

VERBAL-PLENARY INSPIRATION AND TRANSLATION

by
Rodney J. Decker¹

INTRODUCTION

Multiple English translations of the Bible line the shelves of religious bookstores. Although a multiplicity of translations is nothing new in history, modern production and distribution technology as well as modern marketing systems in an affluent society have resulted in greater awareness of such diversity. How are we to assess such a situation? Is this boon or bane? Curse or blessing? Christian leaders have taken very diverse positions on such a query. Some decry the situation as unhealthy and are critical of all new translations. The more vociferous of such claims go so far as to attribute the new translations to diabolic influence. Others take a different tack and freely “mix-n-match” versions (to say nothing of paraphrases), as it seems to fit their fancy (or preferred interpretation) with little discernment of what is used. Neither approach is helpful. But somewhere in between those two poles there is still plenty of room for diversity of opinion.

As various translations have been evaluated, one item that is often assumed to be relevant has been the doctrine of inspiration. What is the relationship between one’s view of inspiration and one’s view of translation? Several related questions arise. Can a translation be described as “inspired” in any sense? Is it possible to translate a document in which the specific words of the original are inspired? If we believe in verbal plenary inspiration, then does that prescribe a specific method of translation, that is, one which reproduces each and every word of the original, donor text in the receptor language? Such questions are the subject of this article’s analysis.² I shall begin with a summary of

¹Dr. Decker is Associate Professor of New Testament at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA.

²I am not attempting to document the claims or positions summarized in the introductory paragraphs. They represent, rather, the opinions I often hear expressed or implied verbally in various conversations or in popular writings. I will address some representative positions later in the paper. I have addressed related issues in several places including the following: “The English Bible: Precious Treasure” (Kansas City, MO: Calvary Bible College and Theological Seminary, 1993), now available in an expanded edition in Spanish, “La Biblia en Nuestro Idioma” (Lima, Peru: Seminario

bibliology since a proper understanding of this doctrine is crucial to building any sort of argument from it to the questions of translation.

DEFINING THE TERMS

TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO INSPIRATION

The following terms are presented in the form of summaries and definitions; there is no attempt here to provide an exhaustive defense of each in the present paper.³

Revelation

We begin with the doctrine of revelation. We believe that God has chosen to give us (i.e., human beings) information that we could not know on our own recourse. That revelation comes in several different forms. It includes what we know about God from the created order—that there is an eternal, powerful Creator. It also includes the spoken message proclaimed as the “thus says the Lord” by the prophets. It includes oral announcements by God himself as well as the physical

Teológico Bautista, 2004); “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8 (Fall 2004): 5–56 (various versions of this review article with varying titles and content have been presented at several conferences including the Bible Faculty Summit [Winston Salem, NC, Aug. 2004] and the national conference of the Evangelical Theological Society [San Antonio, Nov 2004]); and “What Does a Translator Have to Offer the Reader? A Response to Dr. C. John Collins, “What the Reader Wants and the Translator Can Give: 1 John As a Test Case,”” Northeastern Region ETS Conference, 1 April 2006, Mid-America Baptist Seminary, Northeast Campus, Schenectady, NY, pdf copy available from <http://www.NTResources.com>, forthcoming in *Journal of Ministry and Theology* (2007). There are a number of related issues that I will not address in this essay (though they may be mentioned or implied at some points), including inerrancy, the preservation of Scripture, inclusive language, and specific modern translations (except to illustrate various matters).

³Such defenses have been published many places in the literature of which the following are but a representative sample of some of the better discussions. D. A. Carson, “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 1–48; Paul S. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 267–304; Wayne Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 1–59; John D. Hannah, ed., *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83), esp. vol. 4, though vols. 1–3 are also relevant; Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, “The Bible: The Word of God,” in *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), pp. 149–68; Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948); this volume reprints the relevant articles by Warfield from the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

inscription of written texts by the finger of God. To this we add God's supreme revelation in Jesus Christ (both his life and his words), and the written text of Scripture. We typically divide these various forms of revelation into general or natural revelation on the one hand and special revelation on the other.

Propositional Revelation

The revelation which comprises our Bible may be described as propositional. It is becoming popular in some evangelical circles to deny that revelation is propositional.⁴ To say that biblical revelation is propositional does not mean that every statement is crafted in the formal structure of a logical proposition. Rather we use this term to emphasize that God's revelation is verbal in nature and that it does not consist of feelings or impressions. Although God's revelation is personal in the sense that it is a revelation of or from a personal being, this is not to be viewed as some amorphous "personal revelation" apart from words. "God supernaturally communicated his revelation to chosen spokesmen in the express form of cognitive truths, and...the inspired prophetic-apostolic proclamation reliably articulates these truths in sentences that are not internally contradictory."⁵ This revelation has not been left to chance that we might happen upon it at random. We believe that God recorded the body of revelation needed by his people across the centuries in written form. It was recorded in a particular fashion that we describe in the following terms.

Inspiration

As fundamentalists, we are committed to the inspiration of Scripture. We can all recite 2 Timothy 3:16, *πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος*, "all Scripture is God-breathed." The Bible is not just another book. The Scriptures are the inspired Word of God. When we use the word *inspiration*, we are referring to the God-breathed character of the written autographs of Scripture that constitutes the exact expression of God's revealed truth.

Inscription

Inspiration is the direct result of inscription—the work of the

⁴I have explored the doctrine of propositional revelation in an extended comparative study of Carl F. H. Henry's and Stanley Grenz's views of propositional revelation. Henry defends the doctrine; Grenz in large measure denies it. The paper was originally presented at the national conference of the Evangelical Theological Society in Colorado Springs, Nov 2001. It has been published as "Revisioning the Nature of Biblical Revelation: A Critique of Stanley Grenz's Proposals," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8 (Spring 2004): 5–36.

⁵Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:457.

Holy Spirit by which he so guided the minds of the human authors and writers that they chose the precise words necessary to accurately reflect the exact truth God intended, all the while reflecting their own personality, writing style, vocabulary, and cultural context, thus guaranteeing that this truth is accurately, inerrantly, and infallibly recorded in writing.

Notice that the definition of incriptionation includes a reference to both “authors and writers.”⁶ The dual reference is deliberate and is intended to recognize that not all authors of Scripture actually penned what they authored, but, at least in the New Testament,⁷ frequently dictated to a secretary.⁸ A similar situation is the incorporation by the author of previously written texts (e.g., Ezra 4:17–22).⁹ In this case we should assume that God’s providential guidance had directed the original writing of these texts—and that he so directed the biblical author to select the appropriate materials for inclusion in Scripture. The superintending work of the Holy Spirit governs both the verbalization of the truth on the part of the author (including the selection of any other materials to be included) and the transcription of the truth by the writer.¹⁰

⁶Contra Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:208, who suggests that “it hardly follows...that the use of an amanuensis requires the divine inspiration of both apostle and amanuensis.” Part of the problem here is that Henry applies “inspiration” to the author rather than to the text. Nor does he provide any explanation as to why he considers this situation unnecessary.

⁷This is also an OT phenomenon, though it is not mentioned as often as in the NT. See, e.g., the relationship between Jeremiah and Baruch (Jer 36:4, 32).

⁸On the role of the secretary (amanuensis) in the writing of Scripture, see E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2nd series, vol. 42 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1991); idem, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004); and M. Luther Stirewalt, Jr., *Paul the Letter Writer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁹In the example cited from Ezra the included text was a letter written by a pagan king. There are other references in the OT to various historical accounts, etc. that the writer incorporated. In the NT we are told that Luke did research for his gospel and he may have incorporated previous written texts resulting from that research (though we are not told in any particular case that he did so). It is also possible that the NT incorporates some early Christian hymns (for a summary of this possibility, see R. Martin, “Presence of Hymns in the Pauline Corpus,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. Hawthorne and R. Martin [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993], pp. 420–21).

¹⁰It appears that the secretary at least sometimes had liberty in the wording and content of the text. See, e.g., Tertius’s personal greeting in Rom 16:22. It is at least possible that the differences in language and style between 1 and 2 Peter could be accounted for by the use of a different secretary for each letter. If this is the case, then the secretary had some liberty in the actual wording. (It is worth noting, however, that Kruger has argued that the “well known” differences between these two epistles may be illusionary [his actual word is “tendentious”]: Michael J. Kruger, “The Authenticity of

Inspiration and Inscripturation in Spanish

Let me make a brief digression at this point and take you on a brief tour of this same doctrine in the Bible used by our Spanish brothers and sisters.¹¹ It is of value not only as a bit of linguistic, theological trivia, but it also serves to surface a common misconception on the part of many English readers, though for a different reason. The Reina-Valera 1960 translation is the most widely used of all the Spanish translations among Spanish Protestants around the world (including fundamentalist churches). The wording of this translation in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21 blurs the distinctions between inspiration and inscripturation and as a result makes these doctrines more difficult for Spanish speakers to understand. Compare these two verses:

Toda la Escritura es *inspirado* por Dios, y útil para enseñar, para redargüir, para corregir, para instruir en justicia (2 Timoteo 3:16, RV 1960).

Porque nunca la profecía fue traída por voluntad humana, sino que los santa hombres de Dios, hablaron siendo *inspirados* por el Espíritu Santo (2 Pedro 1:21, RV 1960).

The word *inspirado* occurs in both of these passages. That makes it sound like Paul and Peter both used the same word and that they were describing the same concept. Perhaps one of the reasons for this confusion in Spanish is that there is no equivalent word in Spanish for *inscripturation*. As a result it is common for Spanish believers to confuse the two separate doctrines of inspiration and inscripturation. But the Greek text in these two passages is different. You could see the difference in Spanish if you were to read a different Spanish translation:

Toda la Escritura es *inspirado* por Dios, y útil para enseñar, para reprender, para corregir y para instruir en la justicia (2 Timoteo 3:16, NVI 1999).

Porque la profecía no ha tenido su origen en la voluntad humana, sino que los profetas hablaron de parte de Dios, *impulsados* por el Espíritu Santo (2 Pedro 1:21. NVI 1999).

English readers often come to a similar misconception, though for a different reason. Although the wording of these two key texts is

2 Peter," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 [December 1999]: 645–72, esp. 656–62.)

¹¹Part of the impetus for this digression is my recent trip to Latin America where I ministered to Peruvian pastors and also taught a seminary course on the history of the Bible as a book.

different, by translating θεόπνευστος as “*given by inspiration*” the KJV suggests that inspiration involves a process.

