

Church Government

In difficult, controversial, and changing times important decisions are taken in the Church. Of primary importance is the reason for, the grounds for such decisions. Our ecclesiastical assemblies in Canada observe, consider, and recommend decisions. In the Netherlands and Australia grounds for such decisions are also supplied. In this way consistories and individual members are more clearly informed about why a decision was taken. It will also prevent some or all of the considerations from becoming part of the final decision.

It has happened in recent times that a consideration was deemed to be part of an earlier decision and then used as a precedent for a new matter. It is conceivable that contradictory matters are considered. How could they both be part of the final decision, or who will decide which consideration was used in coming to a decision? If a matter is important enough to take to a synod, it should also be important enough to substantiate with clear and concise grounds. This will provide for sound decisions and will serve to instruct the Church.

POLITICS

The practice of providing grounds for decisions may help to prevent the perception of politics in Church Government. Politicians are considered to be those who manipulate the act of governing to serve their own agendas. In civil government it is practiced to ensure re-election or to guide the governed body into a philosophy that is considered desirable. North American socialists wanted to use the democratic system to introduce their method of social infrastructure to our society, and by nifty political moves they have succeeded in many ways.

Politicians manipulate matters and circumstances and work behind the scenes. It is possible to keep persons or viewpoints out of the press. Ridicule and segmentation of individuals or groups is another popular political tool. In today's society, for example, it is considered unacceptable to hold to absolutes. Also white Anglo-Saxon men are often the least acceptable in today's civil service. In the Church the same dangers exist. It is possible to politically manipulate in order to achieve a desired end ... a desirable end; but desirable to whom? The manipulator, of course!

The Canadian people may be 80%+ in favour of the death penalty, but when the politicians believe that it is wrong to take a life they will manipulate behind the scenes to prevent it. In the same way a church politician can manipulate in order to achieve a decision which he is convinced is for the best. But, as in a truly democratic country the final decision correctly lies with the people, so in Church the final decision rests with the Word of God.

We recently remembered the Reformation. The Reformation that emphasized the truth of Sola Scriptura - The Word of God alone! It is the final authority and all decisions should be tested in its revealing light. Let us not be afraid to ground our decisions on this firm foundation. Then we will certainly follow the Church Order that says, "These assemblies shall deal with no other than ecclesiastical matters and that in an ecclesiastical manner." (Art.30).

DEMOCRACY

At times one hears comments that lead an observer to conclude that church life is a democratic affair. The election of elders and deacons, as well as the calling of a minister, as it is done in most congregations, could lead some to be reinforced in this thinking.

When elders and deacons are needed, the consistory nominates twice as many as are needed and the congregation votes. When a proposal to call a certain minister is to be decided upon the consistory sets a percentile of favourable votes that needs to be reached before the call can be extended.

While there are other methods to appoint officers in Church and to extend a call to a minister, Scripture and Confessions do not disagree with these means. Yet, this method of selecting office bearers is not the same as a democratic vote in society for political candidates. In Church the Lord rules, through the officers. Not every constituency needs to be represented. Personal likes and dislikes, or clique relationships should not play a dominant role. This voting is to be based on the qualifications for the office.

PROVIDENCE

While church politics and manipulation is wrong; and while voting for an elder or deacon for personal or political reasons is wrong, it is conceivable that it does happen. And when it does we may want to react. Some may wish to fight fire with fire. If there is manipulation to gain a decision in one direction should we manipulate matters to reverse it or obtain a decision in the other direction to balance the situation? When we think people are voting for the wrong reasons or with a wrong understanding should we have less respect for those who are installed?

God's Word teaches us differently. It gives us grounds for much comfort in these situations. In it He teaches us that "He so rules and governs ... that in this world nothing happens without His direction." (Art. 13 Bel.Conf). That does not make us complacent, or fatalistic; for we must act where He gives us a task. When we are placed before decisions, or are confronted with wrongdoing we may not shy away with the thought that God's providence will look after it anyway. But we may accept that our heavenly Father will guide all things according to His plan. We must live obediently and responsibly before our heavenly Father, and that may mean that we need to speak with a brother who seems to have the wrong idea about his responsibility in the selection of office bearers. Or we may have to speak up when brothers or sisters attempt to manipulate proceedings in an unscriptural manner. But we may not resort to their wrong tactics to even the score.

Let us not forget the example of the Israelites who wanted a king. They received what they urgently asked for, but it was to their detriment. So too, the Church, when wrong things are condoned, may receive wrong direction and officers that lead astray. But when we live obediently and out of faith we may rest assured that the same God Who gave the Israelites king Saul, also sent His Son to save. His providence will ensure a true and faithful Church till the end of time.

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THE (MISTRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE
BY.REV.KENNETH.A.KOK

There is nothing more central to the Christian life than the worship of God. Our worship must honor the Word of God by using a precise and accurate translation. Today we have the specter of the Word of God copyrighted by either groups of scholars or publishing houses.

