

# ARE ONLY SOME WORDS OF SCRIPTURE BREATHED OUT BY GOD?

Why Plenary Inspiration Favors  
“Essentially Literal” Bible Translation

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Is Bible translation a spiritually and morally “neutral” activity, something to be guided only by secular linguistic theories about translation of languages in general? And is it true that there is really no right or wrong, no “better” or “worse” in Bible translations, but only the subjective preferences of readers who happen to “like” one translation better than another? And is the Bible such a sacred and special book that no one should ever criticize anybody else’s attempts at translating the Bible?

Or might the Bible itself say something that is relevant to current debates about how the Bible should be translated?

I will argue in this chapter (1) that the Bible repeatedly claims that every one of its words (in the original languages) is a word spoken to us by God, and is therefore of utmost importance; and (2) that this fact provides a strong argument in favor of “essentially literal” (or “word-for-word”) translation as opposed to “dynamic equivalent” (or “thought-for-thought”) translation.

But first, some definitions:

### A. Essentially Literal

An essentially literal translation translates the meaning of every word in the original language, understood correctly in its context, into its nearest English equivalent, and attempts to express the result with ordinary English word order and style, as far as that is possible without distorting the meaning of the original. Sometimes such a translation is also called a “word-for-word” translation, which is fine if we understand that at times one word in the original may be translated accurately by two or more words in English, and sometimes two or more words in the original can be represented by one word in English. The main point is that essentially literal translations attempt to represent *the meaning of every word* in the original in some way or other in the resulting translation.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes essentially literal translations are called “formal equivalence” translations, suggesting that they try as far as possible to preserve the “form” of the original language in the translation. I do not generally use the phrase “formal equivalence” nor do I think it is a useful phrase for describing essentially literal translations. The reason is that the word “form” places too much emphasis on reproducing the exact word order of the original language, something that just makes for awkward translation and really has very little to do with the goal of translating the meaning of every word in the original. (The label “formal equivalence” is often used by defenders of dynamic equivalence theory, perhaps in part because this makes it so easy to caricature and thus dismiss essentially literal translation theory as a theory that places too much emphasis on the order of words in the original language.)

### B. Dynamic Equivalence

A dynamic equivalence translation translates the thoughts or ideas of the original text into similar thoughts or ideas in English, and “attempts to have the same impact on modern readers as the original had on its own audience.”<sup>2</sup> Another term for a dynamic equivalence translation is a “thought-for-thought” translation, as explained in the

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<sup>1</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), defines “literal” as follows: “1. being in accordance with, conforming to, or upholding the exact or primary meaning of a word or words. 2. word for word; verbatim; a *literal translation* (1050).”

<sup>2</sup> “Introduction,” *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1996), xli.

“Introduction” to the New Living Translation (NLT): the translators say that “a dynamic-equivalence translation can also be called a thought-for-thought translation, as contrasted with a formal-equivalence or word-for-word translation.”<sup>3</sup>

A good illustration of the difference between essentially literal and dynamic equivalence translations is actually given in the “Introduction” to the NLT. They mention 1 Kings 2:10, which says, in the King James Version, “So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David.”<sup>4</sup> Then they note that the NLT translates this verse, “Then David died and was buried in the city of David.”<sup>5</sup> The NLT translators see this as an advantage, for they say, “Only the New Living Translation clearly translates the real meaning of the Hebrew idiom ‘slept with his fathers’ into contemporary English.”<sup>6</sup> The argument in favor of the NLT would be that today, when John Doe dies, English speakers don’t say that John Doe “slept with his fathers.” Today, the way we would express the idea that someone died is simply to say that John Doe “died,” so that is what the NLT has done. The translation is a “thought-for-thought” translation because the main thought or idea—the idea that David died and was buried—*is expressed in a way that modern speakers would use to express the same idea today.*

However, that is not the end of the argument. Defenders of essentially literal translations object that some details are missing in the NLT’s thought-for-thought translation of 1 Kings 2:10. The dynamic equivalence translation does not include the idea of sleeping as a rich metaphor for death, a metaphor in which there is a veiled hint of someday awakening from that sleep to a new life. The expression “slept with his fathers” also includes a faint hint of a corporate relationship with David’s ancestors who had previously died, something that is also missing from the dynamic equivalence translation, “then David died.” Critics of the NLT would agree that the NLT translated the *main idea* into contemporary English, but they would add that it is better to translate *all of the words* of the Hebrew original, including the word *shakab*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> This same wording is followed by the NKJV, NASB, RSV, and ESV, all of which are essentially literal translations.

<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, underlining highlights places where I am comparing the wording of various Bible translations.

<sup>6</sup> “Introduction,” xlii.

(which means, “to lie down, sleep”), and the words *’im* (which means “with”), and *’ab* (which means “father,” and in the plural, “fathers”), since these words are in the Hebrew text as well. When these words are translated, not just the main idea but also *more details of the meaning* of the Hebrew original are brought over into English.

But will modern readers understand the literal translation, “David slept with his fathers”? Defenders of dynamic equivalence translations will say it is too difficult for readers to understand this since it is not an expression that English speakers use today. But defenders of essentially literal translations will reply that even modern readers who have never heard this idiom before will understand it because the rest of the sentence says that David was buried: “Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David” (1 Kings 2:10, ESV). The larger context begins in verse 1, “When David’s time to die drew near . . .” (1 Kings 2:1). Modern readers may ponder the expression for a moment, but they will understand it, and they will then have access to the much greater richness of meaning that was there in the original text.

### C. Translations Fall Along a Spectrum

Everyone involved in recent debates over Bible translations agrees that all Bible translations fall along a spectrum from those that are very literal to those that are very free or paraphrastic. This spectrum is represented on the following chart. (As the chart suggests, dynamic equivalence translations fall along a broader spectrum than essentially literal translations, because there is a wide variety in how much they are willing to paraphrase and to simplify to an easily understood idea in each verse or sentence.)

A SPECTRUM OF TRANSLATIONS						
KJV	NRSV	NIV	GNB	NCV	CEV	LB
NKJV	HCSB	NIVI	REB	GW		MESSAGE
RSV	NET	TNIV		NLT		
NASB						
ESV						
ESSENTIALLY LITERAL	MIXED	DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE		VERY PARAPHRASTIC		

Abbreviations for Bible Versions (in order of publication; dates are given for the first publication of the entire Bible in each version; second dates indicate significant revisions):

KJV	King James Version (1611)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1952, 1971)
NASB	New American Standard Version (New American Standard Bible) (1963, 1995)
LB	The Living Bible (1971)
GNB	Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version (1976, 1992)
NKJV	New King James Version (1982)
NIV	New International Version (1984)
NCV	New Century Version (1987, 1991)
REB	Revised English Bible (1989)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
CEV	Contemporary English Version (1995)
GW	God's Word (1995)
MESSAGE	The Message (1995)
NIVI	New International Version Inclusive Language Edition (published in UK; 1995, 1996)
NLT	New Living Translation (1996)
NET	The NET Bible, New English Translation (1996)
ESV	English Standard Version (2001)
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
TNIV	Today's New International Version (2005)

This means that in actual practice every dynamic equivalence translation still has a lot of “word-for-word” renderings of individual words in the biblical text. And every essentially literal translation has some amount of “paraphrase” where a woodenly literal translation would be nearly incomprehensible to modern readers and would hinder communication rather than helping it. One common example is Philemon 7, which in the King James Version said:

For we have great joy and compassion in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother (Philem. 7, kjv).

