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## Toward a Theology of Language

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In the discussion concerning Bible versions and translations many factors are involved. Consideration must be given to areas as technical as textual criticism and translation philosophies as well as to those as practical as readability and literary quality. Although each area may not merit equal attention in the process, all are significant to the discussion. One factor inherent to the discussion and underlying many of the other areas<sup>1</sup> is the matter of linguistics or how language(s) works. Developing a theology of language is not only beneficial to the discussion, but also foundational to our decisions concerning Bible versions.

Too often we simply take for granted that we know how language works since we use it daily. However, upon closer inspection even our own language is not as logical and sensible as we might think it to be. Consider Richard Lederer's humorous evaluation of our "Crazy English." He states, "We take English for granted. But when we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square, public bathrooms have no

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<sup>1</sup>It is impossible to speak about topics as diverse as revelation, inspiration, inscripturation, preservation, transmission, illumination, translation, versions, etc. apart from a consideration of the theology of language.

baths, and a guinea pig is neither a pig nor from Guinea.” He continues, “Sometimes I wonder if all English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what other language do people drive on a parkway and park in a driveway? Recite at a play and play at a recital? Ship by truck and send cargo by ship? Have noses that run and feet that smell?”<sup>2</sup> In matters as serious as Bible versions we cannot afford to base our decisions on what is taken for granted. We need to consider what the Bible teaches about language—we need to develop a theology of language.

In approaching the topic of Bible versions many differing *practical* reasons are given for making decisions and choices. For many the choice of a Bible version is made on the basis of traditions (“This version is what we’ve always used”) or on the basis of innovation (“This version is modern and contemporary”) or on the basis of comfort (“I’m comfortable with this version”) or on the basis of history (“The church has used this version longer than any other”). However, in this matter of Bible versions if we are to practice what we claim as a principle of New Testament Christianity that the Word of God is our basis of *faith and practice*, then we must consider *theological* implications when making decisions and choices in the area of Bible versions. We must understand and base our practice on what the Bible teaches about language.

The aim of this article is to begin the development of a theology of language; that is, a view of language which is biblically based. Before we can make decisions on Bible versions we must understand what the Bible teaches about language—how it works. In order to begin the development of a theology of language four areas will be surveyed: (1) First, we need to understand what the purpose of language is. (2) Then we need to understand how language functions as a means of communication. (3) Third, we need to determine whether the nature of language is static or dynamic. And (4) finally we need to understand what is involved in translation from one

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<sup>2</sup>Richard Lederer, “Our Crazy Language,” *Reader’s Digest* (June, 1990) 114-115; condensed from *Crazy English* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1969).

language to another. Each area will be surveyed by examining the biblical model for evidence concerning how language works. From the evidence of Scripture, principles concerning how language works will be established. Without searching out the facts of Scripture concerning language, it is impossible to exercise biblical faith in the area of Bible versions. Bible faith is always built on facts. Bible faith is never a leap in the dark or anchored in 'hear-say.' Saving faith is built on the facts of Christ's virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. It is imperative that we understand what the Bible teaches about language *before* we attempt to establish a biblical practice in the matter of Bible versions.

### The Purpose of Language

Before we can actually begin to examine the dynamics of language, we need to consider the purpose behind language. Does language have a purpose? What is it? Who benefits from it?

#### Considering the Biblical Model

According to the creation account in Genesis 1, it is recorded that during the first five days of creation (i.e., before man's creation) God not only spoke audibly (vv. 3, 6, 9, 14, etc.), but also named things (vv. 5, 8, 10, etc.). The element of language is introduced into the creation account early. The question arises, for whose benefit did God use language? It does not seem necessary for God to orally speak to himself. It also does not seem that the all-knowing God would have to name creation for His own benefit. What then is the purpose for the introduction of language at this point of creation? What is God's purpose both in speaking audibly and in naming elements and features of creation?

There is some question whether language is a creation of God or a reflection of God's nature in man (thinking and language appear

to be inseparable).<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, we will treat language as God's created gift to man. As a creational gift to man, Scripture presents language as created *for mankind's benefit*. According to Psalm 19, God has provided mankind with two types of revelation. General truths (e.g. God's existence and greatness) are communicated by means of creation or general revelation (Psalm 19: 1-6).<sup>4</sup> Special truths (e.g. salvation and sanctification) are communicated by means of (oral and written) language; that is, special revelation (Psalm 19: 7-14). Language was created *to benefit mankind*.

As a creational gift to man, Scripture presents language as created for the purpose of *communicating truth* to mankind. According to Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, *but the revealed things* belong to us and to our children forever, *in order that* we may observe all the words of this law" [italics added]. God has given revelation both to adults and to children so that (i.e., purpose) they might know and obey His Word. According to John 20:31, "These things have been *written* that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" [italics added]. God has inscripturated His revelation to mankind so that (i.e., purpose) they might believe in Christ and might experience eternal life. According to Psalm 119:130, "The entrance of Your words gives light; [The entrance of Your words] gives understanding to the simple" (personal translation). The purpose of God's communication by means of language is to bring light and understanding to those who lack it whether young or old. Language was created *to communicate truth*.

