

## Session 6: The Privilege of Reading the Scriptures in English

### Part 1: Why do we need to understand Bible translation?

- God's word was not given in English.
- Understanding how translation works gives us an appreciation for those in church history who gave their lives to making the scriptures available to the average person in his native language.
- Understanding how translation works, will give us a better appreciation for the work missionaries must do, especially when the scriptures are being brought into a culture for the first time in countless generations.
- Understanding translation will help us to become better Bible interpreters.
- The translators of the AV believed every reader needed to understand the work they had done; therefore, we should learn from their wisdom.

### Part 2: A basic understanding of Bible translation

- **Summary:** Translation is the key that unlocks our ability to read God's inspired Word in our own language. While the Greek and Hebrew texts serve as the ultimate source of authority, a faithful translation in any language is sufficient for all matters of faith and practice, and therefore can and should be trusted and viewed as the Word of God.
- **Example: Nehemiah 8:8**

### Part 3: Translating the Bible involves three key components:

- **An accurate standard:** There is a debate regarding the textual basis for translations
  - **Traditional:**
    - **In the New Testament:** The editions compiled by Erasmus, Stephanus, and Beza (Scrivner gives us the actual text the translators of the AV followed.)
    - **In the Old Testament:** The Masoretic Text
  - **Majority:** This is essentially the same as the traditional position, however it considers a larger number of traditional manuscripts than Erasmus and his predecessors.
  - **Alexandrian:** Since the Alexandrian manuscripts represent the oldest manuscript witnesses, when there are differences between the traditional, majority, and Alexandrian, the oldest manuscripts will be favored.
- **A few important notes:**
  - **It is possible to hold an inerrancy position and disagree on which manuscript position is the best, in the same way that it is possible to be preaching out of the same English translation and hold a different interpretation on a**

**specific passage of scripture yet still hold the same basic doctrinal beliefs.**

- **There are some passages where the differences are significant enough for us to make a note of them:**
  - Mark 16:8-20
  - John 7:53-8:11
  - Acts 8:37
  - 1 John 5:7
- **Precision in interpreting:** Interpreting the words and phrases in the original language which will take into consideration the way other translators have handled difficult passages.
- **Balanced readability:** Skillfully and accurately putting those words and phrases into the receptor language in a way that clearly expresses to the average reader the exact intent of the words and phrases in the original language.

#### **Part 4: Translators of the Bible must have six important qualities:**

- An honest, humility coupled with an overwhelming sense of the sacredness of the work they are doing.
- A good theological understanding.
- Expert knowledge in the original languages they will be translating
- Expert knowledge and skill in the receptor language.
- A willingness to have their work scrutinized by others in the process.
- A willingness to consider the translations decisions of others.
- Courage to not compromise due to public pressure.

#### **Part 5: Learning from the translation committee of the Authorized Version:**

- **Fact 1: Translations should always be done out of the original languages:** "As the credit of the old books...is to be tried by the Hebrew volumes; so of the New by the Greek tongue...If truth be to be tried by these tongues, then whence should a translation be made, but out of them? These tongues therefore (the Scriptures, we say, in those tongues) we set before us to translate, being the tongues wherein God was pleased to speak to his Church by his Prophets and Apostles..."<sup>1</sup>
- **Fact 2: No translator is being miraculously guided in his work by the Holy Spirit, like the prophets and apostles were when they were writing the scriptures:** "The Seventy were interpreters,

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, (p. cxvi).

they were not prophets. They did many things well, as learned men; but yet as men they stumbled and fell...<sup>2</sup>

- **Fact 3: Accuracy and reliability are not the same as clarity and beauty:** “The translation of the Seventy dissenteth from the Original in many places, neither doth it come near it for perspicuity, gravity, majesty; yet which of the Apostles did condemn it...They used it...and commend it to the Church...We do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession...is the word of God: as the King’s speech...being translated into French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin, is still the King’s speech, though it be not interpreted by every translator with the like grace. <sup>3</sup>
- **Fact 4: It is possible to say the same thing more than one way, and not be misrepresenting the original language in any way:** “We have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some...would wish that we had done, because they observe, that some learned men somewhere have been as exact as they could that way. Truly, that we might not vary from the sense of that which we had translated before, if the word signified the same thing in both places...we cannot follow a better pattern...than God himself; therefore he using divers words in his holy writ...if we will not be superstitious, we may use the same liberty in our English versions out of Hebrew and Greek...we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of Canaan, that it may be understood.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Example: 4592 σημεῖον** semeion {say-mi'-on}
    - **Meaning:** 1) a sign, mark, token 1a) that by which a person or a thing is distinguished from others and is known 1b) a sign, prodigy, portent, i.e. an unusual occurrence, transcending the common course of nature 1b1) of signs portending remarkable events soon to happen 1b2) of miracles and wonders by which God authenticates the men sent by him, or by which men prove that the cause they are pleading is God's
    - **Usage:** AV - sign 50, miracle 23, wonder 3, token 1; 77
  - **Four examples in the AV:**

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<sup>2</sup> Cambridge (p. cix).

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge, (p. cxiii).

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge (pp. cxvii–cxviii).

