

Too Many to Choose from? The English Bible Translation Controversy

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Abstract

There are too many English translations in existence, but the church need not limit herself to just one. Five or six translations would all be appropriate for the church to use, either for worship or individual use. This article examines four preliminary issues: the New Testament text-critical issues underlying various translations, the various translation philosophies, the literary characteristics of good English, and gender inclusivity in translation. Then follows an examination of various translations, with an eye towards churchly and individual use.

I. *Preliminary Issues*

The text-critical issue can be rather simply stated: does the translation in question follow the *Textus Receptus*/Majority Text, or does it follow the eclectic text tradition of Nestle-Aland? The name *Textus Receptus* means “the received text,” a publication of the Greek New Testament by Stephanus in 1550. The Majority Text differs little from the *Textus Receptus*. It does, however, differ in certain places. The term *Majority Text* refers to a text-critical philosophy that what the majority of the manuscripts say is the original reading. The eclectic text (such as the Nestle-Aland) weighs the value of ancient manuscripts

according to date, relation to other manuscripts, point of origin, and degree of purity. Most modern translations that follow the Nestle-Aland text (which rejects the longer ending of Mark and the pericope of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53–8:11, known as the *pericope adulterae*) will still print a translation of those two texts and enclose the passages with double brackets and a note explaining that some early manuscripts do not include the passages. While the differences between the competing underlying texts are significant, they do not rise to the level of challenging any major doctrine that is established from Scripture.¹ Furthermore, the practice of modern versions in including the longer ending of Mark and the *pericope adulterae* in brackets minimizes the differences still more. Twisting the words of Scripture by means of mistranslation does far more harm to God’s Word than choosing either the *Textus Receptus* or Nestle-Aland as a textual basis.²

The second preliminary topic is translation philosophy. There are four discernibly different translation philosophies on offer, if it is desirable to categorize (formal equivalence, loose formal equivalence or essentially literal, dynamic equivalence, and optimal equivalence). Formal equivalence means “word for word.” A word in the source language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, in the case of the Bible) is matched with the nearest equivalent in the target language (English in this case). This translation philosophy depends almost entirely on the idea that meaning is focused on the level of the individual word. The virtue of this philosophy is that such translations can achieve great transparency to the source language. The deficiency is that if it is not done well, it can result in stilted English. Also, idiomatic expressions can suffer greatly in this kind of translation philosophy. The most extreme examples of such biblical translations are the New American Standard Bible and the American Standard Version.

¹ See Moisés Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture, in Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 270–73; and John Skilton, “The Transmission of the Scriptures,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 137–87, esp. 154–57.

² Excellent discussions of the text-critical issues between the two abound. See Dean John William Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (Collingswood, NJ: Dean Burgon Society Press Reprint, 2000); D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 15–78; Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 111–18; Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 227–38; James White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 149–91, 251–71.

The second kind of translation philosophy is a more relaxed formal equivalence, an essentially literal approach. This philosophy is very similar to the formal equivalence, except that it pays more attention to the existence of idiomatic expressions that might not translate as well from source to target language. If an idiomatic expression is present, the essentially literal approach will abandon literalness in favor of getting the meaning of the phrase across. Many translations fall into this category, including the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New King James Version, and the English Standard Version (ESV).

The third translation philosophy is dynamic equivalence. Often called “thought-for-thought,” this translation philosophy holds that the focus of meaning is at the phrase level, and not so much at the word level. This philosophy gained near-supremacy in translations after the work of Eugene Nida³ and has to some extent influenced almost every translation that emerged after his work. The strengths of this philosophy are considerable: it recognizes more than any other that the context determines what a word means and that words only have meaning in context. It has several weaknesses, however. Firstly, it tends to downplay that individual words can have specific referents. If the word is “propitiation,” then it should be translated “propitiation,” not “satisfaction,” even if there is some overlap in meaning between the two terms. Secondly, dynamic equivalence quite often eliminates ambiguity in the text. It is usually so focused on gaining a clear meaning from the text that when the text is not as clear, possible interpretations are unnecessarily eliminated.