The Greek word translated “bowels” is *splagchna*, which refers to the inward parts of the body, especially the stomach and intestines, but when not used to refer literally to those parts of the body the Greek word referred metaphorically to the seat of inward emotions or to the emotions themselves, especially love, sympathy and mercy.<sup>7</sup>

So how should this word be translated today? The word “bowels” is not appropriate because it has come to be used in modern English almost exclusively to refer to the intestines and the discharge of bodily waste, a sense readers in 1611 would not have given it in a verse like this. Even translating it as “the intestines of the saints have been refreshed by you,” or “the internal organs of the saints have been refreshed by you,” would not help modern readers, because these highly literal renderings would seem more physiological or medicinal than emotional. For that reason nearly all modern translations (including some current printings of the KJV itself) have changed to “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you” (ESV). This still talks about an internal organ (the heart) but does so in terms of an image that modern readers easily understand.<sup>8</sup>

But if all translations depart from complete literalness at some points, is there any difference between dynamic equivalence and essentially literal translations? Yes, there is. First, essentially literal translations will depart from complete literalness only where it is necessary, in cases where a truly literal translation would make it nearly impossible for readers to understand the meaning or would hinder communication of meaning much more than it would help it. But dynamic equivalence translations depart from literal translation and resort to paraphrase far more often, whenever the translators feel that the main thought or idea can be communicated more clearly with a more modern expression.

This reluctance to depart from literalness except where clearly necessary is reflected in the brief motto used by the translators of the 1952/1971 Revised Standard Version: “As literal as possible, as free as necessary.” That motto has been subsequently used by others producing essentially literal translations. The goal is *to be as literal as they can*

<sup>7</sup> W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 938.

<sup>8</sup> The term “heart” is actually within the literal range of meanings for the Greek word, since it sometimes referred to all the internal organs including the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys (Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1996], 1628).

*be* while still communicating the meaning clearly, and to vary from a literal to a more free translation (such as changing from “intestines” to “hearts”) only where it is necessary for accurate communication.

Second, another difference is that essentially literal translations will place a high emphasis on translating *every word* of the original, as opposed to dynamic equivalence translations, which emphasize translating the thoughts more than the individual words. In the process of making an essentially literal translation, if the translators find a verse where a Greek or Hebrew word has not been translated *in some way* into English, they will count it a mistake and seek to correct it. But in dynamic equivalence translations, if the main idea has been translated correctly, the translators do not think it important to translate the meaning of every single word. (This can be demonstrated by many hundreds of examples, as will be evident below.)

In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that the things the Bible claims about its own characteristics lead to the conclusion that essentially literal translations are more compatible with the Bible’s teaching about itself.

## II. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE BIBLE’S TEACHING ABOUT ITS OWN WORDS

Various passages of Scripture indicate that *all* of the Bible (in the original manuscripts) is to be considered the Word of God and in fact the very words of God. Paul writes,

*All Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16, ESV).

The expression “breathed out by God” is a metaphor that implies that we should think of the words of Scripture as words actually spoken by God, words that come out of his mouth and are “breathed out” by him as he speaks. This is a characteristic of “all Scripture,” that is, all that Paul and the apostles would have thought to fall in the special category called “Scripture,” or those writings which were of absolute divine

authority for believers in the first-century church.<sup>9</sup> In other words, every part of Scripture is to be thought of as the words of God.

Peter writes,

. . . knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were *carried along by the Holy Spirit* (2 Pet. 1:20-21, ESV).

Here Peter also emphasizes the divine origin of all the writings of Scripture, because in the immediately preceding verse, Peter referred to the whole of the Old Testament as “the prophetic word” (v. 19, ESV). Once again, Peter is emphasizing the divine nature of everything that would be considered part of the “prophetic word” or part of “Scripture.” The authors of Scripture, as they wrote, were “carried along by the Holy Spirit,” indicating an overall superintendence and direction of their activity such that all of Scripture is from God.

But does “all Scripture” mean the individual words themselves, or only the thoughts or ideas expressed by those words? Several texts of Scripture actually place emphasis on the individual words themselves.

For example, we read,

*Every word* of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him (Prov. 30:5, ESV).

Here the Hebrew expression *kol-'imrat* uses the Hebrew word *'imrah* to emphasize the actual spoken or written words of God. Every one of them is true, in the sense that the meaning that each word contributes to its overall context is reliable and trustworthy, and conforms to reality, and communicates exactly what an omniscient and all-wise God intends it to communicate.

Similarly we read in Psalm 12:

The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times (Ps. 12:6, ESV).

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<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the growth and extent of the canon of Scripture, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 3.



Once again, the same Hebrew word *'imrah* is used to indicate the actual spoken or written words of the Lord. They are said to be pure, so pure that they can be compared to silver that has been refined seven times. The number seven in Scripture is often used to indicate perfection. The very words of God in Scripture, then, are immeasurably pure, without any impurities in them.

Jesus expressed a similar idea when he said,

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word* that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4, ESV).

Here the Greek term that is translated “word” is *rhēma*, which is the term Jesus would use to refer to the actual words spoken by God.<sup>10</sup> And the expression “*every word*” coupled with the fact that the words proceed from the “mouth of God” places further emphasis on the very words themselves. Because Jesus is repeatedly quoting from the words of Scripture in Deuteronomy in this encounter with Satan in the wilderness, the clear reference of “*every word* that comes from the mouth of God” is to the words of Scripture. Jesus’ statement reminds us that we are to think of every word of Scripture as a word that comes from the mouth of God.

Finally, at the end of Revelation 22 we find a related statement:

I warn everyone who hears the *words* of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the *words* of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev. 22:18-19, ESV).

Since John is just coming to the end of writing a book, and since he twice refers to the words of that book in this statement, the reference once again is to the individual words that are written in the book of Revelation. This is one further example of a set of passages in Scripture that emphasize the importance and divine authorship of every single word of Scripture as originally written.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the same word that was used in the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 8:3, from which Jesus was quoting.

