DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE:
A METHOD OF TRANSLATION
OR A SYSTEM OF HERMENEUTICS?¹

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The recent popularity of Dynamic Equivalence in translating the Bible justifies a closer scrutiny of it, particularly in light of the growing interest in biblical hermeneutics which it parallels. A comparison of the disciplines of D-E translation and hermeneutics reveals a large amount of similarity between the two. The similarity exists whether one compares D-E to traditional hermeneutics or to theories being advanced in contemporary hermeneutics. In view of the close parallel between D-E and hermeneutics, three questions need to be faced: a linguistic one, an ethical one, and a practical one.

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Dynamic Equivalence entered the scene as a formalized method of translation and as a scientific discipline with a theoretical basis about two decades ago, but its presence as a practical pursuit in translating the Bible into English dates back to around the turn of the century.²

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²E. A. Nida, Toward a Science of Translating with Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating (Leiden: Brill, 1964) 5. Nida noted that the art of translation had outstripped the theory of translation. His work was put forth as an effort to provide a theoretical basis for what was already being produced. In his survey of the history of translation in the western world he writes, "The 20th century has witnessed a radical change in translation principles" (21). Later in the same work he adds, "The present direction is toward increasing emphasis on dynamic equivalence. This represents a shift of emphasis which began during the early decades of this century" (160). Perhaps he was looking back to the Twentieth Century New Testament (1902) as the first effort which utilized
Since the 1960's, it has grown rapidly in popularity and has been greatly acclaimed. This investigation purposes to examine the extent to which dynamic equivalence draws upon hermeneutical principles as a part of its translation method and to weigh whether it should be termed a method of translation or a system of hermeneutics. Eugene A. Nida, who probably has earned the title of "the father of dynamic equivalence," though he more recently has chosen to call the process "functional equivalence," sees hermeneutics as entirely separate from dynamic-equivalence translation procedures, but does so on the basis of a novel understanding of hermeneutics. He defines the field of hermeneutics as that which points out parallels between the biblical message and present-day events and determines the extent of relevance and the appropriate response for the believer.

This concept of hermeneutics is quite different from that traditionally assigned to the word. Normally it is defined as "the science of what he chooses to label "dynamic equivalence" principles. F. F. Bruce, History of the English Bible (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford, 1978) 153, calls this 1902 publication the first of a series of "modern English translations."


4J. de Waard and E. A. Nida, From One Language to Another, Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating (Nashville: Nelson, 1986) vii-viii. The authors mean nothing different from what Nida intended by "dynamic equivalence" in his Toward a Science of Translating, but have opted for the new terminology because of a misunderstanding of the older expression and because of abuses of the principle of dynamic equivalence by some translators.


6Ibid.
interpretation."7 Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines hermeneutics as "the study of the methodological principles of interpretation."8 Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged makes hermeneutics synonymous with exegesis.9 Terry more precisely notes that hermeneutics constitutes the principles of interpretation that are applied by exegesis.10 Yet Nida emphatically distinguishes between exegesis and hermeneutics, and says they are two distinct components of the larger category of interpretation.11

Admittedly the connotation of "hermeneutics" has shifted in recent times,12 creating widespread confusion. Yet Nida appears to be in disharmony with everyone in his definition. He has equated hermeneutics with what has traditionally been called "application," which


10 Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics 19.

11 Nida and Reyburn, Meaning 30. See also de Waard and Nida, From One Language 40, where the authors write, "This issue of the communicative role of the Bible highlights an important distinction which may be made between exegesis and hermeneutics, although some writers use these terms almost indistinguishably."

12 B. L. Ramm and others, Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 6. Ramm writes, "Although traditionally hermeneutics has been treated as a special theological discipline, recent studies have endeavored to enlarge the scope of hermeneutics. These studies wish to see hermeneutics in a wider perspective as a function of the human understanding . . . " (6). Ferguson notes that the traditional definition "needs amplification and qualification since there has been a steady shifting of emphases in carrying out the hermeneutical task . . . " (Biblical Hermeneutics 4).
is based on the one correct interpretation of the original writing, and in so doing, has represented an extreme position that is unacceptable because it represents an abnormal sense of the word. So his strict dissociation of hermeneutics and translation cannot be taken seriously.

In light of current confusion over the scope of hermeneutics we must stipulate our meaning of the term in the context of this investigation. In the earlier part of the discussion we will focus on "the more technical kind of hermeneutics known as sacred or biblical hermeneutics," in other words, the traditional definition. Later we will expand to include more recent elements which have in some circles found their way under the broadened umbrella of "hermeneutics."

DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE 
AND TRADITIONAL HERMENEUTICS

The Overlapping of Dynamic Equivalence and Exegesis

One of the striking features of dynamic equivalence is its embracing within its methodology of what has been known traditionally as biblical exegesis. Inclusion of exegetical procedures is necessitated by the first of three steps that dynamic-equivalence theory recommends. The three steps are reduction of the source text to its structurally simplest and most semantically evident kernels, transference of the meaning from the source language to the receptor language on a structurally simple level, and generation of the stylistically and semantically equivalent expression in the receptor language.

The first of the three steps consists of two parts, analysis of the source text in terms of grammatical relationships and analysis of it in terms of the meanings of the words and combinations of words. A common way to illustrate grammatical analysis is with uses of the Greek genitive case and the corresponding English construction of two nouns

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13Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics 600.

14Ramm, Hermeneutics 6.

