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BIBLE VERSIONS:
THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY
(Part One)

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SYNOPSIS

What makes a Bible version "good" or "bad" and how can we tell the difference? The rapid increase in the number of major English Bible versions over the past two decades places these questions front and center for many Christians. To answer them, one must understand the two schools of thought regarding translation. The first says that the goal of interpretation is to retain as much of the *form* of the original language as possible. This results in a more literal, word-for-word translation (e.g., KJV, NASB, ASV). The second says that the goal is to retain the *meaning* of the original text but not the *form*. This results in a "freer" rendering (e.g., NIV, NLT, CEV). The numerous English versions currently available lie along a spectrum between these two kinds of translation, although every version contains elements of both kinds. The student of Scripture can gain insight into the biblical text by comparing versions from across the spectrum. The relationship of the translation of the Bible to the church is another issue of concern, given the amount of interpretation involved in those versions that do not retain the original form and the added interpretation and retranslation often involved in preaching. The ideal situation is that the teaching elders in a church be equipped to translate the text from its original language and to expound the meaning to the congregation.

God, in His sovereign freedom, chose to reveal His Word to us in human language, and to do so in written form. He preserved His Word through the years so that it would continue to function as a light and guide to its readers and hearers. His Word was delivered primarily in two languages: *Hebrew*, the language of ancient Israel; and *Greek*, the language commonly used during the first century AD. The revelation in the Old Testament was directly accessible to the Israelites. It came to them in a language they understood within their own historical context. The *Koine* or "common" Greek language of the New Testament era allowed the Gospels to be read across the Roman Empire and allowed the letters of the apostles to be understood by the multicultural and multilingual churches to which they were sent. The original texts of Scripture were understandable to those who were living at the time they were written.

The problem that we face thousands of years later in English-speaking countries is how to translate those ancient texts so that they can speak and be understood today with the same power and meaning that they had originally. The issues surrounding the transmission and translation of the Scriptures remain a mystery to many Christians today. This is a dangerous situation in light of the frontal assault on the accuracy and validity of the Bible in such popular works as *The Da Vinci Code* and in the media's fascination with such groups as the Jesus Seminar. The average believer just cannot afford to leave such things to the scholars; instead, he or she must have at least a basic understanding of how translation works.

Many versions (i.e., translations[1]) of the Bible in English are good. Others are bad, and some are downright ugly. Most people come to their conclusions as to which are good and which are bad without ever considering the wide range of issues that go into answering the question, "Is this a good Bible version?" I am asked constantly, "Which is the most accurate version?" Those who work in the translation field know that answering that question is difficult, mainly because the one asking it probably has a predetermined definition of "accurate" that may or, in most cases, may not correspond to the reality of the task of translation.

Before we can discuss English Bible versions and where they fit in the spectrum of good, bad, and downright ugly, we first must consider what it means to say a version is "good." Only then can we meaningfully discuss what would make a version "bad," or, in the case of cultic mistranslations of the Bible, "ugly."

FORM VS. FUNCTION

I like to use Jesus' words in Luke 9:44 to illustrate the task we face in translating from one language to another. Compare the rendering of the first clause of this verse in 11 major English versions in table 1:

TABLE 1	
BIBLE VERSION	**TRANSLATION OF LUKE 9:44**
King James Version (KJV)	Let these sayings sink down into your ears
New King James Version (NKJV)	Let these words sink down into your ears
American Standard Version (ASV)	Let these words sink into your ears
New American Standard Bible (NASB)	Let these words sink into your ears
English Standard Version (ESV)	Let these words sink into your ears
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)	Let these words sink into your ears
Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)	Let these words sink in
New English Translation (NET)	Take these words to heart
New International Version (NIV)	Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you
New Living Translation (NLT)	Listen to me and remember what I say
Contemporary English Version (CEV)	Pay close attention to what I am telling you

