
The Unity of the Spirit

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"In the Bond of Peace"

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Dear Fellow-believers,

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 though 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. 3:114-17 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).

RichieTemple

The God-Breathed Scriptures

“Inspired by God”

By Richie Temple

The truth of the Bible is self-evident for those who read it with a heartfelt desire to know and live for God. There is a very simple reason for this. As the Bible states and confirms time after time throughout its pages, “all Scripture is God-breathed” or “inspired by God” (II Tim. 3:16). This, however, is not the general view of Western intellectual society today. One example will suffice.

Yesterday’s mail brought to us our weekly edition of *The Economist*, my favorite news magazine on current events and international affairs. It is a British publication that I’ve been reading for over 25 years beginning in my college days when I studied history and international relations. Since it is in good “Oxbridge” style I find it very informative not only about world events, but also about the English language. However, occasionally it veers off into making comments about spiritual and religious matters. When this occurs it usually can be counted on to echo the usual anti-Christian sentiments of Western intellectual skepticism and secularism. Yesterday’s issue was no exception to this rule. It contained the review of a new book entitled *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. The review begins with the following statement,

“This book will strike a cord with anyone who has ever pondered the irrationality of religious faith and its cruel and murderous consequences...”

It then goes on to say in words that typify the entire book that

“The least educated person among us simply knows more about certain matters than anyone did 2000 years ago – and much of this knowledge is incompatible with scripture.”

Such statements, though common enough in intellectual circles, betray a predetermined bias that sees what it wants to see, rather than engaging in a sincere search for truth. Such statements reveal more about the people speaking them than about the Bible itself. My own personal experience would be the exact opposite of this statement because the more I’ve learned and experienced in life, the more I’ve become convinced of the truth of the Scriptures. More importantly, however, such statements also contradict the personal and collective experience of millions of Christians through the centuries – educated and uneducated - who have received comfort, strength and spiritual guidance from the self-evident truth of the “God-breathed Scriptures.”

But what does the Bible mean by the phrase “God-breathed”? Is it to be taken literally as though God literally breathed his word into the scriptures, such as through human agents by means of inspired dictation? Or is it meant to be taken figuratively to simply describe inspiration from God in a more general way as he inspires the biblical writers through his Spirit and guides the process of forming the Bible through his providential care. Here we touch on an important matter in anyone’s search for biblical truth because any close reading of the Scriptures themselves will show that the latter option is the *only* sense in which the Bible can correctly be said to be “God-breathed.” Though the Greek word *theopneustos* can be literally and correctly translated as “God-breathed” as the NIV does in II Tim. 3:16, a comparison of major English Bible translations throughout the centuries will show that translators have always understood this phrase in the less literal sense of “inspired by God” and that this translation best conveys the *meaning* of the phrase. Compare the following:

“*All scripture is inspired by God*”
(Wycliff Bible, the first major English NT translation from Latin, in the year c. 1380-83)

“All scripture is inspired by God”
(William Tyndale, the first major
English NT translation from Greek, in
1525-6)

“All scripture is inspired by God”
(Miles Coverdale, 1535)

“All scripture is inspired by God” (The
Great Bible, 1539)

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of
God” (The King James Version, 1611)

“All scripture is inspired by God”
(Revised Standard Version, 1952)

“All scripture is inspired by God”
(Phillips Modern English, 1957)

“**Every inspired scripture**” (The New
English Bible, 1961, and its revision,
The Revised English Bible, 1989)

“All Scripture is inspired by God” (Today’s
English Version or Good News For Modern
Man, 1966)

“All scripture is inspired by God” (Jerusalem
Bible, 1966, and its revision, the New Jerusalem
Bible, 1985)

“**All Scripture is God-breathed**” (The New
International Version, 1972)

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God”
(New King James Version, 1979)

“All scripture is inspired by God” (The New
Revised Standard Version, 1990)

“**All Scripture is breathed out by God**”
(English Standard Version, 2001)

