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Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, September 27, 2009

What 'Translation' Should I Use?

The best "study Bible" is the Bible that you actually, faithfully study every day. And when you stand before God, the best "translation" of the Bible will prove to be the one that you faithfully translate into practical obedience in everyday life.

After having dealt with the history of the translation of the Bible up to the English translation of the King James Bible, we come to a very practical question. There have been scores of Bible translations that have been produced since the King James--but how do you pick from all of them which is the best one for you?

First of all, you need to know that the fact that there are all of the various translations isn't really a bad thing. In fact, it's a positive blessing. The variety of translations makes it easy to compare the different translations of a single passage of Scripture and gain a better understanding of the meaning of that passage through the comparison. That puts us at a great advantage over English speaking Christians who lived just a few centuries ago for whom there were very few translations--or no translation at all! (Let's be sure to count our blessings!)

Second, you need to know that--with very, very few exceptions--the many translations we have today are good and reliable ones. They are based on sound scholarship, reliable textual support, and can be trusted to accurately represent the original language of God's word to us. God's hand has been very providential in providing and protecting His word for His people. You can't really go wrong.

But to help you think through which translation may be best for you, here are four basic things to consider when choosing a translation:

I. THE TRANSLATION PHILOSOPHY THAT WAS USED.

A. There are different types of English Bibles currently on the market. One type is a "literal" or "formal equivalency" translation (sometimes called a "word-for-word" translation). The translators of these Bibles sought to make a translation from the original Hebrew or Greek into English that followed the wording of the original documents as closely and as literally as possible. The translators of these Bibles recognized that this approach wouldn't necessarily make for the smoothest reading in English; but the priority was to make sure that every word and phrase was translated as accurately and as literally as possible. Some of the most popular and respected of these types of Bibles would be the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the English Standard Version (ESV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New King James Version (NKJV), and the King James Version (KJV).

B. Another type is called a "dynamic equivalency" translation. In these Bibles, the translators didn't seek so much a word-for-word accuracy in their translation, as to accurately capture the broader intention of the original writers. Their translation was meant to reproduce the same sort of experience and understanding in the modern English reader as would have been experienced by the ancient reader of the original Greek or Hebrew text. This means that, in some cases, a literal word-for-word accuracy would need to be sacrificed in order to create a smoother English reading that captures the meaning as a modern reader would understand it. The most popular and respected of these kinds of translations would be the New International Version (NIV), the New Living Translation (NLT), and the Good News Bible (GNB).

C. A third type should be mentioned, which proposes to be a combination of the above two approaches. The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) uses what it calls an "optimal equivalence" philosophy of translation. It begins with an exhaustive analysis of the text at every level. But when a literal translation meets the need, it is used; and when clarity and reliability demand a more "idiomatic

translation”, it takes more of a “dynamic” approach, and the reader is encouraged to read the footnotes where a more literal translation is given.

D. In addition to these, a fourth type of Bible is a "paraphrase". This type of Bible isn't really a "translation"; because it doesn't try to translate its text from the original languages. Instead, a knowledgeable Bible scholar sought to "re-express" what the Bible says in a way that would be meaningful to a modern English reader--sort of like putting it in their own words. These types of Bibles, while very good and helpful to read, are meant mostly for devotional reading, and should not be used for serious study. The most popular of these are The Living Bible (LB), the New Testament in Modern English (by J.B. Phillips), and The Message.

II. THE TEXTUAL SUPPORT THAT STANDS BEHIND IT.

A. This issue has, primarily, to do with the translation of the New Testament. The King James Bible, and the New King James Bible are based on the Byzantine textual tradition (represented in the Textus Receptus and The Majority Text); which most scholars today do not consider to be as reliable as other traditions of the Greek text. The NKJV, however, provides helpful footnotes to tell you what the variations in the text are; and how the variations read in other textual traditions.

B. Most of the other popular translations (NASB, NIV, NLT, ESV, CSB, GNB) are based on the Nestle-Aland 27th Ed./United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament 4th corrected edition; which is a text carefully reconstructed according to sound principles of textual criticism that gives as close a representation of the original text as is possible today.

III. THE AUDIENCE FOR WHICH IT WAS INTENDED.

A. The NKJV is written to preserve the forms and style of the KJV for modern readers. The NASB, RSV and ESV are a part of this tradition as well; but are based on a more reliable text and a more modern style. These are Bibles best suited for fluently English-speaking people who wish to study the word deeply.

B. The NIV is a Bible that is translated by an international translation committee; and is intended for English-speaking people around the world. It is, in fact, one of the most popular Bible among English-speaking people today.

C. The NLT is written for people who are most familiar with the Living Bible; but is a translation rather than a paraphrase, and that seeks to retain the style of the Living Bible.

D. The GNB is a translation; but it was written with an intentionally limited English vocabulary in order to meet the needs of people around the world for whom English is a second language. It's a very easy--but very accurate--translation to read. (Similar to this is the Contemporary English Version [or CEV], which was written to serve people with a fifth-grade reading level.)

IV. THE CIRCUMSTANCE IN WHICH YOU WILL USE IT.

A. A "formal equivalency" translation is the best to use for serious, accurate personal study. But a "dynamic equivalency" translation may prove easier to read for someone that is new at reading the Bible or for whom English is a second language. A “paraphrase” is best used as a “commentary” on a particular passage.

B. It helps to think of the version that will make it easiest to study with other people in church. It's helpful to have a variety of translations to study from in discussion groups; because the differences provide a wider sense of the possible interpretations. But it can become a real distraction if the version you're using is different from the one that's being publically read from, or that's being used in a sermon.

C. Almost all of the translations mentioned above have been published as excellent "Study Bibles"--that is, with helpful notes, maps, charts, and explanations that aid your understanding of what the Bible says. Sometimes, the choice of translation depends on what sort of Study Bible uses that translation.