Optimal equivalence is perhaps the most sophisticated translation philosophy, though it is not obscure.⁴ Optimal equivalence recognizes that every level of the text has something to contribute to the meaning. Words can have meanings (but only in context!), phrases have meaning, clauses have meaning, sentences have meaning, paragraphs have meaning, chapters have meaning, books have meaning, the canon has meaning. All of these levels need to be taken into account in the translation process.⁵ This approach is by far the best translation philosophy. It refuses to jettison the importance of individual words (as the dynamic equivalence philosophy is so prone to

³ Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

⁴ While not officially recognized by scholarship so far as a separate philosophy, it deserves a place at the table.

⁵ The context of the whole canon does not always bear directly on the translation of individual verses. Likewise, the larger levels of context (book, book group, and canon) will often bear only indirectly on the translation of individual passages.

do), without relegating the main weight of meaning to the word level (as the formal equivalence philosophies tend to do). There is a healthy reciprocity between a word and its context(s), and neither level has priority, but rather mutually informs each other. The optimal equivalence model has only been articulated recently, and mostly in response to the excesses of both formal and dynamic equivalence.⁶ The Holman Christian Standard Bible and its major revision, the Christian Standard Bible, are the only two translations that explicitly adopt this philosophy—indeed, the nomenclature was coined by these translators.

The third issue is the literary quality of good English. Many different opinions exist as to the proper kind of English that should characterize a translation of the Bible. Should the Bible be a high literary work, similar to Shakespeare? Should the Bible speak in everyday language? Should there be a mixture of these ideas? The Bible consists of many different kinds of literature. History, poetry, instruction, letter, sermon, apocalyptic, and various subsets of these are prominent in Scripture. Some of these genres have a higher literary style than others. For example, poetry is perhaps the highest literary genre of all. Letters, however, are written in much less formal language, more everyday language. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to make the letters of Paul seem a bit less formal than the Psalms. History writing is somewhere in between, with differences even between various history writers in the Bible. Luke's Greek style, for instance, is more formal Greek than John's more Hebraic style. It would seem appropriate, then, to match the literary style of the source language to the target language.

The fourth issue is the modern gender-inclusivity debate.⁷ Although the New Revised Standard Version (published in 1989) had thoroughly rewritten the Bible in order to cater to modern opinions on gender inclusivity, the debate only really got heated in evangelical circles when Zondervan decided to revise the New International Version along gender-inclusive lines (late 1990s and early 2000s).⁸ The gender-neutral New International Version (Today's New International Version) was published in 2005, and after 2012, Zondervan would not allow anyone else to use the original 1984 version. What is particularly problematic is that the New International Version (NIV) was republished in 2011 without any indication of it being a new edition, and yet it is only a slight modification of the gender-neutral version,

⁶ See the introduction to the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

⁷ The definitive work on the subject is Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

⁸ For an excellent history of the controversy, see *ibid.*, 13–35.

not a republication of the original 1984 version. Christians buying an NIV today, then, are not obtaining the original version but rather a modern gender-inclusive one.

This chain of events initially caused a rather large backlash against the NIV, with many churches changing to the ESV or some other translation. The claims of Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem concerning gender-inclusivity are well worth pondering. Will the church bow to the secular feminists and change the teaching of the Bible? If, however, supposedly patriarchal language is no longer acceptable, then why was it acceptable before in the process of God's inspiration of the text? Poythress and Grudem admit that some changes are worthwhile. If, for instance, the plural Greek *anthropoi* ("humans") refers to both men and women in context, there should be no objection to translating the noun as "humans" or "people." Generic "men" is accurate as well. As is well known, however, gender-inclusive translations do not stop with these kinds of changes. They object to generic "he," which creates all sorts of problems. The only useful substitutes are the pedantic "one" or the distorting "they." Changing singulars into plurals does not clarify the meaning of the original. Furthermore, as Poythress and Grudem note, only the generic references to males are changed in the Bible, never the generic references to females.⁹ This betrays a prejudice against maleness that has nothing to do with accuracy in Bible translation. While some of the translations surveyed below will be gender-inclusive, none of the translations making the final cut will be.