15Nida, Toward a Science 68. According to Nida, this three-step process is the way "the really competent translator" works.

or pronouns connected by "of." Those familiar with the earliest stages of NT Greek study recognize quickly that an analysis of the various uses of the Greek genitive case is a standard part of preparation for biblical exegesis. Yet there is a strange reticence by those who espouse D-E methodology to recognize that this type of study has been underway for a long time.\(^{18}\)

The 1986 work by de Waard and Nida does refer to standard tools of lexicography, but it casts them in a negative light. Traditional bilingual dictionaries are labeled as deficient because they depend almost entirely on "glosses," i.e. surface structure transfer of meanings.\(^{19}\) The same authors criticize Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker for being very unsystematic and in failing to cover the ranges of meaning of individual words.\(^{20}\) It is evident from these criticisms that the analysis step in the D-E process covers the same ground that has traditionally been covered by exegesis, an exegesis based on principles of interpretation that

\(^{17}\)Nida, *Toward a Science* 207-208, 229; Nida and Taber, *The Theory* 35-37. "Field of blood" (Acts 1:19) and "God of peace" (Phil 4:9) are two among the suggested examples of ambiguity (Nida, 229). For the former Nida suggests two possible interpretations, "field where blood was spilled" (or "shed") or "field that reminded people of blood." For the latter he rejects "a peaceful God" as an option, and chooses "God who gives peace" or "God who causes peace."

\(^{18}\)The sole use of "exegesis" in the index of Nida's *Toward a Science of Translating* is in a passing reference to the field in his historical survey of translations in the western world (Nida, *Toward a Science* 28). The only place where Nida and Taber use "exegesis" in their *Theory and Practice of Translation*, according to their index, is as a part of a sample set of principles prepared for use in making a "Southern Bantu" translation, and this mention is only in passing (Nida and Taber, *The Theory* 182). The standard grammars for NT Greek are never alluded to in the above works, nor are they listed in their bibliographies.

This coolness toward what has been a long established field of biblical studies is perhaps reflected in the judgment of Nida and others that good exegetes and grammarians make poor translators (E. A. Nida, "Bible Translation for the Eighties," *International Review of Mission* 70 [1981] 136-137). H. H. Hess, "Some Assumptions," a paper read at the President's Luncheon, Biola University, Nov 15, 1984, 9, states as his ninth assumption "that the linguistic and cultural demands of non-Indo-European languages necessitate biblical interpretation that goes beyond traditional and conventional exegesis." This assumption of a Wycliffe Bible translator displays the same dissatisfaction with traditional exegesis as Nida and his associates seem to entertain.

\(^{19}\)de Waard and Nida, *From One Language* 160.

\(^{20}\)Ibid., 161-62.
compose the field of hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{21}

From the perspective of a traditional definition of hermeneutics little doubt can be entertained that D-E is, among other things, a system of hermeneutics. Perhaps some will respond, however, that all translations are commentaries and hence incorporate the application of hermeneutical principles in arriving at their renderings. This is absolutely true.\textsuperscript{22} A certain degree of interpretation is unavoidable, no matter how hard the translator tries to exclude it. Yet a characteristic of formal equivalence is its effort to avoid interpretation as much as possible by transferring directly from the surface structure of the source language to the surface structure of the receptor language.\textsuperscript{23} By omitting the step of analysis that is built into the D-E approach, interpretation can be excluded to a much higher degree. Since D-E intentionally incorporates interpretation, it obviously has a significantly higher degree of interpretation than formal equivalence and is in a much stronger sense a system of hermeneutics than is formal equivalence.

\textsuperscript{21}Further evidence of the inclusion of hermeneutics in the D-E methodology is seen in what D-E authors have written about such things as how to handle the synonyms ἀγαπᾷ (agapaō, "I love") and φιλέω (phileo, "I love") in John 21:15-19 (de Waard and Nida, \textit{From One Language} 93), the treatment of anacolutha (ibid., 105), the meaning of καταλαμβάνω (katalambanō, "I apprehend") in John 1:5 (ibid., 107), and the meaning of μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ (marturia Iesou, "the testimony of Jesus") in Revelation 1:2 (ibid., 127). All these belong properly in the realm of exegesis. As a matter of fact, de Waard and Nida in essence acknowledge the essential presence of the science of interpretation in D-E when they write, "The primary exegetical perspective of a translator is 'what did the text mean to the people who were the original receptors?'" (ibid., 177).

Glassman gives a similar but simpler explanation of the step of analysis, using σάρξ (sarc, "flesh") with its varying NT meanings as one of his examples of the interpretive decisions which must be made by a D-E translator (Glassman, \textit{Translation Debate} 59-60).

\textsuperscript{22}D. G. Rossetti expressed this over a century ago: "A translation remains perhaps the most direct form of commentary" (cited by Nida, \textit{Toward a Science} 156).

\textsuperscript{23}W. L. Wonderly, \textit{Bible Translations for Popular Use} (London: United Bible Societies, 1968) 51, calls formal correspondence, a later name for formal equivalence, "the direct transfer technique." He refers to dynamic equivalence as a process of "indirect transfer, involving 'decomposition and recomposition' or analysis-plus-restructuring" (ibid.).
Dynamic Equivalence and Ambiguous Passages

One type of passage illustrates particularly well the commitment of dynamic equivalence to the practice of hermeneutics. This is a passage whose interpretation is uncertain, i.e., one whose meaning is ambiguous. As a general rule, dynamic equivalence is dedicated to the elimination of ambiguities.

In building his rationale for D-E, Nida quotes Alexander Fraser Tytler’s principle approvingly: "To imitate the obscurity or ambiguity of the original is a fault and it is still a greater one to give more than one meaning." To follow through with this perspective, he later uses the Greek genitive-case form with the corresponding use of the English preposition "of" to illustrate how to eliminate ambiguities. "Cup of the Lord" (1 Cor 10:21) is rendered "the cup by which we remember the Lord," "wisdom of words" (1 Cor 1:17) is taken to be "well arranged words," and "sons of wrath" (Eph 2:3) becomes "those with whom God is angry." In each case the obscurity in meaning disappears through a grammatical restructuring.

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25 Nida, Toward a Science 207-208; cf. also Nida and Taber, The Theory 35-37; Wonderly, Bible Translations 163.

26 Ibid.

27 Wonderly in 1968 noted the rarity of an expression that is ambiguous when its total context is taken into account (Wonderly, Bible Translations 162). He conversely observed that a completely "unambiguous" expression is also rare (ibid.). In light of this he saw the elimination of all potential ambiguities as undesirable. Yet, for the sake of the uneducated, he advised the translator "to eliminate them or reduce to a minimum the probability of their being misunderstood" (ibid., 163).