Sometimes Jesus and the New Testament authors make arguments from the Old Testament that depend on a single word of Scripture, a process that is consistent with this emphasis on the divine origin and authority of every word of Scripture. For example, notice Jesus' use of the Old Testament in the following dialogue between himself and some Jewish leaders:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'?" If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" (Matt. 22:41-45).

What the Jewish leaders did not understand, but what Jesus understood fully from the knowledge of his own deity and humanity, is that in the expression, "The Lord said to my Lord," the expression "the Lord" is a reference to God the Father while the expression "my Lord" is a reference to Christ himself, who is both descended from David and the eternal second person of the Trinity whom David can call his "Lord."

In order for Jesus' argument to work, he has to depend on the accuracy of the word "my" in the expression "my Lord," and in Hebrew that is expressed by a single letter, the letter *yod*, which is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. If the handwritten form of that letter had been a little longer it would have meant, "his Lord." If it had been a little longer still, it would have meant, "your Lord." So here Jesus depends on the accuracy of a single letter in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and trusts it to make an argument about the identity of the Messiah. This is not surprising: he considered every word to be a word from God.

Jesus emphasized a similar confidence in every detail of the Old Testament when he said,

"For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18, ESV).

In this statement, the expression “not an iota, not a dot” refers to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet (the letter *yod*) and then to a small part of a letter in the Old Testament Scriptures. All is from God; none will pass away.

In Galatians 3:16, Paul bases an argument on the difference between singular and plural forms of a word:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

In this argument Paul depends not on the general thought of an Old Testament passage but on the specific form of one word in the Old Testament.

Roger Nicole, in a significant essay in 1958, listed many more New Testament passages where the argument of Jesus or the New Testament author depended on a single word in the Old Testament. He gives the following list: Matthew 2:15; 4:10; 13:35; 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 4:8; 20:42, 43; John 8:17; 10:34; 19:37; Acts 23:5; Romans 4:3, 9, 23; 15:9-12; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 3:8, 10, 13, 16; Hebrews 1:7; 2:12; 3:13; 4:7; 12:26.<sup>11</sup> This is not surprising: if every word is from God, every word can be trusted completely.

### III. IF ALL THE WORDS ARE FROM GOD, THEN TRANSLATORS SHOULD TRANSLATE NO LESS THAN THE ORIGINAL.

If we are convinced that all the words of Scripture in the original manuscripts are from God, then it is important to focus on accurately translating the meaning of each word in its context. Translators should not only ask, “Have I rendered the main idea of this sentence correctly?” but should also ask, “Have I represented correctly *the meaning that each word contributes to this sentence?*” This is because every word contributes something to the meaning, whether by providing additional

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<sup>11</sup> Roger Nicole, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1958), 139.

information, or by adding emphasis or nuance, or by modifying the meaning of the text in some other way.

(I realize that some Hebrew and Greek words may not always be translated by an English word, such as the Greek conjunction *de*, which often signifies merely a transition to the next thought and may be represented in English only by a comma, or by the beginning of a new sentence, or even by the way in which clauses are arranged in relationship to one another. But in each of those cases the word *de* still represents *some meaning*, and those are various devices by which the meaning may be brought over into English. There are other cases where a word just adds emphasis, as with a Hebrew participle combined with a cognate finite verb, and this may be conveyed in English just by the arrangement of words, or by the choice of a single strong verb, but in each case the translation still attempts to represent *in some way* the meaning that each word in the original contributed to the sentence.)

This attempt to translate the meaning of each word in the original as accurately as possible is the philosophy behind essentially literal translations. This would include, in earlier periods, the King James Version (or Authorized Version), the English Revised Version of 1881, and the American Standard Version of 1901. Among more recent translations, this is the philosophy that has been followed by the English Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version (except for gender language), the New King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

#### IV. DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE TRANSLATIONS OFTEN LEAVE OUT THE MEANINGS OF SOME WORDS THAT ARE IN THE ORIGINAL TEXT.

In contrast to essentially literal translations, dynamic equivalence translations, by virtue of their translation theory, often fail to translate the meaning that some of the words contribute to the verse or sentence in the original. Some examples of this tendency can be seen in the material that follows.

## 1. The Missing Sword

In discussing the role of civil government, Paul says that the civil authority has the right to “bear the sword” in his role as a “servant of God”:

. . . he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer (Rom. 13:4, ESV).

The Greek word translated “sword” is *machaira*, which simply means “sword.” All essentially literal translations use the word “sword” to translate this word: KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB. In addition, the NIV, which lies between essentially literal and dynamic equivalence translation, also uses the word “sword.”

But some dynamic equivalence translations omit the word “sword.” The New Living Translation says:

The authorities are sent by God to help you. But if you are doing something wrong, of course you should be afraid, for you will be punished. The authorities are established by God for that very purpose, to punish those who do wrong.

The NLT has changed a statement about the civil authority (“he does not bear the sword in vain”) to a statement about the reader (“you will be punished”). There is no mention of the sword.

The New Century Version does something similar:

The ruler is God’s servant to help you. But if you do wrong, then be afraid. He has the power to punish; he is God’s servant to punish those who do wrong.

Once again there is no mention of a sword. But was the word *machaira* breathed out by God like the other words in Scripture? Then why not translate it?

The Contemporary English Version similarly omits the sword:

If you do something wrong, you ought to be afraid because these rulers have the right to punish you.

The Message strays even further from the sense of the text:

But if you're breaking the rules right and left, watch out. The police aren't there just to be admired in their uniforms.

Perhaps supporters of dynamic equivalence translations would respond that “he has the power to punish” is stating *the same idea* as “he does not bear the sword in vain,” but doing it in a contemporary way of speaking about government authority. *But is it the same idea?* This is one of the primary verses appealed to by Christian ethicists who defend the right of the civil government in the New Testament era to carry out capital punishment. The right to “bear the sword” involves the authority to do exactly what the sword was used for—to put someone to death. This same word *machaira* is used in Acts 12:2 to say that Herod “killed James the brother of John with the *sword*.” It is also used to speak about persecution, in Hebrews 11:37: “they were killed with the *sword*.” The argument is this: if the state has the power to “bear the sword,” it has the power to carry out capital punishment.

Those who oppose capital punishment argue that Paul mentions the “sword” here only as a symbol of governmental authority and this does not imply the power to take life.<sup>12</sup> People may or may not find this a persuasive explanation of the “sword” in Romans 13:4, but readers of the NLT, NCV, CEV, and The Message cannot even follow the argument. They could never even *think* of such an argument from this verse, because there is no mention of bearing the sword. “Punishment” might mean only jail time. Or community service. Or a fine. When I teach ethics, I could never use these dynamic equivalence translations to argue for capital punishment from this verse because they have not translated all the words.

