

# **BIBLE TRANSLATIONS**

## **WHICH ONE SHOULD I USE?**

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## INTRODUCTION

Imagine being a new Christian, thrilled about your newfound faith, and anticipating learning more about God. You know that you should read the Bible, so you wander into the closest Christian bookstore and find yourself in the “Bibles” section. You are not, however, prepared for what you find. There are black Bibles, brown Bibles, blue Bibles, and even pink Bibles. Some are designed for single folks, others for divorcees. Some are pocket-sized while others have print as large as the “E” on your eye doctor’s wall. To make matters worse, you find yourself drowning in an alphabet soup. You see KJV, NKJV, NIV, TNIV, NLT, ESV, HCSB . . . and the list goes on. Finally, you close your eyes and randomly select one, eagerly anticipating showing it to your Christian friends. When you do, the look of disgust on their faces indicates that you made a grave mistake. In your naivety, you inadvertently chose the “wrong” Bible.

According to my observation, one of the most divisive issues in churches and between individual Christians is the topic of Bible translations. While to some this is simply a matter of preference, to others it holds immense doctrinal significance. After all, if we mess with the Bible, are we not tampering with the Word of God?

What follows is the result of my own personal study on this issue. It is not my purpose in this study to incite a righteous riot or to make you think like me. Neither is it meant to be exhaustive. It is merely the results of my own study on the matter. Therefore, I ask that you read it with an open mind. You may not come to the same conclusions as I have, but if you offer me grace, I will do the same for you.

Ben Hammond

## THE HISTORY OF THE BIBLE

The Bible did not come to us in a neat little package, leather-bound with the words of Jesus inscribed in red letters. To be honest, as I study the history of the Bible, sometimes I wish it would have. Then all the underlying texts would be the same, there would never have been any arguments over which books should have been included, and there would be no divisions over translations. However, God had His reasons for doing it the way He did, which we will discuss below. Because the history of the Bible is a little more cluttered and disorganized than some of us would like it to be, we need to make sure that we gain a clear understanding of how it came to us. Rather than inviting doubt about whether this book can be trusted, I hope that our appreciation for the miracle that it is will be increased.

Although we are not going to study the origin of each book of the Bible, it will be helpful to take an overall look at how the individual books came to be. In the Old Testament, many of the books are accounts of history. Moses and others recorded events that were of historical importance, mainly to the nation of Israel. Many of the books describe the lives and message of prophets that God sent, primarily to Israel and Judah. The New Testament is comprised of gospels that describe the life of Jesus, a book of history (Acts), and some letters (epistles) sent by Paul and others to individuals and churches.

Exactly how the writers received some of their information (such as details about creation) is a mystery to us. God may have revealed it to them some way, or in some cases they may have recorded what previously had been oral tradition. Although we do not know exactly how it happened, we believe that the final result was exactly what God wanted. The Apostle Paul made this clear in his letter to Timothy, when he said that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The phrase “given by inspiration of God” is translated from the Greek word *theopneustos*, which literally means “God-breathed.” Somehow God put within these men the words that He wanted on the page. Millard Erickson helps us with the definition of inspiration, stating that it is “that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bible came into being as men of God were “moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21), but even a casual reading indicates different styles of writing between the authors and varying slants of interpretation, depending upon the circumstances of the recipients. Erickson points out that inspiration “presupposes a long process of God’s providential working with the author.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, God had used their life experiences to make them ready to record His words. These were men who were shaped by the prevailing culture of their day as well as their own educational backgrounds. While God could have dictated the Bible, He chose instead for His Word to be

saturated with first century culture and language (in the case of the New Testament).

I believe in both the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Bible. Plenary indicates that the Bible as a whole is inspired, while verbal means that every word was inspired. While I do not subscribe to the idea that God dictated Scripture word-for-word, I do believe that the words written down were exactly the words that God wanted.

Over time, these books began to be recognized as special. The Jewish writings (the Old Testament) were widely accepted by the Jews (and the early church) as authoritative. Acceptance of the New Testament books, however, was much more difficult, but by the fourth century AD writings of the church fathers indicate that the twenty-seven books in our New Testament were widely accepted as canonical (part of official Scripture).

If you have ever heard two people debating Bible versions, you know that it can be quite entertaining (and, may I add, heated). However, if you listen closely, you will find that many of the arguments against modern versions are actually objections to “changes to the original” and arguments for new versions are that they are “easy to read.” In my experience, few can take this discussion to a deeper level, which is necessary to form a learned opinion. If you truly want to understand the issue of Bible versions, you need to have a basic understanding of two areas: the underlying texts and methods of translation. To begin, let’s look at the issue of the underlying texts.

## **HOW THE BIBLE GOT TO US: THE TEXTS**

It may not surprise you that the Bible was not written in English. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, although some parts were penned in Aramaic. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. It also may not surprise you that we no longer have the original manuscripts (known as autographs). It is my opinion that God did not allow these to be retained because Christians would begin to worship them as holy relics.

In the absence of the original manuscripts, biblical scholars have burdened themselves with the task of determining their actual contents. This endeavor is much more difficult than it may seem.

The original writers of the Bible had no paper, computers, and word processing software. Many of the writers used papyrus, which was a product of the bark of the papyrus, or byblus reed. The bark was cut in strips, dried, and glued together horizontally and vertically, and then rolled up like a scroll. Eventually parchment, which was made from dried animal skins, became popular. Writings on both papyrus and parchment were later put into a form similar to the modern book. These were called codices (singular: codex).