To prove that there are too many English translations is straightforward, once it is remembered that English is not the only language spoken in the world today. Why should Christians pay for so many new English translations when so many of the world's languages do not have a Bible at all? The answer, of course, is money. There is a market for English-language Bibles that dwarfs most other languages. However, the church has a duty according to the Great Commission to bring the Bible to every tongue, nation, and language. Indeed, since God speaks in human language in the Bible, the church should make sure that God speaks in every human language.

The proliferation of English translations has had an exceedingly negative effect: the English-speaking world no longer has a united scriptural consciousness. People cannot allude to Scripture in subtle ways and know that the recipients will catch the allusion. Furthermore, the differences in translations are fuel for the postmodern claim that no one has access to the truth and that everything is simply a matter of one's own interpretation. The

⁹ See *ibid.*, 108–9, adducing Psalm 113:7; Matthew 25:1–13; Luke 13:20–21; 15:8–10 as examples of passages that refer to women but certainly have application to men as well.

postmodern can say, “You have your Bible, and I have mine.” It hurts the unity of the church, as even within denominations different churches will use different translations, and confusion often results.

This argument must be nuanced. New English translations should not stop altogether for the following two reasons. Firstly, the English language does change over time. Secondly, new English translations can be quite useful to those who are translating the Bible into foreign languages, if that translator knows English well.

Limiting the number of translations in this survey is necessary. Many worthy efforts by single authors will not come into view. Only candidates for being a church Bible will come into consideration. These would be translations that were made over time by a committee and that have some influence today.

II. Survey of Translations

1. King James Version

Undoubtedly, the King James Version (1611) is the most influential English translation of all time.¹⁰ It held sway over most of the entire English-speaking world from 1611 until the Revised Version of 1885 (slightly altered and published in America as the American Standard Version). However, many churches did not switch over to these revisions due to the objections raised against them.¹¹ Many churches and individuals continue to read the King James as their primary Bible. It was still the second-best-selling translation in 2016, and the fourth-best-selling translation in 2017.¹²

The textual basis for the King James New Testament is the *Textus Receptus*. This delights some people and not others. The stance taken here is that both the *Textus Receptus* and the Nestle-Aland can be called the Word of God, as can the Majority Text. Nevertheless, there are places where the King James Version follows the *Textus Receptus* where it should not.¹³

¹⁰ Many histories detail the process by which it came about. The most accessible is Leland Ryken’s excellent volume, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years of the Most Influential Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). More scholarly and detailed is David Norton, *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). However, the definitive history of English translations as a whole must be David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), who spends 73 pages detailing the origin and influence of the King James Bible.

¹¹ Burgon was probably the most vocal critic of the RV, but he was by no means the only one.

¹² According to the following websites: for 2016, <http://blog.rose-publishing.com/2016/09/10/top-bible-translations-2016/#.Wh9JGkqnGM8>; for 2017, <http://christianbookexpo.com/bestseller/translations.php?id=1117>.

¹³ For a good list and evaluation, see Jack Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 41–44. The sections on

The translation philosophy of the King James has been variously assessed. On a spectrum, it lies somewhere between loose formal equivalency and optimal equivalency. There is a freedom of rendering that is not slavishly devoted to having only one English word translate one biblical-language word, as there is a recognition by the translators that good English will employ the riches of the English language.

