

## 28 Fallacies in Bible Translation

Thomas P. Johnston, Ph.D.

### Introduction:

God speaks to the Christian through the translation of the Bible in his heart language. When I lie on my back in bed and think the words “Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in Me,” it is through the New King James version of the Bible that God is communicating with me. It is God’s voice calming me in a troubling moment.

However, if the way that God communicates to the Christian is changed (His vocabulary, word order, grammatical constructs, etc.), then this change results in a change in how God communicates. It follows that this change results in a change of relationship. When I spoke to my 2-year old daughter in French, she told me, “You’re not my Daddy!” That was not true, I was her father. But because my language of communication had changed, to her, our relationship had changed.

Similarly, the Bible says that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34 NKJ). Using the reflexive property on this saying of Jesus, a change in the method of speech indicates a change in the heart of the person. While we know that God’s heart does not change, changing His Word results in a change to the recipient of God’s Words.

In actuality, the “old and familiar,” scorned by some forward-thinking Bible translators, is nothing less than God’s eternal voice speaking to the heart of the Christian. It would seem that before the common translations of texts are rejected, the weight of responsibility lies on the translator to be very certain that there is good reason for making changes in the translation.

The following are fallacies in the translation of the Bible, which I am proposing as food for thought to counterbalance the present-day obsession with new and novel translations of God’s eternal Word.

#### A. Time Pacing Issues:<sup>1</sup>

1. Every five to ten years contemporary language has evolved to such a degree that a new translation of Scripture is not only helpful, but necessary.
2. Every five to ten years new variants in the original text have made new translations of Scripture not only expedient, but necessary.

#### B. Cultural Accommodation Fallacies:

3. Market-driven Bible translation is the priority to ensure both readership and wide dissemination—translation should therefore be guided by majority opinion.
4. Traditional extreme—old translations are always right—the Bible shapes culture (true!).
5. Iconoclastic extreme—old translations are always wrong—culture shapes the Bible.

---

<sup>1</sup>Lortsch cited 98 French Catholic translations of the Bible and/or portions of the Bible beginning with the translation of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples’ New Testament in 1523 and ending with Eugène Ledraine’s 1899 entire Bible translation from the Hebrew and Greek (Daniel Lortsch, *Histoire de la Bible en France* [accessed: 5 March 2005; from: [http://www.bibliquest.org/Lortsch/Lortsch-Histoire\\_Bible\\_France-3.htm](http://www.bibliquest.org/Lortsch/Lortsch-Histoire_Bible_France-3.htm); Internet], 3:23-34). That’s almost one translation every 4 years! In the Nineteenth Century alone there were 64 translations.

C. Hermeneutic Fallacies:

6. A proper understanding of the message of Scripture merely necessitates a proper scientific grasp of the original languages, as well as principles of communication and translation into the receptor language—i.e. sensitivity to the eternal purpose of the Holy Spirit is *not* an issue in the translation of Scripture.
7. The *true* meaning of the text is *not* found in the words of the text (whether in the original language or in the translation), but in the mind of the author who is using words to convey his ideas, *ergo* of primary importance is not translating of words as exactly as possible (word-for-word in as close to the original word order as possible), but rather to seek to imagine what was in the mind of the author when he chose the words to formulate his ideas:
  - a. Herein is the hermeneutical *a priori* for dynamic equivalence—“ideas not words” (neo-orthodoxy); and
  - b. Herein the door is opened for dogmatic (theologically-guided) interpretations that purposefully interpret meaning, intentionally moving from the exact words to a higher purpose—catechetics toward a particular theological system (this approach is not new in Church History).
8. Through a scientific grasp of both the original and receiving languages, the cogent translator is able to:
  - a. Discern the author’s intent (both the human author’s intent and God’s eternal purpose) through his particular choice of words;
  - b. Interpret the author’s intent through the grid of a predetermined historical context (enter source, form, and historical criticism);
  - c. The translator is then able to frame the question of the original author in his own mind, exactly as intended by the original author’s intent;
  - d. Readjust words, add phrases, and change word order into the receiving language to match with his framing of the question; and thus
  - e. More accurately convey the author’s intent than does a “literalistic” word-for-word translation.

D. Transparency/Literalness Issues:

9. Because of their unscientific desire to maintain word order, match word case, tense, and form, and a one-for-one ratio of word for word, literal or transparent translations are clunky and irrelevant; furthermore, they cannot be understood, are more difficult to memorize, have less value in Christian education, less spiritual value, and less cultural relevance.
10. Dynamic equivalent translations, however, add clarity and relevance to the text, are preferable for Christian education, and increase the spiritual power and impact of the text.
11. Contemporary language translations *always* use more simple language to convey biblical truths; they *never* confuse the meaning or message of the text, *nor* do they ever render the point of the text even more obscure than a transparent or literalistic translation.
12. More simple language in the Bible makes it more relevant, more culturally accepted,<sup>2</sup> and increases the number of readers, the time spent reading, and the spiritual impact on the readers.
13. Simplistic (or minimalistic) language translations *increase* Bible knowledge and learning in children and youth,<sup>3</sup> as well as among adults who attend culture-driven churches.