These misconceptions illustrate very well the importance of knowing the biblical languages. Those who must rely on a translation (whether Spanish or English) would never realize that there was a crucial difference in these texts. The word translated into English as *inspired* (or into Spanish as *inspirado*) is θεόπνευστος. It means “God-breathed” and occurs only in 2 Timothy 3:16—nowhere else in the New Testament. In its technical, New Testament use, “inspired” applies *only* to the written text. The *Bible* is what is inspired. The Bible never describes the human writers as inspired, nor does it describe inspiration as a process.¹² The “action” part of God giving us his Word is described in 2 Peter 1:21 where it tells us that the Spirit “carried along” the writers. The word in 2 Peter is φέρω, not θεόπνευστος. This is the same word that is used in Acts 27:15, 17 describing how the ship that was taking Paul to Rome was “carried along” by the wind. Just as the wind filled the sails of that ship and carried it along, so the human writers of the Bible were carried along by the Spirit. The result of that guidance was an inspired text, the Bible.

Verbal-Plenary Inspiration

So, we are committed to the inspiration of Scripture. As fundamentalists, we even go so far as to argue for *verbal-plenary* inspiration.¹³ *Verbal* inspiration refers to the fact that the very *words* of the text are inspired, not just the concepts. That is why we refer to the Bible as the “Word of God”: the Bible says in words what God wants said—it accurately communicates God’s truth.

Plenary inspiration affirms that *all* the words of the text are inspired and equally so. The words of Jesus in the text are inspired (even

¹²It is true that some theologians use *inspiration* in a more general sense to include both concepts defined above (i.e., inspiration and inscripturation), e.g., Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:199. Erickson actually defines inspiration in the most direct sense to apply only to the process related to the writer and describes the Scriptures themselves as inspired in a derivative(!) sense (1:219–20). I am not persuaded that this is a wise use of what *is* biblical terminology. We ought, rather, to use Bible terms the way the Bible does. Systematic theology is well within its rights to develop terminology not found in the Bible to describe legitimate biblical concepts that either have no technical term and/or which encompass multiple terms (e.g., Trinity), but using Bible words for this purpose tends to muddle people’s understanding of those terms when they are used in the Bible. Thus I have deliberately restricted the definition of *inspired* to the specific biblical statement in 2 Tim 3:16.

¹³One of the better brief presentations of the biblical evidence for this is Poythress and Grudem, “The Bible: The Word of God,” pp. 149–57. See also Grudem’s longer article, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth*, pp. 19–59.

though he himself wrote none of them), and so are those of James, Habakkuk, and Moses. (For that matter, even the words of Balaam's donkey are inspired in that they form part of the biblical text!)¹⁴

Inerrancy

A related claim that we are bold to make is that Scripture is not only inspired, but also inerrant. The best statement of inerrancy, and one with which we would agree, is the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.¹⁵ The five summary points read as follows.

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

These are good statements of an important biblical doctrine.

¹⁴As a side note, if we are consistent with our claims of verbal-*plenary* inspiration, it would cast serious doubts on the wisdom of focusing attention on certain words in the NT by printing them in red. Although Jesus' words are certainly important and authoritative, so are the words of Obadiah and Jude.

¹⁵The following five statements comprise the summary statement adopted in Chicago in 1978. The published text can be found several places, including Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy*, pp. 493–502.

Authority

We do not stop with inspiration and inerrancy. Although it is inherent in those two doctrines, we fundamentalists are also wont to make a separate statement regarding the authority of Scripture. If God's propositional revelation as recorded in the Bible is inspired both in its words and in its entirety, and if that inspired text is inerrant, then it must, of necessity, be authoritative. By that we mean that the Bible—all the Bible—commands our assent. It is the ultimate and final standard for truth and is not subject to the judgment of human experience or human reason. We must believe all of it.

But we must do more than believe it. Our goal is not an academic discourse on an abstract subject. We must allow God's revelation to impact our lives. Our thinking, our actions, our attitudes, must all be controlled by God's revealed truth recorded on the pages of Holy Writ. We might be technically correct in what we assert, but if such an assertion does not affect the way we live, we have failed miserably. "We can quietly empty our commitment to biblical authority of significance if we deny biblical ethics in day-to-day decision making. Or, we can interpret the Bible so ineptly that its authority is refracted in genuinely disturbing ways."¹⁶

Such are our convictions as to the nature of our Bible. Too often we stop at that point with a nice, tidy doctrinal statement. But does a bibliology such as I have just described affect the way we translate Scripture? If it does, how? So let us now turn our attention to some of the entailments of an inspired, inerrant, authoritative Scripture as it relates to translation. But first some crucial definitions related to translation are in order.

TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO TRANSLATION

Translation

What exactly is translation? And what is its goal? Translation is, of course, much broader than Bible translation, but within this more

¹⁶Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, p. 13. As Baptists we are sometimes inclined to repeat a somewhat traditional claim, that the Bible is the Christian's sole rule of faith and practice. Although the gist and intent of such a statement is true, it must really be qualified before being implemented. By that I mean that despite the fact that all the Bible is authoritative for faith—we must believe all of it—the question of practice must be nuanced somewhat more carefully. That is because God governs the life of his people differently at different times. The Christian no longer lives under the dictates of the old covenant as his rule of life. We no longer offer the sacrifices nor restrict our diet as the Mosaic commands stipulated. Our rule of life is no less stringent or less holy than that of our pre-cross brethren, but it *is different*. The new covenant forms the basis for the believer's faith today. Yes, we still learn much from the old, and its contents still form part of the revealed, inspired, inerrant, authoritative corpus which we must believe, but it is not directly authoritative for how I live my daily life.

narrow focus we might define it as an act of communication by which the meaning of the original texts of Scripture (in the source languages Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) is reproduced in a receptor language in such a way that a reader of the receptor language text can accurately and reliably understand the original message.¹⁷ The goal of Bible translation is communication—accurate communication of an objective, historically-rooted, written divine revelation.¹⁸ Translation does not consist of a simplified summary of the Bible’s message (what we might call a paraphrase); it is rather an attempt to convey all the meaning as precisely as possible.

Exactly how one communicates accurately and precisely is, however, a debated question. Evaluating accuracy and equivalence in a translation is not a simple, straightforward process and multiple answers have been suggested. The following paragraphs will examine two major approaches to that question.¹⁹

Regardless of the method or the result we must realize that there is

¹⁷A similar definition may be found in Eugene A. Nida, *Signs, Sense, Translation* (Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1984), p. 119.

¹⁸This goal of accurate communication is stated in general terms here. It could be argued more narrowly that there could be different goals depending on the purpose or function which any particular translation is intended to serve, whether, e.g., it was designed for function in an established church, for children, or whether for introducing a totally foreign message in a culture with no previous exposure to the gospel (perhaps the proverbial tribal situation in which the language has just been reduced to writing for the first time). As one instance, De Vries suggests that “a single translation can never reflect all aspects of the source text. Translations always select certain aspects of the source text and it is the social function, the *skopos*, of the translation that determines the nature of the translational filter. For example, in a missionary framework where the translation is a pioneer translation, conveying the literary and rhetorical aspects of the source text has lower priority than communicating, as clearly as possible, the basic messages of the source text as perceived by the missionary translator. Any cultural or rhetorical aspect of the source text deemed to be non-essential to the basic message, will not be retained when it complicates the communicative process” (Lourens De Vries, “Bible Translations: Forms and Functions,” *The Bible Translator* 52 (July 2001): 308. I would suggest that a more narrow focus such as this is simply addressing the question of how accurate communication is best accomplished in a specific situation.

¹⁹I am well aware that this question is far more complex than the (over?) simplified dichotomy that I present here. Those desiring more comprehensive discussions would find the following discussions helpful: John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); D. A. Carson, “Translation and Treason: An Inevitable and Impossible Task,” in ch. 3 of *The Inclusive Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, 2nd ed. (Manchester/Boston: St. Jerome, 2000); Johannes Louw, ed., *Meaningful Translation*, UBS Monograph Series, no. 5 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991); Eugene Nida, *Signs, Sense, Translation*; and Glen Scorgie, Mark Strauss, and Steven Voth, eds., *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). The literature on the subject is voluminous and the few items noted here are simply some of those that I have found helpful.

no such thing as a perfect translation. Good ones, yes, but none that are perfect. This has long been recognized. We read in the Talmud that “he who translates a verse literally is a liar, and he who paraphrases is a blasphemer!”²⁰ Cicero, when translating Plato into Latin, bemoans the challenge:

It is hard to preserve in a translation the charm of expressions which in another language are most felicitous.... If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth, and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in the order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator.²¹

The Italian proverb “Traduttore traditore” (translators [are] traitors) reflects the same reality. This is not because translators deliberately distort their text.²² It simply recognizes that “it is impossible not to lose something when you translate an extended text from one language to another”²³—and usually something not in the donor text is added as well!²⁴ “There is always some loss in the communication process, for sources and receptors never have identical linguistic and cultural backgrounds.... The translator’s task, however, is to keep such

²⁰Rabbi Yehuda in Talmud Bavli, Nashim: Kiddushin 49a. One of my Jewish doctoral students offers this translation: “He who translates a Biblical verse literally is a liar, while he who adds thereto is a blasphemer and a libeler” (courtesy of Frantz St. Iago-Peretz, email 7/4/2005). I originally found a reference to this statement in Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 134, who cites it as “The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nashim 8: Kiddushim.”

²¹On Cicero, see Caroline Disler, “Cicero and Translation in the Summer of 45 BCE: A Study of *De finibus*, *Academica posteriora*, *Tusculanae Disputationes*” (M.A. thesis, York Univ., Toronto, 2004); abstract posted at <http://www.yorku.ca/trans/CaolineDisler.htm>, accessed 14 August 2006. There is also a listing of what appears to be the same thesis with the title, “A Philological Study of Cicero’s Translations in the Primary Sources: A Review of the *Tusculanae Disputationes*, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, *Academica posteriora*.” A related work is idem, “A Philological Study of the Concepts of ‘Translation’ in the Ancient World, as Used in Primary Sources” (M.A. thesis, York Univ., Toronto, 2004).

