

Inspiration and Translation
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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 tact and freely “mix-n-match” versions (to say nothing of paraphrases) as it seems to fit their fancy 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 a valid criteria has been the doctrine of inspiration. If we believe in verbal plenary inspiration, then does not that prescribe a “verbal plenary” translation? That is, one which reproduces each and every word of the original, donor text in the receptor language? Such a claim is the subject of this paper’s analysis.¹ I shall begin with a discussion of bibliology since a proper understanding of this doctrine is crucial to building any sort of argument from it to translation theory.

1. Defining the Terms

1.1. Terminology Related to Inspiration

1.1.1. Revelation

We begin with the doctrine of revelation. We believe that God has chosen to give us 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

¹ At this point in the paper I 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. My goal is to deal with what I perceive to be an unexamined assumption and try to work out some of the implications of our bibliology in the area of translation. Although I have read and taught in this area, this is the first time that I have attempted to frame a cohesive argument on the subject in written form. Due to what I perceive to be the fundamental issues, the first part of the paper, which discusses bibliology and translation theory, is as long as the second part of the paper in which I attempt to draw together the implications of these two preliminary discussions.

I have addressed related issues in several places including the following: “The English Bible: Precious Treasure” (Kansas City: Calvary Bible College and Theological Seminary, 1993), now available in an expanded edition in Spanish, “La Biblia en Nuestro Idioma” (Clarks Summit, PA: Baptist Bible Seminary, 2004); “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8.2 (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]).

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 inscription of written texts by the finger of God. We typically divide these various forms of revelation into general or natural revelation on the one hand and special revelation on the other.

1.1.2. *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.² 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.”³ 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.

1.1.3. *Inspiration*

As fundamentalists, we are committed to the inspiration of Scripture. We can all recite 2 Timothy 3:16, “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 which constitutes the exact expression of God’s revealed truth.

1.1.4. *Inscription*

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

² I 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* 8.1 (2004): 5-36.

³ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83), 3:457.

Notice that the definition of inscripturation includes a reference to both “authors and writers.” That dual reference is intended to recognize that not all authors of Scripture actually penned what they authored, but, at least in the New Testament,⁴ frequently dictated to a secretary.⁵ A similar situation is the incorporation by the author of previously written texts (e.g., Ezra 4:17–22).⁶ 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.⁷

1.1.5. 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.⁸ 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 makes the distinctions between inspiration and inscripturation more difficult 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).

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

⁵ On the role of the secretary (*amanuensis*) in the writing of Scripture, see E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*. WUNT 2.42 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1991); and idem, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

⁶ In 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 New Testament 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 New Testament 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: IVP, 1993], 420–21).

⁷ It appears that the secretary at least sometimes had liberty in the wording and content of the text. See, e.g., Tertius’ personal greeting in Romans 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 2 Peter,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 645–72, esp. 656–62.)

⁸ Part 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.

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. But the Greek text is different. You could see the difference in Spanish if you were to read another 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).

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.

English readers often come to a similar misconception, though for a different reason. Although the wording of these two key texts is different, by translating θεόπνευστος as “*given by inspiration*” the KJV suggests that inspiration involves a process.

Both of 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.⁹ 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.

1.1.6. 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. *Verbal* inspiration refers to the fact that the very

⁹ It 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* (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.

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 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 biblical text!) As 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 New Testament by printing them in red. Although Jesus’ words are certainly important and authoritative, so are the words of Obadiah and Jude.

1.1.7. *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.¹⁰ 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.

1.1.8. *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

¹⁰ The following five statements comprise the summary statement adopted in Chicago in 1978. The published text can be found several places, including *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 493–502.

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—and 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.”¹¹

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.

1.2. Terminology Related to Translation

1.2.1. Translation

What exactly is translation? And what is its goal? Translation is, of course, much broader than Bible translation, but within this more 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.¹² The goal of Bible translation is communication—accurate communication of a historically-rooted divine revelation. 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.

¹¹ John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 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 believers’ 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.

¹² A similar definition may be found in Eugene A. Nida, *Signs, Sense, Translation* (Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1984), 119.