These primitive writing materials, of course, were not permanent. If they were to be preserved,

copies had to be made. In the absence of electronic copiers, the copying had to be done by hand.

For each book in the Bible, there was one original manuscript. Because that manuscript could only be in one place at one time, a copy would be made and passed along to another location. Soon another copy would be made and sent somewhere else. Eventually copies were made of the copies. Any inadvertent additions, changes, or deletions that were made within a certain locality were passed along to the others in that area, creating a “text-type” of similar documents.

Unfortunately, the human error that crept into the copying process of these texts often went undetected. Similar letters could be confused and some words or phrases left out. When the copying was done through dictation, some words could be audibly misunderstood. In some places marginal notes could be inadvertently added into the text by an innocent scribe.<sup>3</sup> These errors were then unintentionally passed along by later copyists. In many cases, these occasions explain the differences between English Bible versions that were translated from different texts.

### **Old Testament Text**

Although it seems that most of the discussion about text-types centers around the New Testament, the Old Testament text is worthy of discussion. The fact that persecution of the Jews caused them to be spread around the known world resulted in various text-types of the Scriptures. In the beginning of the first century AD, Jewish scholars began to see the importance of standardizing the text of Scripture. In the fifth to tenth centuries, a group of Jews known as the Masoretes meticulously compiled and copied the Scriptures. If you have ever taken a beginning class in Hebrew, you know about the Masoretes. As the Hebrew language consists only of only consonants, the Masoretes added a system of vowel pointings to describe how the words were pronounced. In that way copies of the Scripture would have the same number of letters as the original, yet the pronunciation would be preserved for future generations.

The Masoretes were charged with evaluating the available manuscripts to determine the original text as much as possible. Their work did not result in one official standard manuscript, but rather a family of manuscripts, known as the Masoretic text. Variations can be found between Masoretic manuscripts just as would be expected within any general text-type.<sup>4</sup>

Around the tenth century AD, the family of ben Asher became the leading family of Masoretes. The texts they produced soon became the recognized Hebrew Scriptures<sup>5</sup> and are collectively known as the ben Asher text.

In 1516, Daniel Bomberg added his contribution to the mix of Hebrew Scriptures in the Masoretic tradition, publishing the First Rabbinic Bible. In 1524, the Second Rabbinic Bible was published by Jacob ben-Chayyim. It is this text from which the KJV is largely (though not exclusively<sup>6</sup>) translated. Almost four hundred years later, Rudolph Kittel published two editions (1906, 1912) of the Hebrew Scriptures, using the ben Chayyim text. These are called the *Biblia*

*Hebraica* (BH or BHK). In 1937, a third edition of the *Biblia Hebraica* was published by Paul Kahle, using the text of the Leningrad Codex (the oldest ben Asher text, dated AD 1008). In 1977 the first edition of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) was published, which was a revision of the third edition of the *Biblica Hebraica*. The fourth revision of the BHS was published in 1997.

Here is a graph of the Masoretic texts used by popular Bible versions:

<b>Masoretic Text (OT)</b>		
<b>Second Rabbinic Bible</b>	<b>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</b>	<b>Biblia Hebraica</b>
King James Version (KJV)	New King James Version (NKJV)	New American Standard Bible (NASB)
	New Living Translation (NLT)	New International Version (NIV)
	English Standard Version (ESV)	

### **New Testament Text**

There are three major divisions of Greek text-types for the New Testament Scriptures—Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine. To understand the differences between them, we have to consider a bit of history.

In 395 A.D., Emperor Diocletian divided the Roman Empire in two sections, east and west. Latin became the most widely used language of the western empire, so naturally the folks there copied and disseminated writings (including the Scriptures) in Latin. Therefore, most of the Western text-types are in Latin have a lesser impact on our discussion than do the text-types from the other geographical regions.

The eastern section of the Roman Empire became known as the Byzantine Empire. Greek was the official language of the Byzantine Empire, so the Byzantine monks tended to copy Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, leading to the Byzantine text-type. Most of the ancient manuscripts we have today are Byzantine.

The third group is the Alexandrian text-type, named after Alexandria, Egypt. Although these manuscripts are fewer in number than the Byzantine manuscripts, they are thought to be older. Their longevity may be a result of the dry Egyptian climate, which allows for a longer life for papyrus documents.<sup>7</sup> The most notable documents of this text-type are the Codex Vaticanus (so named because it was found in the Vatican library) and the Codex Sinaiticus (found on Mount Sinai). Both are believed to date from the early fourth century AD.

The following map may help explain the location of different text-types. The areas shaded in green and brown are the east and west divisions of the Roman Empire.



Codex Sinaiticus has quite an interesting story. It was discovered by Constantine von Tischendorf in 1844 as he was engaged in a mission to locate ancient Scripture texts.<sup>8</sup> His passion to clear the biblical text of all the corruptions that had been handed down through the centuries brought him to the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai. While he was there, he happened to find some old copies of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) in a basket waiting to be burned. Noting their importance, he was allowed to take forty-three of the leaves. His uncontrollable excitement alerted the monks to the importance of the find. Consequently, he was subsequently barred from taking more, even when he returned in 1853. In 1859, however, he revisited the monastery with the blessing of the Emperor of Russia, which bought him a high degree of respect. Still, he was unable to locate the full document and feared it had been destroyed.

