IT'S A BIT MORE COMPLEX THAN THAT

Posted on October 9, 2012 by Eddie

Category: Controversies

Most mornings, which I turn on my computer I find that Google has selected a few new blog posts on the subject of Bible translation for me to read. Generally, these are discussing the merits of various English translations and I can safely ignore them. However, this morning I came across two posts that caused me to pause. The first was an old post from Adrian Warnock (I've got no idea why Google picked up on it today) which consisted of a quote from Wayne Grudem saying why he believes that literal, or word for word, translations are best. There was no discussion of what Dr Grudem said and no probing of his ideas. The implication was that because Grudem said it, it must be true - end of argument.

> *â€œI cannotÂ* ***teach theology or ethics****Â from a dynamic equivalent Bible. I tried the NIV for one semester, and I gave it up after a few weeks. Time and again I would try to use a verse to make a point and find that the specific detail I was looking for, a detail of wording that I knew was there in the original Hebrew or Greek, was missing from the verse in the NIV.*
>
> *â€œNor can IÂ* ***preach****Â from a dynamic equivalent translation. I would end up explaining in verse after verse that the words on the page are not really what the Bible says, and the whole experience would be confusing and would lead people to distrust the Bible in English . . .*
>
> *â€œNor would I want toÂ* ***memorize passages****Â from a dynamic equivalent translation. I would be fixing in my brain verses that were partly Godâ€™s words and partly some added ideas, and I would be leaving out of my brain some words that belonged to those verses as God inspired them but were simply missing from the dynamic equivalent translation.*

The second post which caught my eye was a list of fifteen myths about Bible translation from Daniel Wallace; the first of which reads:

> *Perhaps the number one myth about Bible translation is thatÂ* ***a word-for-word translation is the best kind****. Jerome argued against this, noting that his translation of the Vulgate was not word-for-word, but sense-for-sense. And thatâ€™s as it should be. Anyone who is conversant in more than one language recognizes that a word-for-word translation is simply not possible if one is going to communicate in an understandable way in the receptor language. Yet, ironically, even some biblical scholars who should know better continue to tout word-for-word translations as though they were the best. Perhaps the most word-for-word translation of the Bible in English is Wycliffeâ€™s, done in the 1380s. Although translated from the Latin Vulgate, it was a slavishly literal translation to that text. And precisely because of this, it was hardly English.*

I was rather amused that these two articles turned up next to each other in my Google reader! What to make of thisÂ discrepancy? I think the obvious point is that things are not quite as simple as Dr

Grudem and Adrian Warnock would have us believe. This is ground that we've covered more than once on Kouya Chronicle.

The first thing to note is that the division between 'literal' and 'dynamic' or 'word for word' and 'idea for idea' translations is not particularly helpful. These are not terms which are used in any other field of translation and I'm not sure that they really help us understand translation debates. Joel Hoffman covered this issue a while ago and one commentator wrote:

> *The terminology of Bible translation annoys me somewhat, because in the real world of professional translation, these terms donâ€™t exist. Thereâ€™s mainly just good translation and bad, with some genres requiring more lexical rigidity than others. Preserving the word order and other idiosyncrasies of the source language is always inadvisable. Language is a vehicle for conveying thought. When your focus becomes preserving syntax instead of thought, youâ€™ve missed the point.*

However, I think we are probably stuck with the terms 'literal' and 'dynamic' even if they are not particularly helpful. Â With that in mind, I have to say that there are some serious problems with the idea of 'literal' translation. You can see this illustrated in a couple of short blog posts; one by me and one by Nora. On a more scholarly level, Mark Naylor has this to say:

> *The English Standard Version (ESV), according to the preface on its website, â€œis an â€˜essentially literalâ€™ translationâ€ that emphasizes â€œword-for-wordâ€ correspondence, in order to â€œbe transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.â€ However, unfortunately for literal translations, there is an inverse relationship between maintaining the structure of the original text with â€œword-for-wordâ€ correspondence and the communication of meaning. To the extent that a translation maintains original structure and words, it fails to provide the meaning.Â Therefore, to claim direct access to both structure and meaning is oxymoronic. It is only by using the target language structure and words (i.e., the language of the reader) that communication is achieved.*

Elsewhere, Naylor takes a more nuanced view:

> *Though individually limited, together literal and meaning-based translations provide readers with greater confidence that they have grasped the intended meaning of the original text. Exclusive use of a literal version makes it difficult for the reader to understand the message. Exclusive use of one meaning-based translation will prevent the reader from exposure to other possible nuances of the original text. Excellent scholarship lies behind both literal and meaning-based versions so that we can read them with confidence and compare them in*

> *order to obtain a deeper appreciation of the message. Literal translations ensure that we maintain a tie to the original text as the standard for the meaning, while meaning-based translations provide clarity and comprehension.*

And this to me, is the point. There are strengths and weaknesses in all Bible translations; they are the work of fallible men. All of the translators of the major versions in English have set out to translate Scripture as faithfully as they can according to their own knowledge and abilities; we should be grateful to them. Equally, we all have our preferences as to the values of one translation over another. Dr Grudem clearly has strong views, but his is not the only opinion out there and there are other theologians and scholars who take a diametric opposite view. These are complex issues. Meanwhile, there are still 340,000,000 people without a single word of Scripture in their language. Perhaps if we spent less time faffing around discussing the merits English translations, we might contribute something to this.

One final note; the ultimate andÂ authoritativeÂ guide to Bible translation terminology is still available on Kouya.net.