

## Doctrinal, Exegetical, Translational

It's often said among us that "false doctrine" would be the primary disqualifier of a Bible translation. The Translation Evaluation Committee certainly agrees. But if a Bible translation "taught false doctrine," what exactly would that look like? Does every objection raised against a translation rise to the level of "false doctrine"?

The following is an attempt at a distinction that might be helpful in this regard: the distinction between a *doctrinal* question, an *exegetical* question, and a *translation* question.

Doctrine, as we commonly use the term, refers to a truth that is normative for faith and life and that is established on the basis of several, clear passages of Scripture. For instance, 1 Peter 3:21 teaches the doctrine that baptism saves. There really isn't any other way to understand the passage, the same truth is taught elsewhere (John 3:5, Titus 3:5, etc.), and the connection to our faith is crystal-clear.

Someone who asks, "Does Scripture really teach that baptism saves?" has raised a *doctrinal* question. And a Bible translation would "teach false doctrine" about baptism if, in defiance of the semantics, syntax, and context of the relevant passages—the *sedes doctrinae*—it rendered them in such a way that the result was a Bible that no longer said that baptism saves. The *New World Translation's* consistent and motivated mishandling of the passages that teach the deity of Christ would be a real-life example. There is no question that we would find such a translation unacceptable.

An *exegetical* question involves those cases where the textual evidence, vocabulary, syntax, and context (including the context of all of Scripture) permit a passage to be understood in more than one way. For example, who or what is "coming" in Isaiah 66:6 (Hebrew)—the Lord, a time for judgment, or something else? In John 14:1, did Jesus give his disciples two commands, one, or none? In Matthew 27:65 did Pilate tell the Jews, "Take a guard" (NIV 1984 & 2011)? Or did he say, "You have a guard" (ESV, NKJV)? What exactly does it mean that the Law was "ordered through angels" (Galatians 3:19 Greek)?

To say that these are exegetical rather than doctrinal questions is certainly not to minimize their importance. There are no unimportant matters in Scripture. Nor is it to say that interpreters must hold their judgment permanently in abeyance. What it means is that we make our own best judgments about the interpretation of these passages according to sound principles of exegesis and hermeneutics. If asked, we're prepared to share our judgments and our rationale, to convince others or perhaps be convinced. We don't insist that our judgments become normative for others; we grant that Bible-believing Christians, even those with whom we are one in faith, may well understand these passages differently.

*Translation* questions need a separate category, because, as our committee's report points out, Bible translating involves exegesis—but also much more; in fact, exegesis is just the beginning. Bible translators concern themselves with a host of issues related to the target language, the target reader, the target culture, and the setting and purpose for which their translation is intended. In view of all these factors, they seek the best way to convey those features of the text that are most necessary within the context in which they are working. "Translation studies" has come into its own as a scholarly discipline in the last 40 years. Its practitioners agree that it is not productive "to

attempt to argue for a particular theoretical stance on, or an exclusive approach to, Bible translation.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, their answer to the question, “What’s the best kind of translation?” is invariably, “It depends.”

Many of the concerns that have been raised in our circles about the NIV 2011 have been translation questions. In other words, they really don’t involve the essential meaning of a particular set of passages, but whether that meaning has been brought into 21<sup>st</sup>-century English in the best possible way for WELS members who will use this version. These are not trivial matters, and yet disagreements about them shouldn’t be allowed to trouble us unduly. In fact, as a committee we submit that to expect our synod to reach consensus on the best approach to Bible translating is neither realistic nor necessary. On translational questions, we would hope for widespread, general satisfaction that the Bible used in WELS publications communicates in language that God’s people will find understandable, appropriate, and edifying. It is our belief that NIV 2011 meets these criteria.

A number of the concerns raised have also involved exegetical questions. The NIV 2011 translators occasionally came to a conclusion about the meaning of a passage with which one or more interpreters from within our synod has voiced disagreement, including some on our own committee. We ought to reiterate here that, more often than not, we have found NIV 2011 to be an improvement on 1984 where the two versions differ, though some “significant weakenings” in the newer version nevertheless remain. But these are invariably cases where the NIV 2011’s exegetical decision is at least justifiable on the basis of the vocabulary, syntax, and context of the passage, even if the argument that can be made to justify it isn’t particularly convincing.

In some cases, critics may find themselves in disagreement because NIV 2011’s exegesis differs from what they are used to hearing. In certain cases we may be comfortable enough with what the NIV 2011’s rendering explicitly says, but it may have implications that make us uncomfortable. Or we may be firmly convinced that in this or that instance the NIV 2011 “got it wrong.” Translations—all of them—do “get it wrong,” on occasion. But just as differences over exegetical questions are not divisive of fellowship, a difference with a translation’s exegesis is not enough to disqualify it for use in our circles. And once again, to expect our synod to reach complete consensus on the exegetical questions that have been raised is not realistic, and not necessary.

As for matters of doctrine, here the question would be, “Does NIV 2011 mistranslate those passages where the normative truths of Scripture for faith and life are found, in defiance of the passages’ vocabulary, syntax, and context, so that we can no longer use this Bible to teach these truths?” Since the matter of gender-neutral language has been at the forefront of discussions of NIV 2011, and since it clearly impinges on Scripture’s doctrine of the roles of man and woman, the committee asked: “Will we have difficulty teaching this doctrine using this Bible?”

The answer was a clear “No.” As one of its first tasks, the committee looked at all the passages that are used in standard WELS publications to support the doctrine of the roles of man and woman. We found most of these passages essentially unchanged in NIV 2011, in particular the

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<sup>1</sup> Aloo Osotsi Mojola and Ernst Wendland, “Scripture Translation in the Era of Translation Studies,” in Timothy Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (Manchester, UK and Northampton, MA: St. Jerome, 2003), p 25.

*sedes doctrinae* on the headship of man and husband. Our finding was no different with regard to other truths of Scripture as WELS teaches and confesses them; their *sedes doctrinae* remain essentially unchanged. It is therefore our conviction that NIV 2011 is not a translation that “teaches false doctrine” or that disqualifies itself on that basis.

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