The day before Tischendorf planned to leave the monastery, a steward invited him into his quarters. Because Tischendorf had previously published an edition of the Septuagint, the steward boasted that he had read a copy of the Septuagint himself. As proof, he took his copy of the Septuagint off a shelf and when Tischendorf saw it, he knew that this was indeed the document for which he had been searching. To his delight, not only was most of the Old Testament (Septuagint) intact, but so was the whole New Testament. It is this text that became known as Codex Sinaiticus.

One of the arguments against the Sinai text is that it was originally located in a trash bin. The thought is that if the manuscript was revered as an authentic and reliable copy of the New Testament, it would never have been relegated to the burn pile. However, upon further review,

Tischendorf's excitement tipped off the monks as to the value of the document. If they truly had reason to believe it was worthless, they would have told him so and would not have made it so difficult to procure in the future. Apparently, they just did not know the value of the document.

## **Textual Criticism**

Modern textual criticism is the art of studying Byzantine and Alexandrian texts to determine as much as possible the exact contents of the original manuscripts. In doing so, scholars must consider a very important question. Should greater importance be attributed to an older manuscript or does majority rule? Those who believe in majority rule will favor the Byzantine text-type, simply because there are more Byzantine manuscripts available. Those who prefer older manuscripts will favor the Alexandrian text-type. Who is right? Three approaches have been proposed to answer this question, and the approach chosen will influence the final translation.

### **Majority Text Approach**

One proposed answer is what is officially called the "Majority text approach." A majority text is compiled by accumulating all the available texts, effectively dumping them into one bucket, and giving each a vote when the wording varies. Obviously, a majority text will favor the Byzantine text simply because there are many more texts of this type available. A downfall of this approach is that any widely disseminated errors will be present in the finished work. No major Bible versions have been translated from a majority text.

### **The Byzantine Text Approach (Textus Receptus)**

Those who hold to the preeminence of the King James Version often decry the above methods of textual criticism in favor of the *Textus Receptus* (TR). Therefore, it is fitting that we take a look at this important collection of manuscripts.

In 1515 AD, a Dutch scholar named Desiderius Erasmus, in conjunction with a printer named Johann Froben, gathered a few Greek manuscripts of the Byzantine text-type, hoping to combine them into one official text. The manuscripts he used were dated from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup> No single manuscript contained the entire New Testament, and even when combined, the final six verses of Revelation were missing. Erasmus solved this problem by back-translating from the Latin Vulgate into Greek, a process he also used for other places where the Greek was unintelligible or unable to be distinguished from commentary that readers had written on the pages.<sup>10</sup> When his compilation was printed in 1516, it was found to be full of errors, so in 1519 a new edition was sent to the press. A third edition, printed in 1522, became famous because it included I John 5:7 for the first time. Apparently, there was an outcry when his earlier editions did not contain this verse (which appears in the Latin Vulgate), so he promised that if someone could

produce one Greek text with this verse, he would add it in his next edition. A sixteenth century manuscript containing the verse was produced, so true to his word, Erasmus included it in the 1522 edition. However, he also included a footnote indicating his opinion that it should not appear in the text.<sup>11</sup> Two more editions were later published by Erasmus, one in 1527, and a final one in 1535.

The French printer Robert Estienne (better known as Stephanus, the Latin rendition of his name), continued the work of Erasmus by publishing editions of the Greek New Testament in 1546, 1549, 1550, and 1551. His final edition (1551) introduced for the first time the New Testament verse divisions that we find in our modern Bibles<sup>12</sup> (Steven Langton, around 1227, divided the chapters, and the OT verses were created in 1448).<sup>13</sup>

Between 1564 and 1604, Theodore de Beza published nine editions of the Greek New Testament. It was his 1588/89 edition that was used heavily by the translators of the King James Version.

Publishers Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir soon joined the fray, producing their first Greek New Testament in 1624, and a second in 1633. In the preface to the 1633 edition the publishers printed these words: “So [the reader] has the text which all now receive.” As a result, this whole line of compilations and revisions of the Byzantine text-type became known as the “received text,” or as it came across in Latin, “Textus Receptus” or “TR.”

It is crucial to note that there is no one official “Textus Receptus.” Although the Trinitarian Bible Society has published an edition of the TR, it is an eclectic text that combines readings from different sources within the TR tradition.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Critical/Eclectic Text Approach**

Because the Textus Receptus was widely available in printed form, it was viewed for a long time as the official text of the New Testament. Eventually, however, scholars began to compare it with the many other New Testament manuscripts that were being discovered, leading to what can be called the “critical” or “eclectic” approach. Rather than attributing equal weight to each manuscript, scholars distribute importance based on factors such as the age of the text, its geographical location, and known theological bias of the scribes who copied it. The critical approach places a great deal of importance on the Alexandrian texts Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, because of their age.

In the nineteenth century, Greek New Testaments began to be published that were based on this approach. The most famous of these may be that which was published in 1881-1882 by Wescott and Hort.<sup>15</sup> Their edition became the basis for the English Revised Version of 1881, which was adapted for use in America in 1901 as the American Standard Version.

It is also important to note that in 1898, Eberhard Nestle published his first work, known in

Latin as the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, a Greek edition of the New Testament that was based on his comparison of the editions of Wescott/Hort, Tischendorf, and Weymouth.<sup>16</sup> In 1955, the American Bible Society formed a committee of scholars who published a Greek New Testament designed for Bible translators (complete with information on textual variants). This was known as the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* (GNT). In 1963, Kurt Aland expanded on the twenty-four editions of the GNT, and this twenty-fifth edition became known as the Nestle-Aland (NA) text.<sup>17</sup>

One notable factor about editions of the NA text is that the compilers did not rely heavily on the single texts of the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus texts. They preferred instead to look at all the text types to determine how the differences came to be.<sup>18</sup>

If this information is new to you, you might find yourself a little confused. That is understandable, because there is an inordinate amount of history on this subject. You might also find yourself questioning how we can know that we actually have the Word of God. The answer is quite simple. While some differences between texts include verses or even chapters, most deal only with minor differences, such as spelling.

