

AN EVALUATION OF THE “COLORADO SPRINGS GUIDELINES”

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A group of well-known evangelical leaders met in Colorado Springs in May, 1997, and adopted a statement entitled “Guidelines for Translation of Gender-Related Language in Scripture.” Though these ‘Guidelines’ were formulated five years ago, they have received little attention until the last year, when “Today’s New International Version” (TNIV) was produced by the International Bible Society. Since the TNIV does not always adhere to these ‘Guidelines’, it has received an immense amount of criticism from many of those who formulated the ‘Guidelines.’ [It is interesting to note that other recent English translations, such as the New Living Translation and the Contemporary English Version, which likewise do not conform to the ‘Guidelines’, have hardly attracted any such criticism.] As one who has a Ph.D. in linguistics and who has taught graduate level courses in principles of translation for many years on various campuses, I would like to evaluate these ‘Guidelines’ and other related documents from the perspective of an adequate understanding of how languages really operate, and of what constitutes appropriate principles for translating of the Scriptures (or any other document).

Let me say to begin with that I am not trying to defend the TNIV as being ‘the best of all possible translations’. The TNIV, like every other translation of the Scriptures into English, has its weaknesses, in my opinion.

Perhaps the main fault in the ‘Guidelines’ is that there is no defense given to support the validity of its statements. The ‘Guidelines’ state simply that certain forms should be translated in such a way, with no explanation as to why. It seems as though those who crafted the ‘Guidelines’ are just saying, “Accept these statements as true because we say they are true.” This is not scholarship. So let me begin by making some comments regarding the nature of language, from a linguistic perspective.

Language can be defined as a vehicle by which meaning is conveyed by a set of forms. Those forms can be phonological (the sounds we make with our vocal apparatus) or graphological (the marks we make on paper to represent those sounds), and they also include lexical forms and grammatical forms and structures. But every language has its own peculiar set of forms and structures by which meaning is conveyed. Closely related languages may have a great deal of overlap and similarity between their sets of forms, but they also have differences that make them separate languages. That is what makes translation so difficult. It usually takes years to come anywhere near mastering the forms and structures of a language that perhaps has never been reduced to writing. And since each language has forms and structures that are peculiar to that language, one should NEVER assume that the forms that are appropriate for conveying meaning in one language will carry over to and be appropriate for another language. This is true whether the language is Aguaruna (Peru), Agarabi (Papua New Guinea), Apache (U.S.), Aguacatec (Mexico), Albanian, Hebrew, Koine Greek or English.

Let me illustrate. In English, when you wish to express the fact that your body needs liquid, you say, “I am thirsty.” The forms are thus a first-person singular free subject pronoun, a form of the verb ‘be’, and a predicate adjective. In Spanish, however, it is *tengo sed*, which means literally ‘I have thirst’. No free pronoun, a transitive verb instead of the verb ‘be’, and a noun as its object. A totally different set of grammatical forms. Now let me give you some ways the same meaning is conveyed in other languages:

Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea): ‘nek belong mi em i drai = ‘my neck is dry’

Alekano (Papua New Guinea): ‘about water it has made me sick’

Kazak (Kazakhstan): ‘my throat is a desert’

The forms, both grammatical and lexical, are all VERY different. But the meaning is exactly the same. If the forms in these languages are so varied to express such a universally common experience, we should never expect that we can translate the forms we find in the original languages of Scripture using corresponding forms in English, or in any other language.

A second linguistic principle is that lexemes (words) in every language usually have both primary and secondary senses. The primary sense of a word is that which first comes to mind when that word is uttered in isolation. For instance, what does 'hand' mean? The primary sense is 'body part, at the end of the arm, containing five fingers'. That is what first comes to mind when the term occurs without any context. But terms also have secondary or extended senses. So we have:

She played beautifully; let's give her a hand.
Give me a hand to move this piano.
The big hand was at five.
We played a hand of pinochle.
Don't show me your hand.
The hand of God was on him.
How much milk do we have on hand?
I bought a hand of bananas.
There was fighting on every hand.
He hired a new hand today.
I've got to hand it to him.
Hand me that wrench.

