

The Involvement of
Prof. David Kuske
in the Production of *God's Word*

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Prof. David Kuske's involvement with *God's Word* began long before it was known as *God's Word*, and before there was even a *God's Word* to the Nations Bible Society. Shortly after the New Testament portion of the New International Version (NIV) was published, a group of conservative theologians in the WELS and Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod began expressing concern about the NIV's deficiencies. A desire was expressed by these LC-MS and WELS theologians to produce a Lutheran translation of the Bible which could be used along side other translations for proper interpretation. Although Kuske wasn't involved in these preliminary talks, Dr. Siegbert Becker, a colleague at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, did take part in the discussions. They agreed that they would make a revision involving a few key changes of Beck's "An American Translation" (AAT). The men agreed to go through the AAT in connection with their seminary classes, and note suggested changes. These initial meetings took place around 1978.

Kuske became involved when Becker asked Kuske to help with this project. In the course of that school year professors Becker and Kuske worked through the New Testament. They compiled the changes they felt needed to made, and came up with several hundred changes. At the next meeting which Dr. Becker attended (around 1980), the group realized more than a few changes would have to be made to the AAT. At that meeting they agreed again to go through the New Testament, this time doing a more thorough job. As Becker and Kuske worked through the text once again in connection with their classes, they came up with 500-600 changes they felt should be made to the AAT text.

At the next meeting, the men realized this would be a big project, not just some quick changes. It was about at this time (around 1982) that Pastor Phillip Giessler was appointed to be coordinator of this project. As the men suggested changes to be made, it was agreed that they would send them to Giessler. Giessler, with the help of his secretary, would then compile the suggestions. The material would then be sent out for others to evaluate.

A final editing committee was set up which consisted of Pastor Giessler, Dr. Becker, and Dr. Hoerber, who was a Concordia, St. Louis professor and the general editor of the Concordia Self Study Bible.

In 1984 Dr. Becker's work on the project was cut short when the Lord called him home. However, before he passed away, Dr. Becker asked Prof. Kuske to continue working on the project. Prof. Kuske promised that he would.

After Dr. Becker's death, work continued on the new translation. At a meeting in St. Louis in 1985, an agreement was made with the Beck family for publishing rights to the new translation. It was agreed that the final translation would be approved by representatives of the Beck family. (Reu Beck and Pastor Herman Otten were primarily involved.) Also at that time, Prof. Kuske took Dr. Becker's place on the editing committee.

Meanwhile the project continued to grow. In 1985 or 1986, Giessler suggested that a complete revision be made involving even more changes. Again, the men involved went through the New Testament, and a few other theologians also began to help with the project. Juul Madson, from the ELS Seminary in Bethany, helped with the New Testament. Three or four men from Concordia St. Louis and a couple men from Concordia Ft. Wayne were also sending in material for the New Testament. Giessler would make a composite of these changes and sent^d them to Kuske and Hoerber. However, since

Hoerber was busy at the time with the Concordia Self Study Bible, most of the work of reviewing and revising was left up to Giessler and Kuske. Between 1986 and 1988, Giessler and Kuske spent much of their meeting time looking at the composites which were the result of what other men sent in. Giessler would typically call in the evening a couple times a week and phone conversations would usually last from 9 - 11 pm. Giessler also came out to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary a half dozen times for meetings.

Meanwhile, as the project grew, Giessler began to seek monetary support to make a printing of the New Testament possible. Giessler received invitations to make presentations in various Lutheran forums, such as pastoral conferences and lay groups. He also found many Evangelicals interested in the project. Up to this time, the project was done entirely with the volunteer labor of those working on the project. In fact, Giessler mortgaged his home and was unable to pay his taxes for several years. But after the presentations and after contacting several wealthy people, funding for the project began to come in. Primary funding came from a wealthy Missouri Synod man, and from Marvin Schwan. In fact, Schwan put up a building in Cleveland as headquarters. The funding received enabled God's Word to the Nation Bible Society (GWNBS) to have a small, full time staff.