There is an obvious consistency in these versions over the centuries in translating “inspired by God”, or some close variant, rather than the very literal “God-breathed” (NIV) or “breathed out” (ESV). Though both of the latter translations are literally correct, they can imply something that the Greek word does not actually convey in its New Testament *meaning* and usage. It is especially surprising that the NIV would translate this word so literally given its translation philosophy of placing meaning over form when necessary. For further insight on the

meaning of this word *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* explains the meaning of the Greek word *theopneustos* as follows:

“The adjective *theopneustos* means literally “God-breathed”. It does not imply any particular mode of inspiration, such as some form of divine dictation. Nor does it imply the suspension of the normal cognitive faculties of the human authors. On the other hand, it does imply something quite different from poetic inspiration. It is wrong to omit the divine element from the term implied by theo-, as the NEB [and REB] does in rendering the phrase “every inspired scripture”. The expression clearly does not imply some Scriptures are inspired, whilst others are not. The sacred scriptures are all expressive of the mind of God; but they are so with a view to their practical outworking in life.” [NIDNTT, Vol. 3, p. 491, ed. Colin Brown].

It is, of course, incorrect to think that the Bible must be literal throughout for it to be true throughout. No language or literature anywhere in the world, or at any time in history, works this way. It is simply the nature of language and literature that truth can be conveyed in both a straightforward literal form or in a variety of figurative forms. Given our limitations as human beings, figurative language, which we use throughout every day, is many times the best way to convey truth because it allows us to present truth in a variety of ways that are more vivid and real to people’s experience and understanding than literal language itself. All Scripture is truly “inspired by God” for the Bible is the God-inspired record of God’s words and works, written in history, in the words of men. It is, par excellence, the Book of Books and the one book upon which most of that which is good in our Western heritage was built upon.

Unfortunately, a couple of weeks ago I was reminded of the fact that the Bible no longer forms a basis for a common knowledge, language and source of allusion in the Western world as it once did. While teaching a U.S. history class I remarked concerning a specific incident that “the handwriting was on the wall.” After noticing many blank faces, I asked how many of them understood this expression. The response, from a class of about twenty 10th graders (ages 15 to 16), was one hand being raised. After further inquiries to find out whether my initial assessment was in fact correct I had no choice but to face an all too common conclusion – knowledge of the Bible is on the way out in American and Western culture. Though my disappointment was abated somewhat by the fact that the one person who did know the allusion knew it well enough to explain it to all her fellow students, such occurrences in which knowledge of the Bible is shown to be practically nil amongst a large portion of American youth have become the norm. This, of course, is a great loss not only to the future well being of our society in a spiritual sense but also simply from the point of view of understanding our Western heritage, and for those of us who are Americans, U.S. history itself – a history founded upon and built upon truths found in the Bible.

In fact, no other book in history has had the profound effect on Western society that the Bible has had. Especially, from the Reformation of the 16th century to the mid-20th century the Bible held a unique position as the common fountainhead of truth, wisdom and allusion for all aspects of life for much of the Western world. In his book *From Dawn to Decadence: Five Hundred Years of Western Cultural Life*, Jacques Barzun described this position the Bible once held:

“The Bible was a whole literature, a library. It was an anthology of poetry and short stories. It taught history, biography, biology, geography, philosophy, political science, psychology, hygiene and sociology

(statistical at that), in addition to cosmogony, ethics and theology. What gives the Bible so strong a hold on the minds that once become familiar with its content is its dramatic reporting of human affairs. For all its piety, it presents a worldly panorama, and with particulars so varied that it is hard to think of a domestic or social situation without a biblical example to match and turn to moral ends.” (p. 28).

