

Paraklesis article/interview: “Inspiration and Translation”

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What is the difference between inspiration and inscripturation?

Inscripturation is 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. 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. In other words, inscripturation refers to the Spirit-directed *process* by which the Bible was put into writing, whereas inspiration refers to the *product*—the character of the written text that was inscriptured.

We believe in verbal-plenary inspiration and that the Bible is inerrant and authoritative. How does this relate to the various translations available today?

We need to be careful not to overstate the biblical doctrines here. The process of inscripturation and the resulting inspired text deal with the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts, not translations into any other language. God has never promised to superintend the translator, nor has he promised that any translation would be inspired. We do, however, have many good, reliable translations that accurately reflect the text that God gave. As such we may confidently trust (and obey!) the Word of God—we have in words an accurate and adequate record of what God wanted said. And that is true whether they are the words of an English translation, a Spanish translation, or in any other human language into which the Bible has been translated.

Does that mean, then, that all translations are equally good and useful?]

No, there is quite a wide spectrum of translations available. There are several different ranges involved in this spectrum that cover both theological perspective (from the “heretical” translations of some sects, “liberal,” Roman Catholic, evangelical, etc.) and translation philosophy (from formal equivalent to functional equivalent).

Most of your readers probably have a fairly good sense of the theological range, but translation philosophy isn’t understood as well. When we talk about formal equivalence we are describing an approach to translation that seeks to reproduce the grammatical and syntactical *form* of the donor language from which one is translating as closely as possible in the receptor language into which one is translating. By contrast, a functional equivalent translation 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.

So which is better, formal or functional equivalent translation?

We might initially think that formal equivalence better corresponds to our view of inspiration, but in most instances *form* is language-specific and is not essential to expressing the meaning in another language. In many cases the form cannot be maintained because languages seldom have the exact same set of grammatical/syntactical forms. (For example, English has a grammatical form that we call a gerund, but Greek does not.) Even where there may be the same form, the form may function differently in another language.

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 interesting to note some of the many functional equivalents that are used in the venerable King James Version. When Paul is made to say in Romans 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.

What are some different examples of the categories listed above?

Probably the best known English translation in popular use that represents the more formal end of the spectrum is the New American Standard Bible. The use of more formal equivalence in the NASB accounts for its less than flowing English. On the other end of the spectrum, the most consistent representatives of functional equivalence are the Contemporary English Version or the older translation by J. B. Phillips. I think that a good balance of formal and functional equivalence can be found in the New International Version.

What should a pastor or layperson consider when choosing a version of the Bible to use in his local church?

There are a great many factors that should go into such a complex decision. A few of them include the church's historic usage, the age and reading level of the average member, the extent to which the church is attempting to reach into a pagan world that

knows nothing of the Bible, educational resources available, etc. There is no one right answer that fits every church. It is helpful if a church standardizes on a single translation for preaching, teaching, and Bible memory, but they must realize that there will be a great many translations in common use by people in the congregation.

(I am presently involved in a new church plant that is attempting to reach a community almost exclusively Catholic. We have a number of Catholic people attending each week who still carry their Catholic Bible. In such situations a pastor must be sensitive to what these people will read in their Bible as they follow the sermon.)

How should one address this topic with his congregation?

You ask big questions! ☺ But in brief, pastors need to teach their people how we got our Bible: how it was originally written, how it was copied and transmitted for centuries by hand, how the various manuscripts came to be printed, how it was translated, etc. They also need to understand the biblical doctrines of inerrancy, inspiration, and authority—and how these issues relate to a translation of the Bible in their language. All this takes time—perhaps years of patient teaching. And it should take place before some well-meaning (but poorly informed) person precipitates a controversy. I’ve been able to help a number of churches work through such issues with a seminar on the English Bible, but it would be ideal if the pastor were able to cover the same material in the course of his regular teaching and preaching ministry over the years.

Is there a danger of undermining people's confidence in the Bible they use?

People only become distraught over such issues when they don’t understand the real issues. There is a lack of good teaching on the subject and, unfortunately, this provides fertile ground for some sensationalists to stir unnecessary fear. Shallow answers, dogmatic pronouncements, and ungrounded, sensational claims cause much hurt to our Lord’s church.

What are some books that are good resources about this topic?

One of the best discussions of our English Bible is F. F. Bruce’s *History of the Bible in English*. A broader picture may be found in *The Journey from Texts to Translations* by Paul Wegner. I’ve also written a booklet on the English Bible (available from the BBC bookstore), and I have a paper posted on my website <www.NTResources.com> titled “Inspiration and Translation” that discusses these issues in more detail.