²²The proverb should not be pressed too far—and no one who cites it in connection with translation does so (though Poythress and Grudem seem to imply as much (*The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 183–84). A traitor is one who deliberately betrays; a translator inevitably betrays (in that he or she cannot represent the original perfectly), but not deliberately in an attempt to pervert the original.

²³Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*, p. 58. The Italian proverb illustrates this quite nicely since in the original language there is a deliberate play on the pronunciation of the two words (which are practically identical when you hear a native-Italian speaker recite the proverb!)—but the word play is totally lost in English where the words *translator* and *traitor* do not sound similar (though perhaps a weakened alliteration might be claimed).

²⁴E.g., separate forms for “we inclusive/exclusive” in some languages; languages with no passive voice; differing temporal reference systems, etc. (*ibid.*, p. 61).

loss at a minimum.”²⁵

Unhelpful Terminology

Translation theory has often been described in terms of two opposing philosophies: literal versus dynamic equivalent. Both of these terms are problematic.

Literal and/or “Word-for-Word”

First, “literal” is a very slippery term which has only a vague definition in most people’s minds, and even scholars find it difficult to agree on a definition. Too often it is assumed to refer to word-for-word translation. It is also frequently associated with “more accurate.” Neither assumption is valid. Translation is not a matter of finding word-for-word equivalents in another language. Languages seldom correspond at the word level. If a “translation” were attempted on such a basis (i.e., word-for-word), the result might be something like this:

Of the but Jesus Christ the birth thus it was becoming engaged of the mother of him Mary to the Joseph before or to come together them she was found in belly having out of Spirit Holy (Matt 1:18).²⁶

This is “precisely” (i.e., word-for-word) what the Greek text says if turned into English. No such translation has ever been published.²⁷ Those translations which claim (or are viewed) to be “literal” *always* make substantial adjustments away from “word-for-word” equivalents. Not only is “more literal” not necessarily “more accurate,” the opposite is often the case. For example, Job may say (31:27, “literally”), “my hand kissed my mouth”—but what meaning could that possibly communicate in English?! Even in the context of one’s heart being enticed by the sun and moon an English reader would never suspect that this was a gesture of worship. Far better to follow the modern translations and read “I threw them a kiss” (HCSB) or “my hand offered them

²⁵Jan de Waard and Eugene Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), p. 42.

²⁶I first heard a similar rendition of this verse from Hall Harris in a presentation of the NET BIBLE. It also appears in the preface to the NET NT (1998), p. 10.

²⁷The closest to such unintelligibility are *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, rev. ed. (reprint of 1898 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) and the *Concordant Version of the Sacred Scriptures*, ed. A. E. Knoch, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: Concordant Pub. Concern, 1931), the latter of which produces such nonsense as: “But we have had the rescript of death in ourselves in order that we may be having no confidence in ourselves, but in God, Who rouses the dead, Who rescues us from a prodigious death, and will be rescuing, on Whom we rely, that He will still be rescuing also; you also assisting together by a petition for us, that from many faces He may be thanked for us by many, for our gracious gift” (2 Cor 1:9–11)!

a kiss of homage” (NIV), even though these are not “literal” translations. Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear.²⁸ There are better terms to address the concerns that are typically raised in this regard.

Dynamic Equivalence

Second, “dynamic equivalence,” though popular, is an outdated term. The older term “dynamic equivalence” was coined and defined by Eugene Nida. He explained that this term described “the quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that *the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors*.”²⁹ But as Carson points out, this is a bit silly, if well-intentioned.³⁰ Do we really want to produce the same response? In many (if not most) cases, of course, we have no way of knowing just what the original recipients’ response was. The Corinthians, as one example, responded quite poorly to Paul’s letter which we know as 1 Corinthians! The goal of translation should not be defined in terms of response, but of accurate communication of meaning.

Formal Equivalence

Discussions of translation theory would be helped considerably if more accurate, technical terminology were adopted. The most

²⁸As two additional examples, Prov 15:17 refers to a curiously “stalled ox” in the KJV (“literally,” “an ox of the stall”), but is much more clearly translated as “a fattened calf/ox” (NIV, HCSB, ESV, etc.). Amos 4:6 perplexes the modern reader with its reference to dental hygiene: “I [God] have given you cleanness of teeth” (KJV, ESV). Less “literal,” but much more accurately, we might translate “I gave you absolutely nothing to eat” (HCSB) or “I gave you empty stomachs” (NIV). Herbert Wolf discusses many examples like this: “When ‘Literal’ Is Not Accurate,” in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 127–36.

²⁹Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 202, emphasis added. The term “dynamic” is presumably related to the “response.” This concept is not original with Nida since a remarkably similar statement occurs thirty years earlier: “The new verses should produce the same effect upon their readers as the originals did upon their contemporaries” (U. v. Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, “Was ist Übersetzen?” in *Reden und Aufsätze* [Berlin, 1902?], as cited by Stanley E. Porter, “Eugene Nida and Translation,” *The Bible Translator* 56 [January 2005]: 8, n. 2). I have wondered if this is exactly what Nida intended, however. In other writings his use of the term *dynamic* seems to imply not the emotional or volitional response of the reader, but rather the reader’s understanding of the message. See, for example, his discussion in *Signs, Sense, Translation*, pp. 119–20. (This was a 1984 discussion; his use of “functional equivalence” dates, I think, to 1986; see n. 36 below.) I do not know of many translations that profess to aim for this goal.

³⁰Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*, p. 71.

appropriate terminology in this arena is not a dichotomy of literal versus dynamic equivalence (which are not parallel, contrastive terms anyway), but rather a spectrum with formal equivalence on one end and functional equivalence on the other.

Formal equivalence is a translation approach that seeks to reproduce the grammatical and syntactical *form* of the donor language³¹ as closely as possible in the receptor language.³² Thus for each word in the donor language, the same part of speech is used in the receptor language and, as much as possible, in the same sequence.³³ For example, Greek nouns are translated by English nouns, participles as participles, etc. The guiding assumption here is that meaning is most accurately communicated by reproducing the *form* of the original.

Functional Equivalence

Functional equivalence, by contrast, focuses on the *meaning* of the text and attempts to accurately communicate the same meaning in the receptor language, even if doing so sometimes requires the use of different grammatical and syntactical forms.³⁴ Although the form may differ somewhat in functional equivalence, the translation *functions* the same as the original in that it accurately communicates the *same* meaning.³⁵

This approach should not be described as a “thought for thought” translation, but one which alters the grammatical form when necessary to preserve accuracy of meaning. In some cases form and meaning are

³¹The donor language is the language from which one is translating (e.g., Greek in the case of the NT); the receptor language is the (modern) language into which one translates (e.g., English, Spanish, etc.).

³²This is sometimes referred to as “Lightfoot’s dictum”: “the same English words to represent the same Greek words...as far as possible in the same order” (cited in the preface of the NET BIBLE, p. 7; the citation source is not given). The context here is the translation of the English Revised Version of 1885.

³³Or, in Porter’s summary, “an attempt at consistency in rendering vocabulary, a word-order that attempts to maintain closeness to the original, and often a use of archaic or at least stilted modern language, because of either a felt need to maintain a tradition of biblical translation or a hesitance to become overly colloquial and perhaps to jeopardize the proper sound of the venerated text” (“Eugene Nida and Translation,” p. 9).

³⁴“The question...is whether the translation captures the content of the message in the source language and communicates it effectively to the receptor—even if it means that some of the features of the source language must be abandoned as one finds suitable equivalents in meaning in the receptor language” (ibid., p. 11).

³⁵The terminology “functional equivalence” comes from the original proponent of “dynamic equivalence,” Eugene Nida, who set forth his statement in 1986 as to the reason for the change of terminology to “functional equivalence” (*From One Language to Another*, pp. vii–viii). Much of that reason revolved around a misunderstanding of the translation method and abuse of it by some translators.

interrelated, and in such cases functional equivalence will attempt to preserve the necessary formal elements. But in most instances the form is language-specific and is not essential to expressing the meaning in another language. In many cases it cannot be maintained. Every translation, including the most formal, makes many substantial revisions to the form of the original.

It is also important to note that functional equivalence translation theory is not an excuse to do whatever the translator wants with the text. The standard textbook on the subject guards such changes carefully and explicitly spells out the circumstances in which it is and is not legitimate to make a change in the form of the original.³⁶ Using a functional equivalent expression in a translation is not perfect (neither is a formal equivalent in many cases!), but it can often facilitate accurate communication. At times a functional expression may make contextually implicit information explicit, which, though often helpful in terms of understanding, does change an implication into an assertion.³⁷ Though this may sound “dangerous,” it is also dangerous if a formal equivalent either does not communicate or communicates inaccurately due to the reader’s lack of ability to decipher implicit information. This is frequently the case with cultural information and idiomatic expressions,³⁸ but is also true at the grammatical-syntactical level where there is not semantic equivalence with similar grammatical forms.³⁹ There are limitations of using functional equivalents in translation, but the careful and cautious use of such is essential in any attempt to communicate the text of Scripture accurately.⁴⁰

³⁶Nida, *From One Language to Another*, pp. 36–40. This is sometimes recognized by advocates of formal equivalence. The discussion by Poythress and Grudem (both involved with the ESV) presents a more balanced discussion of the contrasting emphases of functional equivalence than most formal advocates (*The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 169–93).

³⁷On this, see De Vries, “Bible Translations,” pp. 309–12.

³⁸See the examples cited in n. 43.

³⁹This can be seen most easily if one compares the Greek genitive construction with similar “of constructions” in English (or in other languages, e.g., Dutch *van*, German *von*, Spanish/French *de*, etc.). Although often treated as equivalents by those with little language fluency, the semantic range and collocations of these similar terms is quite different (see De Vries, “Bible Translations,” pp. 310–11).

⁴⁰D. A. Carson addressed some of these limitations in his article “The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (July 1985): 200–13. This article has been substantially revised and expanded in his newer article, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—And Other Limits, Too,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Scorgie, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 65–113. See also his article “New Bible Translations: An Assessment and Prospect,” in *The Bible in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Howard Clark Kee (New York: American Bible Society, 1993), pp. 37–67, with responses on pp. 68–88.