The Bible, of course, remains this same vast anthology of truth today despite its loss of popularity and familiarity in Western culture. In fact, its truth is self-evident to those who desire to know and live for God. No other literature of the world even comes close to matching it. Though many people in religious, academic and education circles talk about “the religions of the world” or “the scriptures of the world’s major religions” as though Christianity and the Bible were simply “one religion amongst many other equally good religions” or “one set of holy writings from amongst many other equally holy writings”, the truth is that very few of these people have ever actually read any of these other “scriptures”, except perhaps, in a very superficial way. Nor do most of these people have anything more than a very peripheral knowledge of the Bible. This is easy to tell for two simple reasons. First, when you listen to such people talk or read their writings the superficiality becomes immediately apparent. And second, when a person gains a deep knowledge and understanding of the Bible as a whole all other literatures immediately pale in comparison.

The late British biblical scholar F.F. Bruce made this last point very well. Bruce, who was originally educated as a Latin and Greek Classicist before turning strictly to biblical studies, was so highly respected for his knowledge and familiarity with the Bible and other ancient literatures that he at various times held the Presidency of the Society for Old Testament Studies and the Society for New Testament Studies. This is an almost unheard of

honor in such highly specialized fields of study. When writing about the preparatory nature of the Old Testament in its relationship to the New Testament in his book *The Books and Parchments: How We Got our English Bible*, he describes the view of some Hindus on this matter:

“On the other hand, the contrary difficulty is experienced in India, one hears, where the Old Testament is uncongenial to the intellectual heritage of educated Hindus. Hindu thought is abstract, impersonal and static, whereas the Old Testament outlook is concrete, personal and dynamic. The Indian sometimes says the Old Testament reflects a morality and a conception of God, which lower than that of the best Indian religion, and asks why the ancient literature of his own people should not play for him the role of gospel preparation, which the Old Testament plays for others. A cursory comparison of even the earliest and purest literary monuments of Indian religion with the Old Testament may well fill one with surprise that such an idea could ever be entertained; but it certainly has been and still is entertained, and not by Indians only. Perhaps it all depends on what one means by “morality” and “religion.” [p. 71].

As one who teaches World history and who is thus expected to have some familiarity with the literature of the world’s ancient religions I would echo Bruce’s sentiments. I have yet to read any of the world’s ancient “scriptures” apart from the Bible that did not fill me with an abhorrence and distaste for both its religious and moral aspects. For example, this summer I read through the entire *Koran* to prepare myself for the school year. It was a very informative, distasteful and unpleasant experience. That anyone who has read it and is also deeply familiar with the Bible would consider it to be in any way comparable to the Bible would be very surprising to me. It reflects a bizarre religion of bondage, a history of war and oppression and a literature that is full of fables, tales and deceptions. In fact, its style

and subject matter fit in well with the fabricated and obviously unbelievable stories of the so-called New Testament Apocrypha which includes such 2nd to 5th century forgeries as *The Gospel of Peter*, *the Gospel of Philip*, etc. - from which the popular fiction novel *The DaVinci Code* draws its false inspiration.

But this last comment is illustrative. It is often said, “a little knowledge of a subject is a dangerous thing.” This is certainly true when it comes to the Bible in general and Christianity specifically. Many people have just enough superficial or peripheral knowledge of these subjects to think that they actually know something about them, yet it is often these same people who would accept *The DaVinci Code*’s assertion that Jesus had a child with Mary Magdalene, simply because such a possibility is alluded to in the so-called *Gospel of Philip* – a non-canonical book - despite the fact that this would be a clear contradiction of the New Testament record itself.

But, in contrast, when the Bible is read deeply and consistently with an open heart the results are almost always dramatic and long lasting in their effect on people’s lives. When the famous Christian writer C.S. Lewis was an atheist at Oxford University in England he began his turn to Christianity when a fellow Oxford atheist told him that the New Testament documents actually had a high historical reliability. Intrigued, he decided to read the New Testament for himself in the original Greek, which he knew as a Professor of Medieval Literature. What he read shook him to the core because as an expert on literary fables, style and writings he recognized that the Gospels he was reading belonged in a totally different class. They were eyewitness historical accounts of real events – not fables or tales as he had been taught and heard. Simply put, their power unleashed upon him the conviction that the Bible was “inspired by God”. What followed was the conversion of one of the most influential Christians of the twentieth century.

