

Stewarding the Mysteries of God: Implications for the Use and Abuse of Language

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I have been very careful to see that where everything turns on a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally and have not lightly departed from it.... I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word. –Martin Luther¹

Language has the power to transform cultures. In the case of the Babylonians, recorded in Genesis 10-11, God dealt with man's capacity to do "whatsoever he willed" by introducing the confusion of language. His judgment led to the proliferation of tongues among the peoples of the earth; thus we are now forced to translate the Word of God, faithfully rendering the original text into a multitude of contemporary languages. But the difficulty of the task is due not only to differences that exist between languages; languages themselves also change over time, immeasurably complicating the translator's task. Read Chaucer's fourteenth century originals and you will notice how dissimilar they are to contemporary English usage.

Then too, the divine origin of Scripture should lead us to a particular humility and diligence in the translation task. Christians holding to the orthodox faith acknowledge the *plenary verbal* inspiration of the Bible—that God inspired *all the words* of His Word. Thus the Greek found in 2 Timothy 3:16 describing this process—*theopneustos*—literally means *God-breathed*, and translation undertaken in the shadow of this perfection carries a particularly heavy burden of caution and sobriety. The very words, all of them, were written by the Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). He is the Master Grammarian, the Linguist, the Story-Teller.

Couple the difficulty of translation across languages and centuries with the divine origin of Scripture and a complex situation is created. Add the depravity of man—always leading him to rebel against his Creator, manifested even in his use of language—and translation moves to the edge of impossibility. Scripture expresses the intensity of this corrupting influence this way: "But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

Thus, prior to the work of translating Scripture to the end that idioms of modern English are used, the translator must ask what is causing our language to change? Are some of the changes taking place in English occurring due to the influence of the redemptive mission of the Church in our culture or due to the influence of the sinful hearts of those whose minds "the god of this world has blinded" (2 Cor. 4:4)?

Scholars breathing the radically relativistic air of academe might naturally assume that changes in English usage are inevitable and value-neutral, but the Christian who lives in the light of the perfection of God's Word and the radical imperfection of man's mind and heart may not engage in such naïveté as he labors over God's Word. Modern linguists, as Darwinian as any other branch of the modern university, convince us that language does change due to social pressure, but that it must be allowed to do so without being condemned by such benighted terms as 'good' or 'bad.' Thus Dr. Jean Aitchison, the Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Oxford, writes:

The rapid turnover in vocabulary and the continual changes in the meaning of words often directly reflect social changes. As Samuel Johnson said in the preface to his dictionary (1755): 'As any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish

with it; as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice.²

Aitchison goes on to describe this change as morally neutral:

Continual language change is natural and inevitable, and is due to a combination of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors.

Once we have stripped away religious and philosophical preconceptions, there is no evidence that language is either progressing or decaying. Disruption and therapy seem to balance one another in perpetual stalemate. These two opposing pulls are an essential characteristic of language.

Language change is in no sense wrong...³

Aitchison asserts that language change "is in no sense wrong." But in the same breath, she acknowledges that the philosopher or religious man will see the matter differently. What wise Christian would neglect to run his word choice in daily speech through his own "religious and philosophical preconceptions?" Such a filtering process will easily demonstrate that usage is anything but morally and theologically neutral. Rather, much of our out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new linguistic culture is driven by worldly ideologies⁴ and, if embraced in an undiscerning way, would often constitute a direct attack upon orthodox biblical doctrine.

Consider briefly the ideologically motivated attempt to remove masculine referents from the English language and the impact it would have on orthodox doctrine if incorporated into our translations of Scripture. First, reflect on the incorporation of "brothers and sisters" for the Greek *adelphoi* ("brothers") in Hebrews 2:17: "Therefore he had to be made like his *brothers* in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest...". If we substitute "brothers and sisters" for "brothers" we have reformed Jesus into an androgynous human and distorted the male-only priesthood of Israel. This change is anything but morally or theologically neutral. Also, consider the same change made to James 3:1: "Not many of you should become teachers, my *brothers*...". If this becomes "brothers and sisters," a move has been made toward overturning the orthodox doctrine of the teaching office of the church being exclusively male.⁵

If changes taking place in modern English collaborate to enforce a particular world view upon its speakers, we would be wise to investigate the following questions: Should vernacular language conventions be imposed on modern translations of Scripture or should the grammar, structure and language conventions of Scripture (in so far as they are transposable into English—however difficult) impose themselves on modern language conventions? Should Christians allow the translation of Scripture to follow the evolutionary trend of the English language or should we carefully steward the English language so that the very words we speak and write are a testimony to the truth of God?