This table allows us to define terms and note important aspects of translation. It shows the spectrum, or continuum, that exists in modern English versions between two approaches to translation: *formal equivalence* and *functional* or *dynamic equivalence*. The goal of *formal equivalence* is a more literal, word-for-word translation, whereas the goal of *functional* or *dynamic equivalence* is the communication of the *meaning* of the text but not necessarily the original form or wording. Those versions that seek to maintain as much of the *form* of the original text as possible (e.g., to translate participles in Greek as participles in English, even to the point of maintaining sentence structure) will render the phrase in Luke 9:44 something like "Let these words sink into your ears," as we see in the KJV, NKJV, ASV, and NASB. Two versions that are in general further toward the middle of the spectrum, the ESV and NRSV, likewise render it very formally. The HSCB remains fairly formal in its translation and the NET gives a more functional translation. Both versions provide translational notes. The HCSB note says the literal rendering is "Put these words in your ears" and the NET note says, "*Grk* 'Place these words into your ears,' an idiom. The meaning is either 'do not forget these words'…or 'Listen carefully to these words.'" The NIV, which often sits squarely in the middle of the spectrum, gives a thought-for-thought translation rather

than a literal one. The functional or dynamic versions such as the NLT and CEV give the "freest" rendering as far as the original wording is concerned.

Luke 9:44 provides us with a chance to examine our selected versions further. At the end of the verse the Lord says He is going to be "delivered into the hands of men." Most of the versions keep this rendering, but some of those that differ include the NRSV ("human hands"), the CEV ("handed over to his enemies"), and the NLT ("going to be betrayed"), which does not render the Greek word for "men" at all.

If we placed these 11 versions on a spectrum based solely on their rendering of the first phrase of Luke 9:44, they would fit roughly as follows in figure 1:

FORMAL

Figure 1

If we examined a large enough sample of passages, we could produce a fairly accurate analysis of where these versions fall; although, in some instances, especially in the middle of the spectrum, versions will shift positions, providing either a more formal or more functional translation in particular passages. Indeed, at times within one verse, or even one sentence, you will find a version varying between formal and functional readings.

The use of translational notes as in the HCSB and the NET allows for a broader range of possible renderings to be presented. The NET goes one step further by providing a good deal of original language information as well. This results in a bulky printed text, of course (no "thin line" Bibles here!), but such notes can be helpful when dealing with particularly difficult passages. I believe that notes that present translational options are an underused means of getting past many of the problems faced in making a final translational decision.

What is the "best" translation of Luke 9:44? The answer to that question obviously depends on which translational approach one thinks is best. With the investment of *millions* of dollars in a wide range of new English Bible versions in recent years, the stakes are high; hence, the argument over translational approach has become heated and at times shrill.[2] Let's examine how the two sides of the debate would answer that question so that you can decide which you think is best.

FORMAL EQUIVALENCE

Proponents of formal equivalence would argue that the best translation of Luke 9:44 is the one that is maintained in the majority of versions: "Let these words sink into your ears." The meaning is understandable and the translation very closely follows the Greek wording contained in the original text. Formal equivalence proponents would insist that paraphrases such as "pay attention" or "listen closely" are appropriate within the context of proclamation and teaching, but not for translation of the Bible itself.

Proponents of formal equivalence would point to the consistency of the translation in formal versions, which allows them to be used effectively in worship *and* study. They consider faithfulness to the original form to be part of faithfulness to the Scriptures, and while acknowledging that formal versions are not as "free flowing" as functional or dynamic ones, they would argue that the standard for translation should not be *freedom of flow* but *fidelity to the original form*.

Proponents of formal equivalence believe that the translator should function in as neutral a fashion as possible, rendering in understandable English (even if it is not "fashionable" English) the most consistent meaning of the text that is possible. The translator should act as a facilitator, but should not take the place of the pastor in the pulpit or interpret the text beyond what is absolutely necessary to provide the best formal rendering.