The literary quality of the King James Version sets it apart from all other translations. It is famous for its rhythm, its cadence, its majesty, its force of expression, its memorable turn of phrase, and many other admirable literary qualities. The exceptions to this good literary style are twofold. Firstly, it uses the word “and” to start way too many verses and sentences. The English conjunction “and” is meant to connect two thoughts or two items in a list. The Hebrew *waw* consecutive does not have this specific connective property. Usually, a *wayyiqtol* only has as its purpose a continuation of the narrative. Printing verses in paragraphs, or using “so” or “then,” is quite an adequate translation of *wayyiqtol*. Similarly, the Greek *de* and *kai* are, most of the time, simply not as strong a connective as English “and.” Any English textbook will explain why it is not good English style to begin sentences with conjunctions on a regular basis. Unfortunately, this problem plagues the revisions that follow the King James, including the Revised Version/American Standard Version, Revised Standard Version (though reduced), New King James Version, and ESV. (The New Revision Standard Version, for all its other serious faults, does much better on this particular score, though it is unacceptable on other grounds.) This problem can be alleviated by simply omitting the “ands” during public reading.

The second stylistic problem is the archaic forms of expression. Of course, they were not archaic in 1611. However, these have led to a misinterpretation of the King James style as a whole. When the King James translators were at work, they used the standard English of 1611, not a high style. It was normal English. There is a noticeable leap into a higher style going from the King James to Shakespeare. A comparison between the two reveals that the King James is far simpler. Although literary, it was written in the spoken English of 1611.

The King James Bible, whatever its faults, is still one of the very best translations of the Bible ever made in any language, and deserves remembrance and honor. Certainly, churches should still consider using it as their translation, especially if the majority of the people in a given church are of

mistranslations (44–48) and archaisms (48–61) are also worthy of consideration, though some of his conclusions are questionable.

an older generation. However, this recommendation does not imply endorsement of the various King-James-Onlyisms.¹⁴

2. Revised Version/American Standard Version

As the American Standard Version (1901) can be considered an American version of the Revised Version (1881–1885), they will be treated together.¹⁵ The textual basis for both versions in the New Testament was the newly released Greek edition by Westcott and Hort. While many regarded their text as an improvement over the *Textus Receptus*, some resisted its influence. Westcott and Hort were far too slavishly devoted to the two fourth-century codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and significant refinements to their methods have occurred.

The translation philosophy of the Revised Version and the American Standard Version is formal equivalence, and these versions employ periphrastic translation far more rarely than does the King James. As such, the Revised and the American Standard Version represent a step towards more literalness, not less. This is evident in that far fewer English words translate the same Greek or Hebrew word than in the King James Version: a gain in consistency, but a loss in artistic expression. The verdict of Charles Spurgeon sums it up very well: “Strong in Greek, but weak in English.”¹⁶ F. F. Bruce notes a helpful distinction in translation philosophy between the Cambridge and Oxford schools at the time, saying that Oxford was noted for a more periphrastic translation philosophy that aimed for the sense without slavish adherence to formal equivalence, whereas Cambridge was famous for its literalness. The Cambridge mindset characterized the Revised Version.¹⁷ The Old Testament translation of the revisions is quite different from that of the New Testament; it offers an advance on the King James in accuracy, given improvements in understanding of Semitic languages in general, and Hebrew more particularly, without as much of the blockish school-boy feel of the New Testament.¹⁸

¹⁴ See Carson, *The King James Version Debate*, and White, *The King James Only Controversy*.

¹⁵ Lewis, *The English Bible From K^{JV} to NIV*, 69. For histories and analyses of the RV/ASV, see Burgon’s, *The Revision Revised*; F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 135–52; Lewis, *The English Bible from K^{JV} to NIV*, 69–105; Bruce Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 99–104; Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 683–700, 735–37; David Dewey, *A User’s Guide to Bible Translations: Making the Most of Different Versions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 135–37.

¹⁶ Cited in Lewis, *The English Bible from K^{JV} to NIV*, 76.

¹⁷ Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 144–47.

3. Revised Standard Version

In the 1930s and 1940s, with advances in knowledge of the languages, as well as manuscript discoveries, it became evident that there was a need for further revision. The Revised Standard Version is not a *de novo* translation, and its textual basis is similar to that of the Revised and American Standard Versions, except that a more eclectic approach is visible in its text-critical decisions. The seventeenth edition of Nestle-Aland is the basis for the New Testament of the Revised Standard Version. The longer ending of Mark and the *pericope adulterae* were put back into the text (they were absent from the previous versions), but with spacing and notes, as most modern translations now do. It is not, however, primarily in the text-critical realm that the main differences arose.

