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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

I am very sorry to find myself engaged apparently in controversy with my old friend Dr Houston, (January issue), especially as I have not been able to grasp what it is about which we are supposed to disagree.

Let me limit myself to making a few points in elucidation of my meaning.

Of course I have read Nida and Taber's book on translation and I have carefully perpended the discussions on Bible translation over the past twenty years. My point of view, however, is not that of a theorist but of a practical translator. I have spent a great part of my life in the work of translation — from Greek and Hebrew into Tamil, and from French, German, Dutch and Italian into English. I have also published extended paraphrases of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians and to the Colossians. I have come up the hard way. If there is any problem anywhere in translation, I think I am certain to have encountered it. I admit that I prefer simple terms rather than technicalities. Tom dislikes my use of the term 'free translation', which to my certain knowledge has been in current use for sixty years, as an equivalent for 'dynamic equivalent'. Well let us go forward in simplicity. 'Dynamic equivalent' means no more than what can be expressed in two brief and monosyllabic questions: 'What does this mean?', and 'How do *we* say it?' These two simple sentences contain the entire mystery and technique of translation.

In my friendly review of two books on translation, I wished just to insist on three points:

1. It is very difficult to draw the line between flexibility and distortion. A great many people have found that they preferred Dr Rieu's plain prose translation of the Iliad and the Odyssey to any others, because he tells us what Homer said, with just that slight element of the exotic which is part of the pleasure of reading a work that we know to have been written

in another language. When Tom and I were both in Nairobi, I strongly recommended *Good News for Modern Man* for use in schools, but at the same time banned it from my classroom in the University. In doing so I was not in the smallest degree inconsistent. *Good News* is an excellent introduction to the Bible especially for those whose English is limited. But it makes impossible careful and accurate study of the Scriptures. One example only. In that Version 1 John 5:6 reads 'Jesus Christ is the one who came with the water of his baptism and the blood of his death'. This is falsification of the Holy Scriptures. The words 'of his baptism' and 'of his death' are not found in the Greek. If such unauthorised additions are to appear at all, they must appear in a footnote and nowhere else. In the same issue of *Churchman*, you yourself have written that 'anyone buying it ought to have a Revised Standard Version as a second string' (Editorial p. 3).

2. To find the dynamic equivalent is often far more difficult than most people imagine. The trustees of Teilhard de Chardin's works rejected all suggestions of an English rendering of the title of one of his books *Le Milieu Divin* (I thought that *The Divine Dimension* would have done but apparently this was not suggested), and in the end insisted that the French title must be retained. This is why even in Europe we sometimes have to borrow words from one another; the German for 'fair' is *fair*. Foreign words should as far as possible be excluded from translations of the Bible; to refuse them completely is pedantic.

3. For the Bible translator a deep and sympathetic knowledge of the original languages is the indispensable qualification. The acquisition of these languages is a long and toilsome process but there is no substitute for it, and those who imagine that there is are merely deceiving themselves. At the present time many translators do not have this knowledge, and therefore we have to be content with substitutes, and these would be the best that they possible can be. But we shall never have *great* translations of the Scriptures in contemporary form, until we have indigenous scholars who can compete in their own right with the best that the west has so far been able to produce.

Anyhow, Dr Houston and I are entirely at one in the desire that the Word of God should go out in all languages in such a form as can be most readily be understood by the people, provided only that it really is the Word of God that goes out.

Yours faithfully,
STEPHEN NEILL, BISHOP.

N.B. The editor apologises that due to tight production schedules it was not possible to publish this reply to Dr Houston in the immediately succeeding issue. The debate however remains relevant.