Determination to eliminate ambiguities has seemingly grown stronger with the passage of time. In 1981 Nida and Reyburn saw attempts to reproduce ambiguities in a translation as unjust to the original author and unfair to the untrained reader (Nida and Reyburn, Meaning 7-8; ambiguities referred to are, of course, those resulting from the scholars’ lack of understanding, not intentional ambiguities intended by an author; see also Jean-Claude Margot, "Should a Translation of the Bible Be Ambiguous," BT 32/4 [Oct 1981] 406-413). They suggested that the translator’s goal should be to translate so as to prevent misunderstanding of what the original receptors understood (ibid., 29).
More recently, de Waard and Nida have expressed the same perspective regarding ambiguous passages: "It is unfair to the original writer and to the receptors to reproduce as ambiguities all those passages which may be interpreted in more than one way." They add that the translator should place in the text the best attested interpretation and provide in marginal notes the appropriate alternatives.

Usually the case for non-ambiguity is buttressed by references to the inadequacies of formal-equivalence translations. Examples of ambiguous and allegedly misleading formal-equivalence translations have been multiplied. The volume of examples adduced have won the case for D-E in the minds of some. As persuasive as these lists are, however, superficiality and carelessness have marked the choices of at least some of the illustrations. The scope of our discussion permits citation of only one widely used passage to illustrate this. In Psalm 1:1 Glassman cites the description of the "blessed man" who in formal-equivalence translations does "not stand in the way of sinners." He then criticizes the rendering in these words: "Nowadays to stand in the way of something or someone means to prevent or hinder, to serve as an obstacle." He should have indicated that this was only a personal opinion because his statement is blatantly inaccurate according to authorities on the English language. Webster's unabridged dictionary gives the following as the first definition of the expression "in the way of": "so as to meet or fall in with; in a favorable position for doing or

Also in 1981 Glassman gave "avoid ambiguity" as one of five guidelines to be followed in correct translation. He displays much less caution in his application of this principle than Wonderly did earlier (Glassman, The Translation Debate 101-4).

28de Waard and Nida, From One Language 39.

29Ibid.

30E.g. Carson, "The Limits" 1.

31Glassman, Translation Debate 108. Carson, "The Limits" 5, and de Waard and Nida, From One Language 33, use the same illustration. Glassman is cited because his work has the earliest publication date, though he had access to the unpublished manuscript of de Waard and Nida (Glassman, Translation Debate 127 [ch 6, n 7]) and may have obtained it from them.
getting."\textsuperscript{32} This is clearly the correct idea conveyed by the Hebrew, that of "associate with." The blessed man does not place himself in a compromising position with sinners.

Unfortunately the reaction of Glassman and others against a formal-equivalence rendering of Psalm 1:1 is characteristic of other ill-advised conclusions by D-E advocates. This is surprising, for some of these are leading linguists who as a part of their methodology advocate a careful respect for the referential meanings of words and expressions as they appear in dictionary resources.\textsuperscript{33} Yet they disregard their own advice. For example, de Waard and Nida object to formal-equivalence renderings of Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," by stating flatly, "want no longer means 'to lack' but rather 'to desire.'"\textsuperscript{34} In contrast, contemporary dictionaries give the intransitive verb "want" a first meaning of "lack" or "have a need,"\textsuperscript{35} exactly what the psalmist intended to say.\textsuperscript{36} Rather than correcting the formal-equivalence translators, the linguistic specialists should have acknowledged the legitimacy of their word choice. They would also have been more credible if they had prefaced their critical remark with "in our sphere of knowledge" or "according to our judgment," but to say without

\textsuperscript{32}Webster's New Twentieth Century 2071. This same source gives as the first definition of "in the way" the idea of obstructing, impeding, or hindering, but "in the way of" is a separate entry (ibid.). Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, on the other hand, defines "in the way" as meaning, first of all, "in a position to be encountered by one: in or along one's course" (1325). The idea of hindrance or obstruction is not introduced until the second definition in this latter source. Similarly, Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines "in the way" as follows: "on or along one's path, road, or course: in a position to be encountered by one" (2588).

\textsuperscript{33}Nida, Toward a Science 70.

\textsuperscript{34}de Waard and Nida, From One Language 9.

\textsuperscript{35}Webster's New Twentieth Century 2059. Webster's New Collegiate gives "to be needy or destitute" as the first meaning and "to have or feel need" as the second (1327). The definition incorporating the idea of "desire" is not given until the fourth definition. After giving an obsolete definition, Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines "want" by "to be in need" in the first non-obsolete meaning.

\textsuperscript{36}Another formal equivalence rendering such as "lack" may be clearer in the minds of some than "want," but "want" is still a very legitimate option.
qualification "want no longer means 'to lack'" raises questions about their judgment in general.

Formal-equivalence translations handle ambiguities in exactly the opposite way. In the receptor rendering they maintain as far as possible the same ambiguity that exists in the source language. This places a heavier responsibility upon the reader and student of the English text by forcing him either to interpret the passage himself or to resort to a commentary or Bible teacher or expositor for help, but it also leaves open interpretive options that would otherwise be beyond his reach. It also runs less risk of excluding a correct interpretation.

DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE
AND CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICS

To compare dynamic equivalence with contemporary hermeneutics, it is necessary to sketch some of the recent trends in the latter field.

Recent Trends in Hermeneutics

One of the recent foci in hermeneutical discussions is the establishment of a starting point for interpretation. Special attention to this aspect of interpretation furnishes a convenient approach to comparing D-E with contemporary hermeneutics.

