

THE 1689 BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH

The Holy Scriptures (7)

A. Introduction

1. Two things we are commanded to do as elders are to watch and to hold.

We are to watch what we believe, to make sure we are believing what God's Word says.

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." (1 Timothy 4:16)

We are to hold firmly to the truths taught in God's Word.

"He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (Titus 1:9)

It is vital we do these two things, not just for our own sake, but also for the members of this church and in fact those who live in the community God has placed us in.

To help us to watch and to hold, we are spending our elders' meeting working through the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith a paragraph or so at a time.

2. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith begins with the doctrine of Holy Scripture.

The first paragraph is about the necessity of Scripture.

The second and third paragraphs are about the identity of Scripture.

The fourth and fifth paragraphs are about the authority of Scripture.

The sixth paragraph is about the sufficiency of Scripture.

The seventh paragraph is about the clarity of Scripture.

3. But how can the Bible (the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament) be necessary, authoritative, sufficient and clear for God's people today, when most people can't understand the languages they were originally written in?

It is this question that the Confession turns to in the eight paragraph which deals with the translation of Scripture.

"The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal to them. But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded in the fear of God to read, and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner, and through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope."

4. The paragraph begins by acknowledging that the God's Word was originally written in languages that people at the time could understand.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the language that God's people in the Old Testament spoke.

The New Testament was written in Greek, that is, 'Koine Greek' rather than the more scholarly 'Classical Greek', the most common language of the world at the time.

But though the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, preserved through the thousands of copies that exist (which together enable us to construct an accurate version of the original autographs), are the inspired and authoritative words of God, they no longer can be understood by all of God's people, as they would have been able to be in the past.

The Bible, therefore, needs to be translated from Hebrew and Greek into languages spoken by people today.

B. Without a translation most of God's people would not be able to read God's Word

1. The Bible emphasises the importance of God's Word being able to be understood by God's people.

"If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air." (1 Corinthians 14:8-9)

"If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me." (1 Corinthians 14:11)

"If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God." (1 Corinthians 14:27-28)

If no translations of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament existed, most of God's people would be unable to understand what God's Word says.

"But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God..."

2. The Bible also contains commands for God's people to read, study and meditate on God's Word.

"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:2)

"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11)

"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)

"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11)

If no translation of the Scriptures existed, most of God's people would be unable to do this.

"But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded in the fear of God to read, and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come..."

C. Without a translation God's people would not be able to obey God's Word

1. The purpose of God's people being able to read and understand God's Word, is so that they may obey it by living lives that please God by their beliefs and behaviour.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Colossians 3:16)

"so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:17)

"...that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner, and through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope."

A good translation of the Bible enables this.

2. But what makes a good translation?

A good translation is one that is accurate and readable.

It needs to be accurate and reflect what the original languages say, because only the Scriptures as written in the original languages are inspired.

It needs to be readable so that God's people can actually understand what it says.

There are two translation philosophies. One prizes accuracy, the other readability.

The Formal Equivalence seeks to reproduce what the author said and insofar as possible, how he said it. Whilst these tend to be more accurate, they are not as readable.

The Dynamic Equivalence seeks to reproduce what the author said or was trying to say in a way that is more readable.

Within each philosophy there is a spectrum.

Within the Formal Equivalence, for example, the NASB is more accurate and less readable and the ESV less accurate but more readable. All Formal Equivalence translations are less readable than their Dynamic Equivalence counterparts.

Within the Dynamic Equivalence, for example, the NIV is more accurate and less readable and the Message less accurate but more readable. All Dynamic Equivalence translations are less accurate than their Formal Equivalence counterparts.

D. How then shall we lead?

1. The translation of Scripture impacts us as an eldership because we have the responsibility of deciding what version of the Bible we use when we gather together as a local church.

Whilst the decision to use an English translation is an easy one to make, a harder one, is which of the English translations to use.

Whichever one we choose needs to be both accurate and readable, but to achieve that, compromise will be needed on both sides.

Until recently the NIV (1984) was a good compromise. It was reasonably accurate and reasonably understandable for literacy level of this congregation and this community.

2. But the NIV (1984) is now out of print.

The updated NIV (2011) is not as accurate as its predecessor, although it is equally understandable.

A future question we will have to consider as an eldership, is whether to change to the NIV (2011) as the translation of choice, or whether to adopt a more accurate translation yet still readable such as the ESV.