With the Revised Standard Version, the translation philosophy actually went back more to the King James style of translating. The reduction in strict formal equivalency and increase in loose formal equivalency resulted in better English style, but not necessarily more accurate renditions. Isaiah 7:14 and Romans 9:5 are obvious examples here, although Bruce is correct to caution people against accusations that the Isaiah 7:14 passage was altered for ideological reasons, given the clear support of the virgin birth in the New Testament texts.¹⁹ Less defensible is its translation of Romans 9:5, which removes a reference to Jesus as God that is clear in the Greek. The discussions about this revision got heated in evangelical circles, as many people believed that an agenda drove some of these changes.

It is in the literary realm, however, that the most obvious differences with previous translations surface. The Revised Standard Version replaced “thees” and “thous” with simple “you.”²⁰ The “eth” on the ends of verbs became “s.” Archaic forms fell by the wayside in large numbers. This was a truly modern translation in more than one sense: it had some modernistic agendas, but was also a translation seeking to speak to modern man.

The Revised Standard Version sold well and had enormous influence, far greater than the Revised and American Standard Versions. However, because of its agenda, it would never have the impact that the King James had.

4. New English Bible

For the first time in history, a committee-based translation came about not as the result of revising some previous work, but from scratch. The New

¹⁹ Ibid., 198.

²⁰ Of course, this created intelligibility problems, as “you” cannot bear the weight of distinguishing between singular and plural, a fact well documented by Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 189.

English Bible (1970) is a British product. Based on the eclectic principle in the New Testament, it had a similar text basis as the Revised Standard Version. However, in the Old Testament, it made use of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Greek translations of the Hebrew to make many emendations, for which it was criticized.

The translation philosophy of the New English Bible is far more periphrastic than any previous translation. In some places, however, mistranslation greatly affects its quality. It translates Genesis 1:1–2 in such a way as to deny creation *ex nihilo*. Isaiah 7:14 translates as “A young woman is with child.” (For any translation, incidentally, that does not use the word “virgin,” how is it that this could possibly be a sign?) Romans 9:5 is mistranslated as well. There seems to be a liberalizing bias to this translation.

The style of the New English Bible, however, is quite beautiful. It is excellent literary English, as many have recognized (and also in its revision, the Revised English Bible). It is mostly modern English, with a few “thees” and “thous” when the text addresses God.

Some of the shortcomings of this translation were altered in the Revised English Bible. Genesis 1:1, for instance, reads in the more traditional way, though Romans 9:5 is still mistranslated, and Isaiah 7:14 is still problematic. It removed the “thees” and “thous” and reduced the number of conjectural emendations on the basis of the Septuagint.²¹ It introduced some gender-inclusive language. As paraphrases go, however, it has a high reputation.

5. New American Standard Bible

The New American Standard Bible (and its update in 1995) offers a translation based on the Masoretic Text in the Old Testament (rejecting all emendations) and the Nestle-Aland text in the New Testament. The work came about as conservatives wanted an update to the American Standard Version that did not liberalize the text as the Revised Standard Version had done.

The translation philosophy is extremely literal, to the point of woodenness in places. There is a recognition of idioms, but probably not as many as should be recognized. For instance, the rendering of Paul’s famous denial *mē genoito* as “may it never be” is an overly literal translation that fails to convey the force of the expression. Closer is something like “Perish the thought!” or the New English Translation/Christian Standard Bible rendering “Absolutely not!”

²¹ See Dewey, *A User’s Guide to Bible Translations*, 169.

Its literary qualities are marred to a significant extent by this overly literal translation philosophy. Here it becomes obvious how much a translation philosophy affects the literary outcome. The ideal is to have good English render the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek accurately. However, as in the other King James-related translations/revisions, the New American Standard Bible uses the English “and” far too much in rendering Hebrew *waw* and Greek *de* and *kai*.