Before leaving this point, it is beneficial to clarify what is meant by the term 'communicate.' Etymologically the word 'communicate' is derived from the Latin verb *communicare* which

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<sup>3</sup>For a discussion see Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 20-26.

<sup>4</sup>Notice that even this concept is illustrated by means of language.

means "to make common." The dictionary definition of communicate is "to impart; pass along; transmit."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, communication involves a transmission between a speaker and an audience which results in a commonness or understanding by the audience of the speaker's intended message.

Language was created to benefit mankind. Language was created to communicate God's truth. God created language to carry His message to mankind so that (i.e., purpose) mankind might understand God's truth.

## Principles

The first principle that we observe in the biblical model is that communication involves three elements: (1) The *speaker* or source of the communication. (2) The *message (language)* or means by which communication is carried. And (3) the *audience* or target of the intended communication. On the revelational level: (1) The speaker is God. (2) The transmission is God's Word given through inspired authors (2 Peter 1:21). And (3) the audience is mankind. On the practical level: (1) The speaker is the pastor or individual Christian using God's Word in devotions, worship or witness. (2) The transmission is a Bible version. And (3) the audience is the individual(s), congregation, class, and/or community being addressed.

The second principle we may derive from the biblical model is that the test of communication is 'commonness.' Communication occurs when the audience *comes to share* the same thought, concept, idea as the speaker. Communication has occurred only when the audience has *reproduced* in its mind what the speaker intended to communicate. If communication is successful it produces *understanding* in the audience. If for any reason the message is

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<sup>5</sup>David B. Guralnik and Joseph H. Friend, eds., *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language: College Edition* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1964), 296.

unclear, uncertain, or unknown, then understanding cannot be accomplished and communication does not occur.

Therefore, it must be remembered that: (1) Communication *has not occurred* when the speaker has merely spoken (or written). (2) Communication *has not occurred* just because the speaker can understand his message. (3) Communication *occurs* when the speaker and audience share in common the same message—the audience understands the speaker's message. Only when the proverbial "light bulb" goes off in the mind and the audience can say "Oh, that's what (s)he means!" has communication occurred. The focus of the test of communication is on the audience. If the audience does not share a 'commonness' of understanding with the speaker, communication has not occurred.

### Language: the Means of Communication

God's purpose for creating language was to communicate His truth to mankind. However, in attempting to formulate a theology of language this raises another question: How does language work? How does language communicate from the speaker to the audience? What is it about the nature and function of language that brings about a commonness of understanding between the speaker and his audience? Typically one of two answers are offered: (1) Either by using *words*; or (2) by conveying *meaning*. Is communication achieved by the *words* that are spoken (or written) or by the *meaning* that words convey?

### Considering the Biblical Model

An examination of 1 Corinthians 14 will provide an answer to this question. In this passage Paul is writing about the practice of speaking in tongues in the local church which was disturbing both worship and spiritual growth. To correct the problem Paul laid down some spiritual principles which in part deal with communication.. Paul in writing to the Corinthian believers tells them in verse 9, "Unless you utter by the tongue speech that is *clear*, how will it be

*known* what is spoken?" [NASB, italics added]. Paul's point is that spoken words that are not clear cannot produce understanding in the audience. He continues in verse 11, "If then I do not *know the meaning* of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me" [NASB, italics added]. Words whose meaning is unknown do not communicate. Paul concludes in verse 19, "I had rather speak five words with my *understanding*, that by my voice I *might teach others* also, than ten thousand words in an *unknown tongue*" [KJV, italics added]. Communication is not achieved by words alone; not even by the multiplication of words. Communication is achieved when the meaning of words is understood by the audience.

Paul is saying that *if words do not transfer meaning* to the hearer nothing is shared in common; no understanding is arrived at—*there is no communication*. Language works and communication is achieved because of the ability of words to convey meaning not simply through the use of words. Unless words convey meaning common to both the speaker and the hearer, God's purpose for language (i.e., communication) cannot be achieved. The test of God's creational purpose for language has been failed—there is no commonness shared by the speaker and hearer.

On a practical level, the fact that *communication is dependent on conveying meaning and not simply using familiar words* is demonstrated daily. That truth is demonstrated every time someone goes to a dictionary to understand what has been read or heard. To simply read a word and to recognize it as English and to be able to pronounce it does not produce understanding in the hearer or reader. However, once a dictionary has been consulted and the meaning of the word has been determined communication can occur because communication takes place when the meaning conveyed by the word becomes common to the audience.