One of the strongest arguments that formal equivalence proponents can put forth is based on a rather

simple, logical observation. Let's assume that the apostle Paul wrote the New Testament book of Romans using a level of Greek vocabulary, grammar, and syntax that would rate 10 on a scale of difficulty and content. Can we say that an English translation of the text of Romans that rates at level 5 on the same scale is a "good" translation of Romans? Assuming that the apostle Paul wanted his readers to have *all* the information he included, we cannot call that translation "good," since it cannot possibly convey the same information as the original text. All the specific information found in the range between 5 and 10 is lost. This is one of the chief objections to the simplified versions of the Bible that are currently popular. The *most* simplified versions (i.e., those that use simplified grammar, the least specific vocabulary, and short sentences) are on the level of children's Bibles and handicap the reader by omitting information that the biblical authors deemed to be important.

A translation should not, of course, go the other direction and become unnecessarily complex. One could argue that some versions, most notably the King James Version, may well be a level 11 or above. It is possible to *complicate* a translation, that is, to render it in such a fashion as to make it *less* clear and *less* understandable than the original. This leads us to the arguments pressed by the functional equivalence proponents.

FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE

Those who promote functional (or dynamic) equivalence (arguably the majority of scholars that are currently working in the translation field) would argue that translation is not a matter of rendering *words* but of rendering *meanings*. They would argue, therefore, that the best translation of Luke 9:44 is the one that best communicates the intended *meaning* of Jesus' words, not the one that renders His statement word-for-word into English. We, today, do not tell our children, "Let these words sink deeply into your ears." That is an ancient Greek *idiom*.[3] The best translation from this viewpoint, therefore, would be the one that best communicates the meaning of that idiom in English.

Proponents of the functional equivalence method of translation can provide a massive array of idiomatic phrases in both Greek and English that defy the consistent application of a formal, word-for-word translation. When Matthew describes Mary as being "with child" in Matthew 1:18, for example, even the most formal version cannot render the Greek literally, for it would be "having in the womb." Nearly every page of the New Testament contains examples wherein the most formal version is forced to engage in interpretation and functional translation so that the resultant text is something close to helpful for English readers.

The scholarly literature is packed with debate and discussion over the exact parameters and limits of functional translation, but one thing is certain: the majority of Bible scholars agree that a translation must communicate the intended *meaning* of the original text if it is to be called "good." Given the wide variety of linguistic capabilities among English readers, however, no single translation is going to communicate effectively to *everyone*. I was raised on the King James Version; therefore, I have little difficulty with the most formal translations and chafe at times at the freeness of many functional translations. For others, however, a formal translation may present a tremendous stumbling block.

Consider, for example, the words of the psalmist in Psalm 1:1. The blessed man is described as one who does not "stand in the way of sinners." That makes perfect sense to me since I have the background to understand it, but when we use the phrase "stand in someone's way" in English, we are not saying the same thing that the psalmist intended. The psalmist was talking about "standing in the pathway *with* sinners" (NET, emphasis added), that is, associating with them. He was not talking about standing "in their way" in the sense of blocking their path. This is one of many examples where translators must carefully consider whether the original meaning is being clearly expressed or whether they may, in fact, be giving a *different* meaning, even if it is done inadvertently.

Those who promote the functional/dynamic viewpoint (at least the conservative ones) are not, in general, adverse to the use of formally equivalent terms when providing a smooth and meaningful translation of a word or phrase. The point is that they are not wed to the use of those original terms if the meaning in English is not served by it. This is particularly true of certain elements of speech in the original languages.

The King James Version, for example, is famous for its Old Testament phrase, "And it came to pass," which appears repeatedly in the text. This is due to the translation of a Hebrew particle that most Hebrew scholars would argue is only relevant to the translation of verbal strings; it does not carry with it the repeated idea of "and." Greek particles (prepositions and the like), too, are very much unlike their English counterparts: formal translation of them is simply impossible.

EVERY VERSION A MIXTURE

What serious students must recognize in light of these facts is that every Bible version is actually a *mixture* of formal and functional elements. *Every* version contains translations that are literal and translations that involve an extra level of interpretation in order to render the *meaning* into a corresponding English idiom or phrase.