In 1987, Dr. Hoerber finished his work with the Concordia Self-Study Bible. He saw that the GWN project was actually going to be completed and would soon be published. He again started functioning in his position on the editorial committee. However, most of the work had been done by this time. Therefore, his work was mainly to react to the work which was already done. He only had 30 or 40 changes that he felt needed to be made to the New Testament.

In 1988 the New Testament was published. Originally, this New Testament was called *God's Word to the Nations*. The second edition, printed in 1990 was called the *New Evangelical Translation (NET)*¹. This New Testament was largely the work of Kuske and Giessler who did most of the editing of the suggestions received.

Soon after the New Testament was published in 1988, an Old Testament team of translators was assembled and work on the Old Testament began. But Kuske's work with the GWNBS, wasn't finished. Weekly phone conferences were held and Kuske was flown out to Cleveland several times in 1988 and 1989 for meetings. The purposes of these meetings varied. Although Kuske didn't participate directly with Old Testament translation, he did serve as a consultant for this part of the project. When Old Testament work was started, Kuske was flown out to Cleveland to meet with the Old Testament men to explain to them how the New Testament was translated. The thought was to try to make the Old and New Testaments similar. If the Old Testament men did have to translate in a slightly different manner, the New and Old Testaments would have to be made to correspond.

Also around 1990, there was an unfortunate incident with Giessler, the project director. Giessler was found to be in an adulterous relationship, and was quickly removed from his position as project director. A new director was hired. This man wanted to change the focus of the Bible society for a time. He thought the Bible society should concentrate on distributing Bibles in Russia. He was replaced in 1992 by Pastor E. Michael Hackbardt. Hackbardt had been an executive at IBM before studying for the ministry. Therefore he was a very able man for running the business end of the Bible

¹World Publishers eventually published the entire Bible under the name *God's Word*.

society. Hackbardt intended to steer clear of being involved in the editing process. He felt his role was to make sure the business end of the project was in order.

By this time the Bible society had a fully functioning staff. There were about ten salaried workers including five full-time Old Testament translators (two of whom worked from their homes in Phoenix, Arizona). Hackbardt also started searching for a publisher for this new translation. After considering four different major publishers (Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Word, and Abingdon), a decision was reached to publish the Bible through a fifth publisher, World Publishers. World was a relatively new company, but the owner wanted to publish a clear, simple translation easy to read for lay people. More importantly, World was willing to allow GWNBS to have sole editing rights to the translation. In late 1992, a contract was signed with World. World was in a big hurry to get this new translation published. They wanted to compete with several other translations that were either already on the market, or soon to be published, and so they asked for a complete manuscript for publishing by October of 1994.

Before signing the contract with World, GWNBS realized World would want to simplify the translation further. Kuske was asked to rework the New Testament to simplify it. At this time, GWNBS also asked Kuske to work full time on the project, but he declined. Kuske finished his work by June of 1993. In the meantime, the contract had been signed with World Publishers. World and GWNBS agreed that the translation process should be the "closest natural equivalent" approach.

In *The Translating Process of God's Word* (published in 1995 by GWNBS), the closest natural equivalent translation is described as follows:

"Closest natural equivalent translation attempts to be exactly what its name implies. Above all else, it provides readers with a meaning *equivalent* to the source language... in the target language.... Second and equally important, it seeks ways to express that meaning *naturally* in a way that a native English speaker would have spoken or written. Finally, it expresses the meaning naturally in a way that is *as close as possible* to the way the source language expressed the meaning" (2).

World and GWNBS settled on this translating philosophy while Kuske was in the process of revising the New Testament. However, Kuske wasn't informed of the change, nor was he instructed in using this method. Therefore, in June GWNBS realized the New Testament would have to be revised yet another time to reflect this new approach to the translation, and to bring the New Testament in line with the Old Testament. Kuske was once again asked to work full time on the project, but again he declined. Because of the short time frame they had to work with, Hackbardt decided to have Dr. David Moke work on the New Testament to bring the New Testament in line with the Old Testament. Moke had been an Old Testament translator and editor, so they thought he might be a good man for the project. Hackbardt made Moke a New Testament editor along with Kuske. Kuske, then, agreed to have Moke translate a couple of New Testament books, and then Kuske could review them. Hoerber (who had been a New Testament editor) was relieved of his editorial duties due to illness.