*All the words* of Scripture are breathed out by God for purposes only he fully understood. He put the words there so that we could

<sup>12</sup>For the pro-capital punishment position regarding the power of the sword, see John Feinberg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993), 139, 145; and for the anti-capital punishment argument on the power of the sword, see Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 207.

use them to probe deeper into the meaning of Scripture and even to construct arguments or to answer arguments yet to be invented in the future. But some of these words of God are simply deleted from dynamic equivalence translations. Unless our theory of translation seeks to translate all the *words* (in some way or another), we will leave out things that we don't know we are leaving out, and we will leave out part of the meaning of Scripture.

Are only *some* words of Scripture breathed out by God?

## 2. Removing the Wrath of God

In this same passage (Romans 13) another important element is Paul's affirmation of the fact that the civil government is God's servant who carries out the wrath of God on criminal offenders:

For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer (Rom. 13:4, ESV).

The word translated "wrath" is *orgē*, which means "wrath" and is translated with the word "wrath" by almost all essentially literal translations: it is the reading of the KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, ESV, and HCSB.

But a number of dynamic equivalence translations leave out the wrath of God and simply mention punishment:

The authorities are established by God for that very purpose to punish those who do wrong (NLT).

He is God's servant to punish those who do wrong (NCV).

The police aren't there just to be admired in their uniforms. God also has an interest in keeping order, and he uses them to do it (MESSAGE).

Why is it important to mention God's wrath in this verse? First, because it ties directly back to Romans 12:19:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (ESV).

Paul tells people not to take personal revenge but to leave it to God’s wrath: he will avenge wrongdoing. Then just a few verses later in Romans 13:4 he explains one situation in which this happens: God’s wrath is expressed through the penalties imposed by the civil government. When the government punishes a criminal, Paul says that the punishment is actually carrying out the wrath of God against the criminal. When this is coupled with Romans 12:19, it provides a strong incentive for people not to seek personal vengeance but to allow the God-appointed civil government to punish the criminal. However, this argument cannot be made from these dynamic equivalence translations. They included one main idea (punishment) but left out a crucial detail (God’s wrath).

The second reason it is important to mention the wrath of God is that it shows that government has a retributive function in administering criminal punishments. The phrase “to punish” in dynamic equivalence translations is too weak because punishment may simply be for the purpose of deterring future crime or educating people through discipline. Punishment need not have any connection with the wrath of God or with the idea of actually bringing retribution on the wrongdoer.

But to be “a servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” implies retribution: the one who did wrong is to be justly paid back. The punishment is not just to train the criminal, and it is not just to prevent more crime, but it is also to bring retribution to satisfy the demands of God’s justice, at least partially in this present age. In this way the verse provides profound insight into the ultimate justification for retributive punishment carried out by the civil government: such punishment manifests the just wrath of God.

But the wrath of God is missing from the NLT, the NCV, and the Message at this point. Why? Is not the Greek word *orgē* a word that was breathed out by God? Are only some words of Scripture breathed out by God? Should we not translate *all* the words of God?



### 3. The Missing Hands

Several passages of the New Testament refer to the common practice of Jesus and his disciples to place their hands on people when they healed them. Apparently the crowds understood this to be such a common practice for Jesus that one of the rulers of the synagogue asked Jesus at one point, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her so that she may be made well and live” (Mark 5:23, ESV). He just assumed that that was how Jesus healed. When the New Testament tells specific stories about the healing of specific individual persons, both essentially literal and dynamic equivalence translations report this accurately—they tell us that Jesus laid his hands on someone and the person was healed.

But when the New Testament reports *summary statements* that refer to this frequent practice of Jesus or the disciples laying hands on people, all essentially literal translations faithfully translate the word “hands” but dynamic equivalence translations tend simply to leave the word out, as is evident in the following verses:

Mark 6:2:

... and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?” (ESV; the word “hands” is the plural form of the Greek word *cheir*, which means “hand”; the word “hands” is found in all essentially literal translations: see KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB).

... and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!” (NIV; the word “hands” is similarly omitted from TNIV, NLT, CEV, NCV, MESSAGE).

Acts 5:12:

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles (ESV; “hands” is used to translate Greek *cheir* also in KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB, NET, ESV, HCSB).

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people (NIV; the word “hands” is similarly omitted from TNIV, NLT, CEV, NCV, MESSAGE).

Acts 14:3:

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands (ESV; “hands” is also found in KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB, NET; the HCSB uncharacteristically leaves it out at this verse).

So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling *them* to do miraculous signs and wonders. (NIV; the word “hands” is similarly omitted from TNIV, NLT, CEV, NCV, MESSAGE).

Acts 19:11:

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul (ESV; “hands” in KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB, NET, HCSB).

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul (NIV; the word “hands” is similarly omitted from TNIV, NLT, CEV, NCV, MESSAGE).

So the word “hands” is missing from most dynamic equivalence translations in these key summary verses, and it is also missing from the NIV and TNIV, reflecting their tendency to use dynamic equivalence translations more often than essentially literal translations.<sup>13</sup>

Why is this important? When I teach classes on spiritual gifts I often point to a common pattern of Jesus and the apostles in which they laid

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<sup>13</sup>The plural “hands” in these verses makes these expressions unlike the singular “hand” in the Old Testament Hebrew idiom “by the hand of” (*beyad*, singular, as in Josh. 14:2 and over thirty times in the Old Testament), indicating the agent by which something is done. Therefore these expressions should not be seen as a mere idiom rather than a literal description of what happened. Moreover, there is an evident connection between these summary statements about miracles done through Jesus’ or the apostles’ hands and the numerous specific narratives where they laid their hands on an individual person for healing, and this would lead readers to readily give “hands” a literal meaning in these verses.

their hands on sick people as they ministered to them. The verses above that give a general summary of their ministries show that the pattern was more common than we might deduce from seeing a few specific examples in the gospels. I can make that point from almost any essentially literal translation, but the point is entirely missing from dynamic equivalence translations and even from the NIV and TNIV, which have some dynamic equivalence tendencies. Defenders of these translations might say that they used a “thought-for-thought” philosophy and told us the main idea—that God was working miracles through Jesus and Paul and the other apostles. I would agree that they gave us something similar to the idea in these verses, but they didn’t get the details right. They failed several times to translate the word “hands.” But is this not a word that was breathed out by God? Is this not part of God’s Word to us? Are only some of the words of Scripture breathed out by God?

#### 4. The Lost Soul

Just before his crucifixion, Jesus expressed his deep anguish:

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27, ESV).

The word translated “soul” is *psychē*, a term that can mean either “soul” or “life,” depending on the context. Essentially literal translations all translate it as “soul” here (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, HCSB). But dynamic equivalence translations mostly omit the word “soul” completely, substituting some other word instead:<sup>14</sup>

“Now my heart is troubled” (NIV).