This starting point, sometimes called the interpretive center, functions as a control for the interpreter as he attempts to bring

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37J. W. Scott, "Dynamic Equivalence and Some Theological Problems in the NIV," WTJ 48 (Fall 1986) 355, points out the superiority of the KJV and NASB renderings of Acts 16:31 to that in the NIV, in this regard. Translators with limited understanding of the text, he notes, will more probably convey the original meaning more accurately and more completely than those of a free or D-E translation (see also p. 351). E. L. Miller, "The New International Version on the Prologue of the John," HTR 72/3-4 (July-Oct 1979) 309, criticizes the NIV for not retaining the ambiguity of the Greek in its handling of John 1:9, saying that the translators had usurped the reader's right to an accurate rendering of the text. J. C. Jeske, "Faculty Review of the Revised NIV," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 85/2 (Spring 1988) 106, cites the same version for its failure to retain the ambiguity of the Greek text in Heb 9:14. Yet he also commends the NIV for retaining ambiguity in its handling of Luke 17:20 (105). A. H. Nichols (in "Explicitness in Translation and the Westernization of Scripture," Reformed Theological Review 3 [Sept-Dec 1988] 78-88) calls this focus of D-E "explicitness" and pinpoints the difficulties it creates in translation.
together diverse texts of Scripture.\textsuperscript{38} It serves as the organizing principle, furnishing the interpretive structure for exegesis, and is therefore a very important consideration.

Eitel portrays two broad types of hermeneutical controls, a Scripture-dominant one and a context-dominant one.\textsuperscript{39} These two are a convenient way to divide the wide assortment of starting points that have been proposed. One group belongs to the past and focuses on elements in the original settings of various portions of Scripture, and the other belongs to the present with elements of the contemporary world setting the tone for interpretation.

Thiselton insists that the starting point must be something in the present situation of the interpreter.\textsuperscript{40} The interpreter addresses his initial questions to the text and is personally interpreted by the response of the text, thus beginning the hermeneutical circle.\textsuperscript{41} Thiselton criticizes the traditional method according to which the interpreter works with the text as a passive object, making it his starting point. This, he says, is impossible.\textsuperscript{42}

Among others who have joined Thiselton in making something in the present a controlling factor in hermeneutics are a number of cross-cultural communication leaders. Padilla is even more specific about the necessity of an interpreter’s starting from his own situation.\textsuperscript{43} Kraft agrees and notes that different cultural backgrounds produce different needs, which in turn prompt the seeker to ask different questions.\textsuperscript{44} Because of this, he continues, new theologies will eventual-


\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., 316.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid.; A. C. Thiselton, \textit{The Two Horizons} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 87.


\textsuperscript{44}C. H. Kraft, \textit{Christianity in Culture} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) 144-46.
ly emerge in non-Western cultures. Revelation is thus a relative matter, differing in each culture and necessitating that interpretation begin with needs formulated by the interpreter.45

Marxism as an ideological system is the hermeneutical starting point for liberation theology.46 Another proposed contemporary starting point in hermeneutics is natural revelation. Mbti sees natural revelation deposited in African religions as equal in authority with and therefore in control of biblical revelation.47 Bruce Narramore places natural revelation through secular psychology on the same level of authority as biblical revelation and interprets the Bible through the eyes of secular psychological theory.48 This list of controlling principles could be expanded easily.49

The above rapid survey reflects that in the minds of many the traditional starting point in hermeneutics, that of the original text, is no

45Ibid.

46Ferguson, Biblical Hermeneutics 177.


48Bruce Narramore, "The Isolation of General and Special Revelation as the Fundamental Barrier to the Integration of Faith and Learning," paper read at President's Luncheon, Biola University, Oct 22, 1984, 2-3, 10.

49Some representative writers with a feminist emphasis are explicit about interpretive centers pertaining to their present personal situations. Hull starts with the interpretive guideline that women are fully redeemed and formulates her biblical interpretations in this light (G. G. Hull, "Response," Women, Authority and the Bible [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986] 24). Fiorenza's organizing principle in interpretation is the oppression of women by men (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her [New York: Crossroad, 1984] 32-33). In light of contemporary social emphases Jewett and Bilezikian identify Galatians 3:28 as a norm according to which other Scriptures must be interpreted (P. K. Jewett, Man as Male and Female [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 142; G. Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985] 128; see also Jerry H. Gill, "Mediated Meaning: A Contextualist Approach to Hermeneutical Method," Asbury Theological Journal 43/1 [Spring 1988] 37-38). The conviction that contemporary experience should be identical to apostolic Christianity is another principle that will control interpretation (R. Stronstad, "Trends in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," Paraclete 22/3 [Summer 1988] 2-3). Other controls that have been suggested include a decision about whether one can lose his salvation or not, a conviction about non-participation in war, and ideas about the capability of a believer's never sinning (Scholer, "Issues" 16-17).
longer acceptable as a control in interpretation, if it ever was. Criticisms of the grammatico-historical method of interpretation are often direct and uninhibited.\textsuperscript{50} It is clear that the hermeneutical focus has shifted dramatically from the original setting of Scripture to a variety of contemporary issues that have become interpretative controls.

\textit{Trends in Translation}

Contemporary trends in translation have paralleled those in hermeneutics. The traditional method of translation adopted the source message as its control and sought to bring the contemporary reader back to that point.\textsuperscript{51} Most recent preferences in translation express the opposite goal, that of bringing the source message into the twentieth century to the contemporary reader.\textsuperscript{52} The new aim is to relate the text to the receptor and his modes of behavior relevant within the