So at this time the New Testament editorial team was made up of Kuske and Moke, with Dr. Andrew Steinmann serving as the overall director. Steinmann had come on the scene in 1988 in connection with the Old Testament work. In 1989 he was the coordinator of the Old Testament team. In 1992 Steinmann was made the general editor of the whole project.

At the end of July, 1993, Kuske went to Cleveland for a meeting to review and react to Moke's work on Philippians and Colossians. For some

reason, Kuske was not sent any material in advance of this meeting. Therefore, he had no opportunity to read through the translation ahead of time, or to compare it to the Greek. As they sat down to read through the translation, Kuske had his Greek Bible open next to the translation, attempting to compare the Greek with Moke's translation as they went along. In general, Kuske felt that what he saw was a great improvement. However, Kuske also raised a number of objections to what he found. Although the language was clear and simple, periodically thoughts from the Greek were left out or the substance was changed. Kuske, in working with Giessler, had become accustomed to speaking frankly about a translation. The two frequently questioned each other's work. Questioning the faithfulness to the Greek or the doctrinal soundness of a translation was never taken personally. However, Moke seemed to take some offense at some of Kuske's objections.

Steinmann also took exception to some of Kuske's comments. Steinmann seemed to think that Kuske was objecting to the translation philosophy they were employing. Steinmann also thought Kuske had a problem with changing theological terms into every day English. (For example, changing "justification" to "God's approval".) However, this wasn't the problem Kuske had with the translation. Kuske agreed the translation should be in good, clear, simple English. Kuske also didn't have a problem with substituting simple English for the more abstract theological words. Kuske did raise objections, however, where the translation omitted or changed the substance of some of the thoughts in the original text or did not reflect theological words accurately.

The next morning, Moke was too ill to attend the next meeting. Undoubtedly the long hours Moke had spent in the previous months and the stress of the previous day had taken their toll. That day, Hackbardt and

Kuske had lunch together. At lunch, Hackbardt explained to Kuske exactly the direction they were going with the translation, and how it was part of the contract with World Publishers. This was the first time the whole situation with World Publishers had been explained to Kuske. Hackbardt was surprised to hear that Steinmann hadn't informed Kuske of what was going on. Hackbardt also told Kuske that Moke had felt a bit hurt by Kuske's comments. Hackbardt felt that Moke would no longer be able to work with Kuske, and suggested that he would remove both Kuske and Moke from the New Testament editorial committee. Hackbardt was concerned that Kuske would have hard feeling over being dropped. However, Kuske said that his concern all along was simply to have a simple, clear Bible translation to use along side the NIV. It didn't make much difference to him whether or not he was on the editorial committee.

At this time, the men that had the last read through of the text were Dr. Eugene Bunkowske (a Missouri Synod man who had done mission work in Africa along with extensive translation into African dialects and who had served as a consultant for the GW translation since his return from Africa), Pastor Hackbardt and Dr. Steinmann. Hackbardt asked Kuske to continue on the project, especially to critique the translation doctrinally. Kuske even remembers Hackbardt saying, "The last thing we want is a translation which Lutherans will find fault with doctrinally." And so Kuske continued to receive manuscripts as Moke completed New Testament books. Kuske would review the manuscripts and return his comments to the editorial committee. Moke seemed to tighten up a bit in his translating, and most of what Kuske received was quite well done. Kuske's suggested changes then went to a committee consisting of Steinmann, Moke and an English consultant. Kuske only saw about half the New Testament after this committee finished with it.

