

How Should We Translate Scripture?

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Trinitarian Bible Society

Founded in 1831 for the circulation of Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God

One chief principle of translation constantly applied in deciding whether to approve a particular translation of the Holy Scriptures for publication by the Society is the principle of ‘formal equivalence’.

Formal equivalence means that a translation follows as closely as possible the form of the original languages of Scripture, even to imitating the grammar and syntax of those languages, provided only that no serious and genuinely objectionable distortion of the receptor language results. The principle is often expressed by the statement: ‘as literal as is possible and only as free as is necessary’. Formal equivalence is clearly exemplified in the Authorised (King James) Version.

An alternative principle of translation, called ‘dynamic equivalence’, is the principle more commonly employed by modern translations. Proponents of this principle say that they are more concerned with the meaning of a verse and seek chiefly to convey that, without any particular regard for the form by which that meaning is expressed in the original languages of Scripture.

So why is it that we firmly adhere to the principle of formal equivalence over against the contrary principle of dynamic equivalence? Surely we acknowledge that the meaning is of great importance. Why then should we place such an emphasis upon the form by which that meaning is expressed?

The simple answer to these questions is that form and meaning cannot be so easily separated as the proponents of dynamic equivalence suppose. If we do not convey the form of that written revelation by which God reveals Himself, how may we be sure that we have accurately conveyed its meaning? After all, is it not from the particular form of words used that the precise meaning is obtained?

When the proponents of dynamic equivalence speak of the importance of giving the ‘meaning’ of a verse, they of course intend that ‘meaning’ which they themselves perceive to be the meaning of the verse. But there is no assurance that this is the true meaning of the verse and not simply a meaning which the translator has imposed upon it. Herein we see a safeguard afforded by the principle of formal equivalence: since the translator is

constrained by the very words of the original, he is much less likely to impose his own meaning upon the verse when translating it.

Moreover, why should we not be concerned with that very form of words by which God has revealed Himself? Surely it betrays a lack of reverence for our Creator, Lawgiver, and Redeemer to be unconcerned with the very words by which He has given to us a revelation of Himself and of His will. Why do we presume a liberty to interpret God's words for the reader by giving their 'supposed' meaning, rather than honestly doing what translators are ostensibly commissioned to do, that is, to accurately translate those words?

The difference in practice between the two competing principles of formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence may be clearly seen in the debate over 'gender inclusive' translations, such as the NRSV, TNIV, CEV, NIVI. Should we translate 'he' or 'man' when that is the accurate translation of the original languages, or should we render these words with more 'gender inclusive' terms, perhaps using the plural pronoun 'they' even though the original is singular, so as not to offend the prejudices of some readers? This amounts to deciding between being faithful to the form of the original words of Scripture or accommodating to the current age. Dynamic equivalence would argue that we need only convey the essential meaning and not be overly concerned with the form of the original, especially if being faithful to that form offends some in our modern society. But thereby a part of 'all the counsel of God' (Acts 20.27) is held back. This is a corrupt fruit of the principle of dynamic equivalence.

Let us, therefore, hold fast the principle of formal equivalence, being fully persuaded of its great importance, and let us be thankful to the Lord for the Authorised (King James) Bible, whose translators adhered to that principle and gave us a translation of the Word of God faithful to the original languages of Scripture and one which now bears a testimony against the ungodly 'philosophies' of a backsliding age.