

# ***All Those Translations!***

***How are we to decide which English translation of the Bible to use?***

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The question is raised by all kinds of people: seminary students, devout church members, confirmation students, and perhaps every single Christian at one time or another. And the question is, "What is the best translation of the Bible?"

We have, after all, the KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NIVI, JB, NJB, NCV, NAB, NEB, REV, GNB, CEV, ASB, NASB, GWN, LB, NLT and more! A person could spend all of his or her time just finding out how many translations there are, and none of the time actually reading the Scriptures.

I want to talk about Bible translations, and in doing so, I want to avoid two mistakes while accomplishing two goals.

The first mistake would be to be overly critical of any of the major, established English Bible translations, thereby causing *unnecessary* concern or doubt in the minds of Christians. All of the major English Bible versions (such as New King James, Revised Standard, New American Standard and New International) offer fine scholarship and good translations. Each clearly presents God's truth and especially the Good News that forgiveness and eternal life come, through faith alone, because Jesus Christ died to take away our sins and rose to make us innocent in God's sight (Rom 4:25).

The second mistake, on the other hand, would be to give the impression that there are no differences among these English Bible translations, and that questions of careful study, precise translation and deep understanding are not important. The Lord Jesus, after all, did commission His 11 disciples to make

other disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching others to observe *all things* that He had commanded them to observe (Matt 28:19).

The loving Lord of the church desires all the members of His Bride to grow in their understanding of His Word, their confidence in His mercy, and their ability to know His will and do it. God's desire for our deeper understanding of His Word leads directly to the two goals I mentioned earlier . . . but I'll wait until the end to tell you what those goals are. That way, you, the reader, can decide if the goals were met!

### **Translation vs. paraphrase**

What are some helpful ways of describing the many different English Bibles available to us today? Perhaps the first distinction involves the difference between a "translation" and a "paraphrase."

A "translation" follows more closely both the wording and the meaning of the Scriptures' original languages (Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament, Greek for the New). A "paraphrase," meanwhile, actually tries to explain and restate what the Biblical texts "really mean," especially those hard-to-understand passages (2 Peter 3:16).

Now, let me be the first to say that readers can derive great spiritual blessing while reading a Bible paraphrase. Yet, as you can readily imagine, the benefit derived from a paraphrase will depend heavily on how *good* the paraphraser is, and sometimes they do err! Among English Bibles, the most well-known paraphrases are *The Living Bible* (and its recent adaptation, *The New Living Translation*) and the older *The New Testament in Modern English*. Consider Gen. 6:1-2 as one particularly obvious (and incorrect!) example of an interpretive paraphrase. A "translation," such as the Revised Standard Version, reads, "When men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, *the sons of God* saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose."

The careful reader naturally asks the question, "Who are these 'sons of God'?" *The Living Bible* offers a paraphrase (which in my judgment is incorrect), an interpretation of this difficult phrase that has no direct connection with the wording of the Hebrew text: "It was at this time that *beings from the spirit world* looked upon the beautiful earth women and took any they desired to be their wives."

The advantage of a paraphrase is at the same time its great disadvantage. It is true that some difficult statements in Scripture may receive helpful and accurate paraphrases. Yet, in other places, the unsuspecting English reader will be helpless because he or she will have no access to a more direct (albeit more difficult to understand) translation. Despite the significant benefit of "readability," a paraphrase should not be the only Bible used for in-depth Bible study. One should also consult, for the sake of a more accurate comparison, a solid translation.

Well, then, if "paraphrases" are not as close as "translations" are to the direct wording of the Biblical text, can we say that all translations are "literal"? Not exactly. Strictly (or "literally") speaking, *no* English translation is "literal," for the Bible's original languages use different word order and grammar to structure their sentences. Even the use of the same Greek word cannot always result in the same "literal" English translation.

For example, a simple and quick English translation for the Greek word *sarx* is "flesh." But, as is true with virtually any word in any language, *sarx* in Greek does not always refer to the same thing. At times, it refers to literal flesh, that is, to one's body. This is the case in Gal. 4:13, where the NIV accurately translates, "As you know, it was because of *an illness* (Greek, "weakness of the flesh") that I first preached the gospel to you."

At other times, however, Paul uses the same term *sarx* to refer to the sinful "old Adam" still present in all believing, justified Christians. When this is the case, the NIV quite adequately renders Greek "flesh" as in Gal. 5:13: "Do not use your

freedom to indulge *the sinful nature*." So, no English translation of the Bible can be strictly literal, because the structures of English on the one hand, and the Biblical languages on the other hand, prevent it.

However, one can draw a distinction between translations that are, as scholars say, more "formal equivalent" (such as the NKJV and NASB) and those that are more "dynamic equivalent" (such as the NIV). According to Dr. Eugene A. Nida in *Toward a Science of Translating*, a more "formal-equivalent" translation tries to give "as much as possible of the form and content of the original message." If the Greek has a long sentence, the English sentence will be long, too--even if it means having a poorly written English sentence. If the Hebrew uses the same word, then the same English word will be used.