S. M. Hutchens answers these questions in an editorial that ran in the April 2002 edition of *Touchstone*:

It will not do to say that language has changed so readers accustomed to the new order must be accommodated for evangelical reasons, as though these changes were not imposed by an anti-Christian ideology enforced by political and economic sanctions. Even if the language were undergoing natural evolution to a more egalitarian form quite

apart from these artificial and all too frequently mandatory constraints, the Scriptures themselves provide a theological-grammatical contradiction that requires, for those who regard them as authoritative, the reformation not of biblical, but of vernacular language. If, for example, our native speech had only a gender-neutral word to describe the human race, our conversion to the Christian faith and its theology would necessitate the addition of "man" to our vocabulary as its proper name.

It is more than dismaying to hear educated people who present themselves as orthodox, resting their own teaching authority on an infallible Bible, insist that our standard for its translation includes conformance to the mind and vocabulary of people whose discourse and understanding their Bibles tell them is pervaded by sin and error. The proponents of these new versions have got it exactly backwards: It is the Word of God that is to rule the word of man, not the other way around. The first question to be asked is not whether language has changed, but how God has taught us to speak. Where the ancestral tongue serves Scripture, altering it so it can serve no longer must be identified by Christians not as change to accept, but as corruption to resist.⁶

Contrast Hutchens' statements with those found in an introductory pamphlet produced by the International Bible Society (IBS) for inclusion with their complimentary copy of *Today's New International Version (TNIV)*, sent to church leaders around the world. The IBS describes the motivation behind their work as follows:

Early in the 1960s, America was working its way toward the moon—but the language of the Bible was firmly rooted in the 1600s.

It was becoming increasingly difficult for committed Christians to share their faith using a Bible whose English was out of date at the least, and simply not understandable at the worst.

The issue at hand was more than just a preference of style. For a generation that was adopting terms such as "transistor" and "rocket booster," the antiquated language of the Bible was, for some, a stumbling block to faith.

Clearly, the Church needed God's eternal and infallible Word translated into "shirt sleeve English" that America could understand.⁷

Later in this introductory pamphlet, the IBS describes their work on the *TNIV* as having successfully taken into account the evolving nature of the English language.

The uniqueness of the *TNIV* rests in its ability to speak God's words clearly and accurately in English that has evolved and changed.⁸

And, again, in the *TNIV*'s preface entitled "A Word to the Reader":

The chief goal of this review has always been to bring the text of the *NIV* abreast of contemporary biblical scholarship and of shifts in English idioms and usage.⁹

Finally, from the *TNIV* website's "Frequently Asked Questions" page is the following question and answer:

Why now?

There is a growing need to reach today's generation with language they can understand and relate to. As English language usage changes, the Scriptures must be presented

with unwavering accuracy in a way that clearly and accurately communicates in today's language.¹⁰

International Bible Society and her Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) feel the need to adapt the English of the NIV to modern usage.¹¹ Even Aitchison, though she sees no moral decay evident in language change, states that it (change) may be “socially undesirable” in “certain circumstances”. She then proposes that, in such circumstances, standardization might be useful:

Language change is in no sense wrong, but it may, in certain circumstances, be socially undesirable. Minor variations in pronunciation from region to region are unimportant, but change which disrupts the mutual intelligibility of a community can be socially and politically inconvenient. If this happens, it may be useful to encourage standardization—the adoption of a standard variety of one particular language which everybody will be able to use, alongside the existing regional dialects or languages.¹²

Far beyond considerations of social utility are those of the Christian to whom God has given stewardship of His inspired Word. If secular concerns might cause the linguist unencumbered by doctrinal commitments to decline to salute the latest idioms, how much more worthy of standardized language¹³ might be the very words—all of them—by which the God of the Universe has deigned to reveal Himself?

