
THE CLAMOUR FOR AN EASY BIBLE

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In an age of easy-believism and of relaxing the Biblical standards of holiness, men also want an easy Bible. So, it is not surprising to find easy read versions in high demand. Many modern versions of the Bible bring the Bible down to the lowest common denominator in spoken English so that the reader needs no real effort to understand what is read. The translators interpret and present the reader with what they believe to be the meaning of Scripture. One of the most recent translations is the *Contemporary English Version*, published by the National Bible Society of Scotland. The CEV has, we are told, the unique distinction that it "can be understood by five-year olds", because the translators have valiantly purged from its English every last faint echo of the original languages. What is most disturbing about this claim is not so much whether or not it is accurate but the mentality that assumes the Bible may be reduced to this level without any significant loss or problem. Undoubtedly our faith may be childlike but to be childish is not quite the same thing.

Familiar unfamiliarity

This is educational theory gone mad. Doesn't the Bible require effort from its readers? It does not speak in impenetrable mysteries, but neither does it speak in microwaved sound-bites. It speaks in a familiar unfamiliarity. We may hear it and partially understand, then subsequently grow in understanding as we apply the effort of thought. This is particularly true of the Wisdom books of the Bible such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: "My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" (Prov.2:1-5).

We can think also of the Lord's parables. These stories with familiar details comprise elements of surprise in order to engage thought. "But without a parable spake he not unto them" (Mk.4:34). Although it is not arcane or deliberately obscure, and although certain statements may be immediately clear, the Bible requires the effort of thought. It is only after serious thought that it becomes clearer. Peter in referring to Paul's epistles recognises that even he had to grapple with them in order to understand them since in them

there are "some things hard to be understood" (2Pet.3:16). The work of the Holy Spirit is to make the Word plain to the believer.

The Reformers spoke of the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture; but, as Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, put it, "if there is obscurity, it is in the hearer and not the Bible itself". Scripture never completely conceals its message except to him "who comes to the Scriptures with his own speech and interpretation" as opposed to him "who has a mind to learn from the Word of God". Today's Christian is woefully short of diligence. Yet to profit from the Word, humble diligence is required. The Puritan, Richard Greenham, said that we ought to read our Bibles with more diligence than men dig for buried treasure. Diligence makes the rough places plain, the difficult easy, and the unsavoury tasty.

Humility

The Bible stresses the humble reception of its truth (Prov.1:30). The Lord Jesus Christ had to give solemn rebukes to those who had no room for either Him or His teachings in their lives (Jn.1:11 and 5:38,43). Is this not what the parable of the sower is all about? Paul's command "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom" is a very important reminder. The word translated "richly" has the sense of both fullness and of wealth. We must admit the Word freely into all areas. It must have the run of the house and no costs must be spared to fulfil its requests and requirements. We should approach God's Word not merely as readers (the way that we approach other books), but more as listeners – intent to listen and intent to receive, doing the courtesy of exiting our own thoughts and entering those of the speaker. "Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas.1:21).

The whole theme of that part of James's first chapter is of course about receiving the Word, culminating with: "whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (v25). This Greek phrase translated "looketh into" means bowing down to look intently into something. John used it in the account of the empty tomb, "stooping down, and looking in" (Jn.20:5). For a book to be understandable does not mean the same thing as being simply readable: understanding is more dependent upon attitude and motivation. Speedy reading certainly does not

guarantee value from reading.

Our attitude

A W Tozer, in an illuminating essay entitled "Confessions of a New Version Addict", states: "Since shortly after my conversion to Christ as a teenager I have been addicted to the habit of acquiring and being disappointed with new versions of the Scriptures, both revisions and new translations", in the quest for a "new version that will make any other new versions unnecessary by bringing out the meanings of the Holy Scriptures as sharply as the developer brings out the details of the picture on a photographic plate. But it never works out that way. After poring over the new book for a few days or weeks and finding that it is just one more version, I put it aside and return to my first love, the familiar King James Version". Tozer proceeds to examine his assumptions and attitude: "I believe my error has been that I have nursed the hope, perhaps subconsciously, that my dullness of spirit and coldness of heart are the result of not hearing the truth expressed clearly enough in the common language of the street; that if I could hear a promise or a commandment couched in different words it would be easier to believe and obey".