- **John 2:11** "This beginning of **miracles** did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him..."
  - **John 4:48** "Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see **signs** and wonders, ye will not believe..."
  - **Revelation 12:3** "And there appeared another **wonder** in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads..."
  - **2 Thessalonians 3:17** "The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the **token** in every epistle: so I write..."
- **Fact 5: There are times when we need to recognize that there is legitimate debate about the best way to express a word or phrase and this uncertainty should not diminish our confidence in the authority of the scriptures:** "Some...would have no variety of senses to be set in the margin, lest the authority of the Scriptures...by that show of uncertainty should somewhat be shaken. But we hold their judgment not to be so sound in this point...For though whatsoever things are necessary are manifest...in those things that are plainly set down in the Scriptures all such matters are found that concern faith, hope, and charity: yet for all that it cannot be dissembled...partly...to stir up our devotion to crave the assistance of God's Spirit by prayer...that we might be forward to seek aid of our brethren by conference, and never scorn those that be not in all respects so complete as they should be...it hath pleased God in his Divine Providence here and there to scatter words and sentences of that difficulty and doubtfulness, not in doctrinal points that concern salvation, (for in such it hath been vouched that the Scriptures are plain) but in matters of less moment, that fearfulness would better beseech us than confidence, and if we will resolve, to resolve upon modesty...It is better to make doubt of those things which are secret, than to strive about those things that are uncertain...in such a case doth not a margin do well to admonish the Reader to seek further, and not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily...it is a fault...to doubt of those things that are evident; so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgment of the judicious) questionable, can be no less than presumption...diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not so clear...is necessary, as we are persuaded. They that are wise had rather have their judgments at liberty in differences of readings, than to be captivated to one, when it may be the other.

- **Example: 1 Peter 5:3** “Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock...” or “overruling”
- **Explanation:** Some members of the AV translation committee felt that the sense was clearer with the footnote.
- **Example: Revelation 22:19** “And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book...” or “from the tree of life”
  - **Question:** Should the phrase be translated book or tree? There was a debate in the committee, and one way stayed in the text and the other in the notes
    - Spanish “book of life”
    - Luther’s German “tree or life”
    - French “tree of life”
- **Fact 6: We must be willing to approach these areas of debate in humility rather than with dogmatic inconsistent assertions:**

“Doth not a margin do well to admonish the Reader to seek further, and not to conclude or dogmatize upon this or that peremptorily? For as it is a fault...to doubt of those things that are evident; so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgment of the judicious) questionable, can be no less than presumption...Variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures: so diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not so clear...is necessary, as we are persuaded...They that are wise had rather have their judgments at liberty in differences of readings, than to be captivated to one, when it may be the other.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Part 6: Some additional notable challenges for translators and readers:**

- **How do you express idioms? Romans 3:4** μὴ γένοιτο literally “may it never be” translated “God forbid”
- **How do you handle the limitations of a language to express certain concepts?** We see this in a literal or amplified translation.
- **How do you handle the changing usages of words over time? Philippians 4:6** “Be careful for nothing...” “Do not be anxious”

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<sup>5</sup> Cambridge,(p. cxvii).

- **How do you handle differences in regional uses of words?**  
English words in the UK and in the USA do not always mean the same thing
- **How do you balance accurate expression of the original language with readability in the receptor language?**
- **How do you handle situations where the range of meanings in the original language and the range of meaning in the receptor language are different? Romans 5:8** "But God commendeth his love toward us..."
- **How do you handle situations where a word in the original language can legitimately be expressed with different words in the receptor language?**
- **How do you handle situations where the original language can legitimately be expressing more than one idea? 2 Corinthians 5:14** "For the love of Christ constraineth us..."
  - The phrase ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ, "the love of Christ") could be translated as either objective genitive "our love for Christ" or subjective genitive "Christ's love for us..."
- **How do you express unique nuances in one language that cannot be expressed in another language? baptize/βαπτίζω; deacon/διάκονος; and heretic/αἰρετικός**
- **How do you handle situations where you need to add words that are not in the original text, but must be added for the sake of clarity in the receptor language? John 8:28** "Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am **he**, and **that** I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things..."
- **How do you handle situations where the original languages are more specific than the receptor language? 1 Corinthians 3:16**  
Know ye (do you all not know) not that ye (that all of you) are the temple (singular) of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you (all of you)?

### **Part 7: Putting this discussion into perspective:**

- **Some statistics from Wycliffe Translators:** The full Bible is now available in 698 different languages, giving 5.6 billion people access to Scripture in the language they understand best. The New Testament is available in another 1,548 languages, reaching another 786 million people. Selections and stories are available in a further 1,138 other languages, spoken by 470 million people.
- **The number of languages still needing a translation:**
  - There are currently 3,969 languages with no Scripture.
  - 171 million people, speaking 2,115 languages, still need translation work to begin.

- 1 in 5 people, speaking 6,665 languages, do not have a full Bible in their first language.
- **The Bible in English:**
  - From the year 1526 to the year 1611, the English speaking world saw six significant revisions of William Tyndale's work that was done out of the original languages as an illegal act for which He died a martyr's death. Because of his sacrifice, we have had God's word in our language for nearly 500 years.

### **Part 8: Final Thoughts:**

- We need to be thankful that we can read God's word in our own language.
- We need a deeper appreciation for the tremendous sacrifices given to give us God's word.
- We need to be humble in the way we approach complexities in this area.
- We need to realize that there are certain limitations to any translation work, because of the differing nature of languages.
- We need to pray for those who do not yet have God's word in their heart language, so they can have the joy of reading the scriptures in their heart language.
- We need to learn to take advantage of the wonderful tools that are available to us as we study God's word.
- We need to read our Bibles carefully enough, that this discussion even matters.