Functional equivalents are not new. Although the translation theory which formally defines such differences is of recent origin, the technique did not originate in the late twentieth century. Functional equivalent translation is found in the Septuagint⁴¹ and the venerable KJV also used functional equivalents in many instances.⁴² Even the NASB, one of the most formal translations, uses functional equivalence, though not as extensively as other translations.⁴³

Some advocates of formal equivalence confuse two disparate definitions, attributing the older dynamic equivalence goal to the newer functional equivalent approach. For example, Raymond Van Leeuwen says that “newer FE [functional equivalent] translations [change] what was written. They do not so much translate Paul’s *words* into English words as try to find a *meaning* already familiar to Americans. *They hope the new American meaning will affect readers the same way Paul’s meaning affected his readers.* The two meanings are meant to be functionally equivalent.”⁴⁴ This is a misrepresentation of functional equivalence, not only in the use of an incorrect definition, but also in the attribution of dual meanings, implying a *divergent* meaning in the translation.

⁴¹There is considerable diversity throughout the disparate translations that comprise what is usually referenced as the Septuagint, various portions of which contain different proportions of formal/functional translation. As an example of one situation in which the LXX employed functional equivalence, it is interesting that they were reticent to translate עֲלֵךְ or צוּר (rock) as πέτρα if God was the referent. For example, in 2 Sam 22:3, אֱלֹהֵי צוּרִי אֲסִתְּחַבֵּי (‘‘my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge’’) becomes in the LXX, ὁ θεὸς μου φύλαξ ἔσται μου (‘‘my God will be my guard’’; also v. 47). Other such translations of עֲלֵךְ or צוּר include κτίστης (creator, 2 Sam 22:33); στερέωμα (firmness, Ps 18:2); βοηθός (helper, Ps 18:2); and ἀντιλήπτωρ (protector, Ps 42:9). In each such case the LXX translators have provided a functional equivalent by interpreting the metaphor.

⁴²When Paul is made to say in Rom 6:2, ‘‘God forbid!’’ it is interesting to note that Paul’s statement in Greek (μὴ γένοιτο) includes the equivalent of neither the word ‘‘God’’ nor the word ‘‘forbid!’’ How then did the KJV translators get ‘‘God forbid’’? That expression, a common one in the 16th and 17th centuries, was a good functional equivalent for expressing Paul’s meaning in this context. This is not an isolated example. To cite just a few others, compare the KJV with the original text in these passages: 1 Sam 10:24 (‘‘God save the king’’), Matt 27:44 (‘‘the thieves cast the same in his teeth’’), Luke 19:23 (‘‘wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank?’’), and Eph 3:21 (‘‘world without end’’). See the lengthy study by M. E. Elliott, *The Language of the King James Bible: A Glossary Explaining Its Words and Expressions* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967).

⁴³In Amos 6:10 NASB translates very functionally (and anachronistically!) with ‘‘undertaker’’ for the expression ‘‘the one burning him’’ (or ‘‘his burner’’). Haggai 2:16 reads formally, ‘‘when he came to a heap of twenty,’’ but NASB reads ‘‘when one came to a *grain* heap of twenty *measures*.’’ Even though italics have indicated words supplied, this is a nonformal, interpretive rendering—and a correct one. For a few examples from Acts, see 14:12, 28; and 15:7.

⁴⁴‘‘We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,’’ *Christianity Today*, 22 October 2001, p. 31, emphasis added.

We will return to this issue below; for now let it be said that the goal of any legitimate translation at any point on the formal-functional spectrum is to accurately communicate *the same meaning* as the donor text.

The Translation Spectrum

These two approaches are not to be thought of as mutually exclusive categories. *All* translations include both formal and functional equivalents. Any individual translation may be judged to use a greater or lesser degree of formal or functional equivalence and thus fall on a different part of the translation spectrum. No translation can completely ignore the form of the original. If it did, one would not have a translation at all but a new work altogether. On the other hand, no translation can be completely formal if it is to communicate with any degree of accuracy in another language. It is not possible to translate any extended literary corpus without employing both formal and functional equivalence.

It *is* appropriate to class translations as *more formal* or *more functional*, though this is a *relative* categorization and not an absolute one.⁴⁵ The following is one possible view of such relationships among translation philosophies.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Some translations attempt to avoid these terms or at least a comparison with them. The NKJV professed to follow “complete equivalence,” the new *Holman Christian Standard Bible* opts for “optimal equivalence,” and Poythress and Grudem prefer “maximal equivalence,” but these do not provide a third pole or axis on the translation field. Rather they are simply another target along the spectrum between formal and functional—differing assessments as to the proper balance point between formal and functional equivalence. There are actually a cluster of relatively recent translations that profess an attempt to balance these two concerns, including NKJV, ESV, NRSV, NIV, ISV, and HCSB. The balance point is slightly different in each as various editors and groups of translators have different emphases in achieving such a balance.

Two proposals which suggest different approaches are the tri-polar models proposed by J. Barton Payne and Lourens de Vries. Payne suggests fluent, dignified, and literal as the three poles and presents a triangular schematic of translations. This works only by separating fluent and dignified, which are two related aspects of functional equivalence (“What Is the Best English Version?” in *The New Testament Student and Bible Translation*, ed. John Skilton [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978], pp. 153–57). More innovative is the proposal of de Vries, which consists of three poles: formal, functional, and semantic equivalence (“Bible Translations,” pp. 306–19). His own terminology is form-oriented, interpretation-oriented, and meaning-oriented. The alternate terms are used here to enable an easier comparison with the standard categories. This proposal is worth further study; my initial impression is that “interpretation” and “meaning” are not sufficiently distinct. De Vries defends his view by appeal to H. Grice, “Logic and Conversation,” in P. Cole and J. Morgan, *Syntax and Semantics* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 3:41–58. Another treatise on the subject that also casts the discussion in wider, more diverse categories is Gutt, *Translation and Relevance*.

⁴⁶Please note that this scale is not proportional; only the relative positions are

←More formal	More functional→
ASV-NASB KJV-RSV-ESV HCSB NIV TNIV	GNB-CEV PHILLIPS

CONSIDERING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSPIRATION AND TRANSLATION

BIBLIOLOGICAL ENTAILMENTS

With that long introduction, let us now turn to inquire as to the relationship between inspiration and translation. Does our view of the Bible as an inerrant, verbally-plenarily inspired, authoritative text have any impact on our view of translation? If so, what might that be? There are some very obvious entailments of our bibliological views.

First, if we accept the Bible as inspired and inerrant in the original autographs, then we will be very concerned to represent it accurately in translation. Indeed, this view of Scripture *requires* us to translate the Bible into modern languages and to do so as accurately as possible. Were we to fail to do this, God's *revelation* would no longer be a revelation. As Bruce Waltke has so aptly said in his exposition of Proverbs 30:1–6,

To my knowledge, Agur's confession is the most sustained argument in the Bible for the necessity of *special revelation*...to bridge the gulf between the infinite and the finite—to make the inaccessible accessible, the impossible possible, and the hidden known; and to transform humanity's epistemological despair to hope.

Without a translation into lucid English, however, Agur's enigmatic confession cannot be understood by even the most devoted reader of English. In other words, the translator *also* aims to make the inaccessible accessible, the impossible possible, and the hidden known. The translator also transforms the human epistemological despair over not knowing God's special revelation into hope.⁴⁷

We do not treat the Bible as Islam does the Koran and deny that it can be accurately communicated in any language other than the

significant. Versions linked with a dash indicate those with a similar translation philosophy. Similar charts that reflect roughly the same relative positions may be found in Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 42; Robert Milliman, "Translation Theory and Twentieth-Century Versions," in *One Bible Only*, ed. R. Beacham and K. Bauder (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), p. 146; and on the International Bible Society web site, accessed 12 March 2004, available from <http://www.gospelcom.net/ibs/bibles/translations/index.php>.

⁴⁷Bruce K. Waltke, "Agur's Apologia for Verbal, Plenary Inspiration: An Exegesis of Proverbs 30:1–6," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Scorgie, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 313–14 (emphasis in the original).

original.⁴⁸ A book that only the initiate can read does not serve God's revelatory purpose in disclosing to us the vitally important truth that we could not otherwise know. That he determined to have the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ recorded in Koine Greek, the *lingua franca* (the common trade language) of the first-century world, tells us that it is a message intended for the people. By using Greek, God assured that wherever the apostles and the early Christians carried the message it could be understood.

Second, this initial conclusion also has implications as to the place of modern translations. Since all languages continually change, there is a real sense in which translation is a task that is never finished. There can never be a single translation of the Bible in any language which will serve for all time as the only acceptable translation. Though some may prove useful for long periods of time (some longer than others), all will eventually prove to be of value only for historical studies since they will no longer be intelligible to the speakers of the language. This may be illustrated in English by examining texts from the early periods of the language, including Bible translations.

The oldest known piece of English literature is Beowulf, an epic dating from the 8th century A.D. Here are the opening lines:

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
 beodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

It is totally unintelligible to anyone today except those few students of Old English. With their help, we can read the same text in translation:

⁴⁸The reference to the Islamic tradition that the Koran is untranslatable could be challenged. It is apparently the earlier Islamic traditions that forbid translation. I do not know if there is an "official" doctrine in this regard in contemporary Islam, though given the diversity of that religion and the many competing groups, it is likely that there is no unity on this subject. Obviously the Koran has been translated frequently into many other languages. Many Islamic web sites recommend particular translations, though the tone is almost always, "you really should learn Arabic to read it in the original." As one sample, "Arabic is the language of the Quran, the text revealed to Prophet Muhammad. Muslims from...all over the world do their five daily prayers in Arabic.... *It is incumbent upon every seeker of the truth to gain an understanding of Arabic*" ("Arabic Letters," accessed 27 July 2005, available from <http://www.islam101.com/quran/letters.html>, emphasis added). For an Islamic article evaluating various English translations of the Koran, see A. R. Kidwai, "Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of the Quran," accessed 27 July 2005, available from <http://www.quran.org.uk/out.php?LinkID=57>. This article recommends "a brief, though highly useful, survey of the Muslim attitudes towards the permissibility of translating the text of the revelation to non-Arabic tongues" by M. Ayoub, "Translating the Meaning of the Quran: Traditional Opinions and Modern Debates," *Afkar Inquiry* 3 (Ramadan 1406/May 1986): 349.

Lo! We have listened to many a lay,
Of the Sear-Dames' fame,
their splendor of old...