All of these use the same lexeme, 'hand'. But in each instance there is a different sense, because these all involve secondary senses of the word. When we use the word 'hand' in a sentence, we do not think of the fact that 'hand' has many secondary senses; we simply use the word in the sense we have in mind. The hearer or reader determines what sense is intended by the context in which it occurs.

All languages operate this way. There is no exception. Terms can be used in their primary sense or in a secondary sense. But as a rule, extended senses do NOT carry over from one language to another.

Now, the critics of the TNIV say 'father' should not be changed to 'parent', or 'fathers' to 'parents' or 'ancestors'. But this is ridiculous. The Greek word PATER 'father' can have several meanings; and to insist it must be translated only and always by its primary sense of 'male relative in lineal order of the preceding generation' is simply ignoring the fact that the Greek or Hebrew words for 'father' can have several senses. For example:

'your father, the Devil' (John 8:44) = the one you really belong to spiritually
'our father Abraham' (John 8:53) = ancestor

‘father of lies’ (John 8:44) = originator, source

‘I honor my Father’ (John 8:49) = the first member of the Trinity, with whom I
am equal, and whose attributes I possess

I am not suggesting that all these senses need to be translated in English by different terms. But I AM suggesting that the senses are all different, and therefore to translate them differently is not wrong. One of these senses is clearly ‘ancestor’. To say the word ‘father’ should not be changed to ‘ancestor’ when it clearly means ‘ancestor’ shows a complete lack of understanding of the basic nature of language and the concept of primary and secondary senses.

Likewise, in Hebrews 12:7 we find the words, “What son is not disciplined by his father?” in the NIV. It was altered to “What children are not disciplined by parents?” in the TNIV. Why this change? I suggest it was because that is exactly what the writer of Hebrews intended to convey. Was he suggesting that girls never need disciplining? Or that a mother never should discipline one of her children, male or female, under any circumstances? These would be the clear implications of a literal translation. Are these what we want a translation to imply? No, the original writer used ‘son’ and ‘father’ just as representatives of children and parents. The TNIV is a better translation than the NIV because it conveys the right meaning and avoids wrong meaning.

Similarly, in Hebrews 12:7 the NIV has “God is treating you as sons.” The TNIV renders this as “God is treating you as his children.” Here again the original writer was simply using ‘sons’ in a secondary sense, meaning ‘children’. Was he suggesting that females cannot belong to God, or that females never need disciplining? Hardly! The TNIV recognizes this secondary sense, translates accordingly, and avoids the wrong meanings. Therefore it is a better translation than a literal one. It is not a case of trying to produce a ‘feminist’ version at all.

In the same vein, the claim that the Greek word usually translated ‘brothers’ should not be changed to ‘brothers and sisters’ is again failing to recognize that ‘brothers’ frequently is used in a secondary sense. The word is used a number of times in the New Testament in its primary sense of ‘male siblings’ (e.g., Matthew 13:35, 22:25), but in the vast majority of its occurrences it means ‘fellow believers’. Did the New Testament writers use the term to mean only male believers? Oh, brother! No! They clearly had

female believers in mind also. The TNIV simply recognizes this secondary sense that the writers intended, and translates as ‘brothers and sisters’ and avoids one wrong meaning. Personally I think ‘fellow believers’ would be a much better translations than ‘brothers and sisters’ in passages such as Philippians 1:12, 3:1, 13, 17, 4:1, 8. But at least ‘brothers and sisters’ is better than ‘brothers’ because it captures the intent of the original writers better than ‘brothers’.