As Moke was doing his revision in late October or November of 1993, another meeting was held in Cleveland. This would be the last time Kuske was flown to Cleveland. Kuske thought this was going to be a meeting of the Old Testament consultants. He thought Dr. Bunkowske was going to explain for them the closest natural equivalent translating procedure. Instead, it turned out Dr. Bunkowske presented this material to Hackbardt, Steinmann and Kuske. Steinmann and Hackbardt already knew all about this translation process, so it would appear he presented this especially for Kuske's sake. It would seem Steinmann felt that in the objections Kuske was raising, he was opposing the closest natural equivalent philosophy of translating. They seemed to think they needed to convince Kuske that the closest natural equivalent method was the best. Kuske, however, had already accepted the process in principle. Kuske's point of contention was that occasionally the substance of what was translated was different than what was contained in the Greek.

Kuske's work continued up until August of 1994, just 2 months before the publishers deadline. So the last month and a half or so, the final revision was being put together. It was in August that Kuske stopped hearing from GWNBS. Kuske found out several months later that in August, Steinmann and Hackbardt had a falling out. It would appear Steinmann was the one who was insisting on the translations that didn't reflect clearly what the original says. Finally, Steinmann was removed from the project with only a month and a half to the deadline.

In that last month and a half before the deadline, work was being done hurriedly to re-edit the whole New Testament. There wasn't any time to send out the manuscripts to Kuske or others for reactions. Hackbardt made every effort to put all of Kuske's suggested changes back into the translation. However, they seemed to only have the suggested changes that Kuske had

made in July of that year. Apparently, the work he had been sending in since March was not used. Apparently, Steinmann didn't always show all the changes to others when he received them. Many of the changes Kuske sent in were adopted, while with others Steinmann would write a rebuttal and give that to Hackbardt. Sometimes suggested changes were discussed in lengthy phone conferences between Kuske, Steinmann, Hackbardt and Bunkowski. Hackbardt would often side with Steinmann when it came to translation disputes. As was said earlier, Hackbardt originally had no intention of taking part in the translation or editing process, but after Steinmann's dismissal, he became a key editor of the New Testament. So the last month and a half of the project, hurried (and rather big) changes were being made to the manuscript. But the manuscript was finished by the deadline.

The Bible, then was published under the title *God's Word*. Since being published, the translation has received some criticism from some conservative Lutheran Bible scholars. Prof. Kuske is among those who are disappointed with what has come out. Although the language is very simple and clear, the substance of the original is sometimes changed, even to the point of being false doctrine. For example, "grace" is translated as "favor" or "good will." "Repentance" is translated "change the way you think and act". "Law" is translated "Moses' Teaching." "By faith" is often translated "because of faith." In these instances the translators have changed what the Greek is saying. Such glaring errors make the translation largely unusable for the lay person who is looking for a translation that reflects pure doctrine.

One might think the story would end at this point, but the saga continues. World Publishers wanted to publish a concordance for this new translation. As work started, it was realized there were some inconsistencies in the text, especially between the Old and New Testaments. World Publishers

has asked GWNBS to make some changes to the text, to be completed by the summer of 1995. Hackbardt has contacted Kuske and asked him to submit any changes he feels need to be made. Hackbardt hasn't promised the changes will be incorporated, but at least there is the hope that the second edition of *God's Word* will be a more doctrinally sound work that can be used by conservative Lutherans.

Another interesting side bar to this story is that in the contract with World Publishers, Northwestern Publishing House was given exclusive rights to produce a *God's Word* Study Bible. The idea was that perhaps the authors of the various People's Bibles could also write footnotes and commentary for the study Bible. In addition, some of the useful articles on key theological terms which were contained in the New Testament NET would also be included in the study Bible. However, unless there is significant improvement in the second edition, this NPH produced study Bible may never be.

What if the second edition isn't any better than the first? One might think that the years of effort by Prof. Kuske went to waste (aside from his own personal edification). However, if *God's Word* doesn't change much in the second edition, Prof. Kuske may submit the simplified revision of the 1990 edition of the New Testament New Evangelical Translation to the Seminary publishing committee. If they feel it is worth publishing, students of the Seminary and interested pastors will still have access to the translation.