

How The Truth Is Conveyed

[Presented to the Second Biennial Convention of the South Atlantic District of the W.E.L.S. held at the International Inn, Tampa Florida June 14-16, 1976]

by Pastor Julian G. Anderson

The officers of our South Atlantic District have selected Jesus' words recorded in John 8:32 as the theme of our convention in this year of 1976: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." We might well first begin by recalling Pilate's question, "What is truth?" and Jesus' answer, that *God's Word* is the truth. Whatever God says on any subject is the truth, simply because it is God who says it. He is the ultimate authority on all matters.

What we are concerned about in this paper, however, is the important question, How is the truth conveyed *to us*? This is based on the fact that, God, the Creator, is the *source* of all truth, and we, the creatures, are the recipients of such truth.

In a general way our question can be answered in a very simple way by saying that all spiritual truth is conveyed to us by *revelation*, that is, that *God* reveals it to us. How else could it come to us? But the specific process and methods and principles involved in this process of revelation are many in number and often bewildering in complexity. These, however, are not the subject of this paper, but they must be mentioned very briefly by way of introduction. We begin with the fact that God revealed his thoughts to certain men whom he chose to be the first recipients, with the understanding that they were to pass these revelations on to others. As Hebrews 1:1 points out, in the earliest period of man's history God made these revelations to men who were called "prophets", and he did so in many different ways. Sometimes he *spoke* directly to them, as he did to Moses. But more often he communicated his thoughts to them in other ways, such as dreams and visions, and most commonly, perhaps, by simply filling their minds with what he wanted them to say.

Then, about 2,000 years ago, he made his greatest and most complete revelation through the person of his own Son, Jesus (Heb. 1:2). And this Son of God called a group of twelve men to live with him and be with him constantly for 3 years, during which time he taught them everything God wanted the world of men to know about the sinfulness of men and God's plan to make us perfect again.

And those twelve men, called the "apostles", wrote down all these things Jesus taught them in a collection of little books and memoirs and letters, so that the rest of the world could also learn about all these wonderful things that God had revealed to them (Heb. 2:3).

And the writings of these prophets and apostles make up what we call the "Bible", which is nothing less than God's own Word, the Truth in *written* form.

What we are specifically interested in, therefore, in this paper is: how has this truth, this *written* Word of God, been conveyed to us? To begin with, we must keep in mind two facts. The first fact is that this truth was recorded in its written form over a period of 1,600 years, beginning with Moses, who lived about 1,500 years before Jesus was born, and ending with the apostle John, who died about 100 years after Jesus' birth. This means that all of these books and writings are *ancient* documents, so ancient that all of the originals have become lost or worn out, and have disappeared hundreds or thousands of years ago. This suggests one major problem in this process we are investigating--how has this truth been conveyed to us over these thousands of years, when the originals have all been lost for thousands of years? This problem is known as the problem of *transmission*.

And the second fact is that this truth was written originally in languages which are far *different* from our modern American English, or any of our modern languages. The earlier writings of the prophets were written in Hebrew, the language of the Jews. And the later writings of the prophets were written in Aramaic, a sister language of Hebrew, being the language spoken in ancient Syria, or Aram, as it was called then. This was also the language Jesus spoke as he instructed His apostles.

A curious thing is that while Jesus and his 12 apostles spoke Aramaic as their native language, all the apostles *wrote* their memoirs and books and letters in Greek, which was the universal language of the world at that time.

And this suggests a second major problem in the process we're investigating--how has this truth been conveyed to us when the languages in which they were written are so different from our own language? This is the problem of *translation*.