“Now I am very troubled” (NCV).

“Now I am deeply troubled” (CEV).

“Right now I am storm-tossed” (MESSAGE).

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<sup>14</sup>TNIV and NLT correctly have “soul” here.

This verse is important for countering the ancient heresy of Apollinarianism, the idea that Jesus only had a human body, not a human soul or spirit. If Jesus' "soul" was troubled, then he had a human soul as well as body and was able to experience emotions similar to what we experience. I use this verse in teaching theology students about the person of Christ (lest they fall into Apollinarianism themselves). I also use this verse in teaching about the nature of our souls. But I cannot teach these things from dynamic equivalence translations of this verse. Jesus' soul is missing from the verse in those translations.

### 5. The Lost Spirit

A verse related to John 12:27 occurs in the next chapter of John:

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me" (John 13:21, ESV).

The word translated "spirit" is *pneuma*, which here means "spirit." This word is translated "spirit" by all essentially literal translations, including the KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB, as well as by the NIV, TNIV, and NLT. But some dynamic equivalence translations omit "spirit":

After Jesus said this, he was very troubled (NCV).

After Jesus had said these things, he was deeply troubled . . . (CEV).

After he said these things, Jesus became visibly upset . . . (MESSAGE).

Did they get the general idea right? Yes, approximately. Did they preserve all the important details? No, for that is not the goal of a "thought-for-thought" or dynamic equivalence translation.

This verse is also important when I teach theology, for several reasons: (1) it shows that Jesus had a human spirit that could be troubled, providing another argument against the Apollinarian heresy; (2) the parallel with a similar statement in John 12:27 is one indication that "soul" and "spirit" may be two different terms for the same thing; (3) the fact that Jesus could perceive things in his spirit encourages us also to pay attention to what is happening in our own human spirits in various circumstances.

But none of this can be argued from the NCV, the CEV, or The Message because Jesus' spirit is missing from the verse in those translations.

A similar loss of a person's human spirit is found in Luke's gospel, in the story of Mary coming to visit Elizabeth:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . ." (Luke 1:46-47, ESV).

The verse contains both the Greek word for "soul" (*psychē*) and the Greek word for "spirit" (*pneuma*). Essentially literal translations all translate them as "soul" and "spirit" (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB; in addition, the NIV and TNIV also have "soul" and "spirit" here).

But dynamic equivalence translations leave out Mary's spirit and mostly leave out her soul as well:

Mary responded, "Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior!" (NLT).

Then Mary said, "My soul praises the Lord; my heart rejoices in God my Savior" (NCV).

Mary said: "With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior" (CEV).

And Mary said, "I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God" (MESSAGE).

When this verse is translated literally and "soul" and "spirit" are included, the doctrinal implications of the verse are significant: (1) Since the two halves of Mary's statement follow the pattern of Hebrew poetic parallelism (repeating the same idea with slightly different words or nuances), this verse also provides evidence that "soul" and "spirit" may be used as different words for the same thing; and (2) since Mary was aware of the fact that her spirit was rejoicing, this gives warrant for thinking that we too can be aware of what our spirits are doing or feeling. But these ideas could not be taught from the NLT, CEV, NCV, or The Message, because those versions omit Mary's human spirit from the passage.

## 6. The Disappearing Rod of Discipline

The book of Proverbs is quite explicit about the need for physical discipline of children:

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him (Prov. 13:24, ESV).

The word translated “rod” is *shēbet*, meaning “rod, staff.” It is translated as “rod” in all essentially literal translations: KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB.

But the “rod,” giving justification for spanking or similar use of a physical object for discipline, is omitted from several dynamic equivalence translations:

If you refuse to discipline your children, it proves you don’t love them; if you love your children, you will be prompt to discipline them (NLT).

If you do not punish your children, you don’t love them, but if you love your children, you will correct them (NCV).

If you love your children, you will correct them; if you don’t love them, you won’t correct them (CEV).

A refusal to correct is a refusal to love; love your children by disciplining them (MESSAGE).

The same omission of the “rod” (Hebrew *shēbet*) is found in Proverbs 22:15. All essentially literal translations use “rod” in this verse, as in the ESV:

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him (ESV; similarly, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, HCSB).

But “rod” it is omitted from dynamic equivalence translations:

A youngster’s heart is filled with foolishness, but discipline will drive it away (NLT).

Every child is full of foolishness, but punishment can get rid of it (NCV).

All children are foolish, but firm correction will make them change (CEV).

Young people are prone to foolishness and fads; the cure comes through tough-minded discipline (MESSAGE).

Political activists who campaign for laws prohibiting all spanking of children may face no objections from Christians who read the dynamic equivalence translations of these verses. The rod of discipline is removed, and the verses just talk about discipline and punishment, which can take many non-physical forms. The “thought-for-thought” translators got the general idea approximately right (discipline of children) but they just happened to leave out the meaning of a specific word that is unpopular in today’s culture. Is the word *shēbet* (“rod”) not breathed out by God? Is it not a word God wants his people to have?

## 7. The Lost Faces

Paul speaks about some future time in this way:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Cor. 13:12, ESV).

The Greek phrase *prosōpon pros prosōpon* is translated literally as “face to face” in all essentially literal translations: KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB. It is important because it echoes an Old Testament background where seeing “face to face” is mentioned six times and every time it refers to seeing God.<sup>15</sup> So Paul is saying that “then,” at that future time, we will see God face to face—and that must

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<sup>15</sup> See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1033n.24; or the more detailed discussion in Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), 196-197.

be the time when Christ returns. When Christ returns, then we will see God *face to face* (see Rev. 22:4).

This verse has been important in discussions about spiritual gifts, especially gifts like prophecy and speaking in tongues. Should we expect that they will continue today? Just four verses earlier Paul says, “As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away” (1 Cor. 13:8, *ESV*). When will this happen? If it is connected with the “then” when we see God “face to face” in verse 12 (as some people have argued, including me), then we can expect prophecies and tongues to continue until the time Christ returns. Other scholars have argued against this interpretation,<sup>16</sup> but whatever view someone takes, the phrase “face to face” is important to the whole argument.

However, readers of several dynamic equivalence translations cannot even understand the discussion. The literal translation “face to face” has been eliminated:

Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now (1 Cor. 13:12, *NLT*).

It is the same with us. Now we see a dim reflection as if we were looking into a mirror, but then we shall see clearly (*NCV*).

But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! (*MESSAGE*).

Editors of these translations probably thought they were representing the main thought of this clause: something to do with seeing clearly. But by failing to translate word for word they missed the whole connection with the Old Testament background of seeing God “face to face.” Were the words *prosōpon pros prosōpon* not breathed out by God? Why should translations omit some of God's words?

