

## Understanding *Like Unto* in Tyndale's Prose

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William Tyndale often used the phrase *like unto* in his books and essays, and also in his scripture translations. Today we do not use this phrase at all.

Tyndale used *like unto* to indicate resemblance or similarity much as we now use *like*. However, he also employed it in another, more mysterious way, as in the following excerpt from his prologue to the book of Romans:

Example 1: For the spirit of God only maketh a man spiritual and **like unto** the law, so that now henceforth he doth nothing of fear or for lucre or vantage's sake or of vainglory, but of a free heart...<sup>1</sup>

What does *like unto* mean here? According to Wictionary, an on-line dictionary, *like unto* is a preposition that means "similar to."<sup>2</sup> But is it that simple? Did Tyndale mean that the Spirit of God makes a man "**similar to** the law"? No, he did not. Nor could it be said that the Spirit of God makes a man to be **like** the law. He must have had something else in mind.

Consider another Tyndale sentence:

Example 2: Wherefore we have enough to do all our lives long, to tame our bodies, and to compel the members to obey the spirit and not the appetites, that thereby we might be **like unto** Christ's death and resurrection, and might fulfil our baptism, which signifieth the mortifying of sins, and the new life of grace.<sup>3</sup>

Slotting in the Wictionary definition results in another impossible rendering: "...that thereby we might be **similar to** Christ's death and resurrection." No: Tyndale was not comparing man, death, and resurrection, but was expressing a different idea.

The Wictionary synonym does, however, work well with the following sentence from ***An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue***:

Example 3: For though they saw him raise up other, yet who should raise him up, when he were dead, they could not comprehend. Read what thou read canst, and thou shalt find no temptation **like unto** that from the creation of the world, or so great as it, by the hundred part. <sup>4</sup>

Example 3 (partly transposed): ...Read what you may, you will find no testing **similar to** that since the creation of the world...

So, *similar to* works here. Also, *like* alone could be used. But to understand the meaning of *like unto* in every context requires consideration.

## The Grammar of *Like Unto* and *Like*

Regarding its part of speech, not everyone would agree with the Wiktionary explanation that *like unto* is a preposition. *Unto* is a preposition. But *like*, and the full expression *like unto*, are not so easy to classify. The **Shorter Oxford English Dictionary**<sup>5</sup> classifies *like* with *unto* as either an adjective that means “similarity of character or appearance; resemblance,” etc. or an “adverb, quasi-preposition, quasi-conjunction” that means “in the manner of, in the same manner as, to the same extent as, etc.”

Regarding *like*, grammarians George Kittredge and Frank Farley, in their 1913 English grammar, say it may be an adjective or an adverb, though it is often regarded as a preposition. Their examples:

She sang like a bird. (*Like* is an adverb)  
The earth is like a ball. (*Like* is an adjective)<sup>6</sup>

This explanation, however, only scratches the surface. If *like* is an adjective, like *green* or *round*, therefore just as we might say “The earth is *round*,” so might we say “The earth is *like*.” But of course we cannot use it this way. The reason is that *like* requires more words to complete its sense. It requires an object or complement, and in this it partakes of the nature of a preposition. In “The earth is like a ball,” *ball* is the complement of *like*, and completes its sense. The entire phrase introduced by *like* – “like a ball” – modifies as an adjective. But *like* standing by itself is inadequate in the office of adjective because it requires an object or complement.

### Classifying *Like Unto*

My suggestion, for the purpose of understanding and transposing Tyndale's obsolete usages, is to regard *like unto* as a prepositional modifier that introduces adjective and adverbial phrases. Consider this example from Matthew's Gospel:

Example 4: The kingdom of heaven is **like unto** a net cast into the sea, that gathereth of all kinds of fishes: which when it is full, men draw to land, and sit and gather the good into vessels, and cast the bad away.

The complement of *like unto* in this example is the phrase, “a net cast into the sea..etc.” The entire phrase that hangs on *like unto* is adjectival, expressing resemblance between the kingdom of heaven and a net that is cast into the sea. Like example 3, it may be transposed by using *like* or *similar to*:

Example 4 (partly transposed): The kingdom of heaven is **like** a net cast into the sea...

Example 4 (alternate transposition): The kingdom of heaven is **similar to** a net cast into the sea...

### Uses Expressing Conformity

There are instances, however, as we saw, when *like unto* cannot simply be replaced with *like* or *similar to*. This occurs when Tyndale used it to express not resemblance, but conformity. In some contexts, the different senses of resemblance and conformity may be meaningful. Conformity as an aspect of character is dynamic and inward. ‘Resembling’ concerns simply what appears. ‘Conforming’ expresses, or may express, something more active.