Nida notes that a more "dynamic equivalent" translation, however, will lean not as much on the form of the original language as that of the "receptor" language--in our case, English. Long Hebrew sentences will be made into shorter, more coherent English units. Such an approach does not feel so bound to always translate a given Hebrew or Greek word with the same word in English; it will depend much more on the context (remember the NIV example above with the Greek word for "flesh"?).

All modern English translations use, to a greater or lesser extent, the general concept of "dynamic equivalence." But some use it more than others.

Now, the potential problem with more "formal equivalent" translations is their awkwardness. They can end up being English that is harder to read and harder to understand. The more "dynamic equivalent" translation, on the other hand, can run the risk of losing a bit of the original meaning.

Here is a small example: The NIV is certainly a reliable and accurate translation, but in the Matthew version of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), the NIV translates the response of the first slave (the one entrusted by his master with

five talents) as, "He went at once and *put his money to work* and gained five more" (25:16).

The Greek clause is simply, "He worked with them [i.e., the talents]." But one of my students last year, on fire with the Gospel, read the NIV's dynamic equivalent of "he put his money to work." He paid close attention to this rendering and concluded that the talents in the parable stood for the Gospel itself, since only the Gospel has the power to work in our lives!

It's not that the NIV's dynamic equivalent was a "wrong" translation. But in this case, it opened the door for a misunderstanding that a more formal-equivalent translation (NASB and RSV, "He traded with them") would not have allowed. The idea that in the parable the talents had some power in themselves for working is found only in the dynamic equivalent, and not at all in the Greek words in Matthew 25. And my student, while desiring to engage in close and deep study of the Scriptures, should have been referring to his Greek text! (By the way, he's a great student, and I think he's going to be a fine pastor. I just caught him making one mistake.)

To summarize and repeat, let me say again that all English translations, no matter how "formal" or "dynamic" they *tend* to be, must make choices of how best to state an original Hebrew or Greek meaning in acceptable English. No translation, "strictly speaking," can be consistently literal if it is going to make good sense.

### **'King James Only'?**

When the subject of Bible translations comes up, someone always wants to speak about the King James Version. Let me state clearly that the KJV (as well as the New King James Version) remains an accurate and useful translation, though there is the problem of "old fashioned English" that makes the KJV difficult for modern readers.

Yet, having said this, let me speak to a peculiar idea that circulates in parts of the church, and especially in certain conservative Protestant circles. The idea goes like this: The KJV (and the more recent NKJV) is the English Bible based most closely on the majority of handwritten copies or manuscripts (especially of the New Testament) that have come down to us through the centuries before the advent of modern printing in the 15th century. Therefore, some assert, the KJV is the *only* true and reliable translation--hence the "King James Only" concept.

These "King James Only" advocates also at times assert that the manuscripts on which more recent Bible translations chiefly rely, while far older and therefore closer to the time of the New Testament, are affected by "heretical" tendencies and should not be trusted. Even more radical is the claim set forth by some that there is a modern New Age "conspiracy" afoot to foist "heretical" translations upon unsuspecting English-speaking Christians. What is one to make of such assertions?

James R. White, in his article "Is Your Modern Translation Corrupt?" (*Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1996), offers an excellent, readable response that shows the half-truths and exaggerations in the claims of the "King James Only" crowd. White points out that the King James Version of 1611 was based upon the best Greek (and Hebrew) manuscripts available at the time--but that even these manuscripts varied from one another at different points!

Thus, White comments, "the King James Version is just as much a result of this process of study and examination [of differing textual readings] as any modern text, and those who assert that it is somehow above such 'human' activities are simply ignoring the facts of history."

White's point is well taken. All handwritten manuscripts of the Bible have many (usually) minor variations from one another, and the task of scholars has always been to sort through the various readings to discover which are most original, and to use the best manuscripts available.

In this work (known as "textual criticism"), several common-sense rules or "canons" have emerged, and virtually all Biblical scholars (including our own Missouri Synod scholars) work with the same rules.

I'll mention just two such guidelines. First, older manuscripts are simply much closer to the actual historical events recounted in Scripture, and therefore should receive more weight. The King James Version, as noted above, is based upon manuscripts *much farther away* from the time when the original human authors of Scripture wrote under God's inspiration.

Second, it is well known that Christian scribes throughout the centuries have tended to "help out" the Biblical text (whether consciously or not) by supplying phrases and words that make an orthodox and Christian teaching "more clear." So, when older manuscripts lack an especially "Christian" phrase, and more recent copies have it, the natural and common-sense conclusion is that the shorter reading is the original one. It is much more likely that well-meaning copyists would have added clarifying words than omit them.

Does all this mean that the King James Version is to be rejected? Not at all. But it does mean that there will be times when an English reader should compare the KJV or NKJV with a more modern, formal-equivalent translation (such as the NASB). Modern translators simply have older and better manuscripts at their disposal, and the KJV contains phrases and verses that are not originally part of the Biblical text.

