TWO STYLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

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Category: Methodology

I have Google set up to alert me to any mention of Bible Translation in blog posts. Along with seemingly endless references to the LOLcat translation most of the posts seem to be about which English language translation is the best. I rarely read this sort of thing, for a number of reasons. Firstly, with over 2,000 languages still needing any translation, I find it hard to get worked up about arguments in English. Secondly, many of the posts are either so biased in their approach or so simplified that they don't make much sense. However, today, I came across an excellent article that compares meaning-based and literal translations in a scholarly, but clear fashion and which is well worth reading. Many advocates of more literal translations (such as the ESV, or the King James) argue that meaning based translations distort the message of God's word and are not to be trusted. The author of this article, Mark Naylor of North-Western Baptist Seminary (who is himself a Bible translation consultant) addresses this suggestion head on:

> *Both literal or â€œword for wordâ€ translations as well as meaning-based or â€œthought for thoughtâ€ translations are legitimate representations of the original biblical manuscripts. Each style of translation has strengths and weaknesses in providing readers access to the content of the biblical writings in their own language. The argument in these articles is that a common claim that literal translations are superior to meaning-based translations is incorrect and can be harmful to the body of Christ. Because literal translations often obscure the meaning for the average reader, insistence on using those versions exclusively or primarily serves to keep people from engaging Godâ€™s word with the clarity offered by meaning-based versions.*

Clearly this is not an unbiased article, but it is not so biased as to present a caricature of the opposing argument.Â As someone who tends to prefer meaning-based translations (as I said earlier this week, the NLT is my translation of choice) I was intrigued by the suggestion that readers of literal translations are often compelled to complete the translation themselves because those translations do not always reflect how English is used in every day situations. As literal translations are compelled to use language in ways that don't always reflect the natural usage, preachers and teachers often find themselves saying 'this word means ...). Even though the congregation know full well what the word normally means.

On a similar vein, Lingamish is just about to start comparing two new study Bibles. He has been sent a review copy of the NLT study Bible and he is lining that up against the CEV study Bible. I mention this partly because I've also asked for a review copy of the NLT and I thought that if I dropped another hint I might get a copy (though I suspect they will only ship them to US addresses).