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<sup>16</sup> See the extensive discussion in Wayne Grudem, editor, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), especially the discussions by Richard Gaffin, page 55, and Robert Saucy, pages 123-124, and other literature that they cite.



## 8. The Lost Kiss

In several passages Paul encourages Christians to greet one another with a “holy kiss,” as he does at the end of Romans:

Greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16, *ESV*).

The Greek word *philēma* means “kiss” and the word *hagios* is the very common word meaning “holy.” All essentially literal translations render this expression “holy kiss” (so *KJV*, *NKJV*, *RSV*, *NRSV*, *NASB*, *NET*, *ESV*, and *HCSB*).

This expression is important today in part because Christians are sometimes puzzled over how to explain why we don’t follow this command today. We feel bound to obey most of the commands written to Christians in the New Testament epistles—so why not this one? On the other hand, if we can obey this command in a different way today, such as through a warm greeting or handshake, then should we feel free to change the way we obey other New Testament commands? Just how many commands are “culturally relative,” and how can we tell which ones are? As it turns out, thinking through this problem provides us with valuable understanding about the nature of the New Testament and how its commands apply to us today.

I have written about this question elsewhere, and will not go into detail about it here.<sup>17</sup> But in order to understand the discussion, and to know why it presents somewhat of a challenge, readers have to know that Paul speaks of a “holy kiss.”

However, readers of some dynamic equivalence translations will not even know there is a problem of application here, for the “holy kiss” is missing.

Greet each other in Christian love. (*NLT*).

Be sure to give each other a warm greeting (*CEV*).

Holy embraces all around! (*MESSAGE*).

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<sup>17</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2004), 397-402.

Paul could easily have written the Greek equivalent for “Christian love” or “warm greeting” or “holy embraces” if he had wanted to. But those things are not what he wrote. He wrote, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Even if we agree that we should use another kind of greeting today, should we not first *translate* the words accurately *so that readers can know exactly what Paul was saying at that time?* Translating the Bible is not the same as preaching a sermon or writing an ethics textbook or telling people what they should do today. Bible translators should just translate accurately, not give us their ideas of contemporary application. The words of the Bible are God’s words, and we should translate them as carefully as possible, not change them to say something different. Are the words “with a holy kiss” (Greek *en philēmati hagiō*) not breathed out by God?

### 9. The Missing Heart and the Absent Holy Spirit

Generations of Christians have identified with David’s famous words of repentance in Psalm 51:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me (Ps. 51:10-11, ESV).

All essentially literal translations include the same elements of this prayer: a request for a “clean heart” (or a “pure heart”) and right spirit from God, and a plea that God not cast the person from his presence or remove his Holy Spirit.

But look at The Message on this passage:

God, make a fresh start in me,  
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.  
Don’t throw me out with the trash,  
or fail to breathe holiness in me.

On first reading The Message on this passage people might think, “How creative!” “How catchy!” “What an interesting way to put it!” But then we realize: *creating new ideas* is not what translators are to

do. We have no business creating things God did not say. Why should anyone think it right to invent new metaphors that God did not use (“Don’t throw me out with the trash”) and omit clear wording that he did use (“Cast me not away from your presence”)? This kind of material belongs in sermons; it does not belong in a book that says “The Bible” on the cover.

## V. DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE TRANSLATIONS OFTEN ADD MEANING THAT IS NOT IN THE ORIGINAL TEXT.

When dynamic equivalence translations attempt only to render the main idea of a phrase or verse, *they often add components of meaning* that are not in the original text. As a result, English Bible readers will think something is in Scripture that is not.

### 1. Restrictions to What God Provides

Paul writes to Timothy about those who are rich in this world:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17, ESV).

The Greek word translated “everything” is *panta*, the accusative form of the word *pas*, a common word meaning “everything.” All essentially literal translations render this literally as “everything” or “all things” with nothing else added to it (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NET, ESV, HCSB). This verse tells me I can freely enjoy the abundant diversity of God’s excellent creation, giving thanks to him for everything that he gives.

But the New Living Translation and the Contemporary English Version insert an entirely different idea:

Tell those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which will soon be gone. But their trust should be in the living God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment (NLT).

Tell them to have faith in God, who is rich and blesses us with everything we need to enjoy life (CEV).

Paul could have said “everything we need” but he did not. He did not limit it that way. Perhaps the NLT and CEV translators were uncomfortable with the idea that God richly gives us *everything* to enjoy, so they decided to let us enjoy only the things we “need.” But they have added “we need” to the Bible: there is nothing in the Greek text that means that or says that or restricts our enjoyment of God’s abundant creation in that way.

## 2. Added Elders

In writing instructions to Timothy, Paul says:

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure (1 Tim. 5:22, ESV).

Most essentially literal translations speak of laying on of hands in this verse (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB, NET, ESV, and HCSB).

But the New Living Translation omits laying on of hands and adds words about elders here, words Paul did not say:

Never be in a hurry about appointing an elder. Do not participate in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.

Paul talks about elders elsewhere, and there is a good Greek word for “elder” that he uses (*presbuteros*) in those verses, but he did not use it here. He did not speak of appointing “an elder,” but about laying on of hands. He probably meant to include laying on of hands to establish elders in office, but what about laying on of hands to establish deacons? And what about laying on of hands to send people out on missionary journeys? Why does the NLT decide it can add “an elder” and thus limit the application to elders, when Paul did not limit it in what he wrote? When we add words to Scripture in this way, we often add restrictions to the original statements that the author did not intend or have in mind.

### 3. Teachers Who Can Never Get Anything Right

James warns that even teachers (including himself) make mistakes or “stumble”:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. [2] For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body (James 3:1-2, ESV; other essentially literal translations are similar, and the Greek word *ptaio* simply means “to stumble, lose one’s footing”).

James does not say that he (“we all”) is always wrong or even that he is often wrong (he is an apostle writing Scripture!). He does not say that teachers in the church are always wrong or often wrong (or how could anyone trust them?). He just says that everyone is still imperfect—we stumble “in many ways.” There is sin of various kinds that remains in our hearts, and we do make mistakes of various kinds.

But that is far different from what James is made to say in The Message:

And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths (James 3:2, MESSAGE).

James never said that teachers “get it wrong nearly every time” they open their mouths! That would mean the readers should hardly believe anything an elder or a teacher says in church. That would mean that James himself “got it wrong” nearly every time he said anything. This gives a horrible picture of unreliability even for the speech of an apostle. But “nearly every time we open our mouths” is just a set of words that The Message has added to the Bible. Nothing in the Greek text gives anything close to that meaning. The whole phrase is just a “creative” addition to the words of God. But the phrase is not the words of God, and it does not belong in the Bible. Why do dynamic equivalence translators think they can add whole new ideas to the Bible?