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\textsuperscript{51}Nida, \textit{Toward a Science} 165.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., 166; Glassman, \textit{Translation Debate} 74; H. M Wolf, "When 'Literal' Is Not Accurate," \textit{The NIV--The Making of a Contemporary Translation} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 127. Jerome's Latin Vulgate has often been used as an early example of dynamic equivalence or idiomatic translation because Jerome expressed the purpose of translating "sense for sense" rather than "word for word" (e.g. see Nida, \textit{Toward a Science} 13; J. Beekman and J. Callow, \textit{Translating the Word of God} [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974] 24). This widely used quotation of Jerome is wrongly used, however, because Jerome adds an important qualification to his statement that is not usually noticed: "except for Holy Scripture where even the word order is sacred" (Epistle LVII, in \textit{Jerome: Lettres} [ed. Jerome Labourt; Paris, 1953] III, 59, cited by Harvey Minkoff, "Problems of Translations: Concern for the Text Versus Concern for the Reader," \textit{Biblical Review} 4/4 [Aug 1988] 36). \textit{Mysterium}, the Latin word rendered "sacred" in this quotation, is rendered "a mystery" by others (Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, \textit{A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers} [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954] 6:133), because \textit{mysterium} and \textit{sacramentum} were used almost interchangeably by the Latin Fathers to refer to holy things (A. Dulles, "Mystery in Theology," \textit{New Catholic Encyclopedia} [Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1967] 10:152). Regardless of the English rendering of this word, however, the fact remains that because of its inspiration, Jerome put Scripture into a special category that required more literal translation principles than other literature. His Vulgate was therefore quite literal (Minkoff, "Problems" 36).
context of his own culture, a controlling factor called "the principle of equivalent effect."53 The traditional method of taking the receptor to the text seeks to help the reader identify himself with a person in the source-language context as fully as possible, teaching him the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression of the earlier time. With D-E, comprehension of the patterns of the source-language culture is unnecessary.54 The prime concern given to effective communication by D-E at the expense of the source is a vivid confirmation of this shift in focus.55

These two starting points are quite distinct from each other. Formal-equivalence and D-E approaches represent two opposite poles in a clash that sometimes has been labeled "literal translation" vs. "free translation."56 To be sure, there are many grades or levels between the polar distinctions,57 but they are polar distinctions. The differing grades between the two poles are traceable to the varying degrees of consistency with which the translators have adhered to their stated goals and to self-imposed limitations upon the full implementation of D-E principles from passage to passage within the translation.

53Ibid., 159. Minkoff describes formal equivalence in different terminology. It produces a "text-oriented" or "overt" translation because of its persuasion that the meaning lies in the text. D-E on the other hand produces a "reader-oriented" or "covert" translation, assuming that meaning inheres in audience reaction to the text (Minkoff, "Problems" 35).

54Ibid.

55D-E does give attention to the source text in its step called "analysis," which is described above. This is not the prime concern of D-E, however. In its quest for greater communicative effectiveness, it intentionally omits some information of the source text with all its details (see Nida, Toward a Science 224). Perhaps the secondary importance of the source text and its meaning is reflected also in some of Nida's expressions when he injects some of his precautionary remarks. Commending Phillips' translation for its high rate of decodability, he adds, "Whether Phillips' translation of this passage is the best way of rendering these difficult verses is not the question at this point" (Nida, Toward a Science 175-76). This could imply that accuracy in meaning is not the major concern in translation (see also 207-8 where a similar idea is expressed). Nichols sees the plight of D-E as hopeless because it fails to distinguish between translation and communication ("Explicitness" 82-83).

56Nida, Toward a Science 22, 171.

57Ibid., 24.
An example of across-the-board dynamic equivalence is *The Cotton Patch Version* produced by Clarence Jordan. It transforms the source text culturally, historically, and linguistically. In this work Annas and Caiaphas are co-presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention. Jesus is born in Gainesville, Georgia, and lynched rather than being crucified. Most, of course, would not push D-E to that extreme. Yet the work still illustrates the direction of D-E. It shows how the methodology is limited only by the judgment of the translator or translators.

Such a release from restraints of the original text coincides with varying degrees of subjectivism that characterize contemporary hermeneutical systems. These recent schemes dismiss the traditional system of letting the author be the determining factor in interpretation. In so doing, of necessity they force a judgment of the Bible’s meaning through the eyes of something or someone contemporary. Hirsch notes that the text has to represent someone’s meaning; if it is not the author’s, then it must be the modern critic’s meaning that is drawn from the text. Hirsch’s terminology distinguishes the author’s meaning from the critic’s by calling what the author intended "meaning" and by using the term "significance" to refer to a relationship between that meaning and a person, concept, situation, or anything else.

Another way of viewing such hermeneutics is by contrasting it with the traditional hermeneutical distinction between interpretation and

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59 Nida, *Toward a Science* 184.

60 For example, de Waard and Nida, *From One Language* 37-39, suggest five situations when functional (i.e. dynamic) equivalence rather than formal equivalence should be used. Carson, "The Limits" 5-7, suggests that equivalence of response be limited to linguistic categories alone.


62 Ibid., 8.
application. Gill, an advocate of a contextualist approach to hermeneutics, says it quite plainly. He supposes that his mentor of thirty years ago, Professor Traina, will disagree with his contextualist method in which there is no longer a distinction between interpretation and application. Application has taken a position as a part of interpretation, and in the case of Jordan's translation, it has almost replaced interpretation completely.

While Nida and others call The Cotton Patch Version a translation, Charles Kraft calls it a "cultural translation" or "transculturation," but he also concedes that translation is a limited form of transculturation. He agrees with Nida in advocating use of a "dynamically equivalent" message to secure a response from the modern recipient that is equivalent to the response of the original recipients of the message. Kraft carries dynamic equivalence beyond transculturation into the realm of theologizing, concluding that the latter is a necessary outgrowth of the former. He incorporates social custom as so much of a controlling factor in dynamic-equivalence theologizing that matters like the biblical teachings against polygamy and in favor of monogamous church leadership are negated. This is reminiscent of the hermeneutical use of natural revelation by Mbiti as an equal authority in the

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63 M. Silva, Has the Church Misread the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 63-67, suggests that application is essentially equivalent to allegorical interpretation. This suggestion is interesting, but it loses sight of the fact that allegorical interpretation as usually understood does not change from place to place and period to period as practical application does. Rather it attaches itself to the text as a deeper or hidden meaning that is more or less stable.

64 Gill, "Mediated Meaning" 40.

65 Kraft, Christianity in Culture 284-86. Kraft has a narrower definition of translation: "... The translator is not free to provide the degree, extent, and specificity of interpretation required to establish the message solidly in the minds of the hearers. Nor is it within the province of a translator to elaborate on the written message to approximate that of spoken communication" (280).

66 Kraft, Christianity in Culture 281.

67 Ibid., 291.

interpretation of the Bible. Here then is another tie-in between contemporary hermeneutics and dynamic equivalence.