The New American Standard Bible is free (and remains free) of gender-inclusive translation practices, even in the 1995 update. While it is not ideal in many ways, it remains one of the most trusted translations and one remarkably free from bias. It is therefore one of the five recommended English translations for churches.

6. New International Version

The NIV (original version 1984) is based for the New Testament on the Nestle-Aland tradition of manuscripts and is a mostly “thought for thought” or dynamic equivalence translation. It was the first translation that could significantly challenge the King James for first place in the hearts of English-speaking Christians. The combination of readability, decent English, relatively accurate renderings with no gender-inclusivity (at first), and smooth transitions made it very popular and still make it one of the best private reading Bibles on the market. However, it is less suitable for public preaching and teaching, as it makes too many decisions for the preacher. One of the worst instances occurs in John 11:5–6, which should read something like: “Jesus loved Martha, her sister and Lazarus. Therefore, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days.” The NIV, however, reads “Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick ...” The original Greek is quite clear: Jesus’s love for Lazarus’s family was the *cause* of his delay in returning, so that they would see his glory in raising Lazarus from the dead. The NIV’s translation, however, makes the cause of Jesus’s delay to be some unknown thing that obviously *over-rode* his love for the Lazarus family.

The history of the NIV is fraught with somewhat underhanded tactics by Zondervan.²² Just the most obvious is that a revised, gender-inclusive NIV is now published today without any markers telling the public that it is a revised version. Indeed, the original 1984 NIV is no longer published by Zondervan at all.²³

²² For a detailed history, see Poythress and Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 13–34.

²³ Robert Martin, *Accuracy of Translation and the New International Version* (Carlisle, PA:

7. *New King James Version*

Some conservatives were unhappy with the way the King James Bible had been revised through the Revised and American Standard Versions-Revised Standard Version chain. These had not given them what they really wanted: an updating of the King James that sought to retain its good qualities while updating the archaic forms of speech. Furthermore, they did not like the textual swing away from the received text. By contrast, the textual basis of the New Testament of the New King James Version (1982) is the same *Textus Receptus* upon which the King James was based, with one rather major exception: the editors decided to make marginal notes where the Nestle-Aland differed from the received text.

The translation philosophy is the same as that of the King James, somewhat less literal than the Revised and American Standard Versions, but a bit more literal than the Revised Standard Version. The editors themselves call it a “complete equivalence.” The term seems to mean to convey as much of the original as possible. However, there is no definition of what that means, at least not in the preface to the New King James Version. It contains no trace of liberal or feminist bias, and traditional theological terms remain.

Some have criticized this translation for not revising the style of language enough.²⁴ However, all the most obvious archaisms were removed, such as “thees” and “thous,” “eths” on the ends of verbs, and words changed out that no longer mean what they used to mean (such as changing “prevent” to “awake” in Psalm 119:148). As with all the other King James-genetics translations, however, the problem with “and” persists.

Overall, the translation must be judged a success. For anyone who grew up on the King James Bible, the New King James Version is not a shock. It is recommended as one of the best translations available for personal and public, liturgical use.

8. *New Revised Standard Bible*

A revision of the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version (1989–1990) is a loosely formal equivalent translation that updates

Banner of Truth Trust, 1989) is a thoughtful critique of various aspects of the NIV’s translation technique. He argues that dynamic equivalence violates the doctrine of plenary inspiration (68–69). While I share many of his critiques, I do not share his opinion on dynamic equivalence, since all translations are a paraphrase to a certain extent.

²⁴ See, e.g., Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV*, 350. Lewis quotes several writers to the effect that the New King James Version does not really match the English of any age. That may be strictly true. However, revising the King James Version while still being able to keep “King James” in the title of the translation was going to result in precisely that outcome anyway. The aim was to keep of the King James language what they could, and the result is quite readable.

the language to modern English, removes most gender-specific references—it was the first attempt at a gender-inclusive translation—and displays clear liberalizing tendencies. The textual basis in the New Testament is the Nestle-Aland text.