That truth is further demonstrated in evangelistic efforts. Any time someone is asked, "If you were to die tonight do you know for sure you would go to heaven? Are you *saved*?" And they answer "Yes I would because I'm *saved*." No one accepts the fact that just because they have used the same word "saved" that they must be



genuinely, biblically 'saved.' The next step is to attempt to make sure they understand what was *meant* by "being saved." *Their understanding of the term's meaning is more important than their use of the same term.* Communication is dependent on a commonness of meaning conveyed by the words used, and not by the words themselves.

## Principles

The first truth found in the biblical model is that meaning is basic to communication. *The message is in the meaning.* Authors, whether inspired or not, chose words to communicate their message because of the meaning which the chosen words convey. Words are signs that point to (refer to, call to mind) meaning. Words are vessels that carry meaning. The effectiveness of words to communicate rests in their ability to convey meaning. When one hears the word "blue" a color is recalled to mind. When one reads the word "thirty" a number is recalled to mind. When one hears or reads a word that recalls nothing to mind, communication cannot occur for no meaning was conveyed. The message conveyed by the speaker is carried in the meaning of the words that are used.

For example, suppose that Dad, Mom, and Junior are spending their family day Saturday at the local county fair. As they walk along Dad asks, "Do you want a *dog*?" Both Mom and Junior without hesitation answer, "Yes!" Who understood Dad? Actually we do not know until we understand what Dad *meant* by 'dog' and what Mom and Junior thought Dad meant by 'dog.' Although they all heard and recognized the same word, that does not mean that they have communicated. Mom may have answered "Yes" because she thought that Dad meant *hot dog* when he said 'dog.' Junior may have answered "Yes" because he thought Dad meant *pet* when he said 'dog.' And if Dad meant *dogfish* for his aquarium at home, he did not communicate with either member of his family. Meaning is basic to communication.

The second truth evident in the biblical model is that communication is dependent on the clarity and meaning of the

message being understood by the audience, and not merely by the speaker's delivery of the message. What is clear to the speaker may be totally lost to the audience. The degree of communication is *dependent on the degree of clarity produced in the mind of the audience* by the speaker.

Consider the story of Christ and his disciples in Matthew 16. In verse 6 Christ warns his disciples to "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (KJV). The disciples thought that Christ was chastising them for forgetting to bring along bread to eat (v. 7). After being reminded by Christ of the two occasions of the miracles of the loaves, the disciples came to understand that the warning concerned "the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (v. 12). Until the disciples came to understand what Christ meant they did not understand Christ's message of warning. Until the meaning of the phrase "leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" became clear in the minds of the disciples there was no communication.

Written communication, unlike oral communication, lacks clarifying elements such as inflection, gestures, opportunity for questions, etc. Consequently, written communication depends almost entirely on the audience (1) sharing the same vocabulary (i.e., meanings associated with words) as the author; (2) being able to identify the context and type of literature being used; and (3) understanding the background of the author at the time of the writing.

A third truth derived from the biblical model is that communication involving the same language (or even the same dialect) will not be successful if the source (i.e., speaker) and target (i.e., audience) assign differing meanings to the same vocabulary. The speaker and audience must possess a degree of commonality in the meanings they assign to words. Archaic language may be understood by the target but not by the source. Contemporary slang may be understood by the source but not by the target. Multi-syllabic, techno-jargon (even theological terms) may sound educated and lofty, but does not communicate to the common man. The

"majesty" of language<sup>6</sup> may interfere with the communication of meaning. It is possible for the message to sound "glorified" yet fail to communicate God's glorious Word.

If the speaker and audience assign different meanings to the same word, they cannot communicate with each other. If the audience does not know the meaning of the word that the speaker uses, they cannot communicate with each other. Communication is dependent on the speaker and the audience assigning the same meaning to the words that they use.

The final truth evident in the biblical model is that God chose specific words (verbal, plenary inspiration) to convey specific meanings. Theologically, revelational meaning is static; that is, absolute and unchanging. The message (concepts, thoughts, ideas) of God's mind has remained unchanged for the millennia of man's existence and will remain so forever. God's message for man is forever the same; it is trans-cultural and trans-epochal. When God revealed Himself and His truths to inspired, Spirit-controlled men of old to be inscripturated into written form He did not simply reveal ambiguous concepts or ideas. He communicated a specific, eternal message contained in specific words by means of human authors. That message was captured in the autographa<sup>7</sup> and transcends cultures and the passing of time.

### Language: Static or Dynamic?

God created language in order to communicate His truth to mankind. Language communicates the eternal, changeless message of God to mankind by the meanings conveyed by the words that are used in God's message. The next question that must be considered in establishing a theology of language is: Do languages change over time? Language is a creational gift for mankind to convey God's

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<sup>6</sup>That is, the use of terms such as *Thee's*, *Thou's*, and *-eth's*. However, note that neither the OT or the NT were originally written in "majestic" languages, but in "vernacular" languages.