Other Similarities Between Contemporary Hermeneutics and Dynamic Equivalence

A similarity in origin. It seems appropriate to point out the similarity in source between recent hermeneutical trends and dynamic-equivalence techniques. To a large degree, both have originated in circles that might be labeled as "missiological," "cross-cultural," or "biblical linguistic." One only needs to recall some of the prominent names from our earlier discussion of hermeneutics to illustrate this. Padilla, Kraft, Mbiti, and others in the listed fields have been in the forefront of the contextualization movement that proposes, among other things, a revamping of traditional hermeneutical principles. As for dynamic equivalence in translation, Nida notes five influences that have changed translation principles in this century. Two of them relate directly to mission organizations, and the other three are indirectly related to mission activities. Grossman concurs regarding the mission-oriented origin, giving major credit to biblical linguists in missions for

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69See above p. 15.


71Nida, Toward a Science 21-22. The five influences are the rapidly expanding field of structural linguistics, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (i.e. Wycliffe Bible Translators), the program of the United Bible Societies, the publication Babel by the International Federation of Translators, and machine translators. The second and third are mission organizations, and the other three have impacted the methodology of these and other mission organizations.
the insistence that translation be carried out in cultural context as
dynamic equivalence advocates.  

A similarity of subjectivity. We have mentioned previously the
context-dominant approach of contemporary hermeneutics, and have
noted the high degree of subjectivism promoted thereby. A similar
subjectivity prevails in dynamic equivalence. The potential for
interpretational bias is maximized in the D-E approach. Fortunately
it has not been used often or widely for propaganda purposes, but D-
E translations inevitably encounter criticism in various passages because
the interpretations chosen in debated passages will always displease
some. This problem is not nearly so characteristic of formal-equiva-

cence translations.

The twelve-year-old New International Version furnishes a good
means for illustrating the problem created by subjectivity because,
though it is a dynamic-equivalence translation, strict limitations in its
application of D-E principles have greatly reduced its deviations from
traditional norms of translation. In other words, it differs radically
from the extreme dynamic equivalence of The Cotton Patch Version, for
example. Nevertheless, there is and has been a steady stream of
criticism of NIV renderings. A few illustrations will suffice to show this:

72Grossman, Translation Debate 73-74, 75-76.

73See above pp. 159, 163.

74Nida, Toward a Science 184.

75Because of the nature of the limitations observed in producing the NIV,
Scott refers to its methodology as "moderate 'dynamic equivalence'" (Scott,
24/1 (1981) 6, a member of the NIV translation team, describes the NIV as a
compromise between the traditional and the innovative, as sometimes literal and
sometimes dynamically equivalent. Yet the purpose of the NIV as stated in its
preface, that of representing the meaning rather than producing a word-for-word
translation, places this version squarely in the category of D-E ("Preface," The
Kohlenberger calls the NIV a D-E translation (Kohlenberger, Words 92). The
accuracy of his categorization is confirmed by the extremely complex system of
symbols and typefaces used in the exhaustive concordance that attempts to cross-
reference the English of that translation with words of the original languages (cf.
Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III, eds., The NIV Exhaustive
Dynamic Equivalence . . . 167

(1) In 1976 Mare raised questions about the NIV rendering of σάρξ (sarx, "flesh") in 1 Cor 5:5 by "the sinful nature," saying that in this verse it referred to the body. 76

(2) In 1979 Miller criticized the NIV when it rendered ἐσκηνοῦσα (eskēnōsen, "he dwelled") in John 1:12 by "lived for a while." This, he said, goes too far in molding the reader's interpretation. 77

(3) In the same year Scaer objected to 1 Peter 2:8b in the NIV as an illustration of how this version is potentially more insidious than the Living Bible because doctrinal problems are less easily recognized. 78 The rendering, he said, supported Calvin's doctrine of election to damnation.

(4) In 1980 Fee objected to the NIV's rendering of γυναικός ἀπετεθαί (gynaikos haptesthai, "[good] for a woman not to touch") by "marry" in 1 Cor 7:1. 79

(5) In 1986 Scott criticized the NIV's handling of a number of passages in Acts (i.e. 2:39; 16:34; 18:8) that in the Greek allow for paedobaptism, a possibility that is excluded by NIV renderings in these places. 80

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76 W. H. Mare, "1 Corinthians," EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 217. In a 1984 revision the rendering in the text remains the same, but the NIV committee has added two alternatives: "his body" and "the flesh." Mare's suggested correction is one of many found in the Expositor's Bible Commentary which uses the NIV as its basic text.

77 Miller, "The New International Version" 309. The committee responded by changing the rendering to "made his dwelling" in the 1984 revision.

78 David P. Scaer, "The New International Version—Nothing New," CTQ 43/1 (June 1979) 242. The committee has not yet changed this rendering. Nor have they chosen to change the words "came to life" in Rev 20:4. Scaer objected to these words because of their millennialistic implications.

79 G. D. Fee, "1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV," JETS 23/4 (1980), 307-314. The committee has not yet incorporated his suggested literal rendering of "touch a woman," but has left the text as it was with an added alternative in the margin which reads "have sexual relations with a woman." In 1990 Fee has gone further and expressed hesitation about D-E in general and the NIV in particular because he found "far too many absolutely wrong exegetical choices . . . locked into the biblical text as the reader's only option" ("Reflections on Commentary Writing," TToday 46/4 [Jan 1990] 388).

80 Scott, "Dynamic Equivalence" 353-358.
(6) Earlier this year, Jeske on behalf of the faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary voiced dissatisfaction with the NIV's rendering of Matt 5:32 in both its original form (i.e., "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery") and in its most recently revised form (i.e., "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery").

Reviewers and exegetes find fault with the NIV as being too interpretive here and there, because interpretation is an inescapable aspect of D-E. Since interpretations differ from person to person, no rendering that limits the possibilities to a single interpretation will please everyone. Some ask, "Why could not the text have been left ambiguous in this case?" Others suggest dispensing with the D-E approach so that ambiguities in the source text are left ambiguous in the translation throughout. After examining how the NIV handles a number of debated passages, some writers suggest that the NIV may have a somewhat "free-wheeling" strain throughout.