Another of the ‘Guidelines’ states that “Person and number should be retained in translation so that singulars are not changed to plurals,” and Hebrew ISH should ordinarily be translated ‘man’ and ‘men’. But again the formulators of the ‘Guidelines’ supply no rationale for such statements. What they fail to realize is, as I stated earlier, that different languages use different terms to convey meaning. Therefore we should never presume that any grammatical or lexical form can be translated literally and still convey the meaning of the original in the most natural way. Greek uses ‘the one who’ or ‘the man who’ to introduce generic statements. Hebrew similarly uses ‘the man who’. These are the standard constructions in these two languages to indicate ‘anyone who’. But I submit that ‘the man who’ is NOT used in standard English to introduce generic statements. Thus I would say that ‘The man who does not study will probably fail the course’ is not acceptable English. ‘He who does not study will probably fail the course’ is semi-acceptable. “If you do not study, you will probably fail the course’ and ‘those who do not study will probably fail the course’ are THE standard ways to express this in current English of expressing such a generic statement.

Let me say that in the language in which I worked in Papua New Guinea, if I translated literally Psalm 1:1 as ‘Blessed is the man who ...’, and John 5:24 as ‘He who hears my word ...’, the reaction of the people would be, “Oh, that lucky man! I wonder who he is?” That is NOT the reaction intended by the original writers! In the Alekano language we have to translate such statement using plurals: ‘Blessed are those who’, etc. I called this phenomenon to the attention of one of my colleagues as I checked some of his translation, and he did some checking. He found that he had to change 100% of his ‘he who’ and ‘the one who’ renderings to ‘those who’. I always taught my translation students to beware of translating such constructions literally.

The ‘Guidelines’ state that ‘man’ should ordinarily be used to designate the human race. Again, this fails to recognize the basic principle that terms can have extended senses, and ‘man’ is no exception. In Genesis 1:27 we read “God created man in his own image,” but later in the same verse we read “male and female he created them.” What does this mean? Did God create Adam but not Eve in his own image? Is that what the writer means? No, certainly not. It is a poetic passage with a lot of repetition using different lexical terms with the same meaning. In 1:27a the word ‘man’ is again used in a secondary sense, meaning ‘people, mankind, humans’. Rendering 1:27a as ‘man’ easily gives the English reader the wrong meaning, and fails to recognize the secondary sense of ‘man’ here. I suggest that in current English we seldom use ‘man’ to convey the sense of ‘humankind’, except in poetic writing.

I could comment also at length on the expression ‘son of man’ since it also is mentioned in the ‘Guidelines’. But again, that expression has more than one meaning, depending on the context. In Hebrews 2:6 the sense of the term is “mere mortals”, exactly as translated in the TNIV. It does not mean ‘Messiah’ as the expression means when referring to Christ. The ‘Guidelines’ here are, as in the matters I have already cited, clearly wrong from the standpoint of linguistic understanding and sound principles of translation. The idea of trying “to retain intracanonical connections” (an expression which I never heard before) evidently means ‘try to render the same expression the same way in both the Old and New Testaments’. That notion is valid only if the meaning is exactly the same. But the term ‘son of man’ in every one of its Old Testament occurrences except one (Daniel 7:13) means ‘mere mortal’, not an equivalent for ‘Messiah’, and therefore to try to render all occurrences of ‘son of man’ throughout the Scriptures the same way, when there are clearly two different meanings, is contrary to sound translation principles.

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) has issued a paper entitled “Translation Inaccuracies in the TNIV: A Categorized List of 904 Examples.” I should like to make a few comments on its contents.

First of all, the word ‘inaccuracies’ is totally misleading. Every one of the examples cited is a case of ‘differences in opinion on how a certain term ought to be

translated in English’, but none of the examples is an inaccuracy. Calling them ‘inaccuracies’ is a gross distortion of the truth.

The paper in question also states that the changes from the NIV to the TNIV were made “for the sake of producing a more ‘gender-neutral’ or ‘inclusive’ version.” I do not claim to know the motives of the revisers, and I do not think the CBMW has a right before God to determine their motives, UNLESS these motives were stated in print. I have read the introduction to the TNIV (entitled “‘A Word to the Reader’”) and it says nothing about this being one of their motives. The changes made were made as a result of a better understanding of the way languages work, a better understanding of translation principles, changes in English usage, etc. I believe that in every case the changes were made to make the meaning intended by the original authors clearer to the readers, and thus to avoid giving readers wrong meaning.