This may also lead to you question why God would allow the history of His book to be so “messy.” Why would He deliver His book through human hands, allowing it to be disseminated in such a way that introduced errors into the copied text? As I was pondering this one day, I came to a couple of realizations. First, I concluded that God did not want us to be stuck in the same situation as the Muslims. Although the Koran has been translated into many languages, none of these translations is considered to be authentic. Only the original Arabic suffices. God, however, does not seem interested in requiring His people to learn another language to adequately understand His message. Even on the Day of Pentecost He allowed people of various dialects to understand the preaching of the Apostles. His purpose was not to fabricate an untouchable holy book written in Hebrew and Greek, but to allow us to hear and understand His message in the language we use every day.

Second, the Koran was authored by one man, Mohammed, who over the course of several years frequented a cave where an angel instructed him what to write. The question that comes to my mind is *can I really trust this guy?* How do we know he was not just sitting out there in the cave making up all that stuff? The Bible, however, was written by over forty different men over a period of about sixteen hundred years. Of course, there would be no way for these men to collaborate their stories to “pull the wool over the eyes” of gullible religious folk. They each wrote about things they saw or what was revealed to them, presumably without the understanding that their writings would be compiled into a “Bible” one day. Moses kept track of Israel’s history, prophets recorded what God told them, and Paul wrote letters to churches. Yet their writings all agree and provide us with a pretty good picture of what God wants us to know about Himself. The fact that

the Bible was written over such a long period of time by so many authors leads to a certain amount of confusion concerning its history, but it also reveals the power of God in miraculously providing us with a unified Scripture.

Third, the Bible never channeled through one man, or even a group of men, allowing them to change it according to fit their theology or preferences. Its worldwide dissemination kept it out of the hands of any single person who would tamper with it. James White puts it this way:

By having the text of the New Testament in particular “explode” across the known world, ending up in the far-flung corners of the Roman Empire in a relatively short period of time, God protected that text from the one thing that we could never detect: the wholesale change of doctrine or theology by one particular man or group who had full control over the text at any one point in history. You see, because the New Testament books were written at various times, and were quickly copied and distributed as soon as they were written, there was never a time when any one man, or any group of men, could gather up all the manuscripts and make extensive changes in the text itself, such as cutting out the deity of Christ, or inserting some foreign concept or doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

In effect, the existence of a great host of biblical texts minimizes the possibility for any one text into which a heretic could inject a major change of doctrine. Therefore, in the “messiness” of textual criticism is found confirmation of the purity and preservation of God’s Word.

## **METHODS OF TRANSLATION**

Now that we have considered the matter of the underlying texts, we have another dilemma to solve. We understand that some variations in Bible versions are a result of slightly different texts, but how can similar thoughts be worded so differently in different versions?

The answer to that question is clear for those who have dabbled in any way with languages. If you were born and raised in the United States, it is likely that you know only one language, English. You may also know enough words in Spanish to get a few ideas across to your friends from the south, but that’s about it. However, once you begin trying to fluently transfer detailed thoughts from one language into another, you find that it is difficult, if not impossible. Bible translation is no different. Even if we only had one underlying biblical text, we would still have various translations.

The first thing that we must understand is that we cannot translate between languages perfectly. Word order, idioms, and sentence structure vary greatly between languages.

I have to admit that while I have dabbled in a few other languages, including Hebrew and Greek, I am fluent only in English. I have, however, learned sign language and can interpret for the deaf. This is not as easy as it may appear. A good interpreter will do much more than learn

signs that go with spoken words. Because deaf people cannot hear, many of our idioms and other figures of speech make no sense to them. Therefore, the interpreter needs to listen to the speaker, determine what he means, and transfer it to signs and expressions that will be comprehensible to the deaf person.

That is exactly the dilemma that Bible translators face. What is the best way to take the meaning of the biblical text and put it in such a way that it can be understood?

The answer to this question is not an easy one, and its difficulty is amplified because of the importance of the Word of God. How the translation is carried out can have eternal ramifications. To assist us in our understanding of Bible translation, let's first look at the words themselves.

### **Words can have various translations**

If you enjoy writing, you are intimately familiar with synonyms. For those of you who barely eeked out a passing grade in your English classes, synonyms are words that have basically the same meanings. Without synonyms, books would be quite boring. However, this poses a problem for translators. When several words can be used, which one should be chosen?

One example of this is the Greek word *agape*, which is one of the words that can be translated as "love." However, in I Corinthians 13, the famed "love chapter," the King James translators inserted the word "charity" instead of "love." While in our day "charity" generally carries more of the idea of an organization that helps people, it technically means the same as "love." Those translating from Greek to English have a choice. The KJV translators chose "charity" while most other translators chose "love."

Occasionally you may hear that a certain Bible version is a transliteration of the original Greek or Hebrew. While this sounds pious, it simply is impossible. Transliteration is the process of rendering the sounds of a word in one language into the same sounds in another language. For example, our word "deacon" comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which means "servant" or "minister." While this word would be strictly transliterated as "diakanos," in English we use the term "deacon."