Our attitude to God's Word is important as it reflects our attitude to God Himself. Do we see ourselves in a position of humility and submission before Him? Are we careful to represent Him accurately? The answer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q54 "What is required in the third commandment?" is: "The third commandment requireth the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, **Word**, and works". The following catechism A55 states that the third commandment: "forbiddeth all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God maketh himself known". As Cornelius Van Til has said, the Bible declares to us the self-contained God who is the final point of reference and we must not infringe the authority and Word of God in favour of man's self-important pride. To set aside God's commandment concerning the attitude that He requires from us towards His Word, is to attempt to drown out the very voice of God. Are we willing to learn from God's Word, or do we want to change it in order to suit us?

Accuracy or Readability?

Is it not self-evident that the Scriptures are different from anything else? They have an "otherness" through their historical character but much more so by virtue of Divine verbal inspiration. Translators must seek to get as close to the original languages as they possibly can, rather than interpret and modify the Word to suit the experience of a 21st century Western reader. Accuracy of translation is much more important than style or easy readability. We must accept that the Lord did not give the Word in "today's street English". A translation such as the Authorised Version may have some unfamiliar aspects to it but the benefit of that unfamiliarity is that it forces readers to grow accustomed to it and to make themselves at home in it. Many modern translators take the approach of swapping the true language of the Bible for an easy colloquial paraphrase. Most modern English versions are therefore denying and destroying the "otherness" and the authority, of the Scriptures, in a highly alarming way. An

accurate translation such as the Authorised Version, on the other hand, has the kind of transparency which allows the original language to speak clearly to the serious reader. It is not the function of the translator to explain the meaning of the text. He must present what was written, rather than interpret or paraphrase it.

Why are there difficulties?

Elnathan Parr (d.1630), a highly respected minister in Suffolk, who lived during the time of King James I, (when the AV was produced), asked why there were difficulties in the Bible in his book *Short and Plain Exhortation to the Study of the Word*. He remarked that the Scriptures will not always be difficult as they are now because they become increasingly clearer under the ministry of the Holy Spirit as time goes on. They are not difficult in every area: in the basics or foundations of the doctrine of salvation and of faith and practice they are clear and uncomplicated. Some passages are astonishingly hard. But this is all in the wisdom of our God, who has provided milk for babes and meat for strong men. The simple things are for our nourishment, the hard things for our exercise. The former allay our hunger, the latter our pride. The Church Fathers spoke of the Scriptures as a mighty river in which a lamb may walk safely yet an elephant might also be drowned in it. None should despair of understanding them but neither should any presume that they have known them to exhaustion.

There is variation on a journey through the open landscape between high hills and gentle valleys and there is also change in the seasons: a pleasant summer is more welcome after a particularly harsh and stormy winter. The same type of variation in God's Word between portions that are either difficult or obvious makes both more pleasant to us and sharpens our desire to study it, which would otherwise be easily dulled. Parr then gives some more specific reasons as to "why the Lord would have some things in His Word be enclosed in clouds of obscurity, making as it were, darkness their pavilion".

Firstly, that we might know and acknowledge the understanding of the Word to be the gift of God.

Secondly, to tame the pride and arrogance of our nature which would soon appear if all things were obvious and easy at first sight.

Thirdly, that we should not reject and make of light account the Word, for this is our corruption which does not esteem or appreciate offered kindness or grace.

Fourthly, that impure dogs and swine be kept from holy things.

Fifthly, that we should make of high account the ministry of the Word, ordained for the opening and interpreting of the same.

Sixthly, to stir us up to prayer, and to continue with diligence and care in the hearing and reading of it, as matters of great difficulty are not surmounted with ordinary effort.

"Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge: for it is a pleasant thing if thou keep them within thee; they shall withal be fitted in thy lips. That thy trust may be in the Lord, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee. Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge; that I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth?" (Prov.22:17-21).