The Wessex Gospels constitute one of the oldest translations of any portion of the Bible into English. Here is the parable of the soils from these Gospels, also written in Old English (though more recent than *Beowulf*):

Sothlice ut eode se sawere his saed to sawenne. And tha tha he seow,
summu hie feollon with weg, and fulgas comon and aeton tha.

Even when we move to Middle English,⁴⁹ there are still considerable difficulties in understanding the message. The Lord's Prayer reads as follows in Middle English:

Oure Fader that art in heuene,
halewed be thi name.
Thi kyngdom come to us.
Thi wylle be don,
as in heuene, and in erthe.

Due to its authority and unique role in Christianity (a "religion of the Book"), translations of the Bible tend to be perpetuated considerably longer than the intelligibility of their language would otherwise suggest. There is some value in this tendency in that it portrays the historical rootedness of our faith and reminds us that Christianity was not invented yesterday by the most recent innovation, whether in translation, ecclesiological model, or worship style. But the replacement of aging translations is inevitable. If we are committed to a revealed Bible that God intends to be understood by every Christian, then we must at some point evaluate the translation we have used for many years to determine if it is still serving the communicative function as it originally did. Such changes ought to be infrequent; it may not be wise for an individual to make such a change more than once or twice in a lifetime, or for a church to make such a change more than once in a generation, and then only with considerable deliberation.⁵⁰ But change is inevitable if we are to continue to communicate the

⁴⁹The English language is divided into Old English (before A.D. 1100), Middle English (A.D. 1100–1450), and Modern English (since A.D. 1450).

⁵⁰Such changes have unintended consequences for life and ministry. They may disrupt Scripture memory habits and can also result in a curious mix of citation and wording from the pulpit. But these are neither insurmountable nor determinative considerations in a decision to switch translations. The priority must always be on effectiveness in accurate communication of the message. Certainly a church ought not to change translations every time the pastor changes (unless there has been a much, much longer than average ministry)!

changeless Word of God to a changing world.

The technical advances of our lifetime have resulted in much greater awareness of multiple translations. As a result it is much more difficult to establish standards in local church ministry—where some standardization has considerable benefits. Some have been unwilling to ask the tough questions or make sensitive recommendations for change since most Christians develop deep (and understandable) emotional ties to their Bible. We ought to recommend that Christians use multiple translations for study, even if they prefer a particular version for their regular reading. Pastors ought to lead their people to recognize the value of a standard translation for local church ministry. This facilitates both education programs, Scripture memory, and preaching. Some reactionary groups actually check people's Bibles at the church door to enforce conformity, but this is foolish in the extreme. We need to recognize that we live in a day of multiple translations. A recognized standard neither precludes nor requires that everyone carry only one specific translation to church services. Instead of withdrawal and isolation from such a world, pastors need to teach their people the issues involved and help them make wise decisions as to which Bibles they will use.

INSPIRED TRANSLATIONS?

The two entailments of our bibliology summarized above may be the most obvious ones. There are, however, two additional issues to be considered. First, is verbal plenary inspiration compatible with translation? Or to pose a related question, is a translation inspired? Second, does our view of an inspired, inerrant, authoritative revelation require us to adopt one particular approach to translation? Particularly, does verbal plenary inspiration require us to use a formal equivalence translation model? Each of these questions will be examined in turn.

The Objections of Craig Allert

Craig Allert has argued that there is an unbridgeable gap between Bible translation and verbal plenary inspiration. Holding this view of inspiration, he argues, makes it impossible to view any translation as inspired.⁵¹ He insists quite strongly that we must have an inspired Bible (though he never really says why this is so important) and therefore we must redefine inspiration in such a way that we can maintain that claim apart from the problematic "verbal" qualifier. His solution is to define inspiration in functional, conceptual terms which protect the

⁵¹Craig D. Allert, "Is a Translation Inspired? The Problems of Verbal Inspiration for Translation and a Proposed Solution," in *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Stanley Porter and Richard Hess, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, vol. 173 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 85.

message; it becomes a descriptive term, a faith claim used by the church to characterize writings which have been appropriated because they accurately reflect what the community as a whole believes. Some of these documents have come to be valued more highly than others and have thus been canonized. Since it is almost entirely in translation that these documents function usefully in the church, they may thus be described as inspired. The “loss” of a verbally, plenary inspired text is a non-issue since there is no pragmatic value to such non-existent documents anyway. Such a doctrine is irrelevant—the church has gotten along nicely with non-verbally inspired documents for two millennia anyway.⁵²

Allert’s proposal is quite radical—a postmodern challenge of an orthodox view of Scripture. He proposes two major criticisms of verbal plenary inspiration in relation to translation. The first objection that he raises is that any form of verbal inspiration is incompatible with textual variants. Since verbal inspiration insists that the exact words of the text are important, the fact that there are textual variants which preclude absolute certainty make it “uncertain whether a text can be regarded as verbally inspired.” He recognizes that the standard response is that none of these variants affect any area of doctrine since the text is still reliable. This, Allert says, is inconsistent since “the importance of the God-chosen words is overshadowed by the concept or meaning of the text.” It is not legitimate, on the one hand, to place great emphasis on the fact that God caused specific words to be written, and, on the other hand, to argue that variants which change these exact words have little significance to the meaning of the text. “The importance of verbal inspiration is thus lost to the practical value of the text. Even if verbal inspiration could be proven, it matters little to the community who hold the Bible as authoritative.” If the text is not thus verbally identical with the original, verbally-inspired text, then it cannot be described as verbally inspired, and if this is the case, then no translation can be considered to be inspired either.⁵³

The second objection relates to the role of interpretation in translation. He explains adequately that all translation involves interpretation—that interpretation is an inescapable part of the very process of translation.⁵⁴ From this fact he draws the conclusion that “the verbal

⁵²Ibid., pp. 85, 96, 111–13.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 91–92 passim.

⁵⁴This contention has been challenged or denied by many well-meaning conservatives, but such attitudes are indefensible in any considered examination of what is involved in the process of translation. As an example of naïveté in this regard, Allert cites Iain Murray, “Which Version? A Continuing Debate...” in *The New Testament Student and Bible Translation*, ed. John Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), pp. 124–38. For a brief but careful discussion of this matter from a conservative perspective, see Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*, pp. 71–72.

inspiration school should logically argue that we should not translate because it distorts the originally inspired *words*.⁵⁵ He explains this conclusion as follows:

It is not possible to render a text in exactly the same words as the original.... If the very words are inspired in the original, then changing the words and phrases to be understood in the receptor's mode of thought renders the inspired words uninspired. It is impossible to get the exact nuance of a word from one language to another. And...in some cases we cannot even be sure what the meaning of the word is in every context.

If the exact words are inspired they must, therefore, be important. But the exact wording cannot be retained in translation.⁵⁶

Allert argues, in essence, that since an untranslated document is not a functional tool for the church, therefore we must translate, and since we must maintain an inspired text (even in translation), then we must jettison the view of verbal inspiration that does not conform to this need. It is the inspired *message* rather than inspired *words* that is important. "Verbal inspiration is, therefore, an irrelevant doctrine because the Church has functioned with non-inspired documents (in the verbal inspiration sense) for almost two thousand years."⁵⁷

Response to Allert

What might be said in response to these criticisms? The following paragraphs include a brief response to Allert's arguments against a verbal view of inspiration, but more importantly consider his claim that we must define inspiration in such a way as to have an inspired *translation*. In roughly the order summarized above I would respond as follows.

1. The absolute certainty that Allert demands in textual matters is not possible. The text is as certain as possible given the evidence—and there is plenty of it.⁵⁸ To demand absolute certainty is unrealistic in most areas of life, and this is no exception.⁵⁹

2. Are words "overshadowed" by meaning in verbal inspiration? This is a false dichotomy—meaning can only be expressed in words.

⁵⁵Allert, "Is a Translation Inspired?" p. 96.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 95–96 (quote from p. 96).

⁵⁸As but one example, in round terms, we have nearly 6,000 manuscripts of all or part of the NT. This mass of data is essentially agreed in perhaps 99% of the text.

⁵⁹Although in a slightly different context (semantics), Silva's comment is apropos: "We need not be disturbed when complete precision and certainty elude us; responsible uncertainty will take us considerably further than baseless assurance" (Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], p. 177).

Verbal inspiration does not attribute semantic significance to individual grammatical elements such as a moveable nu (which accounts for as many textual variants as any other category in the NT). Meaning is communicated as a structured whole and any language, including the verbally inspired text of Scripture, has sufficient redundancy, uncertainty, vagueness, and ambiguity to communicate accurately despite “noise” and minor variants.⁶⁰ Those who attempt “grammatical maximalism” may have greater difficulty answering Allert on this point, but a responsible view of language is not at risk.⁶¹

3. Does verbal inspiration “matter little to the community”? In one sense that is correct in that the vast majority of believers could not access the verbally inspired autographa if they were available anyway. It is certainly true that for two millennia most believers have known the Scriptures only in translation, but does this render verbal inspiration “irrelevant” and of no pragmatic value? The answer must be no. Apart from an authoritative original no one can have confidence in a derivative edition (whether in Hebrew/Greek or in English). There must be something to translate, and that original must be accurately vouchsafed to be authoritative and dependable.

As an analogy, consider the matter of weights and measures. The science of metrology is concerned with establishing standards and verification for the various forms of measurement. For a specific example, the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (Bureau International des Poids et Mesures, or: BIPM) in Sèvres, Paris maintains the official International Prototype Kilogram. It consists of an alloy of 90% platinum 10% iridium with a density of 21,500kg/m³, and was

⁶⁰These terms are used in their technical linguistic sense, not the nontechnical, popular use. In brief, redundancy is the repetition of the same semantic information in different ways in a text, some of which can be omitted without affecting the meaning; uncertainty refers to the lack of specificity in a given word (e.g., those that may have several meanings or referents); vagueness is a deliberate lack of specificity in word choice or syntactical construction (e.g., *cow* instead of *Holstein*); ambiguity refers to lexical multivalency that can only be resolved by context; and “noise” (any type of distortion or distraction in the transmission of information that makes it more difficult to understand). On these language features, see Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, pp. 56, 93–97, 108–10, 131–33 (the last reference cited here discusses these features particularly in terms of their relevance to textual criticism); idem, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings*, pp. 136, 148–56; see also Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 82, and Martin Joos, “Semantic Axiom Number One,” *Language* 48 (1972): 257–65.