### 4. Boasting About Being Wise as the Worst Kind of Lie

James warns his readers not to boast:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth (James 3:14, ESV; identical translations, or similar translations such as “lie against the truth” are found in the essentially literal translations of the KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB, NET, and HCSB).

But the New Living Translation adds an entirely different idea:

But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie (NLT).

Where did “the worst kind” come from? Nothing in the Greek text says anything like this, or talks about boasting being worse than other lies. Is boasting really worse than a lie that leads to someone's death or suicide, or a lie that destroys someone's reputation or marriage? Is it really worse than a lie that betrays one's entire country? Is it worse than a lie that leads someone to reject Christ? The NLT has just added words here that are not true, and are not part of the Word of God.

## VI. THE RESULT: CAN WE TRUST DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE TRANSLATIONS?

The examples I have mentioned are only the tip of the iceberg. I put them together in a few hours, and thousands more could be found by looking anywhere and everywhere in dynamic equivalence translations. Such omissions or additions of details of meaning are pervasive in these translations because they belong to the dynamic equivalence philosophy of thought-for-thought translation. The goal of dynamic equivalence translators is to express the primary thought of each passage or verse clearly but they see no need to translate the meaning of every word, and they see nothing wrong with adding some details or expressions that they think will make the primary thought more clear or vivid.

When I look at examples like these I know I cannot teach theology or ethics classes using a dynamic equivalence translation. There are too many details of meaning missing, details that are often impor-

tant for theology. And there are too many details added, details that will lead people down paths of thought that are not part of God's Word.

Although the NIV is not a thoroughly dynamic equivalence translation, there is so much dynamic equivalence influence in the NIV that I cannot teach theology or ethics from it either. I tried it for one semester several years ago, shortly after the NIV first came out, 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.

Nor can I preach from a dynamic equivalence 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 not to trust the Bible in English but to distrust it.

Nor can I teach an adult Bible class at my church using a dynamic equivalence translation without checking the original language at every verse. I would never know what words to trust or what words have been left out.

Nor can I lead our home fellowship group using a dynamic equivalence translation. People have sometimes brought the New Living Translation or The Message to a Bible study and I've seen them get excited about seeing some new ideas in a verse, but I have to bite my tongue because I know that the new idea they see in the verse is not there in the Greek or Hebrew text. I don't want to discourage their excitement about contributing to the Bible study, but I just wish they would be excited about something that is actually in the Word of God.

Nor would I ever want to memorize passages from a dynamic equivalence translation. I would be fixing in my brain verses that were partly God'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 equivalence translation.

But I could readily use *any* modern essentially literal translation

(especially the ESV, NASB, NET BIBLE, and HCSB)<sup>18</sup> to teach, study, preach from, and memorize. The wording may differ slightly, but the words are all there and the meaning is all there as completely as it can be expressed in English.

What then can I do with dynamic equivalence translations like the New Living Translation or The Message? I can read them like I read a commentary, not thinking of them as exactly the Word of God, but as a fresh and creative way to convey an *explanation* of the verse or an *interpretation* of the verse as understood by some very competent evangelical scholars. I think of these versions as skillful free *interpretations* of Scripture, but not strictly as *translations*.

## VII. THE THEORY OF DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE IS THE CULPRIT BEHIND THESE MISSING AND ADDED WORDS.

How did this situation come about? Where did we get all these dynamic equivalence translations? The primary influence behind them has been translation specialist Eugene Nida and his advocacy of dynamic equivalence translations.

Nida earned a Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Michigan in 1943. He published *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill) in 1964 and *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill) in 1969. These two books, in addition to Nida's monumental personal

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<sup>18</sup> Four other essentially literal translations are the KJV (1611), NKJV (1982), the RSV (1952/1971) and the NRSV (1989). They also have value but I find them less useful for various reasons:

The KJV was an amazingly good translation for its day, but the English is now nearly 400 years old and sounds increasingly archaic and foreign to modern readers.

The NKJV translation is also an excellent translation, but the New Testament is based on inferior Greek manuscripts. The NKJV committee decided to base their work on the Greek manuscripts that were used by the original KJV translators in 1611 instead of taking into account the thousands of older and more reliable Greek manuscripts that archaeologists have discovered in the nearly 400 years since that time. No point of doctrine is affected, but it does affect many details of many verses, and that manuscript decision means that the NKJV will never become the standard English version used by the vast majority of New Testament scholars and seminary-trained pastors around the world.

The RSV of 1952/1971 was a very good, essentially literal translation but was never widely accepted by evangelicals because of theologically liberal influences on some key verses, such as the removal of "virgin" from Isaiah 7:14, the removal of Messianic predictions from some Old Testament passages such as Psalm 2:12 and 45:6, the frequent editorial decision to emend the Hebrew text at many difficult Old Testament verses, and the removal of the term "propitiation" from some key New Testament verses. The RSV also has the disadvantage of retaining archaic "Thee" and "Thou" in prayers and praises to God.

The NRSV of 1989 was in many ways a helpful update of the RSV, but its decision to use gender-neutral language resulted in a distortion of the meaning of the original text and the incorrect removal of "father," "son," "brother," "man," and "he/him/his" from around 4000 verses, and this has meant that it will never gain widespread acceptance among evangelical Christians.



influence on the American Bible Society, the United Bible Societies, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), have influenced thousands of Bible translators working in hundreds of languages around the world.<sup>19</sup> Through this work, Nida became the pioneer and primary advocate of the theory of dynamic equivalence translation, an approach that has been used to translate the Bible into many obscure languages in many nations of the world.

Although I will disagree with Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence in the following paragraphs, it is important that I first express appreciation to Nida for his immense contributions to the translation of the Bible into many hundreds of obscure languages in many remote parts of the world. In addition, his dynamic equivalence theory no doubt provided a helpful correction to the overly literal views that had led, for example, to the 1901 American Standard Version, with its difficult sentence structure that reflected the word order of the original languages but yielded very awkward, unnatural English. For these things I do have appreciation. However, as I have explained in the preceding pages, it seems to me that there are significant weaknesses in dynamic equivalence theory that also need to be understood.

In a 2002 interview in *Christianity Today*, Nida explained that his undergraduate training at UCLA influenced his own view of translation:

“When I was at the University of California, Los Angeles, our professors would never let us translate literally. They said, ‘We want to know the meaning. We don’t want to know just the words.’”

Then, in explaining why new translators who come to his training conferences often resist the theory of dynamic equivalence, Nida says,

“They can accept it intellectually but not emotionally because they’ve grown up worshipping words more than worshipping God. . . . This ‘word worship’ helps people to have confidence, but they don’t understand the text. And as long as they worship words, instead of worshipping God as revealed in Jesus Christ, they feel safe.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Biographical information about Eugene Nida was taken from [www.nidainstitute.org](http://www.nidainstitute.org) July 9, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Eugene Nida, interview by David Neff, “Meaning-full Translations: The World’s Most Influential Bible Translator, Eugene Nida, Is Weary of ‘Word Worship,’” *Christianity Today*, October 7, 2002, 46.