Who would deny that the endless array of Bible translations filling evangelical pews and homes, as well as the addition of arguably politically motivated transitions in those texts done under the guise of the incorporation of contemporary usage, has “disrupt(ed) (the) mutual intelligibility of a community?”

Instead of a unified voice, the Evangelical church gives in to the leadership of Bible societies and publishers whose stockholders have a vested interest in the modern proliferation of translations—a Bible for teens, another for those afflicted by low self-esteem, and so on. Planned obsolescence, justified by simplistic appeals to changes in usage, offers the church infinite Bible branding. Thus believers and unbelievers alike are assisted in finding a version that fits their disposition, but also their ideology.

Advocates of such translations say “No” to standardized language and are motivated to produce translations of Scripture that incorporate the dialect of the community hostile to the church.¹⁴ How ironic that one of the *TNIV*'s motivations is evangelism. If words and word constructions have specific meanings, and these words are exchanged for others that avoid offense (an offense felt by the natural man because of his unregenerate mind and heart), how will our message express something distinct from the ubiquitous doctrines of the American civil religion and her inane and vaporous language? If we are not speaking the dialect of Scripture, how will our message intelligibly express the uniqueness of Christ and the scandal of the Cross? Those who undertake to remove the offense of Scripture should ask themselves the question that Paul asks himself before the Galatian church: “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God?” (Gal. 1:10).

Richard Chenevix Trench,¹⁵ professor of Divinity at King's College and Archbishop of Dublin in the nineteenth-century, wrote extensively on the change of language, principally in two books, *English Past and Present*, and *On the Study of Words*. Trench does not fear to attribute a moral dimension to language change: “God gave man language, just as He gave him reason...”¹⁶ and since God gave man language, it, as in

all the things that God gave to man, will indicate through its cultivation or destruction where his heart is. While speaking of the nature of language among primitive tribes, he says,

But what does their language on close inspection prove? In every case what they are themselves, the remnant and ruin of a better and nobler past. Fearful indeed is the impress of degradation which is stamped on the language of the savage, more fearful perhaps even than that which is stamped upon his form. When wholly letting go the truth, when long and greatly sinning against light and conscience, a people has thus gone the downward way, has been scattered off by some violent revolution from that portion of the world which is the seat of advance and progress, and driven to its remote isles and further corners, then as one nobler thought, one spiritual idea after another has perished from it, the words also that expressed these have perished too.¹⁷

On the contrary, he writes that as a culture is brought in conformity with the Word, its language will reflect that enlightenment.

But while it is thus with him, while this is the downward course of all those that have chosen the downward path, while with the impoverishing and debasing of personal or national life there goes hand in hand a corresponding impoverishment and debasement of language, so on the contrary, where there is advance and progress, where a divine idea is in any measure realizing itself in a people, where they are learning more accurately to define and distinguish, more truly to know, where they are ruling, as men ought to rule, over nature, and making her to give up her secrets to them, where new thoughts are rising up over the horizon of a nation's mind, new feelings are stirring at a nation's heart, new facts coming within the sphere of its knowledge, there will language be growing and advancing too. It cannot lag behind; for man feels that nothing is properly his own, that he has not secured any new thought, or entered upon any new spiritual inheritance, till he has fixed it in language, till he can contemplate it, not as himself, but as his word; he is conscious that he must express truth, if he is to preserve it, and still more if he would propagate it among others.¹⁸

If the English language is changing, is it changing in the right direction? In order to be faithful to God's call to walk in a manner worthy of Christ, we must resist any change in the English language which is motivated by unbiblical ideologies. We are capitulating to the sins of those who hate God when we accept change motivated by worldly principles. Exactly where will the current fad of adaptation of God's Word to the religiously, morally, and sinfully motivated conventions of pagans end? What exactly is conversion and might it not involve the vocabulary and speech of those who come to know the truth of Scripture?

Trench, at least, believes conversion will cause men to become more articulate, to have their language grow richer and deeper. As Christ renews a man's mind, we should expect the difficulties of Scripture, whether doctrinal or linguistic, will be wrestled with in humble submission to their Author and reliance upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit. If he accepts the divine origin of the Heavenly Father's Word, we should expect him to come to an understanding of the way the Creator has spoken. How disgusting to think that we, mere men, can decide where to place a buffer between the Word of God and the reader—protecting him from what modern man considers offensive—and withhold from him God's Word.

