

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. As with many early modern English expressions, its uses and meanings have narrowed over time. Of course today we do not use the full phrase, but omit *unto* and employ *like* idiomatically, standing alone.

Tyndale used *like unto* to indicate resemblance (i.e., 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...¹

What part of speech is *like unto*, and what does it mean? According to Wictionary, an on-line dictionary, *like unto* is a preposition that means "similar to".² But is it that simple, and 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. Tyndale was not comparing a living being to an abstract concept (which is not to say an unreal concept: God's law is a very real, spiritual thing). Tyndale 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.³

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. ⁴

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. But clearly it cannot be used in every context, and to properly understand the meanings of *like unto* in Tyndale's prose will require some consideration and exploration.

The Grammar of *Like Unto*

Tyndale usually, but not always, preferred *like unto* over *like to* when making comparisons; that is, when expressing resemblance between persons, human and divine; or things, abstract or concrete; or ways of doing or being. We also find *like* used in other senses, as in this sentence from his ***Exposition of Matthew***:

For if I stick up to the middle in the mire, **like to perish** [likely to perish] without present help, and thou stand by and wilt not succour me, but kneelest down and prayest, will God hear the prayers of such an hypocrite?⁵

However in this paper I will focus on the phrase *like unto* as Tyndale used it to express resemblance, and, also, as I elaborate below, to express conformity, a subtly different meaning.

Regarding its part of speech, most grammarians would not agree with the breezy explanation of our Wictionary friend, that *like unto* is a preposition. *Unto* is a preposition; but *like*, and the complete expression *like unto*, are not so easy to classify. Experts differ. The ***Oxford English Dictionary***⁶ classifies *like* (with *to/unto*) as either (1) an adjective that means "similarity of character or appearance; resemblance," etc. or (2) an "adverb, quasi-preposition, quasi-conjunction" that means "in the manner of, in the same manner as, to the same extent as, etc." Grammarians George Kittredge and Frank Farley, in their wonderful little 1913 English grammar, write:

107. The objective case is used after *like*, *unlike*, *near*, and *next*, which are really adjectives or adverbs, though in this construction they are often regarded as prepositions:

She sang like a bird. (*Like* is an adverb)
The earth is like a ball. (*Like* is an adjective)...
That answer was unlike Joseph (*Unlike* is an adjective)
The man walks unlike Joseph. (*Unlike* is an adverb)⁷

This explanation, however, barely scratches the surface, grammatically speaking. We could be forgiven for thinking that if *like* is an adjective, like *green* or *round*, ergo just as we might say "The earth is *round*", so might we say "The earth is *like*". But of course, we cannot use it in this manner. The reason is that *like* requires more words to complete its sense. It requires an

object, and in this it partakes of the nature of a preposition. In “The earth is like a ball”, *ball* is the object of *like*. The entire phrase introduced by *like* – “like a ball” – functions as an adjective. But *like* standing by itself is inadequate in the office of adjective.

Classifying *Like Unto*

My suggestion, solely for the purpose of constructing a system for understanding and transposing Tyndale's obsolete usages, is to class *like unto* by a name and description of my own invention: as a *prepositional modifier that introduces adjective and adverbial phrases*. Consider this example from Matthew's Gospel:

Example 4: Again 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 object of *like unto* in example 4 is the phrase, “a net cast into the sea”, etc. The entire phrase that hangs upon the prepositional modifier is adjectival, expressing resemblance between the kingdom of heaven and a net that is spread with certain results. This example, like example 3, may be transposed by using *like* alone, or *similar to*:

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

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

The Objective Case

Regarding a fine grammatical point, I quote from Kittredge and Farley on the modern idiomatic use of *like* alone in which it takes the objective case:

The use of the objective after [like] is a peculiar idiom similar to the indirect object. The nature of the construction may be seen by inserting *to* or *unto* (She sang *like unto* a bird)...the objective after *like*, *unlike*, and *near* are all survivals of old dative constructions. Besides the case of the direct object (often called accusative), English once had a case (called the dative) which meant *to* or *for*.⁸

In other words, it is correct to say *like him* or *like them*, and not *like he* or *like they*.... Though modern English has dropped *unto*, it has retained the objective case following *like*. Of course, the objective case only becomes evident where the object is inflected, as it is with pronouns. We can see this, and the historical connection illustrated, in Tyndale's translation of Romans 6:4-5 where “him” refers to Jesus:

Example 5: We are buried with him by baptism, for to die...For if we be graft in death **like unto him**: even so must we be in the resurrection.⁹

Messrs. Kittredge and Farley have explained why this verse can confidently be transposed by simply omitting *unto* and leaving *him* in the objective case. With further minimal editing, we have a sentence nicely understandable to the 21st century reader:

Example 5 (transposed): We are buried with him by baptism, to die...For if we are grafted in death **like him**, so must we be in the resurrection.

Uses Expressing Conformity

There are times, however, when the phrase *like unto* does not lend itself to modernization simply by dropping *unto*. This occurs where Tyndale used it to express not resemblance, but conformity, which is an obsolete use of *like*.¹⁰ *Like* has retained its meaning of resemblance (i.e., similarity), and where Tyndale used it thusly, we can easily understand it and transpose it. But where he used *like unto* to introduce phrases expressing conformation, conforming to, making conformable, conformableness, etc., we must find another way.