Transmission and translation--these are the two processes by which the truth has been conveyed to us. You will notice that these two words are both derived from the Latin language, and that both begin with the same prefix, "trans-", which means "across". Transmission means literally "*sending across*", and this is the word used to describe how the truth has been conveyed to us over these thousands of years, when all the original documents were very soon lost or worn out or destroyed. It is probable that none of the originals survived for more than 200 or 300 years at the most, probably much less time than that. But before they were lost, several--in some cases perhaps dozens--of copies were made from these originals, all by hand, of course, until the invention of printing, shortly before 1500. Thus all copies of the Bible made before 1500 are called "manuscripts", which means "written by hand". In this way the words were "sent across" (transmitted) from one document to another, from one century to another. And then copies were made from the copies, etc. for anywhere from 3,000 to 4,000 years. Even the most recent writings, the books of the New Testament, were each probably copied at least 6 or 8 times before 1500; and the total number of copies run at least into the hundreds of thousands, for we still have 15,000 manuscripts of the New Testament which have survived all the ravages of time. And since the invention of printing the books of the Old and New Testaments have been printed in many hundreds of separate editions, and each edition is really just another *copying*, since the editing and typing and typesetting are all done by hand. This, in brief, is the story of the transmission of the Scriptures, how the truth has been "sent across" to us over these thousands of years by numerous painstaking hand copyings.

But when we come to translation, we have a much more complex process, and one which has engaged the minds and attention and labors of many men over thousands of years, for the earliest translation we know of was made some two or three hundred years before the birth of Christ, when the books of the Old Testament were translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek for the many Jews who at that time could no longer speak either Hebrew or Aramaic.

"Translation" means literally a "carrying across", and this is the word used to describe how the truth has been conveyed to us from the original languages to our own. The basic principles of translation are the same whether we are translating from Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek, and whether we are translating into English or German or French, or any other language. Actually, there is only *one* general principle in the process of translation--that the translation must *say the same thing* to our modern readers or hearers that the prophets and apostles said to the readers or hearers in their day. And naturally, in the case of the Scriptures, which are God's words, we want to have the words of the originals rendered *exactly* in English words. That is, we want a faithful translation, an

accurate translation. We want to be sure that *every word* of the original is rendered by its *exact equivalent* in our modern language.

Now at first glance this appears to be very simple. It's just a matter of finding English words which *say the same thing* and substituting them for the Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek words in the originals. All one needs, therefore, is a good dictionary.

But when we try this process, we soon learn that this doesn't turn out very well, and that this isn't as easy as we thought. As a matter of fact, substituting English words for Greek and Hebrew words is just terrible. Let me give you an illustration, taken at random, Hebrews 9:8-10. This is how a word-for-word translation turns out. "This signifying the Spirit the Holy, not yet made manifest the of the holy things road yet of the first tent have standing, which parable into the season the one standing in according to the thing which gifts both and sacrifices they are bringing not being able according to conscience to bring to an end the one serving, only upon foods and drinks and different baptizing, ordinances of the flesh..." Now that is an exact, literal, word-for-word translation of the 3 verses in question. But it could never be called a "translation", because it *conveys no sense* at all to any modern hearer or reader. It certainly doesn't say the same thing as the original letter said to the original readers, because it doesn't say anything that modern reader can understand.

But if you ask most serious Christians today, especially in our conservative Lutheran circles what kind of a translation they want, they'll probably say, "I want an exact, literal, word-for-word translation". What this proves is that most Christians today don't know what they're talking about in the matter of translation, because an exact, literal, word-for-word translation is no translation at all. If you really want a so-called "translation" of this sort, I'll tell you what to ask for. It's called "The Concordant Literal New Testament". And this is the way this version, printed in 1966, renders this passage: "...by this the holy spirit making it evident that the way of the holy places is not as yet 'manifest' while the front tabernacle still has a standing; which is a parable for the present period, according to which both approach presents and sacrifices are being offered, which cannot make the one offering divine service perfect as to the conscience, only in foods and drinks and baptisms excelling, and just statutes for the flesh...". Even with the help of a dictionary the English reader would never discover from this what the original writer was saying to the original readers.