<sup>7</sup>Autographa' refers to the original writings of the human authors of Scripture.

timeless, eternal truths. Is language itself, however, static in its forms or does it change over time? The stability of a language, or the lack thereof, directly affects the need for and choice of contemporary Bible versions.

### Considering the Biblical Model

God's Word has much to say about the nature of language as being inherently changeable (i.e., dynamic) and not static. The first thing that should be noticed about language is that God gave man the ability and authority to change language. In Genesis 2:18-19 God instructed Adam to name the animals which were brought before him. Through this naming process, Adam added several names to his vernacular language at God's direction.<sup>8</sup> God had not created Adam with a static language and a fixed vocabulary. God created Adam with the ability and authority to adapt and expand his language as needed.

A second indication of the changeable nature of language is that God changed mankind's language extensively in Genesis 11. The story of the Tower of Babel is introduced with a note about the linguistic situation at that time—the population of the whole earth *spoke the same language and used the same vocabulary* (v. 1). God interrupted their building efforts by '*confusing*' their language supernaturally so that they were *unable to understand* each other's language (v. 7). They lost the 'commonness' that enabled communication. God's direct intervention at this point of human history resulted in a multiplicity of human languages—a condition from which mankind has never recovered.

A third evidence of the changeability of language is found in 1 Samuel 9:9 in the story of Saul searching for his father's missing

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<sup>8</sup>It is significant to remember that language as a creational gift to Adam (mankind) was affected by the Fall. As sin-affected people, we use a sin-affected language. We may not like the problems this creates and the implications that result, but we cannot deny this theological truth. Language is affected by the same decay and corruption that characterizes all creation since the Fall.

donkeys. After failing to locate the missing donkeys, Saul's servant suggests they seek help from the "man of God." In verse 9 the inspired author wrote, "Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: *for [he that is] now [called] a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer*" (KJV, italics added). Language had changed in Israel to the point that the readers could not understand what had happened in an earlier period without the writer adding this note. The title "Seer" that Saul had used at the time the events happened had later become archaic<sup>9</sup> in Israel. The title "Seer" was no longer used or understood when God inspired the author to write of this account. Therefore the inspired author used the vernacular<sup>10</sup> title "Prophet" in the added note found in this verse. The time difference between the event (Saul's early manhood) and the author's writing (David's reign) was about 40-60 years or well within an average lifetime. The significance is that in order for meaning to remain the same, the terminology had to change. In order for the author to communicate the same meaning (i.e., man of God) he had to change the title ("Seer") to one that was part of the reader's vernacular language ("Prophet").

A fourth indication of the mutability of language is found in Nehemiah 8:8 which recounts Ezra leading the people in worship after returning from the Babylonian captivity. Verse 8 records that "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating (marg. = explaining) to give the sense so that they understood the reading." (NASB). The culture of Babylon had led to a change in their vernacular language to the extent that they could not even understand what was read in their own Bible without translation and

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<sup>9</sup>'Archaic' refers to language which is out-of-date; Guralnik and Friend, eds., *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 75.

<sup>10</sup>'Vernacular' is the language of ordinary daily speech (F.B. Huey and Bruce Corley, *A Student's Dictionary for Biblical and Theological Studies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 197.

explanation.<sup>11</sup> They no longer understood their own language—Hebrew. To communicate God's Word the priests needed to give them an Aramaic translation and explanation. The time difference would have been at least 70 years.

Within one generation their language had changed so much that they needed an entirely new translation in order to understand God's message. In order to produce *understanding*, God's man had to use a 'version' the audience understood, one that was not their 'traditional' or 'official' translation. The *words alone* did not convey *meaning*. The *translation* into their *vernacular* language, the language they understood, conveyed *meaning*.

## Principles

The first thing the biblical model teaches is that languages are in constant flux. Languages are not static but dynamic. Words may be added to (Gen. 2) or lost from (1 Sam. 9) a language. Changes making it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate may occur in a language from one generation to the next (1 Sam. 9; Neh. 8). The mutability of language is due not only to the Fall, but also to the inherent creational nature of language (Gen. 2).

Languages are as alive and as changing as the cultures which use them. The rate at which a culture is changing will directly affect the change of the language which that culture uses. Perhaps the prime contemporary example of a language undergoing change is the English language. English vocabulary has grown over the centuries so that today it is estimated to contain over 1,000,000 words.<sup>12</sup> This vocabulary is unimaginably vast when compared to other languages.

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<sup>11</sup>This procedure resulted in the production of the Targums, *vernacular* Aramaic translations with commentary. Later in history, when cultural influences changed the *vernacular* to Greek, a Greek translation was produced—the Septuagint.

