

A Little About Bible Translations

For centuries the Scriptures have appeared in numerous translations in various languages. The earliest editions of the Bible in the English language go as far back as the late 14th Century with the work of the English Reformer, John Wycliffe. But it was not until 1611 that the most noted of all English translations appeared in the form of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. Since its early seventeenth century appearing, it has undergone numerous updates, making it more readable.

Other translations that subsequently appeared include the English Revised Version, released in the 1880s. In 1901 a similar translation was produced in the United States called the American Standard Version (ASV). A revision of the ASV appeared in 1971 with the production of the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Two years later the New International Version appeared.

Then in 1982 the KJV received a modernized revision in the form of the New King James Version (NKJV). The general format and flow of the old KJV was preserved, but some of the more archaic terms were replaced with more modern vocabulary. In 1995, the NASB was updated. Then in 2001 the English Standard Version (ESV) was released.

With all these versions to choose from, the biggest question must be, "Which translation is the best?" This question is not as easily answered as one might think. The reason for this is due to opposing philosophies in translating texts of the Bible. These philosophies are represented in two main methods in translating from the original language; one is Dynamic Equivalence, and the other is Formal Equivalence.

Dynamic or "Functional" Equivalence is utilized when more emphasis is given in translating the **meaning of a word** than simply translating the text **word for word**. The problem with this method of translating Bible text is that much is left in the hands of the translator to determine the meaning that the original language was meant to convey. In application this approach may call for use of more than one word, even a phrase to convey the meaning of the original word. This approach is most dangerous because it lends to the probability of the English text teaching things God never intended. Examples of this approach to translating are found in the New International Version (NIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT). Though very readable and easy flowing translations, they often add words not found in the original language to convey the meaning of the original text. Great care should be used in depending on versions utilizing this approach to translating the Bible from the original languages.

The other method, Formal or "Literal" Equivalence, seeks to produce as close as possible, a **word for word** translation of the text. Serious students of the Bible are more inclined to prefer this approach to translating because it gives more exactly in English what is found in the original text. But such an approach does have its drawbacks. For one thing, a more literal translation of the original language makes readability and flow of the text more difficult. In other words,

literal translations tend to be more choppy and harder to read. A good example of a Formal Equivalence translation would be the ASV of 1901. It is a very good word for word type translation, but more difficult to read. For years it has been the preferred English text among scholars. The KJV and NKJV also represent this method of translating, with the added flavor of a more poetic and colorful flow found in classical literature.

One of the best examples of formal equivalence is found in the 2001 edition of the English Standard Version (ESV). Not only did its translators seek to be true to the original text in providing a close word for word translation, but they also chose to use modern language, as much as possible, in translating the original text. In so doing, readability and flow of the text is greatly improved. The ESV has received high praise from sound scholars among churches of Christ throughout the world since its publication. I began reading from the ESV a couple of years ago, and began preaching from it last year. Though, I still enjoy my NKJV and KJV, the ESV is growing rapidly in my estimation as a reliable and valuable study resource for preaching and teaching. I highly recommend it!

—Scott