I have already commented on the invalidity of most of the criticisms of the TNIV. Let me comment on the objection to “changes to avoid the phrase ‘the Jews’.” The references cited are all from John’s gospel, except for Acts 13:50 and 21:11. The question here is simply, not ‘what words did the writers use?’ but ‘what did they intend the readers to understand by “the Jews”?’ In every one of the instances cited, the meaning intended by the writers is clearly ‘the Jewish leaders’. The meaning is clearly not ‘the Jews as a whole’. TNIV is not the only modern version that recognizes the true meaning (i.e., it is a figure of synecdoche, the whole group standing for a subclass of that group). Translating the expression as “the Jewish leaders” is being far more accurate in representing the meaning than is “the Jews”. The criticism here is totally unwarranted.

Finally, the claim that rendering ‘saints’ as ‘God’s people’ is unwarranted because it loses the nuance of holiness in ‘saints’ is also ridiculous. What is the primary sense of the word ‘saint’ to nearly all native English speakers today (or at least to the unconverted ones)? It means ‘an individual who has been canonized by the Roman Catholic Church’. Is that what we want people to understand when they read the Scriptures? I hope not. That is wrong meaning. The sense of the word HAGIOS is ‘holy’ or ‘dedicated to God’, and the sense of the plural HAGIOI is ‘those who belong to God (or to Christ)’, or ‘believers’. Translating the expression as ‘God’s people’ is not only acceptable but better than using ‘saints’ because it conveys the sense well, it avoids wrong meaning, and

because the word ‘saints’ is not used in current general English with any meaning other than the wrong meaning stated above.

Critics of the TNIV have issued a “Statement of Concern about the TNIV Bible.” I have already commented earlier about the validity of two of the three criticisms stated in that paper. Here I will mention only the criticism that “the TNIV translation inserts English words into the text whose meaning does not appear in the original languages.” This charge of unfaithfulness to the original because of including additional words needs to be emphatically refuted. Usually critics cite Revelation 22:18, which states, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll; If anyone of you adds anything to them, God will add to you the plagues described in this scroll” (TNIV). Note, first of all, that the writer is saying “the words of the prophecy of this scroll,” (i.e. Revelation), not “the words of Scripture as a whole.” But ignoring that obvious exegetical weakness in such a criticism, let me point out to those who raise it what the following verse says: “And if anyone of you takes words away from this scroll or prophecy, God will take away from you your share in the tree of life and in the Holy City which are described in this scroll.” Supposing, for the sake of argument, I accept that John’s warning applies to all of Scripture. Then the meaning to me is clear and simple: If in my translation I am taking away anything from the meaning (the Greek word LOGOS here means ‘meaning’) intended by the original writers, I am liable for the punishments John is warning about here. You want a literal translation, one that retains form but not the meaning, one that keeps the reader from understanding the meaning intended by the original writers? Then I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes on the Day of Judgment.

It has been pointed out that those two verses, Revelation 22:18-19, contain 65 words in the original Greek text. The KJV text of those two verses contains 81 words. What about those 16 words that the KJV ‘added’? Did those who translated the KJV have added to them the plagues John described?

To me, the most disappointing aspect of this whole TNIV controversy is that such a long list of recognized evangelicals have allowed their names to be appended to this “Statement of Concern.” Those individuals have all had outstanding ministries of various kinds. God has used them to be great blessings to many. But their ministries have not

been in Bible translation. They were not trained in principles of Bible translation. They have simply put their names to a document that was formulated by someone who is writing out of the vast wealth of his ignorance of how languages actually operate and of sound principles of Bible translation. This is not scholarship, and those who signed their names to this document should all be ashamed of what they have done. The cause of Christ would be served far better by their concentrating on those ministries in which they are truly gifted, and by leaving matters of Bible translation to those who know what they are talking about.