There are several reasons for so many translations coming from these groups:

- 1) Much money can be made;
- 2) Scholars want to include new knowledge of ancient vocabulary;
- 3) The desire to produce a Bible that coincides with certain ideas;
- 4) The old versions are not liberal enough; and,
- 5) The desire to conform to the latest linguistic and communication theories.

While every translation has defects, some are worst than others. The KJV needs some updating; the American Standard is pretty wooden as far as reading in worship is concerned; the New American Standard has a definite pre-millennial bias and mistranslates key verses; the New King James is sloppy in some places (compare grammar of Prov. 30:15b and 18a); etc. However, all of these are translations that attempt to be precise and to minimize the role of the translator in interpreting the text. Not so the New International Version.

The NIV has taken some parts of the Reformed world by storm. Why this is so I do not know for certain. I believe that in part it is because a good number of Reformed and Presbyterian seminary teachers were involved in the initial translation work. Far be it from me to criticize the labours of these men, some of whom were my own teachers. The final product does not necessarily reflect the initial input of these men.

Yet other Reformed and Calvinistic scholars in this country and abroad have raised serious questions about the usefulness and accuracy of the NIV. An early critique was Jakob van Bruggen's *The Future of the Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1978). More recently we have seen Robert Martin's *Accuracy of Translation and the NIV* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989). (Unfortunately, Martin's work was summarily dismissed in the pages of *Diakonia* by the citation of a negative review. If you look up the review, you will find a woefully inaccurate and slanted work which has little more than a piece of special pleading for the NIV.)

I believe that the reason for the widespread acceptance of the NIV on the part of Reformed and Presbyterian opinion makers is that it fits well with the downgrade of the Reformed faith that we have witnessed during the last decade or so. The NIV is the perfect "church growth" type of Bible. It reflects a casting aside of tradition in the name of supposed relevance and is thus a representative product of the "1960's mentality."

The NIV is a good reading Bible, and was initially advertised as a translation for people for whom English is a second language (thus, an "international" English version). The NIV is not a good study Bible because it is not precise. Older translations were made on the principle of challenging

and uplifting people to the level of the Scripture. The NIV seems to have been made on the reverse principle.

Romans 4:1, is an example where the NIV eliminates the word “flesh,” which is one of the most pregnant and potent theological terms and concepts in the entire Bible. The “flesh theology” begins in Gen.2-3, continues in Leviticus, chaps. 13-15, and is vastly significant in Pauline theology. In the NIV is simply does not exist. This is not “concept by concept” or “dynamic equivalence” of any sort. It is rather the reduction of the text’s content by dropping one of the main ideas in the text.

Hebrews 11:11 in the NTV reads:

“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age - and Sarah herself was barren - was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.” In the New American Standard Version (NASV) the margin text, which is the most literal, we read, “By faith even Sarah herself received power for the laying down of seed, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised.”

The literal marginal reading in the NASV points us to the “seed theology” that is so powerful and important, especially in the book of Genesis, but also throughout the Bible. “Seed” in biblical theology is almost identical with “heir,” which is why it cannot be associated with men only; indeed, Gen. 3 speaks right away of the woman’s seed. Thus, Hebr. 11:11 has a very important place in the seed-theology of the Bible.

The NIV text reading is nothing short of appalling. With absolutely no textual support in any witness in any textual tradition, the NIV introduces Abraham into the verse. It makes out that Abraham was past age (a strange idea; men do not get past age of being able to have children, cf.Gen.25); makes out that it is Abraham’s seed that is in view, rather than the seed of the woman; and makes out that it is Abraham’s faith that is being spoken of rather than Sarah’s. The NASV preserves the Greek word order, while the NIV distorts it. There is no foundation whatsoever for the NIV text.

I have worked with the NIV for over 15 years and have not found the Old Testament to be any less grievous than the New as far as accuracy of translation goes. Robert Martin, in his book provides scores of examples of inaccurate translation, grouping them under seven categories. (He only deals with the New Testament).

1. Elimination of Complex

Grammatical Structures.

Long, complex sentences are broken into smaller sentences. To do this, the translators had to make interpretive decisions about the theology of the passage in question. So Ephesian 1:3-14 is broken into eight sentences with a decidedly Arminian slant. II Thess.1:3-10 is also broken into eight sentences (cf. Acts 1:1-5 and Hebr .1:1-4).

2. Addition of Words in Translation.

When older translations added words to clarify meaning, they put them in italics. The NIV does not. 1 Cor. 7:9 says “it is better to marry than to burn,” a statement open to several interpretations. The NIV says “to burn with passion,” an addition which settles the interpretation for the reader. Acts 5:23 says “all the words of this life,” but in the NIV it says “the full message of this new life,” The word “new” is not in the original and clearly adds a new thought to the verse.