Another word that we have transliterated from the Greek is the word "angel," which appears in the Greek as *angelos*. Although this word simply means "messenger," in our minds we picture a cute and cuddly child or a beautiful woman with wings. Never mind that when the gender of angels is mentioned in the Bible, it is always masculine. With this in mind, when the messages of Revelation are given to the *angelos* of each church, are we talking about a heavenly being with a halo and wings, or could it be a human messenger, such as the pastor? Furthermore, remember reading about Paul's thorn in the flesh? If we think that our Bibles are transliterated, this thorn in the flesh would be an angel. Specifically, the "*angelos* of Satan to buffet me" (II Corinthians 12:7).

Finally, if we mistakenly use the term "transliteration," then John the Baptist should also be

among the angels. After all, God said about him that “I send my *angelos* before your face . . .” (Mark 1:2). In both II Corinthians and Mark 1, all major versions correctly interpret *angelos* as “messenger.” It is obvious, then, that individual words can be translated differently, depending on the interpretation of the translator.

Since we now know that words cannot always be directly translated from one language into another, we need to tackle the bigger question. Can ideas be precisely transferred between languages? This leads us to the second main factor in determining which translation we should use—the translation method employed by the translators.

### **Difference in translation methods**

If we set out to determine which is the most accurate Bible version available, we first have to define the term “accurate.” Are we looking for the version that best represents the *wording* of the original, or the one that most accurately represents the *message* of the original? All translators have to answer this question as they embark on their work. The answer will determine which method of translation will be used.

A translator is charged with a very difficult job—helping people of one language understand what was written in another. Essentially, he stands between them as the mediator. The message has to go through him to reach the reader.



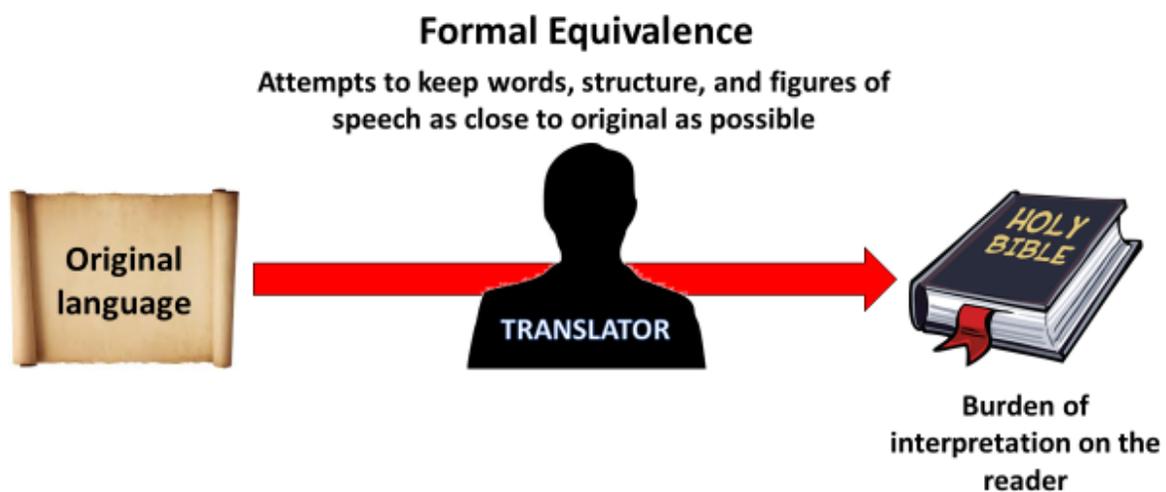
The method the translator uses to do this will have a critical impact on the final translation. The methods of translation are formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and paraphrase. Let’s take a quick look at each of these to see how they cause variety in translation.

### **Formal equivalence**

Using the method of formal equivalence, translators attempt to reproduce the original language in as close to a word-for-word manner as is possible. The positive side of this approach is that it results in a text that is more faithful to the original. It stresses the importance of the *words* of the Bible rather than simply the *ideas*,<sup>20</sup> which is important if we accept verbal inspiration. While the

outcome is a text that is often more difficult to understand, the reader can be assured that, at least in most places, the reading is closely aligned with the original.

The downside of formal equivalence is that the resulting text may be more difficult for the readers to comprehend. It may include figures of speech that, directly translated, are meaningless without explanation. Another problem with attempting to adhere to strict formal equivalence is that it simply is not possible. As we have already noted, it is impossible to translate word-for-word from one language into another. Some words will have to be deleted or added to make the passage flow correctly in the target language. In the King James Version, many of these additional words are indicated by the use of italics.



Positives of formal equivalence:

- More faithful to the original
- Recognizes verbal inspiration
- Less dependence on the interpretation of the translator

Negatives of formal equivalence:

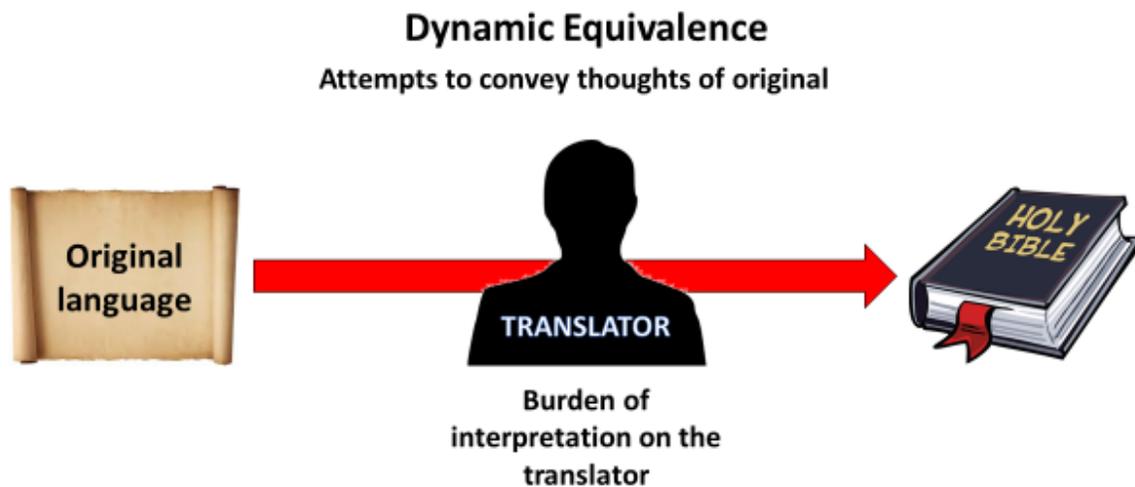
- More difficult to understand
- Idioms and figures of speech may not make sense
- More interpretation by the reader
- Strict formal equivalence is impossible

Popular Bible versions that use formal equivalence:

- King James Version (KJV)
- New King James Version (NKJV)
- New American Standard Bible (NASB)
- English Standard Version (ESV)

## Dynamic equivalence

The second method of translation is dynamic equivalence (aka functional equivalence). With this method, the translator considers the meaning behind the original text and attempts to convey this meaning to the reader of the target language. The goal is to produce the same effect on the modern readers that the original readers experienced.<sup>21</sup> The disadvantage of this method is that, in order to get the meaning across, the words of original Scripture must be changed much more than with formal equivalence. On the positive side, it makes for a much more readable text. With dynamic equivalence, the burden of interpretation of the original text is on the translator, while with formal equivalence, it falls upon the reader.



Positives of Dynamic Equivalence:

- Easier to understand (more readable)
- Less interpretation by the reader

Negatives of Dynamic Equivalence:

- Less faithful to the original
- More dependent on the interpretation of the translator

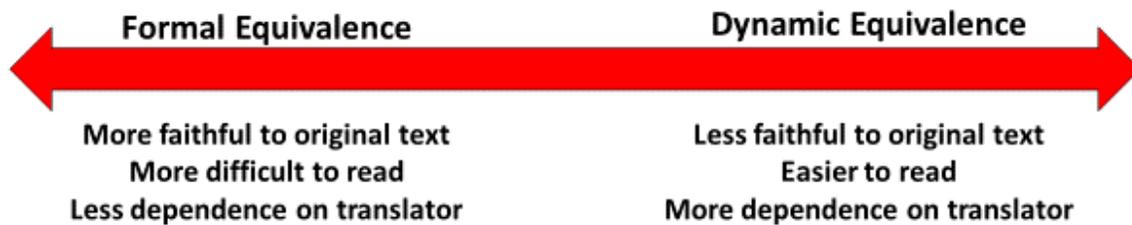
Popular Bible versions that use dynamic equivalence:

- New International Version (NIV)
- New Living Translation (NLT)

An example of dynamic equivalence can be found in Romans 7:18. The KJV, using formal equivalence, reads, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing...” The NIV, utilizing dynamic equivalence, records the same passage as “For I know that good itself does

not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.” The Greek word (*sarx*) translated as “flesh” and “sinful nature” in these respective versions literally means “flesh.” Here is the question: Are we sinners because we have a sinful nature that hangs with us throughout life, or do we sin because we are still living in a sinful physical body? Using dynamic equivalence, the NIV translators (whether correct or not) are able to interject their opinion into the text. The versions that translate this verse literally (KJV, NKJV, ESV) simply translate the word as “flesh” and allow the reader to make the decision.

Because of the differences between languages, it is impossible to have a completely formal or dynamic translation. Every translation falls some place on the continuum between the two. The closer a translation lies toward formal equivalence, the more difficult it will be to read, but the more faithful it will be to the original text. On the other hand, the closer it lies toward dynamic equivalence, the easier it will be to read, but more of the translators’ interpretation will be evident.



**Free translation (paraphrase)**

A paraphrase is more of a commentary than a translation. This method takes the ideas from the original text, but is not bound by specific words and phrases. Examples of paraphrases include The Living Bible by Kenneth Taylor and The Message by Eugene Peterson.

## HOW TO CHOOSE A TRANSLATION

Now that we’ve covered the issues behind Bible translations, we have come to the big question. How do we choose which one to use? When we’re standing in the bookstore with a sea of initials in front of us, which one do we select?

You may have noticed that most of the Bible version controversy centers around the King James Version. Some proponents of the KJV are adamant in their beliefs because they believe that all other versions tamper with the Word of God. This is a generalization, of course, because many of those who prefer the KJV will accept other translations (such as the NKJV or NASB), while others go so far as to say that the translation of the KJV was inspired and is more reliable than the text from which it was translated. As I have already pointed out, at the heart of this debate for the

informed person are the questions of underlying text and translation methods. However, other arguments exist. For example, some claim that because the KJV has been used by God for four hundred years that it proves it is the tool God has chosen to use to declare Himself to English-speaking people. While it is true that God has greatly used this version and all of us who grew up using it have a great appreciation for it, is it possible that God may also permit newer versions to also be used? After all, the KJV was the “new kid on the block” at one time.