The operating principle behind the *TNIV* (to adapt the translation of God's word to today's usage) is necessary in the production of every new translation of Scripture. Yet,

when the fiercest attack against the Church today is by gender-anarchists, we should not make Scripture conform to their sensibilities and "mute the patriarchalism"¹⁹ of the text. Consider that the hatred and fury of the unregenerate for God's Word might well be one of the greatest proofs of its inspiration. Does not the Word bring knowledge of sin (Rom. 7:7)?

For those who believe in the depravity of man and the word-centeredness of the Christian faith, major shifts in usage will never be value-neutral. Rather, they will always be for better or worse, toward life or death, motivated by the fear of God or man. Those called to be stewards of the mysteries of God must bless the nations by cultivating and protecting usage that, though at key points quite different from the world around us, is in possession of as keen an edge as Scripture in communicating all God's Truth.

Great then will be our gains, if, having these treasures of wisdom and knowledge lying round about us, so far more precious than mines of Californian gold, we determine that we will make what portion of them we can our own, that we will ask the words which we use to give an account of themselves, to say whence they are, and whither they tend. Then shall we often rub off the dust and rust from what seemed to us but a common token, which as such we had taken and given a thousand times; but which now we shall perceive to be a precious coin, bearing the "image and superscription" of the great King: then shall we often stand in surprise and in something of shame, while we behold the great spiritual realities which underlie our common speech, the marvelous truths which we have been witnessing *for* in our words, but, it may be, witnessing *against* in our lives.

...It was something for the children of Israel when they came into Canaan, to enter upon wells which they digged not, and vineyards which they had not planted, and houses which they had not built; but how much greater a boon, how much more glorious a prerogative, for any one generation to enter upon the inheritance of a language, which other generations by their truth and toil have made already a receptacle of choicest treasure, a storehouse of so much unconscious wisdom, a fit organ for expressing the subtlest distinctions, the tenderest sentiments, the largest thoughts, and the loftiest imaginations, which at any time the heart of man can conceive.²⁰

Let it be clearly stated that the International Bible Society and her Committee on Bible Translation naively have accepted and implemented the presupposition of modern linguists that language change is neither good nor bad. Thus they have, in thousands of places, adapted the words of Scripture to a wholesale shift in English usage that springs from the womb of feminist ideology.

But wait! IBS, the CBT, and Zondervan all give us their solemn word that this is absolutely, without doubt, completely not true! Never and nowhere has feminism influenced their work! In a February 12, 2002 press release IBS boldly but quite naively proclaimed, "Accusations that these godly servants [CBT members] have been influenced by feminism or political correctness are false."²¹ And again, Peter Bradley, the president of IBS writes, "IBS never has and never will follow a social agenda in regard to its translation work."²² Later in the same publication, Bradley states, "I will restate for the record—the CBT members are not, and never will be, influenced by any social agendas."²³

These statements are self-evidently false. What Christian alive today would claim he is beyond being influenced by the overwhelming feminist pressures ubiquitous in our culture—certainly not!! And to claim this precisely at the fault line of gender language

where feminist browbeating has been most intense—how precious! No, one thing that may, most certainly, be said about the translators of gender-neutral versions of Scripture is that they have been influenced by feminism. The question remains, though, whether that influence has been adverse or salubrious? By now the good reader is aware it is our conviction that feminist political correctness has fueled the gender-related language changes incorporated into the *TNIV*.

The Bible we bequeath to our children must not be blindly modern, and thereby distort the distinctively glorious light of Scripture. Only to the destruction of the souls of future generations will we haphazardly incorporate the poison of modern linguistic agnosticism and unbiblical worldviews. Just as Christ taught us how to pray in a specific manner, we must teach our children and those who come into the Church to speak and read the dialect of the Holy Spirit. We must struggle to make our English Christian—not simply up-to-date or idiomatic. The very form and meaning of our words will be a testimony to God's truth and a rebuke to the sins of our culture.