The Quest for Understanding the Bible

“Original Intent and Meaning”

By Richie Temple

There is a wonderful record in the Book of Nehemiah of a time when the faithful Israelites who had returned from exile to Judea gathered together to hear the Old Testament Law of God read and explained to them by Ezra and the Levites. Let us compare this account in two different versions. This will help us understand as clearly as possible the meaning, or sense, of what is being said:

*“They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear (or, footnote, ‘translating it’) and **giving the meaning** so that the people could understand what was being read” (Nehemiah 8:8, NIV).*

“They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly (*or, footnote, ‘with interpretation’*), and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”(Nehemiah 8:8, ESV).

This record, which is translated similarly in all major translations, teaches us that when Ezra and the Levites read the Book of the Law to the assembly of Israelites who were gathered to hear it that day that their primary goal was to give the “meaning” or “sense” of the text to the listeners. It may very well be that the biblical text was in Hebrew and that it had to first be translated into Aramaic before being explained; however, it is also possible the listeners understood enough Hebrew but simply needed a clearer interpretation of its meaning. At any rate it is clear that the end goal was not gaining “word for word” knowledge of the text, but rather, *understanding* the original meaning or sense of the text so that the people of Israel could *apply* that original sense or meaning to their new situation in Judea.

This biblical account is a great example for us today and illustrates the two basic steps,

or principles, involved in trying to properly understand and live according to the truth of the Bible. These two principles can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. 1. We must *understand* the original intent and meaning of the biblical writers in the light of their own historical, literary and cultural context.
2. 2. We must then *apply* that original intent and meaning of the biblical text to our own present day situations.

Though this may seem simple enough and, even, obvious to many people, it is not the way that most people go about understanding and applying the Bible today. Most people appeal to “the plain sense of the text.” They simply read it, or hear it, and then understand it according to a “what it means to me” way of thinking and then apply it according to a “common sense” way of living. Fortunately, the “what it means to me” way of thinking often coincides with the original meaning and intent of the biblical text and the “common sense” application of it is usually in line with the general sense of scripture as a whole – that is, “to love God” and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself.”

If either the interpretation or the application were way out of line with the general overall sense of scripture most people would recognize that there is probably some problem with one or the other. That, of course, is because most people retain a general sense of right and wrong and most people live with at least a modicum of common sense. However, relying on this methodology for understanding and living according to the Bible is subject to both to grave errors. It also potentially, leaves the Bible open to be interpreted and applied according anyone’s own personal whims, or even, evil manipulative intent. The consequences of this can be catastrophic for individuals, for marriages, for families, for

churches, for societies and for nations as a whole as the history of the world has shown. It must always be remembered that the “plain sense” to a modern reader can often be wrong. We must seek, instead, what would have been the “intended sense” or the “original sense” of the biblical writers.

Suppose someone wrote you a letter and you were unclear about what that person was saying. What would be the best way to clear up the failure to communicate effectively? Some possible choices are:

1. To guess about the meaning intended.
2. To supply one’s own preferred meaning.
3. To say that it means anything anyone wants it to mean.
4. To try to find out the author’s original intent and meaning.

Obviously, only #4 is a correct choice. And so it is with understanding the Bible. The process of doing this is at times difficult and requires a study of the historical times, culture, vocabulary, etc. in which the documents originally appear. Though this may take time and effort, it must be recognized that there is no other *proper* way to understand the Bible just as, for example, there is no other proper method for understanding the U.S. Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. How then does one begin this process? A few fundamental principles are as follows:

1. Read, read and read the Bible for scope and overall context. The details of the Bible will always fit within the scope and context of the Bible’s overall structure and themes.
2. As you read ask yourself two basic questions:
 - a. Do I understand what is written?
 - b. How does what is written apply to me?