This dissatisfaction stems ultimately from the large subjective element that is inherent in D-E. Here then is another area of kinship with contemporary hermeneutics. Continuing revision committees are at work on the NIV and similar versions to try to weed out unsatisfactory renderings. The general "tightening" trend observable in the

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82 Ibid.


84 Miller, "The New International Version" 310; Scott, "Dynamic Equivalence" 361. Kohlenberger, Words 66-67, recognizes the problem of the excessive-commentary element in versions such as the Amplified Bible, the Living Bible, and Wuest's Expanded Translation, but he is apparently oblivious to the presence of the same in the NIV. Thomas A. Boogaart criticizes the NIV's sacrificing of faithfulness to the original Hebrew and Greek in the interest of harmonizing different textual traditions within Scripture and of seeking agreement with various scientific theories ("The New International Version: What Price Harmony?" Reformed Review 43/3 [Spring 1990] 189-203).
recommendations of these committees is an implicit recognition of the problems raised by subjectivity. The task is endless because of the translation philosophy of D-E translations.

A similarity in theological implications. Another relationship between contemporary hermeneutics and D-E in translation may be detected in the theological implications of each. Some of us have shied away from this subject for fear of saying too much or of being misunderstood. Yet something of this nature must be discussed.

Nida observes the tendency of those who hold the traditional orthodox view of inspiration to focus attention on the autographs and therefore to favor a formal-equivalence approach to translation. On the other hand, he sees those who hold to neo-orthodoxy or who have been influenced by neo-orthodoxy to be freer in their translations. This, he says, is traceable to neo-orthodoxy's view of inspiration in terms of the response of the receptor with a consequent de-emphasis on the source message. He and Reyburn make clear that there are exceptions to this rule, however.

There is little doubt that the assured conviction that the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek autographs of the Bible are inspired, lies behind the dominance of formal-equivalence translations throughout the centuries of Christianity. The Philoxenian, Harclean, and Palestinian Syriac Versions are early examples of efforts to conform the translation to the original text for this reason. The theological motive behind this

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85E.g. Jeske, "Faculty Review" 104; see also Kubo and Specht, So Many 82-83, 253-254.

86Nida, Toward a Science 27.

87Ibid.

88Nida and Reyburn, Meaning 61. Kohlenberger is one of those exceptions when he writes, "I believe in verbal inspiration, but I do not believe a word-for-word translation best honors that view of Scripture" (Kohlenberger, Words 73).

type of translation is obvious. 90

The presence of such a motive can be seen in the reactionary nature of some of the early-twentieth-century free translations. Moffatt in the preface of his free translation of the NT associates his freedom in translation methodology with being "freed from the influence of the theory of verbal inspiration." 91 Phillips justifies his approach in a similar way in the preface to one of his paraphrases: "Most people, however great their reverence for the New Testament may be, do not hold a word-by-word theory of inspiration. . . ." 92

Another symptom of a relaxed attitude toward biblical inspiration is the attitude of D-E advocates toward the source languages of Scripture. Nida and Tabor view these languages as being no different

90 de Waard and Nida, From One Language 10. Carson’s statement is surprising: "Why a literal translation is necessarily more in keeping with the doctrine of verbal inspiration, I am quite at a loss to know" (D. A Carson, The King James Version Debate [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 90). The church has long felt that inspiration elevates the original texts to the point that a translation should reflect as much of them as possible, as reflected in Minkoff’s careful analysis of the goals of the LXX translators and Jerome in biblical translation (Minkoff, "Problems" 35-36).


92 J. B. Phillips, The Gospels Translated into Modern English (1952) 5. It may be coincidental, but the earliest formulation of D-E theory coincided with the espousal of new theoretical proposals regarding inspiration among evangelicals. It was just one year before the appearance of Nida’s Toward a Science of Translating that Earle wrote the following in the ETS Bulletin: "The words are not the ultimate reality, but the thoughts which they seek to convey . . ." (R. Earle, Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society 6/1 [Winter 1963] 16). He continues by observing that Paul's struggle to find adequate words "accords well with the view of plenary dynamic inspiration—much better than it does with plenary verbal inspiration" (ibid.).

It was also roughly contemporary with similar developments in other realms. Just seven years after Nida’s initial effort at establishing a theoretical basis for D-E, Richard Buffum, in one of his regular columns of the Los Angeles Times, wrote, "Contemporary journalism is learning to perceive a subtle spectrum of grays between the old black and white reporting techniques" (R. Buffum, Los Angeles Times [Oct 5, 1971]). He defines "subtle spectrum of grays" as a new "kind of ponderous, informed subjectivity” that journalists are using in place of “the old rigidly objective approach” (ibid.).

These other developments probably had nothing directly to do with the development of D-E, but they portray the spirit of the age that indirectly spawned the D-E philosophy.
from any other languages. They make a strong point that Hebrew and Greek are subject to the same limitations as any other natural language. This point is valid, but it is only part of the picture. These biblical languages are the only ones that God chose to communicate inspired Scripture and are therefore unique among all languages. Why, then, do D-E advocates criticize those who believe in biblical inspiration and put these languages into a special category because of it, unless they themselves hold a lower view of biblical inspiration? How, then, can these same authorities in a context of discussing Bible translation insist that anything said in one language can be said in another, when there is inevitably some loss of meaning in translating from the inspired original into other languages? Is there an evangelical rationale for such emphases?

While opposition by D-E to an evangelical view of inspiration may not be viewed as explicit, there are implications and overtones that raise serious questions. Certainly no doubt can be entertained about the clear evangelical stance of some individuals that have participated in D-E efforts. The question here relates to the foundational philosophy behind D-E.

The same type of questions exists in regard to the hermeneutical emphases of contextualization. For example, the position of Charles Kraft regarding the relative nature of all systematic theology calls into question the traditional doctrine of inspiration with its associated grammatico-historical method of interpretation. Herein lies another similarity of D-E to contemporary hermeneutics.