In some contexts, the different senses of resemblance and conformity may scarcely be distinguished, but in others they significant and meaningful. Resemblance as an aspect of appearance is static and outward, whereas conformity as an aspect of character is dynamic and inward. Resemblance may describe inanimate things, abstract or concrete; but conformableness more readily describes animate beings. ‘Resembling’ concerns what appears, but ‘conforming’ expresses something that is happening.

Consider the first sample 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...

Clearly we are dealing with an unfamiliar use of *like*, in an adjective phrase. The **OED** suggests no fitting sense, but does refer the reader to “*conform, adjective*”. If we follow the thread we discover that in an obsolete sense, *conform* meant *conformable*. We are rewarded with a satisfactory result by taking *like* to mean *conformable* and making the appropriate substitution:

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...

That *conformable to* is appropriate is confirmed against these **OED** definitions:

Conform(able):

1. According in form or character *to*; like.
2. Corresponding so as to fit; consistent, harmonious; fitting.
3. Disposed or wont to conform; tractable, compliant *to*.¹¹

The third sense applies well to example 1. Surely what Tyndale was saying is that the Spirit of God changes a man so he compliantly conforms to God's law, in character and conduct. This he does willingly – "of a free heart".

However, this operation will not work in certain contexts:

Example 6: 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...¹²

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

With verbs which themselves clearly suggest conformation, I have found that it works to employ *to* alone. *Conform*, *shapen (or shape)*, and *fashion*, submit well to this operation; after these, *like* is essentially redundant because the verb conveys the sense. Example 6 could, therefore, be transposed thusly:

Example 6 (transposed): Would you worship 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, for convenience' sake, be classed as a prepositional modifier that introduces certain adjective or adverbial phrases expressing resemblance or conformity. Synonymic transposition to modern English will vary according to the meaning and function of the phrase in any given sentence. While transposition will not conform to rigid rules, the following guidelines assist:

1. When introducing adjective or adverbial phrases that express resemblance: *Like*, standing alone, usually works well in adjective and adverbial phrases. *Similar to*¹³ is limited to adjective phrases.
2. When introducing adjective phrases expressing conformity or conformableness: Employ a derivative of *conform* coupled with *to*.
3. When introducing adverbial phrases expressing conformation or conformity (and resemblance in some cases) following verbs and participles of *making*, *conforming*, and *thinking*: Select among prepositions such as *to* alone, or *in*, in a variety of constructions. In some contexts, *like* is also a good option.

Examples of *making* and *conforming* verbs include *fashion* and *shape*. Examples of *thinking* verbs include *imagine* and, possibly in obsolete usages, *feel*.

Guideline 3 transpositions may require additional deliberation and creativity to achieve the best sense and sound.

Applying Guideline 1

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

Example 7: 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.¹⁴

Example 7 (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 13th 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. Applying the Guideline 1 options, readers may judge for themselves whether transposition with *like*, or with *similar to*, is preferable:

Example 8 (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 9 (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 10 (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 11 and 12, from *The Obedience*, we have adverbial uses expressing resemblance, which fall under Guideline 1 and therefore call for *like* alone:

Example 11: 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.¹⁵

Example 11(transposed): First, by the authority of the gospel, those who preach the word of God in every parish, and 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 12: If we be in Christ we are minded **like unto** Christ, which knew nothing fleshly or after the will of the flesh¹⁶

Example 12: (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.

In Matthew 6 there is an adverbial use which, when transposed pursuant to Guideline 1, becomes:

Example 13 (transposed): Even Solomon in all his royalty was not arrayed **like** one of these.

Applying Guideline 2

To test Guideline 2, where *like unto* expresses conformity or conformableness in adjective phrases, here is another text from *Exposition of Matthew*:

Example 14: 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.¹⁷

Example 14: I think all things to be damage, or loss, 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.

This is a good result.

Applying Guideline 2 to the text of 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 be **conformable 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 foregoing two examples, *conformable* takes the first sense under the **OED** definitions: according in form or character to.

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

Example 15: ...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.¹⁸

Example 15 (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.

Applying Guideline 3

To test Guideline 3, in instances where *like unto* introduces an adverbial phrase following a verb or participle of making, conforming, or thinking, consider the following texts, again from ***Exposition of Matthew***:

Example 16: 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.¹⁹

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

Example 16 (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 17: 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.²⁰

Example 17(partly transposed): ...we must fashion ourselves **to** Christ...

As an aside, a rather esoteric consideration arises under Guideline 3. Consider: in example 16 we might have said “**in** the image of Christ”, and in example 17, “we must fashion ourselves **like** Christ”. But these renderings lose the subtle sense of fusing with the dative²¹ that comes with the preposition *to*, and which here imports the idea of the believer *approaching to* Christ spiritually, in nature and character. The senses of moving toward and reaching come with *to*, which are lost with *in* and *like*. Another option for example 17 might be “And we must fashion ourselves **to be like** Christ”, but still the sense of fusing with the dative is lost, and the extra words are not necessary to convey the sense; there is something pleasingly Tyndalian about greater economy of expression.

