even of children. Far be it from me to depreciate the place of the simplest in the congregation; it is one of the best features of the Church in the present day that it cares for the lambs. I dealt with this subject, not unsympathetically I hope, in a former lecture. But do not ask us to be always speaking to children or to beginners. Is the Bible always simple? Is Job simple, or Isaiah? Is the Epistle to the Romans simple, or Galatians? This cry for simplicity is three-fourths intellectual laziness; and that Church is doomed in which there is not supplied meat for men as well as milk for babes. We owe the Gospel not only to the barbarian but also to the Greek. Not only to the unwise but also to the wise.<sup>(16)</sup>

Stalker's counsel here is to preachers, who in their sermons must engage the attention of grown men and educated people as well as the simple. He takes it for granted that the reader will agree with him that the Bible itself is not always simple, and is itself "meat for men."

### **The Bible for Everyone?**

Mention was made above that the publishers of the dynamic equivalence versions have presented them as being for everyone. We have already questioned this claim from one direction, but there is another angle to be considered which is perhaps even more important. Everyone who has had some experience of actually using the Bible in ministry is surely aware of the problems which arise from different people having different versions in front of them. Someone reads a passage out loud, and others follow along in their own Bibles, in whatever version they may be, and the differences between the versions sometimes give rise to difficult questions. This problem is not severe when the different versions are all essentially literal, having only minor differences which are easily taken in stride. I have been involved for many years in group Bible studies, at which various versions were being used, among them the King James, the New American Standard, the New International, the Revised Standard Version, and others, all of which can be read together without much trouble. But when such a version as the New Living Translation is read, it is quite impossible for people to follow along in other versions. They soon lose track and look up from their Bibles in confusion. I have seen this several times in recent Bible study meetings. As a practical matter, then, I find that a "dynamic equivalence" version can only be used very extensively if *everyone* uses it. This being the case, I think we have a right to ask whether it can ever be appropriate to

use such a version for teaching. It is unreasonable to expect everyone to use the same "dynamic equivalence" version. People will have their own Bibles, after all, and they will choose between versions for their own private reading; but a teacher must use a version that is not always going its own peculiar way. <sup>(17)</sup>

## Conclusion

We have shown that the dynamic equivalence method represents a departure from tradition, and from the principles of translation used by the Biblical authors themselves. Its pretensions to "scientific" principles of linguistics are a sham, as has been pointed out by numerous linguists and biblical scholars. It results in a simplification of the text in which important features of the Bible are erased. It proceeds from false assumptions about the relationship of Scripture to the Church and to the reader. Finally, as a practical matter, we have seen that the versions produced with this method cannot "get along" with other versions already in use.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ESV margin, "or, *with interpretation*, or, *paragraph by paragraph*. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon says the word *meparash* here most probably means "distinctly" (which may mean either "clearly" or "in sections") though it mentions the sense "interpreted" favored by some (page 831).

<sup>2</sup> The BDB Lexicon says that the phrase *wesom sekel* means simply "set forth (the) understanding." (p. 968).

<sup>3</sup> See Nehemiah 13:23-25. Hebrew, and not Aramaic, is meant by "the Jews' language" here and elsewhere in Scripture. See Loring Woard Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemia* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1913). Gesenius also (*Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Kautzsch, §2.t) concludes that "the supplanting of Hebrew by Aramaic proceeded only very gradually" and that Hebrew was still understood by the common people as late as 170 B.C., centuries after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

<sup>4</sup>See Nida's books *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960) and *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), and also the book he later co-authored with Jan de Waard, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986). I should mention that much of what Nida wrote on the subject does not square very well with the translations which have been produced under the banner of "dynamic equivalence." Nida himself coined this phrase in an effort to distinguish his method from unrestrained "paraphrase." Later he complained

of abuses of the method he outlined, and for this reason in his later writings he distanced himself from the term "dynamic equivalence," preferring instead "functional equivalence." Recently some others have preferred to call it "meaning-based translation" or "closest natural equivalence," a phrase which Nida also sometimes used in his writings. These shifts in terminology do not represent changes in the method. I use the term "dynamic equivalence" because it continues to be the one most widely used.

<sup>5</sup>Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 221.