*Like unto* still suggests resemblance to moderns, and where Tyndale used it this way, we can easily understand and transpose it. But it is more difficult where he used *like unto* to introduce phrases expressing conformity, conformableness, etc. Consider the first text we saw:

Example 1: For the spirit of God only maketh a man spiritual and **like unto** the law, so that now henceforth he doth nothing of fear or for lucre or vantage's sake or of vainglory, but of a free heart...

This is updated well by understanding *like unto* as expressing conformableness:

Example 1 (transposed): For the spirit of God makes a man spiritual and **conformable to** the law, so that from then on he does nothing from fear, or for money, or for advantage, or for personal glory, but from a free heart...

What Tyndale was saying is that the Spirit of God changes a man so that he conforms to God's law in character and conduct. This he does willingly – “of a free heart.” It requires his will and action.

But this substitution does not work in other contexts:

Example 5: Will ye therefore worship saints truly? Then ask what they preached, and believe their doctrine; and as they followed that doctrine, so conform your living **like unto** theirs...<sup>7</sup>

Adverbial phrases introduced by *like unto* that import senses of conformity, and which follow verbs or participles of *making*, *conforming*, or *shaping*, can be challenging. Also included in this class are verbs of *thinking*, because we also make and shape ideas and images in our thoughts.

With verbs that themselves import conformation, I have found that it works to employ *to* alone. *Conform*, *shapen*, and *fashion* submit well to this operation. After these, *like* is essentially redundant, because the verb itself conveys the sense. Example 5 again:

Example 5 (transposed): Would you honour the saints truly? Then ask what they preached, and believe their doctrine; and as they followed that doctrine, so conform your living **to** theirs...

This result is both pleasing to the modern ear and understandable as Tyndale intended.

However, *to* alone does not work in all adverbial phrases with verbs of making, shaping, or conforming, nor with thinking verbs. In many cases, different prepositions and alternate constructions are necessary.

### **Guidelines: *Like Unto* in Transposition**

If my analysis is correct, *like unto* may be considered a prepositional modifier that introduces adjective or adverbial phrases which express resemblance or conformity. Transposition to modern English will vary according to the context. While it is not possible to set rigid rules, I find the following guidelines helpful:

1. When introducing adjective or adverbial phrases that express resemblance: *Like*, standing alone, usually works well in adjective and adverbial phrases. *Similar to*<sup>8</sup> is limited to adjective phrases.
2. Adjective or adverbial phrases expressing conformity or conformableness are more difficult. It is possible to employ a derivative of *conform* with *to*, or to retain verbs of making or forming with *to* alone. In some cases, *like* works well.

#### ***Guideline 1: Phrases expressing resemblance***

For adjective uses under Guideline 1, consider the following text from Tyndale's ***Exposition of Matthew***:

Example 6: Thou wilt haply say to me again, If I cannot have my sins forgiven except I love the law, and of love endeavour myself to keep it; then the keeping of the law justifieth me. I answer that the argument is false, and but blind sophistry, and **like unto** this argument: I cannot have forgiveness of my sin except I have sinned; ergo, to have sinned is the forgiveness of sins.<sup>9</sup>

Example 6 (transposed): You will perhaps respond to me, "If I cannot have my sins forgiven unless I love the law, and from love endeavour to keep it, then the keeping of the law justifies me." I answer that this argument is false, and but blind sophistry, and **similar to/like** this argument: etc...

The kingdom parables (or "similitudes," as Tyndale would say) from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel spring to mind as examples of where Tyndale used *like unto* to introduce a series of adjective phrases expressing

resemblance. Readers may judge for themselves whether transposition with *like* or *similar to* is preferable:

Example 7 (transposed): The kingdom of heaven is **similar to** a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men slept, his foe came and sowed tares among the wheat.

Example 8 (transposed): The kingdom of heaven is **like** a grain of mustard seed, which a man takes and sows in his field. It is the least of all seeds. But when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and it is a tree, so that the birds of the air come and build in the branches of it.

Example 9 (transposed): The kingdom of heaven is **similar to** leaven, which a woman takes and hides in three pecks of meal until all is leavened.

In the following examples 10 and 11, from *The Obedience*, we have adverbial uses expressing resemblance, which fall under Guideline 1 and therefore call for *like* alone:

Example 10: First by the authority of the gospel, they that preach the word of God in every parish and other necessary ministers have right to challenge an honest living **like unto** one of the brethren, and therewith ought to be content.<sup>10</sup>

Example 10 (partly transposed): ...other necessary ministers, have the right to claim an honest living **like** one of the brethren, and ought to be content with the same.

