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# Which Bible Translation Is Best?

Eric Snow, sermonette, 4/30/2010, Ann Arbor, MI, UCG

What is the best translation of the Bible? What specific qualities or characteristics should Christians consider when buying a new translation of the Bible? Is the time-honored King James Version the best overall translation? Which modern Bible translations are good, and which ones are bad?

There are many different factors to consider when buying a new translation of the Bible.

S.P.S. In general, Christians should use multiple translations, especially those that are more literal, with modern language, and/or use the Byzantine text for the New Testament.

The answer depends on the purpose for which you're buying the Bible: Different tools have different purposes. Using the just right tool can make the repair job much easier, as any serious auto mechanic can tell you. Don't use a monkey wrench or ratchet as a hammer. Don't use a nail when a screw is better. The same goes for Bible translations: Be aware of the limitations of the tool you're using. Don't end up pounding in a nail using ½" drive ratchet.

Now, let's zero in on some key points when choosing to buy and read a new Bible translation.

1. What philosophy of translation did the translators use?

Word-for-word (formal equivalence)?  
RSV, KJV, NKJV, ESV Or meaning-

for-meaning (dynamic equivalence)?  
CEV, TEV/GNB? Did they compromise  
between the two? NIV  
Is the “translation” really a paraphrase,  
such as the Living Bible and the  
Message? “Paraphrase and perish.”  
Many years ago, a reprint article by our  
parent organization slammed the LB  
hard, “It is full of imaginative details not  
supported by the biblical text. It cannot  
be relied upon.”

Should figures of speech be literally  
translated?: “Kidney” instead of “heart”  
as center or source of emotions and  
feelings.

Ps. 73:21

KJV: “Thus my heart was grieved, and I  
was pricked in my reins.”

[Open, then read NKJV’s translation]

Two problems here: Obscure English word derived from Latin used in place of modern word for “kidneys,” then it’s also overly literal translation of Hebrew.

Spanish example: “Eye out of face” (“me costó un ojo de la cara”) in place of “cost an arm and leg.” If follow original language’s sentence structure too closely, can result in a wooden, hard-to-read translation. Suppose I translated this Spanish sentence as “It me cost an eye out of the face.” Ironic result: The real meaning can be obscured or covered up when one gets too literal.

Use readable versions for reading Bible, especially the historical parts and the Gospels, such as the CEV or NIV. But use literal translations for studying, especially Paul’s letters, such as the NKJV, KJV, and NASB. The translator’s

doctrinal or liberal bias becomes a bigger problem with less literal translations. Also, a Bible can be more readable, yet slangy and undignified (Message) or more elegant and literary (NIV). Own experience, RSV vs. NIV read aloud.

2. If old fashioned English is hard for you to read, then the KJV should be mainly used for reference and fine doctrinal points. Thou's, thee's, thine's, thy's, -ths, etc., set up an artificial barrier to understanding. The word of God is difficult enough as it is to understand, so why make it worse by using early 17<sup>th</sup> century English? English words change meanings over centuries. "prevent" and "fetch a compass."

Luke 18:16

KJV: “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.”

[Open NKJV, read aloud] Obviously, Jesus didn’t want these children to endure pain when they came to Him!

Own experience when reading bilingual Spanish/English Bible, and I used the Spanish to clarify the English once or twice! (KJV and Reina Valera)

Don’t give KJV to children or grandchildren if one expects them to read it on their own. 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level vs. New Century Version’s 3<sup>rd</sup>, NKJV’s 7<sup>th</sup>.

3. Use a Bible that has the Received/Byzantine Text for the New Testament, not the Critical/Westcott-Hort text.

KJV/NKJV are nearly the only Bibles that use the Received text. Almost all others use some variation of the Critical text.

The two oldest main manuscripts of the New Testament are of the Critical text type and are from the fourth century. But early Catholic writers quoted from the Byzantine/Received text type centuries earlier. Also 80%-90% of all Bibles have this text type, and they are much more consistent with fewer textual variations.

Mark 1:1-3

If “Isaiah” appears in your translation, that’s an error from the Critical text type, since “the prophets” is more accurate, and is from the Received Text. The first quote is from Malachi, not Isaiah!

Conclusion: For me, overall best is NKJV: It's literal, it avoids archaic language, and it uses the Received Text. But no one translation is perfect. Buy and use different Bible translations for different purposes. Be aware of their limitations. Don't use the wrong one for the wrong situation. Don't end up using a hammer to pound in a screw!

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