Its translation philosophy is “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.”²⁵ However, it has a firmly left-leaning tendency, as can be seen in the following litmus test passages. In Genesis 1, the translation denies creation *ex nihilo*. In Isaiah 7:14, the wording is “young woman” instead of “virgin.” Romans 9:5’s translation obscures a clear reference to the deity of Christ. Furthermore, the whole book of Proverbs is addressed to the father’s “child” instead of “son,” thus obscuring the references to Lady Wisdom as being a desirable “woman” to pursue.

It has become the standard scholarly translation for mainline scholars, as well as the standard Bible for mainline denominations. Its gender-inclusivity has resulted in distortions of the biblical text. Due to its thoroughgoing rejection of generic “he,” the New Revised Standard Version pluralizes texts that need to be singular in order to point out the individual relationships that God has with people.²⁶ This translation cannot be recommended for church or private use.

9. *New Living Translation*

Unlike the first Living Bible, which was a paraphrase of a translation, not a translation of the original languages, the New Living Translation (1996) is a translation of the original languages done by a committee. Its New Testament textual basis is Nestle-Aland.

The translation philosophy of the New Living Translation is a fairly thoroughgoing dynamic equivalence, going beyond the NIV in its embrace of dynamic equivalence. However, there does not seem to be much in the way of liberal bias. Genesis 1:1 affirms creation *ex nihilo*, Isaiah 7:14 translates ‘*almah*’ as “virgin,” and Romans 9:5 very clearly affirms the deity of Christ.

There is a moderate amount of gender-inclusive language. However, it is mostly limited to removal of generic “he.” John 14:23 demonstrates (as with the New Revised Standard Version) the problems of substituting plurals for singulars. Pronouns referring to God are still male. In general, the translation is one of the best dynamic equivalent productions. However, it cannot be recommended as a church’s first choice, for two reasons. Firstly, even

²⁵ Rhodes, *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations*, 119.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 124, citing John 14:23 as an example.

the moderate gender-inclusive language will be harmful. Secondly, as with all dynamic equivalent translations, too many decisions are made for the preacher, and on too many occasions, he would have to correct the translation.

10. English Standard Version

Evangelicals wanted an update of the Revised Standard Version that was not liberal like the New Revised Standard Version. Crossway therefore published the ESV in 2001. The textual basis for the New Testament is the Nestle-Aland.

The translation philosophy is formal equivalence that seeks to acknowledge the presence of idioms and to achieve a less wooden feel than the New American Standard Bible, while being more literal than the NIV. There is certainly no liberal bias whatsoever in the ESV, which passes the three-passages “litmus test” with flying colors.

The main problem with the ESV is its literary style. It is even more incessant in translating Hebrew *waw* with “and” than the King James was. As an example, one can point to the infelicitous repetition of “and” in Deuteronomy 5:18–21, a repetition that the Revised Standard Version did not have, as it translated the *waw* with the far better “neither.” This is poor English.

Two of the three best study Bibles on the market are ESV (the *ESV Study Bible* and the second edition of the *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, which is called simply *The Reformation Study Bible*). Crossway has made the ESV available in an almost bewildering variety of bindings. It has steadily gained on the NIV in popularity, and now that the NIV has ceased being published in its original form, more and more conservative churches are switching to the ESV.

The ESV can still be recommended as one of the very best translations available, though with its literary faults kept in mind. One can read it aloud while skipping the “ands.”

11. Holman Christian Standard Bible/Christian Standard Bible

Out of the furor arising from the gender-inclusive debates swirling around the NIV, conservative Baptists desired to make a completely new accurate and readable translation, the Holman Christian Standard Bible. The textual basis for the New Testament is Nestle-Aland. There is no liberal bias in Genesis 1, Isaiah 7:14, or Romans 9:5. It was published in 2003, and the major revision, the Christian Standard Bible, came out in 2017.