So Nida seems to be saying that he developed his theory of translation from the teaching of his UCLA professors. But he gives no evidence of being influenced by the teaching of the Bible about the importance of its own words. I am not sure that the translation theories of certain secular professors provide an obviously superior foundation for translation, rather than the statements of the Bible about its own words. Nor is it clear that all linguistics experts agree with Nida's former UCLA professors that essentially literal translation is an improper goal: see, for example, the comments (in another context) of Valerie Becker Makkai, past president of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the U.S., regarding the importance of accurately translating the very words of the Bible.<sup>21</sup>

As for Nida's criticism that those who favor word-for-word translation are guilty of "word worship" rather than worshiping God, it is simply a distorted caricature. No supporters of essentially literal translation put a Bible in front of the church and sing to it, "O Bible, we worship you! O words of the Bible, we praise you! O Bible words, please hear our prayers!" That is foolishness, and Nida's critique misrepresents the thoughtful, sincere, intellectually sound approaches to essentially literal translation that scholars have understood for centuries.

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*,<sup>22</sup> Nida and Charles Taber explain their views more fully. They explain that translators need

a shift in some of the attitudes which tend to place the source languages on a theological pedestal and to bow down before them in blind submission. . . .

Greek and Hebrew are just "languages," with all the excellencies and liabilities that every language tends to have. They are neither the languages of heaven nor the speech of the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

But if Nida thinks that the Greek and Hebrew words of the original manuscripts of the Bible are not the "speech of the Holy Spirit," then it

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Becker Makkai, "Foreword," in Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), xix-xxv.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003; first published 1969).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 6.

makes sense that he would not see the need to preserve and translate the meaning of every word. If they are not God's words, but merely human words, then the individual words are not so important.

For Nida, then, the goal of translation is not being faithful to the meaning of the *original text*, but rather the goal is to bring about a proper *response* from the reader. When Nida evaluates a translation, his primary reference point is not the words of the original text but rather the degree to which modern readers will understand the translation. This is evident in the following comments:

The new focus, however, has shifted from the form of the message to the response of the receptor. Therefore, what one must determine is the response of the receptor to the translated message. This response must then be compared with the way in which the original receptors presumably reacted to the message when it was given in its original setting. . . .

Correctness [of a translation] must be determined by the extent to which the average reader for which a translation is intended will be likely to understand it correctly. Moreover, we are not concerned merely with the possibility of his understanding correctly, but with the overwhelming likelihood of it. In other words, we are not content merely to translate so that the average receptor is likely to understand the message; rather we aim to make certain that such a person is very unlikely to misunderstand it.<sup>24</sup>

To measure dynamic equivalence we can only rightly compare the equivalence of response, rather than the degree of agreement between the original source and the later receptors, for we cannot presume that the source was writing for this "unknown audience." . . .

Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language.<sup>25</sup>

In actual practice the "average reader" for Nida is primarily a non-Christian reader, for he explains, "the Scriptures must be intel-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

ligible to non-Christians, and if they are, they will also be intelligible to Christians.”<sup>26</sup>

While I agree that translators should weigh heavily the ability of ordinary readers to understand a translation, I do not think that reader response should be the primary criterion for good translation. Rather, the primary criterion should be faithfulness to the words of the original text, representing their meaning accurately in English (or another language) even if at times that means that the meaning is difficult to understand or requires some effort on the part of the reader.

Nida wants a Bible in which it is certain that an average reader “is very unlikely to misunderstand it.” In practice that means a Bible with simple vocabulary, simple, short sentences, and thousands of verses that state the main idea clearly but leave out details and complexities of meaning that are there in the original Greek or Hebrew text. But what if the Bible is not that simple a book, and what if the Bible was not that simple even when its various books were first written? What if many parts of it were difficult to understand even for the original readers?

What if God gave us a Bible that was not easy to understand in every place? What if he gave us a Bible that had layers and depths of meaning that an “average reader” who is a non-Christian will simply not comprehend on first or second reading, and that Christians themselves will only understand after repeated study, reflection, and meditation? What if God gave us a Bible that contains wisdom that is “not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age,” but is “a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory,” a wisdom that “none of the rulers of this age understood” (1 Cor. 2:6-8, ESV)? Is it then right to simplify or remove everything that we think some average readers will find difficult?

Nida’s primary emphasis on reader understandability neglects the fact that the Bible has depths and richness of meaning that can never be fully understood by any person in one lifetime. That is because it is the speech not only of men but also of God, and divine authorship is fully operative in every part of it (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). Divine wisdom is reflected in every detail of it, and this is a wisdom beyond

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 31.

all of our ability to fully understand or exhaust. Even Peter the apostle admits that there are some things in Paul's epistles "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16), and he recognizes that the Old Testament prophets themselves did not always understand completely the meaning of their own writings as they were guided by the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:10-12). So when Nida places such priority on the readers and hearers of Scripture as opposed to placing primary emphasis on faithfulness to the original text of Scripture, he seems to misunderstand the nature of Scripture as the product of the infinite mind of God our Creator.

Our goal should not be just to produce a simplified, easy-to-understand translation that uses only common contemporary forms of speech, that is nearly impossible for anyone to misunderstand, and that leaves out thousands upon thousands of details of meaning that are there in the text in the original Hebrew and Greek. Our goal rather should be to produce a translation that brings over into English as much of the meaning of the original text as possible within the constraints of good English today. Some parts of such a translation will be clear and easy for almost anyone to understand. Other parts will be more complex and more challenging to contemporary readers, just as they no doubt were to the original recipients of some of Paul's epistles when they first received and read them as native speakers of Greek. Our final standard of good translation should be faithfulness to the original text, not just easy understandability by average non-Christian readers.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Our views about the proper goal of a Bible translation should be determined primarily by the teachings of the Bible about its own character and the nature of its words, not by some secular linguistic theories, and not by our estimates of how much or how little an average non-Christian reader will understand.

When dynamic equivalence translations again and again leave out the meaning of words that are there in the original Hebrew and Greek texts, and when they again and again add meanings that have no basis in the words of the original texts, they do not seem to me to be placing adequate emphasis on all the words of Scripture as the very words of God. By contrast, essentially literal translations seek

to translate faithfully the contextually understood meanings of every word in the original texts. Therefore it seems to me that belief in the plenary inspiration of Scripture—the idea that all the words of Scripture are the words of God—strongly favors essentially literal translation of the Bible, and seriously calls into question the theory of dynamic equivalence translation.