<sup>12</sup>Robert MacNeil, "The Glorious Messiness of English," *Reader's Digest* (October, 1995): 151, condensed from *The Story of English*. Gerald Parshall points out that 75% of our vocabulary comes from foreign languages in "A 'glorious mongrel'" *U.S. News & World Report* (September 25, 1995): 48.

For example, biblical Hebrew has a vocabulary of about 8,000 total words<sup>13</sup> and the whole OT contains a total of only 305,500 words.<sup>14</sup> The vocabulary for modern French is roughly 75,000<sup>15</sup> words and modern German has less than 200,000.<sup>16</sup>

Every year the vocabulary of English *grows by thousands of words* due to additions from foreign languages, technological and medical advancements, changes in culture, slang, etc. At the same time, *scores of words drop out* of colloquial (spoken) English, become archaic, then obsolete<sup>17</sup>, and eventually are forgotten because they completely fall out of regular usage. Every day this process of addition and subtraction is constantly affecting and altering the English language.

For years Elizabethan English (the English of the KJV and Shakespeare) was the language of education and literature. This fact gave colloquial (spoken) English stability for centuries. Our language was 'anchored' in Elizabethan English as the highest and finest expression of English. However, in the last several decades due to the 'decay' in our education system and the preponderance of the electronic media, the standard of colloquial English has become the language of the electronic media (and associated entities such as Hollywood, etc.).<sup>18</sup> With the anchor line to a *written* standard (such as Shakespeare or the KJV) cut, as a culture we are experiencing greater changes in English over the last few decades than we have over the last few centuries. This is a truth that we may not like and

<sup>13</sup>Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 42.

<sup>14</sup>F.L. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes, *The Vocabulary of the Old Testament* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989), 23.

<sup>15</sup>MaeNeil, "The Glorious Messiness of English," 151.

<sup>16</sup>Gerald Parshall, "A 'glorious mongrel'," 48.

<sup>17</sup>'Obsolete' refers to language which is out of use; see Guralnik and Friend, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1014.

<sup>18</sup>Not only has our culture changed, but it has become multi-cultural. We cannot expect the 'gems' of our heritage to be familiar to or common knowledge with all members of our contemporary congregations or communities.

that we may struggle with, but it is the state of the society in which we live and to which we have been called to minister.

The second truth found in the biblical model is that over a period of time languages (due to their constant change) lose their ability to communicate meaning, because vocabulary becomes outdated. A distinction between viewing language in a synchronic<sup>19</sup> or diachronic<sup>20</sup> manner needs to be recognized. Synchronically, when we look at language within the framework of a single time period, language appears to be static and unchanging. Diachronically, when we look at language back through a period of history, languages very apparently change. Vernacular language is a synchronic phenomena. Therefore it is often the case that the mutability of language is hard for the individual to detect.

Bible versions are a synchronic phenomena. Any Bible version is produced and published within a set period of time and reflects the language of the culture it was produced for in that particular period of time. Because Bible versions aim at communicating God's Word in the vernacular language of the people at a given point in history, once their last sentence is dotted with a period mark they begin the unending process of becoming archaic and eventually obsolete. Each version communicated God's mind within a synchronic epoch; that is, in the vernacular of its time. Each version lost its ability to communicate as years and decades and centuries passed; that is, diachronically. Past versions, though no longer understandable in the present, are still God's Word. Their nature as God's Word does not depend on their ability to communicate beyond the synchronic period in which they were produced. As time passes it is *not their inherent nature* as God's word that changes *but their ability* to communicate God's message that is affected by the passage of time.

The third truth found in the biblical model is that when language changes, new words must be found to carry the original

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<sup>19</sup>Synchronic simply means 'within time'; that is, within one frame of time.

<sup>20</sup>Diachronic means 'through time'; that is, over an extended portion of time which includes a number of time epochs.



meaning in order for the message to remain the same. When the meaning of words changes over time, the message they communicate changes. When the meaning of words becomes unclear over time, the message they communicate becomes unclear. When the meaning of words becomes unknown over time, the message they communicate becomes unknown. Consequently because language changes over time, it is imperative that contemporary words be used which convey the original meaning so that the original message is communicated.

The form of words (i.e., spelling) in a language may remain the same, while their meanings have changed. Unchanged form does not necessarily indicate unchanged meaning. If we insist on using archaic or obsolete vocabulary when the meanings associated with those terms have changed or been lost, *we will lose meaning*. For example, if one were attempting to communicate the idea of “a mechanical device with a horizontal, circular spinning platform and an arm with a needle on it that rests on a plastic (or lacquer) disk and produces music or other sounds,” a different term would have to be used in each of the last three generations. The generation of World War II would call it a *victrola*. Their children would look at the same machine and call it a *phonograph* or *record player*. And their grandchildren would call it a *turntable* or *stereo*. The three generations would refer to the same basic machine with three different words. Even though the terms range from the vernacular to the archaic to the obsolete they all refer to the same machine. To communicate this unchanging concept through three generations the vocabulary used to refer to it had to change. If the vocabulary remained static (*victrola*) at some point the concept would not have been shared in common from one generation to the next and communication would not have occurred.