The translation philosophy is the newly coined term “optimal equivalence.” This translation philosophy states that there is meaning on every level of the text, all of which must be taken into account. This is very similar to “complete equivalence,” except that “optimal equivalence” makes more of a point of delineating the various levels on which the meaning resides, whereas “complete equivalence” is more of a general term embracing the idea that everything in the original ought to transfer to the translation. In practice, there is probably little difference, except that these two new translations tend to have better English than the various revisions of the King James. For instance, the Holman Bible does not start nearly as many sentences with “and.” This feature alone is a welcome relief. However, together with the Christian Standard Bible, it does, on occasion, end sentences with a preposition, a practice generally rejected by the English-language scholarly guild.

Both versions are especially to be commended in recognizing the true meaning of John 3:16. The King James accurately translated *houtōs* as “so,” as long as it is understood that “so” means “in this way.” However, many people have wrongly come to the conclusion that “so” is an indication of the extent of God’s love. The New Living Translation, in particular, gets this verse wrong by translating “God loved the world so much” The Christian Standard Bible reading is “For God loved the world in this way”

The Christian Standard Bible is now the single best translation available in balancing accuracy and readability, good English style with as much transference from source to target language. It has, in my opinion, the best translation philosophy. Furthermore, it widened its denominational base in the revision, so it can no longer be called “the Baptist Bible.” (Iain Duguid, a Presbyterian pastor and scholar, was one of the main consultants in the Old Testament revision.) Finally, to churches that desire a switch from the NIV to some other translation, the Christian Standard Bible would be a smoother transition than the ESV.

12. *New English Translation*

The New English Translation shows how translations will most likely be done in the future. The 2005 edition utilized the full resources of the Internet in soliciting feedback for the translation (much of which has been incorporated in various revisions), as well as using the Internet for propagating its text. Its New Testament is based on the Nestle-Aland text and is a dynamic equivalent translation, although less periphrastic than some. It does well on Genesis 1 and Romans 9:5, but fails the test of Isaiah 7:14, translating the text as “young woman.”

It is a fine dynamic equivalent translation, joining with the New Living Translation and the Revised English Bible as the best periphrastic translations available. It does use some gender-inclusive language but is not as intrusive as some. Certainly, its bias comes nowhere near the New Revised Standard Version. In John 14:23, the New English Translation retains the generic use of “he.” Its practice is self-described as “gender accurate” rather than “gender inclusive.”

What sets this translation apart from other translations is the more than sixty thousand translation notes that allow the reader to peek over the translator’s shoulder, as it were, to see the process. Frequently the notes will give a more formal equivalent so that the process of paraphrase is transparent.

This version cannot be recommended for church use, however, as there are numerous translation problems (such as Isaiah 7:14). Besides, as with the other dynamic equivalent translations, too many decisions are made for the preacher.

Conclusion

The five translations that are most highly recommended for use in church are the King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version, the ESV, and the Christian Standard Bible. If the old NIV were still being published, that would make the list as well. All translations have both strengths and weaknesses. The King James Bible has a high literary style and great accuracy of expression. It is not as difficult to read as many suppose. However, its archaic forms of expression can be off-putting to some new believers and visitors. The “ands” are distracting, which are a feature of all the translations that are in the King James genetic line (which includes all of the five recommended translations except the Christian Standard Bible). In addition, the King James has a higher literary style today than it did in 1611. The New American Standard Bible is a highly accurate translation. However, it is so woodenly literal at times that clarity is missing. The New King James Version is one of the best of the five, as it retains much of the majesty of the King James while updating the language into modern idiom and is one of the only modern translations to be based on the received text, which is either a strength or a weakness depending on how one evaluates the textual data. The ESV goes more towards formal equivalence and sacrifices good literary English at times to accomplish that goal. The Christian Standard Bible is highly accurate as well, while being flexible enough in its translation practice to recognize that good English should not be sacrificed on the altar of accuracy.