3. Omission of Words.

The NIV often omits conjunctions and interjections. The word “lo” or “behold” occurs 62 times in Matthew, but is omitted 37 times. Mark abounds in the use of “immediately” and this creates a major theme in his perspective on Jesus, but the NIV omits it in five places. “Of the house” in Matthew 10:6 and “unto himself” in Eph.1:5 are omitted.

4. Erosion of Technical Vocabulary.

There are parts of the Bible, esp. in Moses and Paul, where highly technical terms are used. The NIV renders dikaios as “justify” except in Romans 2:13 and 3:20 where it reads “declare righteous,” which is not the full idea of justification. As Martin puts it, justification “involves the imputation of our sins to Christ and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us,” not mere verbal declaration. Propitiation becomes the vague “sacrifice of atonement” and “atoning sacrifice” in Romans 3:25 and I John 2:2. As Martin has well stated, “any translation that erodes a familiarity with the concept of propitiation is to be lamented.” (This is also a glaring flaw in the RSV).

5. Leveling Cultural Distinctives

“Girding up the loins of your mind” in I Peter 1:13 becomes “prepare your minds for action” in the NIV. The NIV gives the “sermonic gist,” but eliminates the rich biblical imagery which calls to mind much of the Old Testament. In Eph-2:2 “sons of disobedience” becomes “those who are disobedient,” eliminating the possible correlations with the “sons of Belial,” etc.

6. Slipping in Interpretations.

Some examples will suffice:

- John 17:11 literally - in your name; NIV - in the power of your name
- Gal. 1:11 literally – according to man; NIV – something man made up

More examples can be found in Martin’s book.

7. Finally, Paraphrasing.

Matt. 12:49 literally says, “and he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples and said,” while the NIV translates, “pointing to his disciples, he said” (hand is eliminated). In Mark 1:2 “face” is eliminated. Luke 1:15 literally reads, “from his mother’s womb,” the NIV says, “from birth.” (Pro-abortionists prefer such a reading).

Another matter that needs to be mentioned is the tendency towards a chiliastic bias in both the NIV and NASV which should move them both out of the Reformed sphere. Thus, both will tend to the less likely interpretation of Romans 4:1 that emphasizes Abraham as forefather of racio-cultural Jews rather than of the Church. For further evidence see Matthew 24:30. It is not that a sign appears in the sky or heaven, but rather a sign is given that the Son of Man is in Heaven.

Here I recommend the critique in Dr. van Bruggen’s book about dynamic equivalence. To be very rough about it, dynamic equivalence is an attempt to translate concept by concept instead of word for word. Of course, every translation, except an interlinear study Bible, does this to some extent. But the NIV goes way too far.

By translating in this manner, the editors of the NIV have removed ambiguities from the text and have fixed the meaning and interpretation. Obviously there is a sliding scale between “literal translation” on the one hand and “interpretative paraphrase” on the other.

Further, the NIV practices a type of textual arrogance in the choice of Greek text underlying the New Testament. There are two main textual traditions for the Greek New Testament that have exponents in the theological and ecclesiastical community. For simplicity's sake, we can call them the Byzantine and Alexandrian traditions. The former is the tradition that God saw fit to preserve publicly in the life of the Church.

All new Bibles except the New King James and earlier the King James II are made using the Alexandrian tradition as base. I personally view this as unfortunate and as a side effect of the failure of the Church and the transfer of authority from the Church to the academy. One of the more paltry aspects of the NIV is the arrogance with which it asserts the superiority of the Alexandrian tradition in its treatment of John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20.

The NIV stands in the same trend we see in the hymnals today: anything with any spice and beauty is eliminated in the interest of producing a lowest common denominator, street level, generic English. The assumption is that the average member of the congregation is too stupid to know what we big, bright, ministers know. At least, the NIV assumes nobody is smart enough to look up an unfamiliar word.

This brings us to a final consideration, which is the suitability of the NIV for ecclesiastical use. We have already seen that it is poorly suited for study purposes. The artistic downgrade renders it unsatisfactory for public reading as well. It reflects (and is, I hope, the last gasp of) the kind of "away with all tradition" and "conversational prayer" mentality of the 1960's. Being grounded in the shifting sands of "relevance," the NIV will be only a curiosity in another generation.

The NIV stands between a paraphrase and a translation, and it has real usefulness as a first Bible for children and young converts. The NIV, because it reads well in modern generic English, is a useful "reading" Bible for anybody. If we were to evaluate it as a paraphrase rather than as a translation, we should give it high marks.

The Church, however, should maintain a higher standard for worship and study. I do not believe that people in the main are so poorly educated that precise translation of the Bible is unintelligible to them. I would recommend that any of the following be considered for worship: the Authorized Version (KJV), the New King James Version, the (old) American Standard Version, and the New American Standard Version. The NASV makes some improvements over the old ASV, but also has a pre-millennial bias in the prophetic passages.