3. To get help in understanding the Biblical text we should use:
 - a. Several good English versions of the Bible along with a Greek-English Interlinear for the New Testament.
 - b. Several good study Bibles, Bible Dictionaries and Bible Commentaries to see what Biblical scholars say about the passages that you are reading. Compare what these different scholars say in the light of what seems to be the most reasonable understanding of the text from your own personal reading and study of that text.

To understand the Bible well we must maintain humility, honesty and integrity in our quest for truth. We must also read widely and deeply, not only the Bible itself, but also works that can help us understand the original intent and meaning of the Biblical text. Though we can know and understand the most important truths of the Bible without having a vast and deep overall knowledge of the Bible, we *cannot* be faithful interpreters, guardians, or teachers of the Bible as a whole if we do not possess a scope, knowledge, understanding, and feel for the Bible as a whole. The first step in doing this is to find and use a good translation or version of the Bible, or better yet, several good translations or versions. Then, to use them most effectively we must understand the nature of translation itself and which translations or versions of the Bible can best help us to properly understand and then apply the truth of the scriptures to our lives today. That will be the subject of our next *Notes & Quotes on the Bible*.

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Notes & Quotes on the Bible

Bible Translations and Versions

The most important principle for understanding the Bible properly is to read, read and read it in order to gain a scope and feel for its main themes and overall content. This, of course, is true with any book. However, since the Bible was originally written in mostly Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) all that is available for the normal speaker of modern languages is to read translations or versions of the Bible. In its technical sense the word translation refers to an original attempt to translate from one language into another while the word version refers to any revision or new edition of that translation. In practice, however, these words tend to be used interchangeably by the common man and often even by scholars as well. Fortunately, for the speaker of English there are many excellent translations and versions to use for Bible reading and study that are built on a long and rich history of biblical scholarship. Many of these can be used confidently as one's main text for reading and many others can be used in a comparative sense as aids in Bible study. It would, however, be a great mistake to think that any particular version or translation is *the* authoritative version. Instead, each has its own strengths and weaknesses – a fact that is almost guaranteed to occur because of the process of translation itself.

We should always remember that the main reason for reading the Bible is to gain spiritual nourishment so that we are “equipped for every good work” (II Tim. 3:16-17). Using a single version as your main text and augmenting it with other versions can greatly aid this process. Since the Bible is, in effect, a book of books organized with two major divisions – the Old Testament and the New Testament - the task of Bible study is in many ways much more

difficult than the study of a single book. Fortunately, there is a unifying theme, which ties it all together and simplifies the process of understanding. That theme is God's plan of salvation, which he brings to fulfillment through his Son, Jesus Christ. The 20th century NT scholar F.F. Bruce summarizes the key points of this plan of salvation and shows how it helps to unite the Bible as a whole:

“The Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both Testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation. This could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying that the central message of the Bible is God's covenant with men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant, and the covenant people. God himself is the Savior of his people; it is he who confirms his covenant-mercy with them. The bringer of salvation, the mediator of the covenant, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant, is God's grace, calling forth from his people a response of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people, are the Israel of God, the church of God.

The continuity of the covenant people from the Old Testament to the New Testament is obscured for the reader of the common English Bible because "church" is an exclusively New Testament word, and he naturally thinks of it as something which began in the New Testament period. But the reader of the Greek Bible was confronted by no new word when he found *ekklesia* in the New Testament; he had already met it in the Septuagint as one of the words used to denote Israel as the "assembly" of the Lord's people. To be sure, it has a new and fuller meaning in the New Testament. The old covenant people had to die with him in order to rise with him to a new life - a new life in which national restrictions had disappeared. Jesus provides in himself the vital continuity between the old Israel and the new, and his faithful followers were both the righteous

remnant of the old and the nucleus of the new. The servant Lord and his servant people bind the two Testaments together” (*The Origin of the Bible*, pp. 11-12, Tyndale Pub.).