⁶¹“Grammatical maximalism” is an approach to language that seeks to imbue every minor grammatical and syntactical detail with semantic significance. It may be the approach of maximalists that form the target of Allert’s attack, but despite being a popular (if poorly thought out) approach to the text, this is by no means inherent in a verbal view of inspiration. For a discussion and bibliography, see Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, *Studies in Biblical Greek*, vol. 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 154–55.

made in 1879 by George Matthey of London, in the form of a cylinder, 39 mm tall and 39 mm in diameter. This is the standard by which all other kilogram measures are established. Were it not for a standard reference such as this, there would be no basis upon which to speak of a kilogram.⁶² So with Scripture. Were there not a “standard” there would be no basis upon which to speak of “Scripture.” As with the International Prototype Kilogram, there is a very precise standard: a verbally inspired original.

Allert is right on one point, however. Since a translation is not verbally identical with the original, verbally inspired text, the translation cannot be described as verbally inspired. If it were requisite that all copies of Scripture were verbally identical, then we would have to follow the Islamic tradition and forbid translation altogether since *any* translation changes *all* the words.⁶³

4. In regard to his objection related to interpretation, Allert misrepresents verbal inspiration as believing that individual words are the most important feature of the doctrine. But this is a straw man. Yes, we believe that the exact words of the autographa were the words God wanted written, but these words are not isolate entities; they are rather components of propositional statements. We do not translate solitary verbal chunks; we translate propositions—intelligible, coherent, verbal statements. The “exact wording” of the original must *always* be changed, yet there is no proposition that cannot be expressed in any other language. As one aspect of the *imago Dei*, language is a reflection of God’s rational nature. It is his gift to enable communication—and to enable cognition of his revelation by human beings.

That there must be interpretation in order to translate is undeniable, but that is also true of reading and understanding the (untranslated) original text. Even a first century native speaker of Koine Greek upon reading Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, must interpret the statement in order to understand it or to translate it. It is not just an undifferentiated string of characters, nor a series of unrelated words, nor is it immediately obvious just what are the referents of each of these words. (Who/what is θεός? What θεός is this? What did John intend by telling us about θεός? etc.)

5. As to Allert’s comment that we do not always know the

⁶²Varying degrees of accuracy are acceptable for differing purposes. When I fill out a medical questionnaire asking for my weight, I can respond, “160 lbs.,” even though my bathroom scales might read 162—and my doctor might say “161.5.” Of course more precise scales might read 161.5139! In the context above this range might represent the range evident in the translations—all of which are sufficiently accurate for most purposes, though when greater precision is necessary recourse must be made to the original.

⁶³I will give Allert the benefit of the doubt and assume that he does not intend to imply that translation can be done on the basis of a word-for-word substitution model!

meaning of some words in particular contexts, that is our problem (one of ignorance), not a problem with the original text. That we do not always have sufficient data to be confident as to the meaning of, say, ἐπιούσιος does not mean that the original readers did not understand it.⁶⁴ Note, too, that these semantic issues are matters of the original, untranslated text and do not necessarily impinge on a translation (though they may do so).

6. Finally, his definition of inspiration results in a church-produced Bible rather than a Bible-produced church. That is, it turns the proper relationship between church and Bible on its head.

Allert's objections (some imagined, some of greater substance) lead him to the conclusion that we must reformulate our definition of inspiration in order to preserve an inspired translation for the church. There is an alternate conclusion which better handles the data and Scripture's own self-attestation as the verbally inspired revelation of God: we should conclude instead that inspiration is not to be attributed to a translation at all. There is no biblical assurance that any translator would be borne along (φέρω, 2 Pet 1:21) in his work. We must respect what the text says in this regard and what it does not say. The only entity which receives the biblical designation as θεόπνευστος is Scripture itself. Neither author, writer, nor translation ever receives this descriptor.⁶⁵

INSPIRED METHODOLOGY?

Does verbal plenary inspiration require us to use a formal equivalence translation model? This seems to be a popular impression, both by laymen and by beginning language students. It has even been advocated in some published works on translation. Some view this as essential to orthodoxy, so it is not a light charge to be ignored.

The Challenge by Leland Ryken

The most extensive statement of this position in recent publications is that of Leland Ryken.⁶⁶ Consider his charges; I quote at

⁶⁴Allert's example of ἰλασμός is more theological than lexical. That some object to the doctrine of propitiation and insist on expiation is due to theological presuppositions, not to a lack of data.

⁶⁵We will return to this same issue in the next section, so further development will be left until that point.

⁶⁶Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002). The book is written as a defense of the translation philosophy of the ESV and comes from the same publisher. Although my response to Ryken's book will be rather negative, this is not intended to reflect on the ESV as a translation. It is perhaps unfortunate that an English professor chose to write a book on theology and translation issues such as the ones discussed here. The ESV is a serviceable translation in the "formal" tradition. My evaluation of this translation has

some length to make his position clear and to show that it is not a passing comment—it is a major burden of his book.

In establishing the reliability of a text, everything depends on whether the actual words of the author have been accurately preserved....

...The irony is that in some translation processes this care to preserve the original text is repeatedly and casually disregarded when translators turn the original into English. Words are changed, added, and deleted with apparent ease and frequency. Surely there should be some carryover of principle between the scrupulousness of attention to the actual words of the Bible in the original languages and the way in which that text is transcribed into English.⁶⁷

Three interrelated doctrines are particularly relevant to Bible translation. They are the authority of the Bible, the inspiration of biblical authors by the Holy Spirit, and the verbal or plenary (“full, complete”) inspiration of the Bible. I will make my own position clear right at the outset: I believe that these three doctrines lead logically to a translation that is essentially literal. Correspondingly, I believe that dynamic equivalence translations have led many evangelicals to compromise (perhaps unwittingly) the very doctrines of the Word that they theoretically espouse.⁶⁸

So far as Bible translation is concerned, the crucial principle is this: *We can rest assured that the Bible as it was written is in the form that God wants us to have...*

...If the writers of the Bible were at some level guided and even “carried along” by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), it is a logical conclusion that the Holy Spirit moved some biblical authors to write poetry, others to imagine prophetic visions, and so forth. The very *forms* of biblical writing are inspired, and to the fullest extent possible the forms of the original need to be carried into the syntax and structure of the receptor language.

been published as, “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” pp. 5–56. Another writer who implies a similar linkage between inspiration and translation (though the argument is not developed) is Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), p. 93. Wayne Grudem made the same linkage in his oral comments at the ETS annual meeting in San Antonio, 18 November 2004, “Are Only Some Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors ‘Essentially Literal’ Bible Translation,” which has since been published as ch. 1 of *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Translation* by Wayne Grudem, Leland Ryken, C. John Collins, Vern S. Poythress, and Bruce Winter (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), pp. 19–56. Grudem’s article was published after this essay had been written, so there is not direct interaction with it here. For a response, see Mark L. Strauss, “Do Literal Bible Versions Show Greater Respect for Plenary Inspiration? (A Response to Wayne Grudem),” paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Valley Forge, PA, 16 November 2005.

⁶⁷Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, pp. 29–30.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 126–27.

If this is true, certain implications for Bible translation follow....⁶⁹

We need to take seriously what we believe about the inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit. I do not feel free to change the words of Wordsworth or Dickens or C. S. Lewis, and the stakes are considerably higher with a book that I believe to be inspired by God.⁷⁰

Within the context of dynamic equivalent thinking, the descriptions of verbal inspiration are an implied rebuttal to the prevailing ideology of dynamic equivalence, because translators in that camp do not regard it as essential to retain the actual words of the original.

...The testimony of the Bible itself gives priority to the very *words* of the Bible, not to the thoughts....

...The application of the doctrine of verbal inspiration to Bible translation should be obvious: If the words rather than just the thoughts of the Bible are inspired by God, it is the words that a translation should reproduce.⁷¹

It is my belief that an essentially literal translation is congruent with the doctrine of verbal or plenary inspiration. Contrariwise, the preoccupation with dynamic equivalent Bibles is with the thoughts of Scripture, with no priority assigned to the words. I come to the unwelcome conclusion that many evangelicals who theoretically espouse the doctrine of verbal or plenary inspiration—who reject the position of theological liberalism that the Bible contains primarily the thoughts of God—are betrayed by their very choice of a dynamic equivalent translation into the position that they claim to reject....

I can imagine dynamic equivalent translators saying that they accept the doctrine of verbal and plenary inspiration. In that case, my reply is that my understanding of verbal inspiration is different from theirs, that I believe their translation practice to be incongruent with their view of inspiration, and that I do not see a basis for differentiating their emphasis on the thoughts rather than the words of the Bible from the twentieth-century liberal and neoorthodox position that gave rise to a renewed evangelical emphasis on plenary inspiration.⁷²

Response to Ryken

So, what are we to make of these charges? Several preliminary observations about Ryken's particular argument are in order. As is true of the remainder of his book, it is apparent that Ryken does not work proficiently with the biblical languages and has not attempted a translation such as he describes. Although he served as the English stylistic

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 129–30, emphasis in the original.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 131.

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 132–33.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 134–35.

consultant to the ESV, that does not mean that he understands the issues involved in translation.⁷³ He has also acknowledged in a public forum that he does not know and has never studied Hebrew or Greek, that he knows no modern language other than English, and has never attempted to translate anything.⁷⁴ This is evident in the extracts above.

He talks, for example, about “changing words”—but *all* the words have been changed in any translation. They were originally Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, but are now English (or Spanish, etc.). Hopefully this does not suggest that he views all the original words of the biblical texts as having one-to-one equivalents in English! Instead of being “essential” it is actually impossible “to retain the actual words of the original.” The words of the original certainly cannot be “reproduced” or “transcribed” into English. His analogy of not changing the words of Wordsworth or Dickens or C. S. Lewis is simplistic—they are English words to begin with! His argument would not work if the English text at hand were Beowulf, or if the issue at hand were a translation of Dickens into Tagalog.

He also criticizes the addition and deletion of words. In one sense, *all* the original words have been deleted; there are no more Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words in a translation. But as anyone should know who has had even a semester of Greek (or any other language, ancient or modern), it is *always* necessary to supply additional words not represented by any specific word in the original text. Languages simply do not correspond at the word level. Hardly any sentence will have the same number of words when translated regardless of whether one works with a formal or functional model. There may be more or fewer words in the translation when compared with the original. If there are more, have we “added” to God’s Word? If there are fewer words, have we “omitted” anything from God’s Word?