The interesting aspect of this debate is that everything that is now old and trusted was at one time new and untrusted. Change is inherently difficult, and proposing a change in Bible version borders on heresy. To illustrate, let’s take a few examples from the history of the Bible. Take note also that the idea of a perfect translation (even to the point of inspired translators) did not originate with followers of the KJV. It has happened many times in the past.

In the third and second centuries before Christ, persecution had resulted in the dispersion of Jews all over the Greek-speaking world. Eventually these Jews began to take on the language and customs of the Greeks, so the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) were translated into Greek. In about 100 B.C., a letter known as the “Letter of Aristeas” was written which claimed that the translators, after working separately, were able to come to agreement.<sup>22</sup> Eventually others took this to mean that the translation process had been miraculous. As the story goes, seventy-two scholars individually translated the books of Moses, and when they met together, they found that each of them had come up with exactly the same translation. As a result, the translation became known as the Septuagint (from the Latin for “seventy”) and it is often referred to as LXX (Roman numerals for seventy). Several famous early church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Cyril of Jerusalem, tended to view the Septuagint as the authoritative (and even unalterable) Word of God.<sup>23</sup>

Problems with the widespread use of the Septuagint began to appear with the rising popularity of Latin. Although the Septuagint had been translated into Latin, Jerome came along and thought it would be beneficial to have Latin Scriptures that were translated directly from the Hebrew. This he did in the fifth century AD. Jerome’s translation, the Vulgate, was not received well by Augustine, the bishop of Hippo. He believed that any place Jerome’s Vulgate differed from the Septuagint, it could not be trusted.<sup>24</sup> In 405 he wrote a scathing letter to Jerome, berating him for the differences between the Vulgate and the Septuagint (which had been around for 600-700 years).<sup>25</sup> Augustine believed that the Septuagint had the hand of God on it and was the standard against which other versions should be compared.

Now fast-forward 1,100 years. The popularity of Latin had sidelined the Septuagint and the Vulgate (which also included the New Testament) has become the favorite translation of the masses. In 1546, the Council of Trent deemed the Vulgate to be the “authentic” Scripture and disallowed it from being rejected for any reason.<sup>26</sup> However, some scholars began to feel an urge

to re-visit the ancient manuscripts rather than simply trusting a translation (just as Jerome had done all those years before). Among these was Erasmus, who, as we have already seen, began a string of Greek editions of the New Testament that eventually became known as the *Textus Receptus*. Because his compilations differed from Jerome's Vulgate, we should not be surprised that he suffered the same blows that Jerome suffered a millennium earlier for daring to "change" the Word of God.<sup>27</sup> When it comes to change, some things never change.

How should we approach the sensitive subject of Bible translations within our ministries? First, a translation should be as faithful as possible to the original text. While paraphrases and some dynamic equivalent translations can be helpful, they include an overabundance of interpretation on the part of the translators. Second, the translation must be readable. This will, of course, differ depending on the reader. Many of those who grew up with the King James Version may comprehend it with little difficulty. For others, however, the style may become a barrier to understanding. In my opinion, choosing a translation that is closest to formal equivalence that can still be understood is the recommended course of action.

There is no question that God has blessed the ministry of the King James Version, which was originally published in 1611. That is, in fact, one of the reasons that many people believe that the KJV should be the only translation in use. Most people, it seems, grew up with it. Even many who make use of other versions quote from the KJV, because it is engrained in their memory. While there are some that have turned their back in defiance on the KJV, I think most of us love and respect it. Does that mean, however, that newer versions should never be printed?

If you go to the bookstore today and buy a KJV Bible, it will most likely be the edition of 1769. Between 1611 and 1769, many revisions were made. Those who dislike the KJV often point to these revisions as proof that the "1611" was not as perfect as is often cited, while KJV supporters claim that the revisions were minor. The simple fact is that even since 1769, the English language has changed dramatically. For example, the KJV declares that the Word of God is "quick, and powerful" (Hebrews 4:12). In my mind, I automatically envision a sword zooming through the sky all by itself, slashing quickly at its enemies. However, the Greek word behind "quick" means "alive." The KJV translators were correct in their translation, because "quick" also means "alive." However, the word "quick" has a far more common meaning that our minds automatically affix to the word. Therefore, modern translations appropriately use the word "living" or "alive."

Another example, which I am a little hesitant to bring up because it has become so engrained in our thinking, comes from II Timothy 2:15. In the KJV the verse begins with "Study to shew thyself approved unto God..." How do we get approval from God? We study! So we go to AWANA to memorize Scripture. The truth, however, is that Paul was not encouraging Timothy to go to school or read more books. The word he used means to "make haste" or "be diligent," and is translated with that meaning every other place it appears in the KJV. Again, the KJV translators

did not get it wrong. We just no longer use the word “study” in that way. Just to make it clear, going to AWANA is good and memorizing Scripture is one of the best ways to “study to shew thyself approved unto God.” However, Paul’s command encompasses much more than mere study.

We should also take into consideration the fact that words change meaning over time. For example, in the KJV, the term “bastards” appears in Hebrews 12:8. While this word means “illegitimate children,” it has come to be used more as a curse word than a designation for a child born out of wedlock. Therefore, other translations prefer to use “not legitimate” (NIV) or “illegitimate children” (ESV). This is a perfectly acceptable translation of the Greek word *nothos* and is also suitable for use in our society. Another unsavory word appears in I Samuel 25:22 (and five other places). Look it up in the KJV and see if you would prefer your children to use another word that means exactly the same thing. Another acceptable (and more palatable) way of translating this word would be “urinate.” It was a derogatory term used to describe males, and in most other versions the phrase is simply translated as “males.” And while we’re on the subject, I feel much more comfortable talking about Balaam’s “dumb donkey” (II Peter 2:16) than the “dumb a--” in the KJV. Fewer snickers from the kids that way.