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.¹³

Regardless of the method or the result we must realize that there is 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!”¹⁴ The Italian proverb “Traduttore traditore” (translators [are] traitors) reflects the same reality. This is not because translators deliberately distort their text. It simply recognizes that “it is impossible not to lose something when you translate an extended text from one language to another”¹⁵—and usually something not in the donor text is added as well!¹⁶ “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 loss at a minimum.”¹⁷

1.2.2. *Unhelpful Terminology*

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

1.2.2.1. *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:

¹³ I 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,” ch. 3 of *The Inclusive Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, 2d ed. (Manchester/Boston: St. Jerome, 2000); Johannes Louw, ed., *Meaningful Translation*, UBS Monograph Series, no. 5 (Reading, UK/New York: United Bible Societies, 1991); Eugene Nida, *Signs, Sense, Translation*; and Glen Scorgie, Mark Strauss, and Steven Voth, *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.

¹⁴ The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nashim 8: Kiddushim, cited by Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 134.

¹⁵ Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 58.

¹⁶ E.g., separate forms for “we inclusive/exclusive” in some languages; languages with no passive voice; differing temporal reference systems, etc. (ibid., 61).

¹⁷ Jan de Waard and Eugene Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 42.

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).¹⁸

This is “precisely” (i.e., word-for-word) what the Greek text says if turned into English. No such translation has ever been published.¹⁹ Those translations which claim (or are viewed) to be “literal” always make substantial adjustments away from “word-for-word” equivalents. There are better terms to address the concerns that are typically raised in this regard.

1.2.2.2. *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.*”²⁰ But as Carson points out, this is a bit silly, if well-intentioned.²¹ 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.

1.2.3. *Formal Equivalence*

Discussions of translation theory would be helped considerably if more accurate, technical terminology were adopted. The most 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 language²² as closely as possible in the receptor language.²³ Thus

¹⁸ I 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.

¹⁹ The closest to such unintelligibility are *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, rev. ed. (1898; reprint, 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)!

²⁰ Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 202, emphasis added. The term “dynamic” is presumably related to the “response.” 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*, 119–20. (This was a 1984 discussion; his use of “functional equivalence” dates, I think, to 1986; see n. 24 below.)

²¹ D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 71.

²² The 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.).

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. 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.

1.2.4. 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. 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.²⁴

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 inter-related, 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.²⁵

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 Septuagint²⁶ and the venerable KJV also used functional equivalents in many instances.²⁷ Even the NASB, one of the

²³ This 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*, 7; the citation source is not given). The context here is the translation of the English Revised Version of 1885.

²⁴ The 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*, vii–viii). Much of that reason revolved around a misunderstanding of the translation method and abuse of it by some translators.

²⁵ Nida, *From One Language to Another*, 36–40.

²⁶ There 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 **קִלְעַב** (rock) as πέτρα if God was the referent. For example, in 2 Sam. 22:3, **אֱלֹהֵי צוּרֵי אֶתְקֵהָבוּ** (“my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge”) becomes in the LXX, ὁ θεός μου φύλαξ ἔσται μου (“my God will be my guard”; also v. 47). Other such translations of **קִלְעַב** 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.

²⁷ When 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

most formal translations, uses functional equivalence, though not as extensively as other translations.²⁸

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.”²⁹ 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. 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.

1.2.5. 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.³⁰ The following is one possible view of such relationships among translation philosophies.³¹

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”), and Luke 19:23 (“wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank?”).

²⁸ A few examples from Acts include 14:12, 28; and 15:7.

²⁹ “We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” *Christianity Today*, 22 Oct 2001, p. 31, emphasis added.

³⁰ Some translations attempt to avoid these terms or at least a comparison with them. The NKJV professed to follow complete equivalence,” and the new Holman Christian Standard Bible opts for “optimal 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, and Holman’s CSB. The balance point is slightly different in each as various editors and groups of translators have different emphases in achieving such a balance.

One proposal which does suggest a new approach is a tri-polar model by Lourens de Vries. This consists of three poles by which to gauge a translation: formal, functional, and semantic equivalence (“Bible Translations: Forms and Functions,” *The Bible Translator* 52.3 [July 2001]: 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; I have encountered it only recently and am not prepared to evaluate it at this time. Another treatise on the subject that

<-More formal

More functional->

ASV-NASB KJV-RSV-ESV HCSB NIV TNIV

GNB-CEV Phillips

Cotton Patch

2. Considering the Relationship Between Inspiration and Translation

With that long introduction, let us now turn to the 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.³²

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 original. 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

also casts the discussion in wider, more diverse categories is Gutt, *Translation and Relevance*. I have likewise only begun reading and digesting Gutt's work.