All of the major Bible translations and versions present this central theme of the Bible in a way that can be understood by the generally educated reader. Though they have a great number of, mostly minor, differences among them, it is easy to overstate the importance of these differences. Sometimes arguments can break out over translations that even cause divisions within the people of God. This is happening to day in a battle between users of two new translations, the English Standard Version (ESV) and the Today’s New International Version (TNIV). Unfortunately, this is nothing new. It has happened all too often in the history of Christianity including Jerome’s translation of the Latin Vulgate in the 4th Century and Tyndale’s translation of the Bible into English in the Reformation of the 16th century. While some of the issues involved are not minor, they are not of such major proportion that they should cause division within the body of Christ. When this does occur it is often a matter of becoming so engrossed in the details of translations that the central over-arching theme of God’s Plan of Salvation is lost. In other words, it is a matter of not being able to see the forest for the trees.

As I stated in an earlier article I do not believe that any of the major Bible translations and versions published in the past 50 years are much better than the others *in terms of reading and understanding the Bible as a whole*. They all have their strengths and weaknesses and are all based on the solid scholarship of biblical scholars who, at least in the great majority, love God and are trying to convey accurately the meaning of the Scriptures in a way that people can understand. In addition, all of these scholars and translation committees agree in general on the basic principles of translation, though each favors a particular translation

philosophy that would place them at a particular point on a scale stretching from a more literal translation to a more free translation. Most importantly, all of these translations can be read with confidence and enjoyment in understanding the central truths of the Bible as a whole.

For reference I present below a scale of many of the best of these major Bible translations that are now in use. I have put in bold print the ones that are my favorites and which I most use and recommend to others. With the exception of the King James Version (KJV published in 1611) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV completed in the early 1950s) all of these translations and versions have been completed since the 1970s. All of the versions listed on the second or third lines are revisions of earlier translations or versions that are listed on the first line above them. They move from very literal (word for word) on the left to very free (meaning for meaning) on the right:

<u>Literal</u>	<u>Balanced</u>	<u>Free</u>
NASB KJV RSV	NIV NET NEB JB CEV LB	
NKJV NRSV	TNIV REB NJB NLT	
	ESV	NLT 2004

In choosing a version to be one’s main text for reading and memorization there are two important factors to consider. First, one should consider *readability*. It simply makes no sense to choose a Bible that is not readable for you and thus will discourage you from reading it. Second, the translation you choose should be a faithful rendering of the *meaning* of the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts. We must always remember that the most important goal of translation is to convey the *meaning* of the original text as clearly as possible into the target language so that the reader can *understand* properly what the original text *means*. The above chart is only an approximation but it is useful for understanding the differences in translations. My own personal favorites for use

as a main text for reading, study and memorization are the more literal ESV, the balanced NIV/TNIV and the freer NLT 2004 edition. A person could use any of these as his main text if he consulted the others as well. But other combinations could be used equally well. The key is to consult across the spectrum of literal to free, and for in-depth study, the more the merrier.

Generally speaking, the more literal the translation the less likely there will be interpretative error in the translation. However, it is also true that the more literal the translation the more likely it is that the translation will have a wooden, unnatural feel to it and the more likely it is that there will be ambiguities left in it that are not in the original text itself. All of this can lead to discouragement on the part of the reader and break the flow of reading. On the other hand, there are some free translations that, though very readable, are so interpretative that they can at times also be very misleading. Thus, one can read along quickly, easily, and with understanding of what is said, and yet, being misled at the same time. In all cases with all translations the *original intent and meaning* of the inspired biblical writer is the only proper and stable control for both translation and interpretation. Without that everything deconstructs into subjective chaos.

One issue that has come up in the last twenty years or so is that of the use of gender inclusive language. This issue revolves around the question of how to translate the generic form of “man” = “human being” = “person” along with corresponding pronouns into English without causing ambiguity or the impression of gender bias. Without getting too far into the details of this debate, I will only say that as a high school history teacher I deal with this issue every day and it is, in fact, a real issue. In fact, I find myself using gender inclusive language more and more without even thinking about it in my own speaking and writing. It is simply the way most young people think and speak and

also the normal manner of discourse in the press and the arena of public affairs.

