

Which Bible Translation to Choose?

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As I write this opening letter for this winter edition of *The Unity of the Spirit* I am in the midst of enjoying a winter break from my job of teaching high school history and government at Woods Charter School in Chapel Hill, N.C. I certainly enjoy teaching my subjects at school, and more importantly, working with my students and fellow faculty members. However, it's been nice to have more time to read and study my *favorite* book - the Bible. All my life the Bible has been my primary and unchanging source for spiritual strength, nourishment, and guidance. Indeed, as the Apostle Paul states in II Timothy I have always believed it be "inspired by God":

"But as for you [Timothy] continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed [inspired by God] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (II Tim. 3:11-17 NIV).

When I was a young boy I had no sophisticated doctrine relating to biblical inspiration; instead, I was taught that the Bible was God's word and I read it in that light. My parents taught me this truth, my church taught me this truth, and not unimportantly, it was also generally accepted as true in the culture of the 1950's, 60's and 70's of the American South where I lived. However, for me there was

something far more important than any of these outside factors in convincing me to believe the Bible to be true. Very simply, when I read it for myself it touched the very depths of my own heart and related to me truth that made sense out of the world in which I lived. To put it another way, the Bible had a "ring of truth" to it that is unmatched by any other literature of the world that I have ever read since that time. This is important because no amount of talk "about" the Bible will ever convince anyone of its truth. It must be read and allowed to speak for itself in order to be properly understood and appreciated. It also must be approached with an honest and seeking heart and with the humility, openness, and faith of a child looking to God for guidance as his heavenly Father.

As with most people in the 1960's I began my reading of the Bible with the *King James Version* (KJV or AV, published in 1611 with many revised editions thereafter) and then increasingly used the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV, published in full in 1952 two years before my birth in 1954) since it soon came to be the version that was most used in the Presbyterian Church in which I grew up. The KJV was beautiful and great for memorization, but it was also difficult for me to understand because of its archaic English. The RSV, which was a revision of the KJV, was much easier to understand but lacked some of the beauty of the KJV. Nevertheless, between the two of these versions I was able to read, learn and memorize a great deal of the Bible. As a result, I gained a passion as far back as I can remember for understanding the truth of the Bible – a passion that has never waned in my heart and life.

A great breakthrough in my own understanding of the Bible was the publication around my high school years (early 1970's) of two new versions of the Bible: *Good News For Modern Man* and the *New English Bible*. These two Bibles were modern "free" translations of the Scriptures. That is, instead of translating

primarily “word for word” from the Hebrew and Greek texts, they translated “meaning for meaning.” Since I was taking Spanish at the time it was not difficult for me to understand why this method of translation could enhance understanding for the reader. For example, who amongst us when translating from Spanish to English would ask someone “How many years do you have?” just because this is literally what is said in Spanish? These two versions became my primary texts for reading the Bible throughout my high school years. They were a “God-send” for me in that I could understand *the message* of the Bible so much better with each of these than with either the KJV or the RSV. I devoured these newer versions and have never lost my love for reading and comparing such “free” versions of the Bible with more literal versions because of the insight that these translations can often shed on the meaning of the original text.

Of the major versions that have been published in the last fifty years or so I do not believe that there is any one version that is much better than the others. They each have their strengths and weaknesses but, within a certain range, they are all adequate for being one’s main text for reading. I would normally recommend that someone use a version that is fairly literal as his standard Bible for personal reading, studying, and memorization. Then use other versions for comparison or for special purposes.

Since the mid-1980s I have used the *New International Version* (NIV) as my primary

Bible for reading and memorization while using many others for comparison (NKJV, NRSV, REB, NJB, etc.). Now, however, after the recent publication of the *English Standard Version* (ESV, pub. 2001) and the *Today’s New International Version* (TNIV pub. 2004) I use the ESV, NIV, and TNIV almost equally. Also, an excellent free translation I use and recommend the NLT 2004 edition. All of these are excellent translations with their own strengths and weaknesses. Together they offer a wealth of Biblical understanding immediately available at a believer’s fingertips - literally, because they can now be compared online.

I would suggest that most people should choose a main Bible that “works” for them. Use this as a primary Bible for reading, and then, supplement it with a comparison of other versions. Any of the major versions will do. Then read, read and read the Bible. By doing this you will gain a scope, understanding, and “feel” for the Bible as a whole. Then, the parts of the Bible will fit within that whole. Without doing this, however, a person will always be without a sound basis for understanding the truth of the Bible. Therefore, let us read the Bible. Let us read it and let it speak, for itself, to us. Then we will be able to say with the prophet Jeremiah,

“Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart; for I am called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts.” (Jer. 15:16 KJV).