Those who can read and understand the original languages can see where an English version has adopted an idiomatic or less formal rendering of the original text. Those with access to multiple English versions can likewise gain a sense of when a particular version has adopted an idiomatic translation (just as we saw by comparing translations of Luke 9:44). By comparing translations from across the spectrum of Bible versions, Bible students can gain a clear sense of the passage being studied, recognizing that the more functional versions are providing a second level of interpretation that may not be present in the formal versions.

This process of comparison also reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding the meaning of a literal rendering in a formal version (such as standing "in the way" of sinners). If the versions the student compares are all from one portion of the spectrum, the benefit of such comparison is obviously diminished. Cross-checking between the NASB and NKJV, for example, outside of illuminating their textual differences, will not yield much assistance, since the translational philosophy of the two versions is very similar. Comparison of versions from across the spectrum, however, will provide Bible students with a wealth of insight.

THE "GENDER" ISSUE

The topic of gender-inclusive language in the Bible has been addressed widely of late and in the pages of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL.[4] I believe that this subject has been highly politicized, leading to a tremendous amount of heat but not nearly as much light in the debate. There is great danger in allowing a pop culture movement of deeply antibiblical foundations to influence the translational choices made with reference to Scripture. I do not believe that there is any need to bow to the pressures of political correctness, and surely such wild efforts as those that result in "Father/Mother God" and "Child of God" (instead of "Son of God") are far beyond the pale of defensibility. At the same time, there are many instances where the masculine gender of a pronoun is not at all translationally relevant; thus, one can, for example, render the Greek phrase that literally reads "all men" in some contexts as "everyone" or "all people" without having any impact on the meaning of the text. When Paul, for another example, instructed the Corinthians to examine themselves before participating in the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:28), he did not intend, by using the singular Greek word for "man" ("*a man* must examine himself"), to exclude the women of the congregation from the same duty (hence the propriety of the ESV's "let *a person* examine himself"). When, however, there is any chance at all that removing the gender-specific language may lead to questions of interpretation, I believe in preserving the language and leaving it to the Bible student to determine whether the gender is a necessary element of the passage or not.

THE PROBLEM OF PARAPHRASE

A *paraphrase* of the Bible, such as The Living Bible or The Message, is a loose, free-flowing rendering that reflects the individual author's personal idea of what the original text is saying. As such, it is *not* a translation and at times may not have any meaningful connection to the original text outside of a loose, conceptual one. A paraphrase functions somewhat like an extended running commentary. One thing that is beyond dispute, however, is that a paraphrase should never be taken as a ground for a theological teaching or doctrine. A paraphrase should be read with a formal (or at least functional) version firmly in hand, and if that version does not support some "insight" that is offered in the paraphrase, one should be

very slow to adopt that insight. A paraphrase does not fall into the "bad" category for the simple reason that is it not a Bible translation at all, and should never be treated as one.

THE CHURCH AND TRANSLATION

There are two extremes when it comes to the relationship between the translation of the Bible and the church. History shows us what happened when the Roman Catholic Church exercised dictatorial control at the height of papal power, establishing and protecting the Latin Vulgate as the Church's "official" translation, even promoting it by the "infallible" decree of the Council of Trent. Just as in other areas, however, the tendency of the children of the Protestant Reformation has been to swing to the other extreme like a pendulum. In this case, for many, the translation of the Bible is completely disconnected from the church and from the Bible's role in worship and teaching.

We have seen that no matter where one falls in the formal vs. functional (literal vs. dynamic) debate over translational theory, one thing is certain: there is an unavoidable amount of "interpretation" involved in the translation of the scriptural texts into English. Given that reality, the next obvious question is, *who should be doing the interpretation?* Should committees of scholars, the majority of whom will never be known to the Christian reader, seek to apply their collective understanding throughout the translation, behind closed doors, or is there another way? Should elders of churches, many of whom teach in their local congregations, seek to convey their knowledge of interpretation though the ministry of the Word?

This surely already takes place in healthy, well-balanced churches where the exposition of the Word of God is central to the purpose and function of the congregation and is the centerpiece of worship itself. Pastors will often read a passage of Scripture and then say, "that is to say," followed by an almost always more dynamic rendering of the text from the pulpit. This is done in the process of illuminating the meaning of the text and applying it within the context of the sermon.