The two fields can be tied together even more specifically when,

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93 Nida and Taber, The Theory 7.

94 Ibid., 3, 6. In discussing D-E, Kraft rejects "mere literalness even out of reverence for supposedly sacred words [italics added]" (Kraft, "Dynamic Equivalence" 44). Is this an implicit denial that the words of the original text were inspired?

95 Ibid., 4.

96 Kraft, Christianity in Culture 291-292.

now and then, some of the hermeneutical presuppositions of D-E come to light. For example, Nida and Reyburn appear to be in agreement with Smalley regarding the non-absolute nature of biblical revelation. Smalley elaborates on alleged biblical diversity in such a way as to raise questions about his view of inspiration. He notes that Jesus in the antitheses of Matt 5 revoked the teachings of Moses in the OT and substituted a new standard that was better suited to the Palestinian culture of the first century. Nida and Reyburn accept this proposition that differing cultures have caused contradictory presuppositions in the Bible, citing the same passage as Smalley to prove their assertion. Other contradictions that they cite include the teaching of henotheism in certain parts of the OT and the teaching of monotheism in others, the OT teaching of polygamy as set aside in the NT, and the NT rejection of the OT sacrificial system.

If this is not an explicit disavowal of an evangelical view of inspiration, it is at best a foggy representation.

QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

An answer to our initial question of whether D-E is a method of translation or a system of hermeneutics must acknowledge a considerable amount of hermeneutics in the dynamic-equivalence process. The correlation between contemporary hermeneutics and dynamic equivalence is not as conspicuous as that between traditional hermeneutics and dynamic equivalence. Nevertheless, even here substantial similarities exist. But even if one cannot agree to the former correlation, as suggested above, he certainly must grant that D-E incorporates a large measure of traditional hermeneutics into its fabric. That being the case, several questions arise.

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99 Nida and Reyburn, Meaning 26-27.

100 Ibid.
A Linguistic Question

Nida and other linguistic authorities are quite specific in telling translators to abide by the referential meanings of words, meanings they identify with those found in standard dictionaries.\(^{101}\) In *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* the relevant definition of the word "translation" is, "an act, process, or instance of translating: as a: a rendering from one language into another; also the product of such a rendering."\(^{102}\) There is little doubt that, in the minds of most people who use the English language, the term "translation" used in a cross-cultural connection suggests the simple idea of changing from one language into another. Yet this is only one-third of the process of dynamic equivalence, the step that is called "transfer."\(^{103}\) The question is then, "Is it proper linguistic practice to use the word 'translation' to describe the product of a D-E exercise?"\(^{104}\)

More recently, de Waard and Nida use "associative meaning" in lieu of "referential meaning" to describe lexical definitions.\(^{105}\) They point out, for example, the hesitancy of most translations to use "Yahweh" because in the minds of many Christians, it has become associated with a modernistic attitude toward the Bible and God.\(^{106}\)

Should not the same precision be shown in use of the word "translation"? The use of "translation" to include implementation of all the principles of hermeneutics and exegesis reflects an insensitivity to

\(^{101}\)Nida, *Toward a Science* 70.


\(^{103}\)Glassman, *The Translation Debate* 61-63.

\(^{104}\)Glassman equates the verb "translate" with the verb "interpret" in his attempt to show the basic equality in meaning of "translate" and "paraphrase" (Glassman, *The Translation Debate* 61-63). His definition, however, is limited to the use of "translate" within the same language rather than its use in connection with different languages. He states his definition in a way that the noun "translation" is hardly ever qualified in general usage in connection with D-E. From the perspective of referential meaning, he fails in this regard to justify the use of "translate" in the senses of "interpret" or "paraphrase."

\(^{105}\)de Waard and Nida, *From One Language* 123-24.

\(^{106}\)Ibid., 142.
the associative meaning of that word in the minds of most English-speaking people. Perhaps "commentary" is too strong a word to describe a D-E product, but it seems that something such as "cultural translation" or "interpretive translation" would be more in keeping with principles espoused by linguistic authorities.

**An Ethical Question**

A closely related ethical question may also be raised: Is it honest to give people what purports to be the closest representation of the inspired text in their own language, something that intentionally maximizes rather than minimizes the personal interpretations of the translator or translators?

Graves has observed that every translation is a lie in the sense that there are no identical equivalents between languages. This problem is alleviated by an understanding in the minds of most that translation is done by means of near equivalents rather than exact equivalents. But if a translator goes one step further and intentionally incorporates his personal interpretations when he could have left many passages with the same ambiguity as the original, has he done right by those who will use his translation?

It is not our purpose to pursue this ethical question further, but simply to raise it as a matter for possible discussion.

**A Practical Question**

A last question for consideration relates to the use of a D-E product in ministry: How shall I deal with the problem that the high degree of interpretation in a D-E work makes it unsuitable for close study by those who do not know the original languages? The answer

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107 Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* 284-286.


110 There is agreement among those who have faced the issue, that free translations and paraphrases are inadequate for those who wish to do a detailed study of the English text (J. P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] 116, 156, 260, 291; Kubo and Specht, *So Many* 80, 150, 242,
to this question will depend on the type of preaching and teaching one does. If his approach is general, dealing only with broad subjects, he perhaps will not be too bothered by this characteristic.

But if he at times treats specific doctrinal issues and wants to stress this or that detail of the text, the presence of a large interpretive element in his basic text will pose problems. He will inevitably encounter renderings that differ from the view he wants to represent in his message—a problem that is largely precluded in using a formal-equivalence translation. If a preacher has to correct his translation too often, people will soon look upon it as unreliable and reflect doubts about either the translation itself or the larger issue of biblical inspiration.

These are only three questions that emerge because of an intentional incorporation of hermeneutics into the translation process. Others could be proposed. It seems that precision in discussing English versions of the Bible has been largely lost. If more exact terminology is not adopted, the church may some day incur the besetting ailment of a confusion of tongues that is self-inflicted.

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