A few simple examples may be helpful. First, instances in which there may be fewer words in English than in Greek (this is less common, but not at all rare). If a Greek phrase uses a preposition with an articular infinitive (three words), it may well be represented in English as simply “to x” (i.e., just an English preposition). In this case we have two words in English representing three words in Greek. Likewise with abstract nouns Greek normally uses an article, English does not. We thus have two words in Greek but only one in English. Second, consider instances in which the translation requires more words than the original (this is much more common). The most obvious examples

⁷³His theological perspective might also be challenged in that he equates verbal inspiration with plenary inspiration—but those terms are distinct and each expresses a different concept. On this, see the discussion in the definitions section above.

⁷⁴Ryken’s public statement was in the discussion session following his paper at the national ETS meeting, November 2004, responding to a series of questions posed by Mark Strauss.

are words in Greek which must have two or more words in English to translate. Almost any verb would qualify since every finite verb contains an inherent subject; thus ἀγαπάω means, not “love,” but “I love.” Or, flipping the lexicon open at random,⁷⁵ ὁμοιόω means “I make like” (three words for one), and ὁμοιοπαθής means “with the same nature” (four words for one). Or what about ἰλασμός? Is the obsolete word “propitiation” the only legitimate translation—even though no one untrained in theology has any idea what propitiation means? Would not “satisfactory sacrifice” be a legitimate alternative that might well communicate more accurately what John meant by ἰλασμός in 1 John 2:2? Other situations that are equally valid include the necessary addition of words to translate many of the prepositions and case relations in the New Testament, or (especially) the translation of adverbial participles.

Following are two examples, both drawn from the ESV (which Ryken advocates as the right way to translate). For example, consider Romans 1:5, εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως, which the ESV translates, “to bring about the obedience of faith.” Though probably correct and certainly helpful, this must be judged as a subjective translation of εἰς with the accusative (which might more formally be left as simply “unto”). It also uses three English words for one Greek word. Or 1 Timothy 3:10, εἶτα διακονεῖτωσαν ἀνέγκλητοι ὄντες. The ESV translates, “then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.” Formally this reads, “then let them serve being blameless.” The use of “if” is justifiable if the adverbial participle ὄντες is understood as a conditional participle, but the additions of “as deacons” and “prove themselves” are interpretive/exegetical additions which, even though an accurate understanding of Paul’s point here, is not what the text actually says—and it once again uses four English words for one Greek word.

Ryken produces a *non sequitur* argument when he first argues that the genre of the original text was divinely intentional in terms of the form that was used (poetry, prophecy, etc.), but then leaps to the conclusion that this means that the *words and syntax* must be preserved in a formal equivalent fashion. Rarely would any translation model seek to rewrite the text in a different genre. In at least one situation where this might be suggested, it is a formal equivalent translation that has done so. The KJV (and some other translations as well) has printed Hebrew poetry as prose. This is not helpful in many respects and does suggest (at least to an English reader) that a different genre is involved. In any regard, the logical connection between this and a word-based

⁷⁵Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 706–7.

formal equivalent translation model is lacking.

In situations where the form of the original is semantic,⁷⁶ it *is* ideal if the form can be represented in the translation in an equivalent or analogous form. Sometimes this is possible, sometimes it is not. The elaborate alliterative/acrostic structure (form) of some parts of the Old Testament cannot be reproduced in English without producing an English monstrosity.⁷⁷ In this case a note may be appropriate, or, in the case of Psalm 119, the Hebrew letters may be retained as section headings. Although the formal epistolary nature of the Pauline corpus can be maintained formally, an untaught English reader will not recognize the genre since the form of a first century letter is markedly different from the form of a twenty-first century letter.⁷⁸ In this case the form of the original is probably best preserved even though it is semantically obscure since transposing the entire letter into a “Dear Timothy...” form would not only be anachronistic, but would also compromise the accuracy—and at this point Ryken would be correct, but I know of no translation (no matter how functional) that has taken this approach to Paul’s letters.⁷⁹

Focusing on “thoughts” as the preoccupation of functional equivalence is a red herring. It conjures images of non-conservative views of concept inspiration (and Ryken comes close to charging functional translators with this view—and he does charge them with a liberal and neoorthodox view of inspiration). To suggest that functional translators have no concern for the words of the text is irresponsible. Any translator who believes in an inspired Scripture (especially those who profess verbal plenary inspiration) pays careful attention to the words of the original text. It is impossible to understand the thoughts of the text apart from the words. But this is quite a different matter from suggesting that the translation must reproduce the words of the original. The focus should be on *meaning* rather than on thoughts. If a formal equivalent results in either nonsense or inaccuracy (due either

⁷⁶It may not be assumed that the form is indeed semantic; this is a conclusion that must be argued in any particular situation.

⁷⁷The acrostic Psalms include Pss 25, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; see also the entire book of Lamentations.

⁷⁸And a “taught” reader knows this only because he has been told that the epistolary genre includes certain features, not because he can figure them out for himself from the English translation.

⁷⁹Not even Clarence Jordan’s idiosyncratic *Cotton Patch Version* does this—though the closing does sometimes become, “Best wishes to you all, Paul.” The greeting maintains the formal structure: “From Paul, by God’s will...to God’s fellowship in...” (This is not to say that other formal matters are not radically altered in the CPV, but this is not “mainstream” translation and should surely never serve as the representative of functional equivalent translation—as Robert Thomas takes it to be in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, p. 89.)

to idiom or divergent syntax), then focusing on the words has not enabled accuracy in terms of meaning.

As these observations suggest, the most fundamental misconception reflected throughout Ryken's argument is the nature of language and communication. There is no space here to develop an alternative view in any detail—and that job has already been accomplished elsewhere.⁸⁰

We must coordinate the elements of both verbal inspiration and propositional revelation as it relates to translation. As Allan Chapple has well pointed out,

As a result of the Spirit's unique activity, these particular written words are God's words—and God's Word.... But this revelation does not consist simply of words, like beads on a string: it is propositional. The words of the Bible mean something and teach something. It is not words as such that constitute revelation, but 'propositions'; that is, revelation has to do with what these particular words, in these particular combinations and sequences, in these particular writings, actually mean.⁸¹

If all we had was verbal inspiration apart from propositional revelation we might wonder as to the legitimacy or value of any translation. It is the combination of both these factors that enables us to translate God's message confidently. In light of the translation spectrum discussed above, each doctrine tugs a different direction. Since we believe in verbal inspiration, we are concerned to accurately represent the inspired words of the original with appropriate verbal equivalences (thus formal equivalence). We realize that our translation must also communicate in words. We might take that as a given until we consider proposals to *translate* the Bible into, say, drama.⁸² Verbal

⁸⁰As a few sample correctives to the view of language and communication evidenced in Ryken's writing, see first of all Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*; and idem, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*. Other relevant discussions include James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961); Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989); Sue Groom, *Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003); and Peter Silzer and Thomas Finley, *How Biblical Languages Work* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

⁸¹Allan Chapple, "The English Standard Version: A Review Article," *The Reformed Theological Review* 62 (August 2003): 77.

⁸²The American Bible Society has had several projects over the past few years to *translate* (their term) Scripture texts into other media, including film, drama, and multimedia. These attempts are an extreme form of dynamic equivalence (in the original and technical sense of that term [attempts to produce the *same effect* as the original]—not what I would define as functional equivalence). See, for example, J. Werner's essay, "Musical *Mimesis* for Modern Media," in *From One Medium to Another: Basic Issues for Communicating the Scriptures in New Media*, ed. R. Hodgson and P. Soukup (New York: American Bible Society, 1997), pp. 221–27. This article assumes that the re-creation of biblical events is *superior* to their written record; the reduction of these

inspiration would protest the legitimacy of such a move. But we also hold firmly to propositional revelation—which tugs us toward the importance of translating meaning—of communicating accurately the propositional content of the text (thus functional equivalence). It is only as we understand the message and meaning of the words arranged in their given syntactical relationship that we understand the propositional content of God’s revelation. Words as words convey only potential meaning. It is only when we read words in a given context that they become meaningful. Both are essential. We must maintain the importance of the words—and the exact words that God has given. But we must also maintain that it is only context which enables meaning from these inspired words.⁸³ As a result of these two doctrinal emphases we must in our translation employ both functional and formal equivalence.

It is dangerous to focus too narrowly on the words of a translation and their supposed equivalence in the original text. One could easily end up arguing for the inspiration of a translation on this basis. Instead we must maintain that verbal plenary inspiration (as well as inerrancy) resides only in the autographa of the two Testaments. I do not think it is wise to use terminology such as “derivative inspiration” or to say that a translation is inspired to the extent that it accurately reflects the original.⁸⁴ Let us allow that God has only guided the minds of the

“experiences” to “a written lexical medium” is “unfortunate.”

⁸³As an example, the following words do not communicate anything: “begotten world god gave only loved the that so his son for he.” All of these words carry potential meaning—but we cannot determine what meaning is intended in this form. The word “god” could mean several different things: the true God, the god of this age, a “deified” Roman emperor, etc. The same is true of each of the other words (and of the Greek words which they represent). It is only when these seemingly random, unrelated words are arranged in a particular order and are placed in a context (in this case, John 3) that they communicate meaning: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son,” or, in Greek: Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν.

⁸⁴This has been proposed, e.g., by Robert Dunzweiler, “Are the Bibles in Our Possession Inspired? Two Studies on the Inspiredness of the Apographs,” IBRI Research Report 5 (1981), accessed 14 August 2006, available from <http://ibri.org/RRs/RR005/05inspiration.htm>; a revision of this paper by Elaine Phillips presents essentially the same argument: “A Re-presentation of ‘Are the Bibles in Our Possession Inspired?’ Research Report No. 5–1981, by Robert J. Dunzweiler,” IBRI Research Report 52 (2004), accessed 14 August 2006, available from <http://www.ibri.org/RRs/RR052/52EPhillips.htm>. Dunzweiler proposes a theological construct which defines inspiration as involving two subcategories: inspiration as an act and “inspiredness” as a quality. This quality is “inherent in the autographs in a primary, immediate, absolute sense, but also retained in the apographs in a derived, secondary, mediate and relative sense” which can be attributed not only to copies of the original language texts (i.e., apographic copies of the autographa) but also to translations to the extent that they accurately represent the original. Although the intent is commendable, it seems unwise to use Bible terminology in a way different than the Bible itself does—even if

original authors and writers of Scripture. There is no biblical basis upon which to claim any similar guidance for any translator. God did not “breathe out” any of the words of any translation.⁸⁵

Given that we have abundant evidence upon which to establish with certainty (for all practical purposes) that original text, we can confidently claim to have the Word of God. Such a claim would be true not only of a Hebrew Bible or a Greek Testament, but also of any translation which accurately communicates the meaning of the original text. Such a translation is, indeed, the Word of God—it says in words what God wants said.