Unfortunately, this principle of literal, word-for-word translation is the basic principle that has been followed, with very few exceptions, from 1611, when the King James Version was made, down to the present day, since all but a handful of modern translations are nothing more than revisions of the King James. And this is no doubt why such a great majority of Christians today believe that a "faithful" translation is one which renders every word of the original into some corresponding word in English, and retains, insofar as possible, also the original word order. To illustrate how literal the KJ is, this is the way this passage is rendered there: "The Holy Ghost this signifying that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: which was a figure for the then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances...". This is much better than the inter-linear we gave first, or the Concordant Literal New Testament, but it leaves much to be desired as a clear, understandable translation.

What we should learn from all this is that an *accurate* translation *cannot* be obtained by translating word-for-word. This is a false principle. If we're going to *say the same thing* in our modern language that was said in the Hebrew or Greek, we're going to have to follow the principle that we must translate thoughts, and not just words. Now, this may sound to some like a distinction

without a difference. Someone will say that the only way to translate thoughts *is* to translate words, since we express our thoughts in words. But there is a *distinction* between thoughts and words. That is, the two are not synonymous. You see, aside from a very few exceptions, such as the words "Go!" or "Come!", no word in itself expresses a *thought*. "Tree", "table", "on", "down", "quickly", "enough", "ride", "sing"; none of these express a thought, although the verbs come closest, in that they express an action. Thoughts, however, involve subjects and objects, and reasons and purposes, and locations, etc.. And such thoughts are expressed in combinations of words, called phrases, or sentences; and each word normally expresses only a part of the thought.

The proper principle, therefore, is that we must translate the thoughts of the original into the equivalent thoughts in the receptor language. And to do so the translator concentrates on translating the phrases instead of individual words. If we follow this principle in the passage in question, this is the way it sounds in Everyday American English: "In this way the Holy Spirit was showing that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been opened up so long as the first room was still there. This is a picture of what has been happening right up to this present time. It's a picture of gifts and sacrifices being offered to God which can't make the worshiper perfect so far as his conscience is concerned, because they're only gifts of things to eat and drink and different kinds of washings. These are just rules which are concerned about bodily things." I think you will all agree that in this translation the modern reader or hearer can understand what is being said, because each thought comes through clearly. And this, incidentally, was Luther's guiding principle of translation, that one renders the thoughts, not the words.

Another application of this principle is that the accuracy of a translation cannot be measured on the basis of the *number of words used*, on the assumption that each word in the original must be rendered by just one equivalent word in English. And yet the writer has read numerous reviews of modern translations, such as the RSV, the NEB, and the TEV, written by supposedly educated pastors and teachers, in which the judgment is expressed that the new translation is unfaithful or inaccurate because it uses more words than the original, or *more words* than the King James Version.

Anyone who has studied any of the original Biblical languages will recognize at once the fallacy of this criterion or principle. All of the ancient Biblical languages are inflected languages, which form their words in an entirely different way than modern English does. The subjects of the verbs are always added as suffixes, so that there is still one word, albeit a more complex one. And thus we must always render such Hebrew and Greek words by at least *two* words in English. Neither can we express the original verb form in any corresponding English *word order*. That is, we cannot say, "So say I..." or "Then said he..." or "Sit though not...", even though in the original verb form the subject follows the root. It's surprising, however, how often this common mistake is made in the KJ and older versions.

Moreover in both Hebrew and Greek, tenses and moods are all formed by adding prefixes or suffixes or infixes, so that there is still only one word, which now expresses the subject, the tense and the mood. And the different cases of the nouns and pronouns are all formed by adding different suffixes to the root, so that one still has only one word. This means that one Greek word form may have to be expressed by as many as four English words, and one Greek or Hebrew noun may require three words in English. Thus any proper accurate translation will necessarily require 3 or 4 times as many words in English to express the equivalent thought.

Next, the way the words are put together in a sentence (what is called the "syntax") is entirely different in the original Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek from our modern English. English word order is very stereotyped. It has the subject, verb, and object, and in that order, with the

modifiers attached directly to the words modified. But in all the Biblical languages, word order mattered little or not at all, aside from showing emphasis, because of their inflected nature. What this means for the translator is that in most cases the original sentences must be taken apart, so that all the words can be re-arranged into phrases, and then the phrases put together into their "proper" word order in an English sentence.