Example 11: If we be in Christ we are minded **like unto** Christ, which knew nothing fleshly or after the will of the flesh<sup>11</sup>

Example 11: (transposed): If we are in Christ we are minded **like** Christ, who knew nothing in a fleshly way or according to the will of the flesh.

### ***Guideline 2: Phrases expressing conformity***

Here is a text from *Exposition of Matthew*:

Example 12: I think all things to be damage, or loss, for the excellent knowledge's sake of Christ Jesus my Lord...and to know also the fellowship of his passions, that I might be made **like unto** his death.<sup>12</sup>

Example 12: (transposed) I think all things worthless for the sake of the precious knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord...and to know also the fellowship of his passions, that I might be made **conformable to** his death.

Applying Guideline 2 to example 2, first seen above, also yields a good result:

Example 2 (transposed): Therefore we have enough to do all our lives long, to tame our bodies, and to compel the members to obey the spirit and not the appetites, that we might **conform to** Christ's death and resurrection, and might fulfil our baptism, which signifies the mortifying of sins and the new life of grace.

In the following passage, Tyndale writes to comfort believers who grieve at iniquity, and who are kept under and disesteemed by the world. He assures them that greater suffering indicates that one is greatly beloved by God:

Example 13: ...let not thine heart fail thee, neither despair, as though God had forsaken thee, or loved thee not: but comfort thyself with old ensamples, how God hath suffered all his old friends to be so entreated, and also his only and dear son Jesus; whose ensample, above all other, set before thine eyes, because thou art sure he was beloved above all other, that thou doubt not but thou art beloved also, and so much the more beloved, the more thou art **like to** the image of his ensample in suffering.<sup>13</sup>

Example 13 (partly transposed): ...let not your heart fail; neither despair, as though God had forsaken you... doubt not that you are beloved also, and so much more beloved, the more you are **conformed to** the image of his example in suffering.

From ***Exposition of Matthew:***

Example 14: Go to then, and desire God to print this profession in thine heart, and to increase it daily more and more; that thou mayest be full shapen **like unto** the image of Christ, in knowledge and love.<sup>14</sup>

Fully transposed with *to* alone, produces a beautiful result:

Example 14 (transposed): ...pray to God, then, to print this profession in your heart, and to increase it daily more and more, so that you may be fully shaped **to** the image of Christ in knowledge and love.

And see:

Example 15: And we must fashion ourselves **like unto** Christ, and take every man his cross, and slay and mortify the sin in the flesh; or else we cannot be partakers of his passion.<sup>15</sup>

Example 15: (partly transposed): ...we must fashion ourselves **to** Christ...

In the above examples it has worked well to omit *like* and retain *to* with the verbs of shaping and fashioning.

Another example from ***The Obedience:***

Example 16: It is verily, as Paul saith in the eleventh chapter of the second Epistle to the Corinthians: The false Apostles are deceitful workers, and fashion themselves **like unto** the Apostles of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Because false apostles do not really approach Christ in nature or character, it seems better to suggest mere resemblance:

Example 16 (transposed): It is truly as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11: false apostles are deceitful workers, and fashion themselves **to be like** the apostles of Christ.

In conclusion, I offer this analysis to consider how Tyndale employed *like unto* in his writing and scripture translation, together with suggestions as to how it might be transposed in modern English.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyndale, William, *Prologue to Romans*, as contained in *Tyndale's New Testament*, Editor David Daniell (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Wictionary, as at January 2010. A one-line definition: "'Like unto' means 'similar to'. A preposition." Wictionary has since amended the definition.

<sup>3</sup> Tyndale, *Prologue to Romans*, from *Tyndale's New Testament*, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> Tyndale, William, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (Parker Society Edition, ed. Henry Walter, 1850) (hereafter *Answer*), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> I am using the *Shorter OED* of 1936.

<sup>6</sup> Kittredge, George, and Farley, Frank, *Advanced English Grammar* (Ginn & Company, Boston, New York, 1913), p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Tyndale, William, *Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John* as contained in *Expositions and Notes on Sundry Portions of the Holy Scriptures Together with The Practice of Prelates* (hereafter "*Sundry Portions*"), Editor Henry Walter, The Parker Society (Wipf & Stock Edition, Eugene, Oregon, 2004), p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> According to the *Shorter OED*, the adjective *similar* was first used in print in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it would not have been in Tyndale's vocabulary.

<sup>9</sup> Tyndale, William, *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Tyndale, William, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (hereafter "*The Obedience*"), (Penguin Books, 2000), p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> *The Obedience*, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> *The Obedience*, p. 73.