When language is changing, translations must change in order to communicate the same (original) message. When dealing with revelation, meaning remains static or absolute because God's truth does not change. When communicating God's Word with mankind, translations need to be updated to maintain the meaning of the original message. If vocabulary remains the same while the language

undergoes a change, the audience's understanding of the meaning will change or be lost.

With the ever present flux of language, the meaning associated with terms is in constant danger of change or discontinued use. When the meanings associated with terms change, the message they convey changes. When the meanings associated with terms become unclear, the message they convey becomes unclear. When the meanings associated with terms become forgotten and unknown, the message they convey is lost.

A brief survey of Colossians 3:5a from several versions illustrates this truth. Consider the following chart:

Absolute Concept	Date and Version	Action	Verbal Object		
Col. 3:5a	1978 NIV	Put to death	impurity	lust	evil desires
	1960 NASB	Mortify	impurity	passion	evil desire
	1881 KJV	Mortify	unclean-ness	passion	evil desire
	1769 KJV	Mortify	unclean-ness	inordinate affection	evil concu-piscence
	1611 KJV	Mortifie	Vnclean-nesse	inordinate affection	euill concu-piscence
	1534 Tyndale	Mortifie	Vnclean-nes	vnnatural lust	evyll concu-piscence
	1380 Wyclif	se	vnclean-nesse	leccherie	yuel coueitise

Included in these examples are words which are archaic ("leccherie" Wyclif 1380) and obsolete ("concupiscence" KJV 1769, 1611; Tyndale 1534). There are also words which have changed their form (i.e., spelling) while their meaning has remained the same (e.g., yuel ⇒ evyll ⇒ euill ⇒ evil; vnclennesse ⇒ vnclennes ⇒ vnclennesse ⇒ uncleanness). There are also words which have retained the same form (i.e., spelling) while undergoing a change of meaning. For example, "mortify" in the past (Tyndale 1534 through NASB 1960) meant "to put to death" or "to slay;" however, the contemporary meaning is "to punish (one's body) or control (one's physical desires and passions) by self-denial, fasting, etc."<sup>21</sup> The meaning communicated by the term "mortify" has changed significantly with the passage of time. Consequently the term no longer communicates the original, absolute truth, thus requiring new terminology (NIV 1978) which does communicate the original idea. If we insist on retaining the term "mortify" we will in effect change the meaning because contemporary readers will understand it to speak of punishment or self-control and as a result miss the original message of put to death.

Language is dynamic, in flux, changeable. It is constantly undergoing the change of addition, subtraction and alteration. Our language is becoming archaic and obsolete on a daily basis due to radical and imperceptible changes. This characteristic of change is inherently a part of language both from creation and from the effect of the Fall. Because of language's changeableness Bible versions eventually lose their ability to communicate God's message clearly even though they never cease being God's Word.

### **Translation: Reproducing Meaning**

When someone translates, they are attempting to reproduce meaning from one language to another. God created language to communicate His truths to mankind through the meanings conveyed

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<sup>21</sup>Guralnik and Friend, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 959.

by the words He chose to use. However, due to the nature of language from creation and the Fall, the language that mankind uses is undergoing constant change. Part of the change that language has undergone involves the multiplication of languages (Gen. 11). This raises a fourth question in developing a theology of language, particularly as it applies to the question of versions: Is it possible in translation for one language to fully reproduce all of what is 'going on' in another language? Can the language of translation fully reproduce the meaning which is found in the language of the original text? In considering and choosing versions we must consider the ability of one language to reproduce or convey the thoughts expressed in another language.

### Considering the Biblical Model

Since the Bible was not originally written in English, any English version we work with must be the result of translation efforts. Our English Old Testament comes from Hebrew and Aramaic originals. Our English New Testament comes from Greek originals. The question arises concerning just how 'fully' the target language (English) can capture the source languages which are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

The first thing we need to realize in the biblical model is that languages 'work' differently from each other. For examples, consider the difference between the verb systems in Hebrew and English. Hebrew is a *mood oriented verbal system*; that is, the action is viewed as either real or unreal; complete or incomplete; without tense value. On the other hand, English is a *tense oriented verbal system*; that is, the action either precedes (past), is concurrent with (present), or follows (future) the statement made in the present. The two verbal systems emphasize entirely different nuances of the verbal action.