This is called the principle of restructuring, and it is the most important working principle in the process of translation. Indeed, it is the only proper method of translation, if we're going to say the same thing, and express the same thoughts to modern American readers or hearers in modern English in a way they can readily understand. This principle requires that everything be recast or restructured - words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, idioms, emphases--into truly modern idiom and style. And to attain this end, the translator must constantly ask himself, "How would I say this today if I was speaking to a group of ordinary people, or a group of children?".

This is the reason why all the older versions and their revisions sound so unnatural, because they tend to retain the word order of the original, which distorts the meaning in English so much that it is often quite unintelligible. You might turn back to page 7 and read the King James Version again, and then read the EAE on page 8. The difference is that the EAE has restructured the original and then has put the thoughts into normal English idiom. The result of such restructuring is a true translation, since it conveys exactly the same meaning to the modern English reader or hearer as the original did to the Hebrew or Greek hearers 2,000 years ago. True, the outward form is entirely different. The EAE uses more words, and they are arranged in an entirely different order. But the *meanings* are the *same* to the two audiences.

Next we must realize that words in all languages accumulate many so-called "secondary" meanings in the course of time. This is the principle of multiple meanings. The commonest words will often have as many as 25 or 30 distinct meanings, and most words will have at least two or three. This means that the word-for-word method is doomed to failure from the very beginning, for every Greek or Hebrew word will require a many as 2 to 25 different English words to give the *exact thought* of that word in any context. And no single English word will ever have all the variety of meanings of any Greek or Hebrew word. What this means is that there is no such thing as "*equivalent*" words, or exact synonyms, in any two languages. This leads to the principle that the exact meaning of any word in any language is determined by the context in which the word is used. And the choice of which English word is to be used will likewise have to be determined by the English context.

This is a very important principle in translation, that in every case the context determines the meaning. And it sounds the death knell for another popular misconception, that a faithful translation always renders every Greek or Hebrew word with the same English word. This is the specific aim of the Concordant Literal New Testament, the Emphasized Bible, and the New World Bible of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Any student of languages will realize that this is a false principle. In our sample text, for example, the word rendered as "signifying" should be "showing", and the word "made manifest" should be "opened up", and the word "tabernacle" should be "room", and the word "figure" should be "picture", and the word "divers" should be "different", and the word "carnal" should be "bodily". Here are six words which have been mistranslated in just 3 verses, because these words have gained or lost different meanings in the last 365 years.

Another special problem for the translator is the fact that some words which were common 365 years ago have now completely disappeared from our modern English language. The reason for this is that all languages are constantly changing from year to year. Words therefore become "archaic" or "antiquated". Naturally, if we are to express the *thoughts* of the originals in the

language of today, we must use words which the people of today understand and use, and not words which have become archaic, for an archaic word conveys *no meaning* at all to the average person. For example, we can't any longer say "espoused" when we mean engaged, or "holpen" for helped, or "waxed" for became, or "sod" for boiled, or "conversation" for life, etc. And we don't say "all ye people" and "thou sayest", etc. No, we must use words which are intelligible and meaningful to the people of our modern 20th Century America. And this principle of archaism means that no translation will remain a satisfactory vehicle of thought for more than 2 or 3 generations at the most. One linguist has gone so far as to say that the Scriptures must be retranslated into modern vernacular in every generation, that is, every 30 to 35 years! This may be an overstatement, but it does point to the fact that all translations become archaic and therefore unusable in quite a short period of time.

Then we come to one of the most difficult problems for the translator, which involves what we call the principle of *paraphrase*. The word has taken an odious meaning, especially among those who insist on exact, literal, word-for-word translation. But this is a legitimate and necessary principle at times. The word "paraphrase" means "saying something alongside of or in addition to"; and paraphrasing therefore necessarily means using more words. Many object to this as being an uncalled-for addition to the text, or an interpretation. But this, too, is a misconception. In some few cases paraphrase is the *only way* to render the *thought* of the original in any understandable way to the modern reader.