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruit. Proverbs 18:21*

¹ Martin Luther, "On Translating: An Open Letter," in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. T. G. Tappert, trans. by C. M. Jacobs, rev. by E. T. Bachman, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 186.

² Jean Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

⁴ For detailed analysis see Wayne A. Grudem and Vern S. Poythress, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), chapter 8.

⁵ Both of these changes are found in the *TNIV*. Her translators state, "In no cases do these updates [gender related updates] impose upon or change the doctrinal impact of Scripture." *TNIV: The Facts that Inspired an Updated Scripture Text for Today's Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, no date), 10.

⁶ S. M. Hutchens, "Heretical Bibles," April, 2002, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/docs/issues/15.3docs/15-3pg3.html> (5 October 2002).

⁷ *TNIV: The Facts that Inspired an Updated Scripture Text for Today's Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, no date), 2. (ISBN: 0-310-95593-9). Also online: "TNIV Story," <http://www.tniv.info/story/introduction.php> (3 October 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ *Today's New International Version: New Testament Preview Edition* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 2001), v.

¹⁰ "TNIV FAQs," <http://www.tniv.info/QandA.php> (3 October 2002). See also the endorsement of Richard D. Patterson on *TNIV's* "Endorsements" page: <http://www.tniv.info/endorsements.php> (3 October 2002).

¹¹ A modern translation that has slipped further down the slope in the incorporation of modern ideologically motivated language conventions (to the point of changing "Father" to "Father-Mother"), the Oxford University Press 1995 *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* could well be a harbinger of the way modern secular English usage and contemporary secular thought will force itself upon future translations of God's Word. The editors of this edition have this to say in the "General Introduction":

"Why do we need so many versions of the Bible?" people often ask whenever a new one is introduced. The answer is twofold.

First, we need new versions because the languages into which the Bible is rendered (hundreds worldwide) are themselves changing. New words and expressions come into use and older expressions fall out of use, seem tired and trite, or do not convey much meaning at all. Do we ask "whither" we are going, or claim that we are going "thither"? No, we ask "where" and go "there." Christians in every culture around the world want to hear their Bible in the language of their time, speaking specifically to them, as well it should.

And also, in an interesting circular argument, they state:

This new, inclusive version of the Bible not only reflects the newest scholarly work on the most reliable manuscripts available, it also reflects and *attempts to anticipate* developments in the English language with regard to specificity about a number of issues such as gender, race, and physical disability. Bibles are widely read and therefore can serve to influence the development of important changes in language. Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into the German spoken by the common people in his country is an example of this. Luther's translation helped to develop and unify German as not only a spoken, but also a written language.

¹² Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?*, 259-260.

¹³ I'm not implying a return to the KJV or something of that sort. As explained earlier, our English usage should be dictated by the language of Scripture—a standard usage that seeks, as Luther said of German, to do violence to English rather than to the Word of God. This can be done while availing ourselves of the valuable studies of textual criticism and modern linguistic theory.

¹⁴ This "flip-flop", it seems to me, is tied into the impoverished doctrine of the church in American Evangelicalism. The church has lost its self-identity as the "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15) and is content to import the culture of the world into the church. The Evangelical church is desperately seeking to speak the truths of Christ using a cultural language that is incapable of expressing those deep truths. Meanwhile, the culture of Christianity as uniquely expressed in the community of the church is being sacrificed for the sake of retaining respectability within the structures of the world.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Aitchison pokes a bit of fun at Trench in her book *Language Change* by calling his statements "thunderous pronouncements." Even this statement is indicative of a general feminization of discourse and hatred of "straight talk" in today's society and academic world.

¹⁶ Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words* (London: J. W. Parker, 1851; reprint, London: Routledge/Thoemmer Press, 1994), 15 (page citations are to reprint edition).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ As famously expressed in the preface to the *New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), vii.

²⁰ Trench, *On the Study of Words*, 24-26.

²¹ "An Open Statement About the TNIV from the International Bible Society and Zondervan", <http://www.tniv.info/resources/openstatement.php> (15 October 2002).

²² Peter Bradley, "An Open Letter from the President of International Bible Society," *Light Magazine*, July 2002, 3

²³ "Peter Bradley and the Truth about the TNIV," *Light Magazine*, July 2002, 10.

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