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The New International Version of the Bible and Contemporary Christianity

That there is a plague in our midst is a fact no one can now deny. If Jon Butler, Professor of American Studies, History, and Religious Studies at Yale University can discuss the American religious situation as a people Awash in a Sea of Faith (Harvard University Press, 1990), I can be permitted to address one of the contributing factors to this situation. We are also awash in "contemporary language" translations of the Bible. This is both a cause as well as an effect of the radical democratisation of Christianity on American soil.

The very idea that there should be a normative, ecclesiastical determination as to what is an appropriate method of translation as well as appropriate examples of the same is now taboo; as taboo as making the claim with any kind of universal acceptance that homosexuality and abortion are in terms of traditional historical Christian teaching, respectively, perversion and murder. Again, this loss of consensus on such moral issues is a direct result of silencing the univocal voice of Scripture by means of providing so many optional textual variants, renderings and interpretations that the very idea that there could be a "thus saith the Lord" on such subjects is now perceived in the modern situation as a kind of reactionary and dangerous form of universal "fundamentalism."

In the midst of all of this violent upheaval a profit making, multi-national corporation has come to the rescue of the anaemic Church--The Zondervan Corporation, owned now by the Collins conglomerate. They have succeeded in stealing away the Bible from the rightful domain of the Church and now have a monopolistic hold on the minds and hearts of all those under the influence of this marketable profit-making commodity called the New International Version (it is actually an American product through and through). There are three reasons why this is not an answer to the problem.

Translation Philosophy

1) Historically, all branches of the Christian Church until the Enlightenment believed the Bible was authoritative because it was divinely inspired like no other book. This meant that every vocable was regarded as sacred. Consequently, translations produced, for example, during the Reformation tended to follow as closely as possible the grammatical structure as well as the syntax (word order) of the inspired Greek and Hebrew texts. On this one should consult Gerald Hammond's *The Making of the English Bible*. That the NIV fails on this point in a rather significant way has been highlighted first by Jakob Van Bruggen in his *Future of the Bible* and more recently by Robert Martin in his *Accuracy of Translation and the New International Version* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989). The NIV was more informed by secular linguistics theory rather than by Biblical, or historical theology. Is not the Bible a religious book? Should it not be governed by religious criteria, one of which demands the mastering of Greek and Hebrew grammar in order to understand the divine grammar of Revelation?

Textual Criticism

2) Historically, the Church has determined what recensional form the Bible should take. That is, both at the macrocosmic (the number of books in the Bible) as well as at the microcosmic (what form of text each book should have) levels the canonical dimensions of the sacred text had, until the Enlightenment (and for some time after), always been determined by the Church.* This is no longer the case. Today, the Bible goes through any number of transmutations dictated by the ever shifting flux of the Academy (University). Tertullian would be dumbfounded to know that when he once asked "What hath Athens [the Academy] to do with Jerusalem [the Church]" the answer today would be: everything! The Church, particularly that branch known as "Evangelicalism," has been receiving her marching orders (such as they are) from the Academy since the advent of the publication *Christianity Today*. The NIV is one manifestation of this. Hence, the NIV's renderings are not determined by the consensus ecclesiae catholicae but by the consensus of the Academy.

Proper Domain

3) Finally, the unprecedented situation whereby a profit-making corporation now has a monopolistic strangle-hold over the form, dimensions, quality and content of Holy Writ, all of which can be altered according to perceived marketing demands, is an ominous state of affairs. The situation is compounded by a progressively collective short-term retention, immediate, blitz-like information age, inundated with so much data that the very possibility of making a technical evaluation of such boardroom Bibles is all but impossible for the average person (thus reinforcing the monopolistic potentialities of the NIV now that it is firmly in place). Add to this the rather abrasive and generally uninformed conspiracy-theorists who as a matter of course rant against anything modern and just reject

all that they are unfamiliar with, or that which they do not understand , and few will actually want to even make the effort to offer criticism of something like the NIV for fear of being lumped with such odious na-sayers.

Conclusion

The NIV should not be used or endorsed until all these factors have been explored and addressed in detail. A few sources that can help in this endeavour have been mention. Others can be provided for those who want to make a genuine and earnest inquiry. But in the meantime the Evangelical coalition (Christianity Today, World Magazine, Evangelical presses, Evangelical seminaries, i.e. Westminster, Gordon-Conwell, Dallas, Fuller, Trinity Evangelical, Wheaton, et al) havbe now taken a new tact--they have "Evangelicalized" the old Revised Standard Version the rights of which are owned by the National Council of Churches. This I will be addressing on my return from the annual Meeting of the SBL...

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