Or consider the matter of gender. Hebrew has *two*, *grammatically* distinguished genders—masculine and feminine. But English has *three*, *basically sexually* distinguished genders—masculine, feminine, and neuter. Also consider the matter of number. While Hebrew has *three* numbers (singular, plural, dual), English has

only *two* (singular and plural). Although both English and Hebrew are syntactically oriented languages (versus case-ending) they use differing syntactical orders. Normal Hebrew word order is verb - subject - object. While normal English word order is subject - verb - object. At very basic levels the two languages are dramatically different. At times one language is able to do more than the other. At other times it is able to do less. And some times the languages simply do things differently.

Another truth to consider is the fact that words in the source language may have too many facets for the target language to fully capture.<sup>22</sup> Too often we think that the most important, if not the only, significant question in translating from one language to another is the question of meaning, "*What does this word mean?*" Such a question neglects the multitude of nuances other than meaning that can be communicated by a single word.

For example, consider the Hebrew word וַיַּכּוּהָ (*wayyakkuah*, "to strike;" e.g., Judges 1:8) apart from meaning, other things in need of consideration for translation are the actor, the mood, the tense, any specialized stem nuances, aspect, voice, case frame, etc.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps a better question to ask is, "*How does this word say what it means?*" Even when we ask, "What does this word mean?" we often fail to appreciate the breadth of a term's semantic range.<sup>24</sup>

In translation no target language can fully capture and reproduce all the nuances of another (i.e., source) language without using paraphrase or other means beyond translation. If the target language fully captured all the features and nuances of the source language, it would be the source language; consequently, translation would not be necessary. "Every translation suffers some loss of

<sup>22</sup>'Source language' refers to the language *from which* the translation is being made. 'Target language' refers to the language *into which* the translation is being made.

<sup>23</sup>Compare the discussion found in Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 344-345.

<sup>24</sup>'Semantic range' refers to the range of meanings associated with a term in differing syntactical, contextual, and generic environments.

information, some addition of information, and possibly also some distorting of information."<sup>25</sup> There is no such thing as a 'perfect' translation or perfect version.<sup>26</sup>

## Principles

The first truth we realize from the biblical model is that it is possible that even though versions may *differ* from each other, none of them are *wrong*. Each may simply capture a differing feature (nuance) or features of the same word, phrase, clause in the source language.

For example in Psalm 31:21 we find the phrase *בְּעִיר מְצוּרָה* which is translated in a variety of ways. The KJV reads, "For he hath shewed me his marvelous kindness *in a strong city*." The Douay version reads, "for he hath shewn his wonderful mercy to me *in a fortified city*." The NASB reads, "For He has made marvelous His lovingkindness to me *in a besieged city*" (see also RSV, NIV). The NJPS<sup>27</sup> reads, "For He has been wondrously faithful to me, *a veritable bastion*."

One might ask, "Which of the *four different* translations is accurate?" If you think that 'different is wrong' then you will probably choose your favorite translation or version as correct and question all the others. However, in this case right and wrong are not the issue since all four translations are accurate. The Hebrew phrase (*בְּעִיר מְצוּרָה*) refers to a walled city which is prepared for and/or under siege. In biblical times the cities which were sieged were the large,

<sup>25</sup>James D. Price, *Complete Equivalence in Bible Translation* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 19.

<sup>26</sup>Note the KJV translator's testimony concerning the expectation of 'perfection' in a translation: "No cause therefore why the word translated should be denied to be the word, or forbidden to be current, notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it," quoted in Dewey M. Beegle, *God's Word into English* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 196), 142.

<sup>27</sup>*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia, New York, and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

strong, fortified cities. Smaller cities were simply abandoned or captured. Each version simply captures a different aspect of the Hebrew phrase or expresses the same truth in different English terms.

Sometimes versions are condemned simply because they are different from the one being used, when in effect they are as accurate and faithful to the biblical language as any other version. They simply use different English words to capture the same meaning or a different slice of the original meaning.<sup>28</sup>

The second truth we discover in the biblical model is that translation *always* involves interpretation. Not only do translators reflect their background, education, theological prejudices, experience, sin nature, etc. in their translation, but they also reflect their understanding of text and context. Language involves both science (rules) and art (the translator's individuality). While the 'science' of language establishes the rules and limits used in translation, art makes the choice of words to convey intended meaning. Science may limit the meaning to "a walled city which is prepared for and/or under siege" but art must choose which term(s) to use to convey that meaning or as much of it as possible.

### Conclusions

In an attempt to begin developing a theology of language we discovered: (1) That the purpose for which God created language was

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<sup>28</sup>Note the testimony of the KJV translators concerning other versions to their readers: "That 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 . . . containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God" (Dewey M. Beegle, *God's Word into English*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960, 142). Even when the translation was done by a 'recognized' heretic it was still accepted as God's Word. They state, "The whole Church of God for certain hundred years, were of another mind: for they were so far from treading under foot (much more from burning) the translation of Aquila a proselyte, that is, one that had turned Jew, of Symmachus, and Theodotian, both Ebionites, that is, most vile hereticks, that they joined them together with the Hebrew original, and the translation of the Seventy . . . and set them forth openly to be considered of and perused by all" (*ibid.*, 143).

to communicate His message to mankind. (2) That language is able to communicate because of the meaning conveyed by words. (3) That language is undergoing constant change. Even though the message it may have been designed to communicate is absolute and unchanging, language is not. And (4) that no target language is fully able to one-hundred percent convey what is found in the source language without resorting to paraphrase or commentary.