---

<sup>2</sup>*Contra*: note the very complex terminology found in the “culturally-relevant” and “politically-correct” book *Fahrenheit 451*, that my high school child was asked to read.

<sup>3</sup>Youth are often fed pavlum from a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Bible text devoid of theological teeth, while in their schools their minds are being challenged with increasingly complex scientific and philosophical ideas and terminology.

14. Of primary importance to the simple language of a translation are stylistic issues:
  - a. The *beauty* of the language (i.e. the use of *non*-theological synonyms or phrases to translate key words);<sup>4</sup>
  - b. *Rhythm* (i.e. the inclusion of words and/or phrases not in the original text); and
  - c. *Flow* (i.e. the changing the word order in the original text).
15. Therefore, translators who take liberty with and embellish the text of Scripture for the beauty of the language (and *never* for theological adjustment or manipulation) are considered literary geniuses, forward thinkers, and master craftsmen—and are rewarded for their important work with fame and fortune (much as Balaam was?).

E. Theological Issues:

16. Translators of the Bible and/or [unknown] members of editorial committees *never* propagate theological or ecclesial biases, orientations, predispositions, or agendas; in fact, they are likely washed of original sin prior to joining the committees.
17. Differences in various translations are neutral and *never have any* theological or ecclesial motive; again the translator's depravity is eliminated prior to his translation of Scripture, as are his "sins of the mind" and his "pride of life."
18. God's Word *cannot* truly be understood by lay people unless properly interpreted, expanded, and elaborated by those who are trained and skilled in the original languages; thus the theological training of the translators is passed on to the untrained minds of lay people through dynamic equivalence Bible translations—Sounds like a Reformation issue!
19. Antagonism to literal translations, especially those not containing the apocryphal books, betrays *no* theological bias and/or no ecclesial provenance.
20. Contemporary language translations *never* change or alter any theological concepts or important terminology in the text of Scripture.

F. Fallacies of Scholarship:

21. Changes in the Greek (or Hebrew) texts and changes in the apparatus have *no* political, theological, or ecclesial motive
22. Scholarship (in the original languages) is *never* used as a guise to achieve desired ends, such as promoting corrupted translations<sup>5</sup> or the reinstatement of the preeminence of the Latin Vulgate in the apparatus of the Nestle-Alan 27<sup>th</sup> edition.
23. Similarly, the so-called "rules" of textual criticism are *never* created or applied with theological or ecclesiastical motivation.
24. Lexicons, Bible dictionaries, and other translation helps *never* seek to influence the translation of key theological terms which then alter theological concepts in the text, such as justification by faith, the substitutionary atonement, and total depravity.

G. Financial Issues:

25. Financial and/or market competition between Bible Societies, copyright holders, and/or publishing companies is *not* an issue when it comes to translation; hence, all translators of Scripture and their publishers are free of rivalry, bitterness, jealousy, strife, greed, and/or false teaching.

---

<sup>4</sup>Imagine a chemistry book edited to exclude all chemistry terms! What chemistry teacher would want to use such a book?

<sup>5</sup>By the way, how many verses of Scripture would need to be tampered with in order to undermine key doctrines such as the substitutionary atonement and salvation by grace through faith alone? Likely, if the five passages for any major doctrine were changed, then it would be difficult to definitively substantiate their biblical provenance. One would be left to argue from Church History or a Creed.

26. Money is *not* an issue when it comes to marketing translations, as most Bible publishing is a not-for-profit endeavor, and very little money is made in the publishing of Bibles.
27. The potentially vast amount of money to be made in Bible publishing *never* clouds the thinking of translators or publishers, *nor* does it ever cause them to compromise key commitments to the text or to theological integrity.
28. The reputations of persons who have made a huge impact on the church are *never* abused for the promotion of particular [copyrighted] translations of Scripture and/or their accompanying biblical annotations.

Some Encouragement: God's Word *is* eternal (Matt 24:35). Therefore, God is sovereignly guarding His Word, by which He guards the faith of His faithful ones (Acts 20:32). He has allowed over the years, and will allow, that "those who are approved may become evident among you" (1 Cor 11:19). As this approval proves true for individuals, so it proves true for churches and for translations of the Bible.