Such cases occur when the translator is attempting to describe customs of the ancient world which are now totally unknown and unfamiliar to the modern reader. An example is the word "hospitality", which was a common feature of the Jewish world at the time of Jesus. But the only way this word can be rendered now so as to make it understandable to American readers, is to say, "being kind to strangers who are traveling and need a place to stay and something to eat" (Heb. 13:1). Another case is the word translated as "worship" in the older versions. This gives no clear picture at all to the modern reader as to what the worshiper was actually *doing*. One must use the paraphrase and say that the person came up to Jesus and "fell on his knees, with his forehead on the ground" (literally acted like a dog).

Admittedly such paraphrases take 10-20 words to render one word in the original, but unless the action is described this way, the whole action is meaningless to the modern reader. Thus the true paraphrase is not a case of *adding* something which is not in the text, even though many extra words are used. This is the only way to express the *equivalent thought* in a meaningful way to the modern reader. This is founded on another fundamental principle, that a translation must *make sense*, and say something understandable to the modern reader, in the same way that the original readers or hearers understood very well the customs described by the one word so paraphrased. But if these words are simply translated in the normal way, they become "empty" words, meaningless words, which convey no thought at all.

And the last translational problem we're going to discuss is, Which level of language are we going to use? Most people are not acutely aware of the fact that there are many different levels in every language.

Have you ever talked to some university professor about some aspect of his work or his field, and wondered what he was talking about? The *words* were all English--at least most of them were--but you just couldn't understand anything because most of the key words were so big and unfamiliar.

Have you ever tried to read a legal document? Or your liability insurance policy? Or a medical journal? There you encountered the same problem.

Have you ever conversed with an uneducated person of a different ethnic background? Here, too, you had the same problem. So many of the words were unknown to you, and the way he puts his words together is so strange that you really can't understand what he's saying.

The reason is that there are many levels of every language, and you are familiar with only one, or at most a few, levels. Most middle class people of average education speak *standard* English. But there are a few highly educated people, and some "high society" people who speak on a level *above* your head. This is called *super-standard* English. And the people of no education, speak on a level *below* your understanding. This is called *sub-standard* English.

And in each category there are many sub-levels or *dialects*, especially in the super-standard and sub-standard varieties.

Now then, this raises a most important practical problem in the matter of translation--which *level* of English should we use if we're going to translate the Scriptures? If you think about this for a few minutes, I'm sure you will all come up with the same answer, and the right answer: obviously we should translate it into standard English, because this is the kind of English 95% of the people readily understand.

But this seemingly obvious principle was not obvious to the 70 translators of the King James Version in 1604 to 1611. They were all learned clergymen and professors, educated in Oxford and Cambridge Universities. They were "upper class" people. And they translated the Bible into their kind of English, which was *super-standard* English.

And the King James Version was not popular with the common people when it was published. The common people continued to read the Geneva Bible for another 100 years, until the pressure from the church authorities stopped all further printing of the Geneva Bible.

And aside from the NEB, Phillips, the TEV and the Living Bible, all the other modern translations are really only revisions of the King James, that is, translations which aim to make as few changes as possible in the KJ, and mostly in modernizing archaic words and phrases. But the *style* is still basically super-standard.

And this is one reason why most people, and especially children, don't really *understand* the Bible at all. It's no doubt one reason why so few of our modern Christians, and so few Lutherans, ever read their Bibles today. And if they do, they don't understand half of what they read, because it's "over their head". This wasn't true of Tyndale's Bible, or Luther's German Bible, which were both translated in the language of the common people.

But the fact remains that God's Word *shouldn't* be "over the heads" of any reader. Because the Greek of the New Testament and the Hebrew of the Old Testament were not super-standard Greek or Hebrew, but the standard, and sometimes even the sub-standard varieties. The Greek of the apostles and evangelists is noticeably different from the classical Greek of Plato, and Thucydides, and Sophocles. It was called *koine*, which means "common", because it was the language of the common people. It was the language of the uneducated people. It didn't follow the rules of grammar. It didn't use a lot of big words. It was the language of the street. Remember what Paul says in I Corinthians 1:26, the early church was not made up of many highly educated people, or people in high positions, or those of the upper classes.