Let me make one further comment about this whole matter of different manuscript readings, and the need to decide carefully and prayerfully which readings are to be preferred. The simple truth is that the vast majority of such "differences" involve little words that do not change the meaning of the Biblical text in the slightest. A typical variant reading found often in manuscripts of the Gospels, for instance, is the difference between "*the disciples*" and "*his disciples*." Slightly different readings; no difference in meaning. Moreover, in no

case is any doctrine of the Christian faith affected by any of these variant readings.

### **What about "inclusive language"?**

One of the "hottest" issues in Bible translation is the question of "inclusive language," and at times the debate definitely generates more heat than light. It is important, however, to note the difference between using "inclusive language" to refer to God, and using such language to refer to human beings.

First, the more radical position argues that the language of Holy Scripture is hopelessly bogged down in the culture and time in which it was written. One aspect of the Biblical times and places is the presence of "patriarchy"--values and rules that give a position of prominence and authority to men over against women.

Many modern scholars, influenced by the ideals of feminism and our egalitarian American society, reject such norms and values. More radically, they go so far as to reject any use of language that refers to God or any of the Persons of the Holy Trinity exclusively or even predominantly with "masculine" language. Thus, in their view, God should not be referred to as "Father," but as "Parent"; not "King," but "Monarch." Jesus, in turn, should not be called God's "Son," but God's "Child." *An Inclusive-Language Dictionary* used in some churches today translates John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Child, that whoever believes in that Child shall not perish but have eternal life." Such views do not deny that the Hebrew and Greek terms actually means "father," "king" or "son." These views simply reject all use of "patriarchal" language, no matter what an accurate translation might be.

Rather than offer any extensive analysis of this radical and unacceptable view, let me simply refer to the February 1998 document issued by the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations, [\*Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language\*](#).

This document is tightly argued and carefully written. It provides an excellent rebuttal and refutation of those who want to jettison all "patriarchal" language when speaking of the Triune God or any of the Persons within the Holy Trinity. The CTCR notes, for example, how the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible removes all references to the term "Son of Man" in the Old Testament. The CTCR report is correct: This more radical use of "inclusive language" *for God* must have no place in the Christian church, either as translation or as theology. To cite just one of the conclusions from the CTCR document: "The masculine language and imagery which Scriptures use for God is purposeful and therefore must not be neutralized, even to make it more accessible to contemporary interpreters."

But there is a second way of speaking about this matter of "inclusive language." What about language that refers to human beings? *Christianity Today* (June 1997) reported on the hue and cry from American and British evangelicals over a plan to make the NIV a more "gender-accurate" Bible. Charges and counter-charges filled the air, and soon the plan was dropped. We would not minimize the issues involved. But it should also be said that the proposed changes in the NIV were directed at language that referred to human beings, and not to God.

The problem is one of modern English usage. No one would doubt that a generation or two ago, the common and accepted ways that English referred to "humans in general" were the terms "man" and "mankind"; these words had a general, generic meaning as well as more specific reference to *males*. But English, like any living language, changes over time. The question is this: When Hebrew and Greek use their own general, generic terms to refer to human beings, should English translation consistently use terms like "humanity," "person," and "people" rather than "mankind" and "man"? Has the *English language* changed enough to warrant this change in translation of Greek and Hebrew terms? Caution is certainly in order here, for some inclusive-language versions (such as the NRSV) systematically and pervasively use, for example,

plural pronouns in place of gender-specific pronouns (such as "their" instead of "his"), which are in the original text.

Now, to state the issue this briefly is to severely oversimplify, and I am well aware of that. But let me once again refer to the excellent CTCR document regarding the use of inclusive language for human beings. There are several conclusions involved, but the document does recognize rightly that there will be times when more "inclusive" English language for human beings is certainly both faithful to the Bible's language and meaning and accurate for modern English readers.

### **Did I accomplish my goals? You decide!**

If you remember, I earlier referred to two goals that I had in writing about such an important and complex subject as Bible translations. Now I can tell you what the goals were. The first was that you, the reader, would be interested and motivated to continue your own close, careful reading of God's Word, the Bible! This is where we learn of what Christ has done for us, and all of what that means! In God's Word there is power and comfort and truth and guidance! It is worth all the joyful, disciplined effort we can offer to read, learn and rejoice in the doctrines and truths of Holy Scripture. That's the first goal.

The second goal is this: that you, the reader, would treasure your pastor as an irreplaceable and essential resource for understanding Holy Scripture! At times the study of Holy Scripture is a complex business. There are times when no English translation can communicate all of what God's Word intends to say. I want you to be grateful to God for your pastor and to run to your pastor with your questions about Holy Scripture. This is why our Missouri Synod seminary training emphasizes the pastor's use of the Biblical languages. And I can tell you from my own experience in parish ministry: No words bring more joy to a pastor's heart than these from one of his members: "You know, Pastor, I was reading my Bible the other day, and I had a question. . . ."