As an elder in a Reformed Baptist congregation who likewise has worked in Bible translation, I boldly walk out into a rather unpopulated portion of the field when I suggest that interpretation is also part of the task of the teaching elders of the local congregations. This obviously places a tremendous responsibility on the teaching elders to have a firm grasp of the original text and the ability to communicate its meaning to the congregation. I realize that the solution that I am proposing runs counter to current trends. Today much pressure is placed on elders to be focused on anything but the text and its translation; to be focused, instead, on being the CEO, manager, and a million other things. It is my opinion, however, that it would be ideal if the church would use more consistently formal versions (the range of NASB to ESV to NIV) in regular teaching and worship, with the teaching elders doing the "interpretation" based on a solid knowledge of the original languages. I think a more formal version should be used as the base text in worship because such versions lend themselves to public and responsive reading and provide more consistency in the preaching than when the congregation is using a dozen different functional versions at the same time.

Individual Christians can benefit from the utilization of a variety of versions in private reading and meditation, again, by starting with a more formal version (many find formal translations easier to memorize) and comparing and contrasting that with functional/dynamic versions. Each student, more importantly, needs to know more about each version he or she uses, that is, what the translational goal was, who was involved, and where the version fits in the formal/functional spectrum. Such education is vital, so that believers can use the wealth of translational insight that the wide range of modern versions provides.

The majority of controversies surrounding the topic of Bible translation, especially in English, are based on *partial information*. Some have heard about the excesses of the functional translations found in some Bible versions, or the dangers of a paraphrase, and hence immediately assume that their preferred Bible version is a completely literal translation, when it is actually a mixture of literal and dynamic.

GOOD, BAD, OR UGLY?

Bible versions that exist solely to pervert the Word of God or to promote cultic and false beliefs or to undermine biblical authority are easy to classify. These are clearly in the "ugly" category; but how do we distinguish between the "good" and the "bad" versions?

I suggest that *purpose* is one of the best criteria we could use to determine whether a version is good or bad. We should ask whether a version lives up to its own stated purposes and translational directives. We should also examine key passages that can reveal whether a particular anti-Christian bias is present (typically passages that address the deity of Christ or other "controversial" topics). Finally, we should ask whether the translation oversimplifies or overcomplicates. We can discern the good from the bad using these criteria. The "good" list, in fact, will be significantly longer than some would have you believe, or that I myself once believed. I have come to see a much wider spectrum of English versions as useful and good, *as long as the reader understands the basic issues in translational philosophy.*[5]

In part two of this series I will get specific about the "bad" translations as well as the "ugly" ones. What pushes a translation into the "bad" category, and what about such versions as Joseph Smith's "translation," used by many Mormons, or the Jehovah's Witnesses's New World Translation?

NOTES

1. In order to avoid ambiguity, I will use *version* throughout the article when referring to a whole work, such as the New International Version or the King James Version, and *translation* when referring to the act of translating or a particular rendering of a passage.
2. Many new versions were prompted not by a particular need, but by the competition between major publishing houses or because a major publishing company did not wish to pay royalty fees to the copyright owners of the previously existing, perfectly usable and accurate version. The reality of English Bible translation today is that it takes place within a massive, multibillion-dollar publishing market. The first English translations, however, were done in the midst of intrigue and even murder (in the case of William Tyndale).
3. An *idiom* is a phrase or way of speaking that is peculiar to a given language. The phrases, "keep tabs on" and "keep an eye on," for example, are English idioms that probably wouldn't make sense to people whose native language is not English.
4. Mark L. Strauss and David Wegener, "The Inclusive Language Debate: How Should the Bible Be Translated Today?" *Christian Research Journal* 22, 4 (2000): 30–39.
5. It is problematic to see writers making an entire theological point based on a free, functional translation when the term they are focusing on in English has no corresponding Greek term or phrase behind it and the meaning being emphasized is absent in the original.