And if this was the kind of Greek the Holy Spirit used in the first century--and it *was* the Holy Spirit who wrote the New Testament, or had it written--it must be the kind of English God wants today.

Admittedly this is a great surprise to most people. We all think of God as someone who lives and moves and thinks, and therefore *speaks*, on a *much higher level* than ours. We think of

him as some kind of a super-professor, who must speak on a level far above our understanding, because his wisdom is so much above ours.

But this isn't true. Because God *is* omniscient, He also knows how to speak in *simple* Greek or Hebrew or English. He knows how to speak in a way that everyone can understand.

We must remember what Paul says in I Timothy 2:4 - that "God wants all men (and women) to come to know the truth." And if this be the case--and it surely is--then it is absolutely necessary that he will put his Word into the kind of language that *everyone can understand*, especially the lower classes, and the uneducated, because there are so many more of these than any other class.

And therefore it's the duty of the translator to put the simple *koine* Greek of the New Testament and the simple Hebrew of the Old Testament into a corresponding kind of simple, everyday American English for the ordinary American English reader today. The highly educated can read and understand this kind of English too, without any trouble.

We don't need more translations made by preachers and professors for other preachers and professors. We need a translation that anyone, even the children, can read and understand without using a dictionary.

Let me give you two examples of the kind of super-standard English found in our traditional versions, followed by a translation of the same Greek text into simple everyday English, demonstrating that it is always possible to translate God's Word in language which everybody can understand, and reminding you that the apostle Paul, who wrote both of these passages, wrote in the kind of simple Greek that everybody in his day could understand.

The first passage in Colossians 2:18-20, in the KJ:- "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bonds having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God. Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances...?"

Compare that with the following EAE: "There are people who want others to see how lowly and unimportant they are, and how faithfully they worship the angels. They tell you all about the visions and things they have seen. They're all puffed up by their sinful human mind, although there isn't any reason for them to be so proud. Don't let anyone like this take away your prize, for he isn't holding on to Christ the Head, who supplies the whole body with everything it needs by means of the nerves and blood vessels, and holds it together by the muscles, so that it grows as God wishes. Since you have died with Christ and have been set free from the world's childish ideas, why do you go on living as though you still belonged to the world?"

The second passage is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 17-21a, in the King James Version: That which I speak, I speak it not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly in the confidence of boasting. Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also. For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise. For ye suffer if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face. I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak..."

But what Paul was writing wasn't all that incomprehensible to his friends. This is what he wrote as rendered in EAE: "What I'm going to say now is something that our Lord would never say. Instead, I'm going to talk like a fool by bragging so confidently. Since a lot of people are bragging about purely earthly things, I'm going to do the same thing. You see, since you people are so wise, you gladly put up with fools. After all, you put up with it if someone makes you his slaves,

if he destroys you, if he takes all your money, if he treats you like dirt, if he slaps you in the face. I'm ashamed to say that we were too weak to do such things."

And this brings us back again to the fundamental principle that a translation must make sense to the people who read it. God has given his Word and revelation to men to teach them something, and to impart certain information to them. And if God wants us to understand these things, he will certainly speak in a way, and use words that everyone can understand, as he assuredly did in the days of the prophets and apostles. And unless our translation of his Word is expressed in words that everyone can understand, it will be of no real value in our modern world or our modern church.

All of these principles, of course, have an important application for us Lutherans, who are especially concerned about the spiritual education and training of our children. It should go without saying that we, of all people, should be extremely interested in having and using translations that use the kind of simple language that even our children, our smaller children, can understand. Such simple language need not be vulgar, or contain words or expressions that are in bad taste or are objectionable. In this respect simple language can be as pure as the most elegant.

- written for the South Atlantic
District Convention, June 14-16
by Pastor Julian G. Anderson and
read at the convention by Pastor
John C. Lawrenz

* File from WELSNET (Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod) BBS: (414)475-7514