This is not a new or novel proposal. It has been the orthodox position of the church for centuries. Old discussions and definitions tend to be forgotten in later generations, but it is often the case that contemporary debates are simply rehashing issues that have been discussed before. In the current turmoil precipitated by the competing claims of advocates of the TNIV and the ESV, the debates from the 1970s and 80s precipitated by the publication of such diverse translations as the NIV, NASB, and TEV have been overlooked. But the discussion began long before this. It is instructive to turn the pages back another hundred years and read the arguments of B. B. Warfield. Consider a few of his comments:

Not only *was* the inspired Word, as it came from God, without error, but...it remains so; that the Church still has this inspired Word and still has it without error.... “That the original Scriptures of the Old and New

acknowledged to be a “theological construct.” (See the discussion earlier in this article regarding the doctrine of inspiration.)

⁸⁵It might be argued that 2 Tim 3:15–16 describes a translation as inspired since what Timothy would have known from childhood was likely the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text (and surely not the Hebrew autographa). Such an argument would ignore two factors. First, the expression in v. 15 is τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα (articular, plural, and a form of γράμμα) whereas in v. 16 the expression is πάντα γραφή (anarthrous/qualitative, singular, and a form of γραφή). The equation is not as direct as an English translation might imply, the reference shifting from the specific copies from which Timothy would have learned (whether Hebrew or, more likely, Greek, i.e., the LXX) to the abstract category of Scripture. Whether this is “all Scripture” as a whole or “every (individual passage with the quality of) Scripture,” makes little difference. (For a different analysis, see J. William Johnston, *The Use of Πᾶς in the New Testament*. Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 11 [New York: Peter Lang, 2004], pp. 178–83.) Second, this would pose a theological problem in attributing inspiration to the Septuagint with its wide-ranging differences from the Masoretic Text. It would require postulating that a superintending work of the Spirit on the 2nd–3rd century B.C. translators of the Septuagint deliberately changed large portions of the OT both in content (some portions are of considerably different length) and in wording. Although the Orthodox Church has, indeed, taken this approach and accepted the Septuagint as their authoritative OT canon, such a conclusion has not commended itself outside those circles. We accept what is essentially the same Hebrew text as that given by God through the prophets.

Testaments, being immediately inspired of God, were without error,” and “that the Bible, as we now have it, in its various translations and versions, when freed from all errors and mistakes of translations, copyists, and printers, is the very Word of God, and consequently wholly without error.”⁸⁶

The [Westminster] Confession...does assert the preservation of Scripture in “absolute purity”: but it does not assert the “absolute purity” of “the seventeenth century editions,” or of every copy, or of any copy of Scripture.... They recognized the fallibility of copyists and typesetters; and they looked for the pure text of Scripture, not in one copy, but in all copies. “What mistake is in one copy...is corrected in another.”⁸⁷

The original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are distinguished first of all from translations. The originals alone are declared to be inspired, and therefore authoritative for the determining of points of religious doctrine. The translations are declared, however, competently to represent the inspired Bible for all general purposes.... It was by “*immediate* inspiration” that God gave the Scriptures.... We must not confound inspiration and providence.... One was an immediate and the other a mediate activity of God. And the product corresponded to the difference: one produced the plenary inspired Bible, every word of which is the Word of God; the other produced the safe transmission of that Word, but not without signs of human fallibility here and there in the several copies.⁸⁸

Warfield was expounding the significance of his denomination’s standards for issues facing his church at the end of the 19th century. But in doing so he reminds us that this distinction between inspired autographs and non-inspired, but nevertheless accurate copies and translations, is a much older distinction—one already defined in the 17th century.⁸⁹ So consider these older affirmations, not only of the

⁸⁶Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Westminster Confession and the Original Autographs,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. J. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), 2:589. (Originally published in *The Presbyterian Messenger*, 13 September 1894.)

⁸⁷Warfield, “The Westminster Confession and the Original Autographs,” p. 592.

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 593–94.

⁸⁹Such statements can be traced further back, though to do so exceeds the present purpose. For a few samples, consider these two earlier statements. The statement of the Westminster Confession draws on the earlier Irish Articles of Religion (1615), which, after affirming that the Scriptures were “given by the inspiration of God, and in that regard to be of most certain credit and authority” (article 2), go on to say, “The Scriptures ought to be translated out of the original tongues into all languages for the common use of all men: neither is any person to be discouraged from reading the Bible in such a language as he doth understand, but seriously exhorted to read the same with great humility and reverence, as a special means to bring him to the true knowledge of God and of his own duty” (article 4). For the full text, see Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols., 6th ed., rev. David Schaff (reprint of 1931 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:526–44. Compare also the Puritan catechism

Westminster standards (1643–46) that serve the reformed community, but also of the Second London Confession of 1677, for this Baptist confession reproduced the Westminster statement verbatim at this point.

The Old Testament in Hebrew...and the New Testament in Greek..., being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal to them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

There is room for diversity in translations. Since no translation is perfect, multiple translations are not only helpful, but essential.⁹¹ Some will be more formal, some more functional—and an English reader

of John Ball, *A Short Treatise...* (15th ed., 1656), pp. 6, 7, 8: “The Holy Scripture, immediately inspired, which is contained in the books of the Old and New Testament.” “To be immediately inspired is to be as it were breathed, and to come from the Father by the Holy Ghost, without all means.” “Thus the Holy Scriptures in the originals were inspired, both for matter and words.” Or again, “The Scriptures were written in Hebrew and Greek, how then should all men read and understand them? They ought to be translated into known tongues and interpreted.... (1) Because the Prophets and Apostles preached their doctrines to the people and nations in their known languages, (2) Immediately after the Apostles’ times, many translations were extant, (3) All things must be done in the congregation unto edifying” (Ball, *Short Treatise*, 52f; all Ball citations taken from Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” pp. 177–90 passim).

⁹⁰The Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. I, VIII, cited here from *The Westminster Standards* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, n.d.); this is identical with The Second London Confession of 1677, ch. I, 8 (for which see William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd ed. [Valley Forge: Judson, 1969], 251). For an extensive discussion of this statement, see Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, ed. J. Meeter (New York: Oxford, 1931), pp. 155–257. Originally published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 4 (1893): 582–655.

⁹¹This is not to deny the adequacy of a single translation for understanding God’s message—that is all much of the world has available to them. The statement here is intended to be understood in the context of study purposes. Those believers who cannot access the original text directly must use multiple translations to achieve full and accurate understanding of God’s revelation. When that is not possible, caution must be exercised to avoid invalid conclusions. There is no doubt that the “big picture” is clear in any reliable translation, but the details often require direct access to the original texts.

should use some of each of these translations. Given that some formal elements of the text are semantic (though I doubt that all, or perhaps even most, are), that an appropriate degree of distantiation should be evident between the biblical and contemporary worlds,⁹² and that it is often possible to express the original in good English that nevertheless often approximates the form of the original,⁹³ I prefer translations that lean toward the formal end of the spectrum.⁹⁴ I realize, however, that meaning is the crucial element and that this necessitates a generous dose of functional equivalence to maintain accuracy. As a result I often find that translations such as the NIV, NET, and (if my preliminary impressions are correct) the HCSB⁹⁵ and the ISV⁹⁶ to be satisfactory examples that attempt to balance these various factors.⁹⁷ The English-only reader must balance these useful tools with more formal translations in his study—and he may also from time to time consult those which are much more functional.⁹⁸ Such a reader must realize,

⁹²The Bible is, after all, an ancient book. It ought not to be so modernized as to suggest that it was written yesterday. Meaning must be clear and the language of a useable translation must be contemporary, but these factors should not belie the antiquity of the historical-cultural setting of the events and message.

⁹³De Vries has argued that some audiences (particularly those raised in church as well as educated secular audiences) can read and accept a greater degree of “foreignness” in a translation (especially of an ancient text like the Bible) than some other audiences for whom cultural assumptions and pragmatic speech patterns and usage would make a more formal translation unacceptable. For the later group a “common language translation” which adjusts for such ability (or lack thereof) may be necessary to avoid interference and communicate accurately. This “foreignness” relates to what De Vries calls “the sociocentric ethnography of speaking” and is not true of the morphosyntactic level. When a formally equivalent expression is used at the grammatical-syntactical level which is not acceptable in the target language, undue interference hinders communication. “Interference at the level of lexical, morphological and syntactic patterns has disastrous communicative effects; but at the level of ethnography of speaking, a level where cultural meanings play a crucial role, interference phenomena do not pose major communicative problems” (“Bible Translations,” pp. 316–18, direct quote from p. 318).

⁹⁴The basis for my *preference* (and, I suspect, that of many other professors and pastors) may be largely because it is more transparent to me in terms of the biblical languages. I know and understand the potential of the various grammatical and syntactical constructs and can make what I consider to be the necessary adjustments. This does not mean, however, that those without such ability should have the same preference. A greater degree of functional equivalence is more helpful to such people.

⁹⁵*The Holman Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2004).

⁹⁶*The International Standard Version* (Yorba Linda, CA: Davidson Press, 2003); full text is available online at <http://www.isv.org/>. The ISV NT is complete (now in ed. 1.3) and about half of the OT is available.

⁹⁷Certainly none of them deserve to be “tarred” as functional translations or classified with legitimate examples of such (e.g., GNB, CEV, PHILLIPS).

⁹⁸This, of course, is true in any language, not just English, but the examples

however, that he is working with a secondary tool. This underscores the importance that must be placed on the biblical languages in the seminary curriculum so that pastors will be equipped and able to deal with the text directly. In so doing he will not only be able to respond to questions that arise among his charge as to differences and difficulties in the translations, but will be able to teach his people something of the nature of translation and how the various translations should be used.

under consideration here are English translations.