Recent surveys indicate that when English-speaking people hear the word “man” used in a sentence 80% of them take it to mean someone of the male gender. The same is true of the generic “he”. Because of this when a translation translates the generic “man” as “man” rather than as “person” or “human” or “one”, etc. they risk grave misunderstanding on the part of the average reader. Though one can make a strong case that the word “man” should be retained in its generic form based on: (1) its proper generic meaning in the Biblical texts, (2) its proper generic meaning in the English language, (3) retaining continuity with its generic historical usage in all forms of literature, and, finally (4) not bowing to political correctness driven by a feminist agenda, the plain fact is that English usage has changed dramatically in recent years and it is not likely to change back any time soon. Due to these facts and based on the goal of communicating *meaning* in a way that can be understood effectively almost all of the more recent translations and versions have adopted gender inclusive usage in some way, ranging from mild usage to more extreme usage.

The NIV was translated just before the era of gender inclusive versions began and it has promised that it will not be revised from its present form. The TNIV is called a new version. The ESV has generally found a good balance on this issue while still not going far enough at times. The NRSV, TNIV, NLT, etc. have each in their own way gone somewhat too far at times in their gender inclusive versions while at other times finding just the right balance. Let’s look at an example in I Timothy 2:4-6:

“Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave himself for a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (NKJV).

“Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for men – the testimony given in its proper time.” (NIV).

“Who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” (ESV).

“Who wants all people to be saved and to come to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.” (TNIV).

All of these translations of this section of Scripture are “correct.” However, the NIV is the least clear as to meaning since there is possible ambiguity throughout in its use of “man”. On the other hand, the TNIV is the clearest as to the meaning of the text without leaving any possible ambiguity that could be misunderstood. In my view, when the original text says “man” in its male gender meaning the translation “man” should be retained, even when this “man” is representative of others. A footnote can make clear the representation (e.g. see Psalm 1 in ESV). When, on the other hand, “man” is used in the original to refer to “man” in its generic form it is often – though not always - better to translate it as “person”, “one”, “human being”, etc. (e.g. see Rom. 3:28 in ESV, TNIV).

Another problem is how to translate pronouns corresponding to the generic “man”, “person”, “one”, or “human being”. Though from one point of view it is valid as a translation technique to pluralize the third person singular pronoun “he” in its generic sense to “he or she”

or “they” in order to avoid any hint of gender bias, it often produces some very awkward, strange or unnatural English. Thus as is often the case, going to an extreme to overcome one problem results in creating other problems including very unnatural English. Compare, for example, the same versions above on Romans 14:1-5. In this case the English of the ESV is natural, consistent, and understandable (as are the fully pluralized renderings of NRSV and the NLT) while the language of the TNIV sounds unnatural even though gender misunderstanding has been eliminated. One can certainly ask, “Would the original text have sounded so unnatural to the original readers?” I don’t think so. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t want to make too much of this issue. Usually, the translation choices of the NRSV, TNIV, NLT, etc. in this regard do not affect the sense of the passage in question and they can alleviate a common misconception in translation.

In conclusion, I must emphasize that a student of the Bible needs to learn to properly use the Bible or Bibles that he reads and studies. He should learn all the different translation philosophies and methodologies listed in the chart above and make full use of the benefits of them all. And at a minimum, every Bible reading person should read the Preface and Introduction of any version he’s going to seriously use so as to get the most out of it and so as not to abuse it due to misconceptions. In addition, almost all Bible versions have their own web-sites now that give you a wealth of information about their own versions and their corresponding translation philosophies. Finally, never allow anyone to limit you to using a particular version or versions of the Bible. Some churches, Bible study fellowships, etc. use a common text - usually, for good reasons; however, this should not prevent you from making full use of the other versions in your own private study. Read, study and enjoy the Bible – it is our fountainhead for spiritual truth and spiritual nourishment. And, it is the greatest literature in the history of the world.