An example where I would avoid the sense of fusing with the dative is this sentence from ***The Obedience***:

Example 18: 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.²²

Because false apostles do not really approach Christ in nature or character, this might be better transposed in the following manner:

Example 18 (transposed): It is truly as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11: false apostles are deceitful workers, and fashion themselves **like** apostles of Christ.

Under example 18, it is interesting to reflect upon the differences in the meanings of *resemblance* and *conformity*. False apostles may resemble Christ in outward appearance, but never in inward conformity. Modern English, with its fine distinctions, enables a writer to hone nuances of sense.

The next example, from the ***Answer***, is a passage where Tyndale is describing how carnally-minded persons think of God. It is a challenging one:

Example 19: For they that be worldly, and fleshly minded, cannot but fleshly imagine of God, altogether **like unto** the similitude of worldly things.²³

Imagine is a verb of thinking (used here in an archaic or obsolete sense) and thus falls under Guideline 3. Possible transpositions include:

Example 19 (transposed): For those who are worldly and fleshly minded can only think of God according to the flesh, **in** the likeness of worldly things.

Example 19 (alternate transposition): For those who are worldly and fleshly minded can think of God only in a fleshly way, **conforming to** the likeness of worldly things.

Finally, we have this loving, typically Tyndalian exhortation:

Example 20: Thy neighbour that is out of office is honoured, when thou (as God hath commanded thee) lovest him as thyself, countest him as good as thyself, thinkest him as worthy of any thing as thyself, and comest lovingly to help him at all his need, as thou wouldest be help thyself; because God hath made him **like unto** his own image, as well as thee, and Christ hath bought him as well as thee.²⁴

In this passage it seems best to employ the **KJV** rendering “**in** his image”, which is familiar to all, well understood, and eminently satisfactory to express the intended meaning:

Example 20 (partly transposed): Your neighbour who is out of work is honoured when you (as God has commanded) love him as yourself... because God has made him **in** his own image...

In conclusion, I offer this analysis to offer an explanation of Tyndale's uses of *like unto* and how this interesting phrase should be understood, and suggestions as to how it may be transposed in modern English.

¹ 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.

² Wictionary, January 2010. A one-line definition: “‘Like unto’ means ‘similar to’. A preposition.” Wictionary has since amended the definition, but not as I at first suggested, and it is still not satisfactory in my view.

³ Tyndale, *Prologue to Romans*, from *Tyndale's New Testament*, p. 218.

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

⁵ Tyndale, William, *Exposition of Matthew*, 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. 41.

⁶ I am using the *Shorter OED* of 1936.

⁷ Kittredge, George, and Farley, Frank, *Advanced English Grammar* (Ginn & Company, Boston, New York, 1913), p. 52.

⁸ Kittredge and Farley, *Advanced English Grammar*, p. 52.

⁹ All biblical texts are taken from *Tyndale's New Testament*, being Tyndale's 1534 translation in modern spelling. See endnote 1.

¹⁰ Another obsolete meaning of *like*, not given in the *OED* but identified in Samuel Johnson's dictionary (3rd edition, 1768), is “equal; of the same quantity”. I have not found in Tyndale's writing any uses of the phrase *like unto* in the sense of *equal to*. However he used *like* meaning ‘equal’ at Romans 12:16: “Be of like affection one towards another”.

¹¹ These meanings of *conformable* arose either in Tyndale's lifetime, or shortly after his death, according to the *OED*. In a later-arising sense, it also meant “conforming to the usages of the

Church of England". The *OED* indicates that *conformable to* was also used quasi-adverbially, meaning *conformably to*.

¹² Tyndale, William, *Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John*, from *Sundry Portions*, p. 164.

¹³ According to the *OED*, the adjective *similar* was first used in print in the early 17th century.

Therefore, it would not have been in Tyndale's vocabulary.

¹⁴ *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Obedience*, p. 92.

¹⁶ *Obedience*, p. 150.

¹⁷ *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 76.

¹⁸ *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 30.

¹⁹ *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 15.

²⁰ *Exposition of Matthew* from *Sundry Portions*, p. 76.

²¹ Re "fusing with the dative": The dative case arises when a verb takes an indirect object. In "John gave the book to Kathy", *Kathy*, is the indirect object of the verb *gave*. In "Bob wrote the book for Betty", *Betty* is the indirect object of the verb "wrote". The indirect object is the "dative object", or "in the dative case". When there is fusion or blending with the dative object, there is motion towards, reaching, or even becoming as one with. *To* and *unto* import the sense of fusing with the dative, but *for* does not (*OED*); nor does *like*. The book reached Kathy when John gave it *to* her, but Betty might have been dead when Bob wrote his book *for* her. These prepositions mean very different things. It would be an interesting study to consider the implications in modern Bible versions where *for* replaced *unto* in many places where it was employed in the *Matthew Bible* and the *KJV*.

²² *Obedience*, p. 73.

²³ *Answer*, p. 119. The scripture is in the 11th chapter of 2 Corinthians.

²⁴ *Answer*, p. 57.

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