<sup>6</sup>Addison, English poet and literary critic, described the effect of these idioms with the following words: "The Hebrew idioms run into the English with a peculiar grace and beauty. Our language has received innumerable elegances and improvements from that infusion of Hebraisms which are derived to it out of the poetical passages in Holy Writ. They give a force and energy to our expressions, warm and animate our language, and convey our thoughts in more ardent and intense phrases than any that are to be met with in our own tongue. There is something so pathetic in this kind of diction, that it often sets the mind in a flame, and makes our heart burn within Us." [quoted by James Anderson in the preface to the fifth volume of his translation of John Calvin's Commentary on the Book of Psalms.] See also Robert Alter, "Beyond King James," *Commentary* 102/3 (1996):57-62. Alter decries what he calls the "heresy of explanation," the idea that "translation should explain the Bible rather than simply representing it in another language" and laments the general demise of literary translations after the King James Version. He concludes, "There is no good reason to render biblical Hebrew as contemporary English, either lexically or syntactically." Alter is Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996).

<sup>7</sup>Even if it be regarded as a metaphor. See Michael Reddy, "The Conduit Metaphor," in A. Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

<sup>8</sup>Barclay M. Newman, *Creating and Crafting the Contemporary English Version*. New York: American Bible Society, 1996. Page 17.

<sup>9</sup>Gerald Hammond puts it well: "While the Renaissance Bible translator saw half of his task as reshaping English so that it could adapt itself to Hebraic idiom the modern translator wants to make no demands on the language he translates into ... The basic distinction between the Renaissance and the modern translators is one of fidelity to their original. Partly the loss of faith in the Hebrew and Greek as the definitive word of God has led to the translators' loss of contact with it, but more responsibility lies in the belief that a modern Bible should aim not to tax its reader's linguistic or interpretive abilities one bit." (Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible* [Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1982] pp. 212-13).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf, 'Science and Linguistics', *Technology Review* 42 (1940): 229-31, 247-8. Also in *Language, Thought and Reality* (ed. J. B. Carroll). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956. pp. 213-14.

<sup>11</sup>While most scholars reject the extreme view that profound differences of world-view are *predetermined* by languages, nearly all admit that words do *predispose* thought and recollection along certain lines. As Simeon Potter puts it, the principle "has probably been exaggerated by its more exuberant proponents, and yet few experienced philologists would gainsay its intrinsic truth." (*Language in the Modern World*, Penguin Books, 1960, page 173). The principle of linguistic relativity is often discussed in the literature of linguistics, philology, and comparative literature. See, for example: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; M. Black, *Models and Metaphors*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1962; R. Brown, *Words and Things*. Illinois: The Free Press, 1958; A. Ellis and G. Beattie, *The Psychology of Language and Communication*. New York: Guilford Press, 1986; J. Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; J. Penn, *Linguistic Relativity versus Innate Ideas*. Paris: Mouton, 1972; F. Rossi-Landi, *Ideologies of Linguistic Relativity*. Paris: Mouton, 1973. D. Slobin, *Psycholinguistics*. London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1974.

<sup>12</sup>Edward Sapir (1884-1936) was another notable American linguist. He expressed the principle thus: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." [from 'The Status of Linguistics as a Science' (1929). In *Culture, Language and Personality* (ed. D. G. Mandelbaum). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1958. Page 69.]

<sup>13</sup>Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the famous German philologist, wrote: "Der mensch lebt mit den Gegenständen hauptsächlich, ja ... sogar ausschliesslich so, wie die Sprache sie ihm zuführt. [Man lives in the world about him principally, indeed ... exclusively, as language presents it to him]." See Roger L. Brown, *Wilhelm von Humboldt's Conception of Linguistic Relativity*. Paris: Mouton, 1968.

<sup>14</sup>George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1992. 3rd edition, 1998. Steiner is professor of comparative literature at Oxford University.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation*. Cambridge: University Press, 1986. An important book that

criticizes the facile assumptions of Nida et al. and shows how much is lost in so-called "equivalence" translations.

<sup>16</sup>James Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models* (London and New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891). Rev. James Stalker, D.D. (1848-1929) was best known for his books *Life of Christ*, *Life of St. Paul*, and *Imago Christi*. He was Professor of Church History at Free Church College, Glasgow, and a notable preacher in his day.

<sup>17</sup> For a good discussion of other problems presented by dynamic equivalence versions in Bible teaching, see Robert L. Thomas, "Bible Translations and Expository Preaching," chapter 17 in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, edited by Richard Mayhue (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992).