In bringing this study to a conclusion we must finally answer the question, "What should we consider in choosing a version or translation?" What bearing do these principles from Scripture have on the matter of versions and the choices that lie before us?

The first consideration we must weigh is that our choice of versions must take into account God's purpose for language which is communication with mankind. Man has been given the gift of language so that it might serve as the means by which God would communicate His truths with him. The test of communication is commonness of understanding. Communication has not occurred until the audience understands what the speaker intended to communicate. Consequently we should ask: How effectively can we communicate in teaching, preaching, witnessing if the version we use is not understood or is misunderstood by our audience? Have we passed the test of commonness? Have we used language to accomplish God's purpose? The question to ask is not simply, "Do *I* understand this version?" But, "Do *they* understand this version?"

If we are sensitive to the needs and abilities of our audience (congregation, class, community) we may (1) use versions which we would not often (or no longer) personally use; or (2) change to versions which we are not familiar or comfortable with. The question is not one of familiarity or comfort but of communication. The question cannot be limited to edification of adult believers but must also include edification of young believers and evangelism of the lost. The question cannot be limited to preaching and teaching times when explanation and illustration are readily available but must include times when children sit alone developing a devotional life in God's Word or when an unbeliever sits alone with a gospel tract.



The second consideration we must ponder is that our choice of versions must take into account the nature and function of language. Communication is accomplished because of the meaning that words convey. If the meaning of the words is unclear, uncertain, or unknown, then understanding will not be communicated. Thus, versions need to avoid both that which is archaic and obsolete as well as contemporary slang, since neither communicate understanding in the vernacular language of daily life. There is no benefit in memorizing a group of words, if you do not understand what they mean. God's 'mind' has not been communicated even if the one can recite a verse 'word-perfect' but has no idea what the words mean. *Every new linguistic era deserves the Bible in its vernacular daily language.*

We praise Wyclife, Tyndale and others for bringing us the Bible in vernacular English so that we can read our Bible without going through a priest or pastor. We praise the translators of the Bishop's Bible and the KJV because they took their heavily Latinized Bibles and translated them into the vernacular English of their day. We need to realize that the need for and right to a Bible in the vernacular language of daily life has not changed. If we are to practice the priesthood of the believer that we believe the Bible teaches, we need to provide the average believer with a Bible version that he or she can sit down and read and understand; not one that they do not understand without the help of someone else. Every generation has the right to the Bible in its own vernacular language.

The third consideration, from the scriptural model, that we must account for is that our choice of versions must reflect the three elements of communication: speaker/source; language/means; and audience/target. The message of the speaker/source (God) is absolute and unchanging. The language (the means by which the message is carried from speaker to audience) is constantly changing. The audience is dependent on language to understand the eternal message of God.

Therefore, in order for the audience to understand God's unchanging original message, it must be communicated in the *vernacular* that they *understand*. If the language bearing the

message does not change (i.e., a Bible version), the meaning understood by the audience will change (or be lost). The constantly changing nature of language necessitates that each epoch of change in a language results in a vernacular version. No version, no matter its degree of accuracy or acceptance, can continue indefinitely to communicate God's truth in a culture with an ever changing language. Until Christ returns we will need a series of vernacular versions to reach our society with God's unchanging message.

Many of our conservative, fundamental brethren are afraid of what might happen with the acceptance and use of a new, contemporary version. Choosing to change the version of God's Word that we use in ministry and worship does carry a risk with it. Such a choice does involve the unknown and a number of legitimate questions. There is risk involved and the unknown can be scary. However, it must also be recognized and admitted that maintaining adherence to a version with which we are comfortable and familiar also has its risks. These risks are not from the unknown but from the known. We can look back in history and we can look to a biblically based theology of language and understand that if we maintain adherence to a version whose language no longer speaks to the culture in which we minister: that we will lose our effectiveness in ministering God's message to them. There is a missiological, evangelistic consideration to be made in the matter of the choice of a Bible version.

Our decisions in the matter of Bible versions must be made on the firm foundation of the principles of God's Word. If we truly believe that the Bible is our only rule for faith and practice, what better place to live up to our beliefs than in the choice of Bible versions. There are a number of *practical* reasons and arguments that are given when it comes to the matter of Bible versions. However, there is one *theological* consideration that must be made in the matter of Bible versions. That consideration is what the Bible teaches about the theology of language.