³¹ Please note that this scale is not proportional; only the relative positions are significant. Versions linked with a dash indicate those with a similar translation philosophy. Similar charts that reflect roughly the same relative positionings may be found in Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 42; Robert Milliman, "Translation Theory and Twentieth-Century Versions," in *One Bible Only*, ed. R. Beacham and K. Bauder, 134–54 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 146; and on the International Bible Society web site, <<http://www.gospelcom.net/ibs/bibles/translations/index.php>> (accessed 3/12/04).

³² Bruce K. Waltke, "Agur's Apologia for Verbal, Plenary Inspiration: An Exegesis of Proverbs 30:1–6," ch. 13 of *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. G. Scorgie, et al., 303–20 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 313–14.

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, 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 AD. Here are the opening lines:

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
 þeodcýninga, 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:

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,³³ 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

³³ The English language is divided into Old English (before AD 1100), Middle English (AD 1100–1450), and Modern English (since AD 1450).

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.³⁴ But change is inevitable if we are to continue to communicate the 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.

The two entailments of our bibliography summarized above may be the most obvious ones. There is, however, an additional issue to be considered. 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? 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 most extensive statement of this position in recent publications is that of Leland Ryken.³⁵ Consider his

³⁴ Such 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)!

³⁵ Leland 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 is published by 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 been published as, “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8.2 (2004): 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), 93.

charges; I quote at 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.³⁶

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.³⁷

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.

If this is true, certain implications for Bible translation follow....³⁸

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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰

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

³⁶ Ibid., 29–30.

³⁷ Ibid., 126–27.

³⁸ Ibid., 129–30, emphasis in the original.

³⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132–33.

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.⁴¹

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 consultant to the ESV, that does not mean that he understands the issues involved in translation.⁴² This is evident even 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*.

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?⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid., 134–35.

⁴² His 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 § 1.3.1 above.

⁴³ 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 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 (BDAG, 706–07), 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

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 formal equivalent translation model is lacking.

In situations where the form of the original is semantic 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 structure (form) of the Old Testament cannot be reproduced in English without producing an English monstrosity.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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 John...” 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.⁴⁶

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

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 Rom. 1:5, which the ESV translates as, “to bring about the obedience of faith” (εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως). 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”)—and also uses three English words for one Greek word. Or 1 Tim. 3:10, “then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (εἴτα διακονεῖτωσαν ἀνέγκλητοι ὄντες). 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 addition of “prove themselves” is an interpretive/exegetical addition 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.

⁴⁴ The acrostic Psalms include Psalms 25, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; see also the entire book of Lamentations.

⁴⁵ And 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.

⁴⁶ Not 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*, 89.)

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 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 arguments 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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

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. Verbal 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

⁴⁷ As 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 Meanings*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). Other relevant discussions include James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1961); Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989); Sue Groom, *Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew* (Carlisle, UK/Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003); and Peter Silzer and Thomas Finley, *How Biblical Languages Work* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

⁴⁸ Allan Chapple, "The English Standard Version: A Review Article," *The Reformed Theological Review* 62 (2003): 77.

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.⁴⁹ 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. Let us allow that God has only guided the minds of the 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.

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.

There is room for diversity in such translations. Since no translation is perfect, multiple translations are not only helpful, but essential. Some will be more formal, some more functional—and an English reader should use some of each of these translations. Given that some formal elements of the text are semantic (though I doubt that all are), that an appropriate degree of distantiation should be evident between the biblical and contemporary worlds,⁵⁰ and that it is often possible to express the original in good English that nevertheless often approximates the form of the original, I prefer translations that lean toward the formal end of the spectrum. 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 impression is correct), the HCSB⁵¹ to be satisfactory examples that attempt to balance these various factors.⁵² The English-

⁴⁹ As 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 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.

⁵⁰ The 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.

⁵¹ *The Holman Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2004).

⁵² Certainly none of them deserve to be “tarred” as functional translations or classified with legitimate examples of such (e.g., GNB, CEV, Phillips).

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. Such a reader must realize, 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.