Even the translators of the King James Version of 1611 understood that changes in language require updates to translations of the Bible. In the preface to their translation they instructed the reader that “if anything be halting, or superfluous, or not so agreeable to the original, the same may be corrected, and the truth set in place.”

Which translation should be used depends also on the purpose for which it will be used. A serious scholar will often prefer a literal (formal) translation so he can view all pertinent conjunctions and diagram the sentences.<sup>28</sup> Others may prefer a more dynamic translation because of the readability factor.

Consider handing a KJV to a person who has no knowledge of the Bible or Christianity. He opens it with anticipation only to find older English words such as “thee” and “thou” and words ending in “eth.” What kind of message are we sending about the Bible? Would he not be tempted to surmise that the Bible is an elite book that is for intellectual people or for those of the past? If the original writers had penned it with this kind of language, then I would be the first to accept it as the way it should be translated. However, the Scriptures were written in such a way that people could understand. Why do we take something easy to understand and make it more difficult?

### **My personal conclusion**

After studying this whole matter, I came to two conclusions. The first deals with the underlying texts, and the second takes into consideration the methods of translation.

First, I see no problem considering all the texts that have been discovered. The Textus Receptus is a family of similar manuscripts, not a single document that has been miraculously preserved.

Therefore, it is beneficial for all the available manuscripts to be compared.

Second, because I believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, I prefer for my English translation to follow as closely to the original language as possible, while keeping its readability. Therefore, when choosing a translation, we should select one that is as literal (formally equivalent) as possible while being translated in a way that we can understand. If you can understand the King James Version without trouble, I recommend it. If you prefer something more readable (and lean toward the Textus Receptus), then try the New King James. Other good formally equivalent translations are the ESV and the NASB. I would caution against making a dynamic translation your Bible of choice, primarily because it places too much dependence on the translator.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

As I mentioned earlier, I know that the topic of Bible versions is a “hot potato” and one’s view on the subject is often a criterion for fellowship or separation. Nevertheless, it is important for us to know why we believe what we believe.

I also think that the question “Which Bible version do you read?” should be usurped by the more important question “Are you reading your Bible?” Furthermore, “Are you putting to practice what you are reading?” Donald Whitney colorfully records that “some wag remarked that the worst dust storm in history would happen if all church members who were neglecting their Bibles dusted them off simultaneously.”<sup>29</sup> As far as I’m concerned, if we are not habitually reading and obeying our Bibles, we have no right to debate which version is “correct.”

## INFORMATION ABOUT SPECIFIC VERSIONS

### **King James Version (KJV)**

Originally translated: 1611

Translation Method: Formal Equivalence

Old Testament Text: Second Rabbinic Bible (Ben-Chayyim)

New Testament Text: Theodore de Beza 1588/89 (in the line which later became known as the Textus Receptus)

### **English Revised Version**

*A revision of the KJV, based on differences of Wescott and Hort (1881) and Tregelles (1857).*

Originally Translated: 1885 (NT in 1881)

Translation Method: Formal Equivalence

Old Testament Text: The Preface indicates that it uses the Masoretic text, only to differ in exceptional cases.

New Testament Text: Revised using Wescott and Hort (1881) and Tregelles (1857)

### **American Standard Version (ASV)**

It was a revision of the English Revised Version of 1885.

Originally translated: 1901

Translation method: Formal Equivalence

Old Testament Text: Masoretic Text with Septuagint influence

New Testament Text: Wescott and Hort (1881), Tregelles (1857)

Note: The Jehovah's Witnesses used the ASV until the publication of the New World Translation, partly because it translates the name of God as "Jehovah."

### **Revised Standard Version (RSV)**

Originally Translated: 1952, as a revision of the ASV

Old Testament Text: Masoretic (BHS) with influence from ancient versions

New Testament Text: Nestle-Aland N.T.G. 17<sup>th</sup> edition

Translation Method: Formal Equivalence

### **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

Originally Translated: 1989

Translation Method: Formal equivalence – the “To the Reader” section indicates that they followed the maxim “As literal as possible, as free as necessary”

Old Testament Text: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS)

New Testament Text: Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies (1966, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, revised in 1983)

Pertinent Information: Attempts to use gender-neutral language when possible

### **New American Standard Bible (NASB)**

Originally Translated: 1971, updated 1995

Translation Method: Formal Equivalence

Old Testament Text: Kittel’s *Biblica Hebraica* with Septuagint and other influence

New Testament Text: Mostly Nestle 26<sup>th</sup> edition (23<sup>rd</sup> edition in the 1971 version)

Pertinent Information: The 1995 update removed pronouns such as “thee” and “thou” when referring to God. The NASB is considered to be a very accurate translation. It originally attempted to preserve the literal accuracy of the ASV.

### **English Standard Version (ESV)**

The ESV is a revision of the RSV (1971)

Originally Translated: 2001

Translation Method: Formal Equivalence

Old Testament Text: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS 1966/1967), influenced by Septuagint

New Testament Text: Nestle-Aland N.T.G. 27<sup>th</sup> edition

### **New King James Version (NKJV)**

*The NKJV was designed to emulate the word flow as well as the spelling of the KJV.*

Originally Translated: 1982

Translation Method: Formal Equivalence

Old Testament Text: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS 1966/1967), comparing Bomberg 1524, the Septuagint, Vulgate, Dead Sea Scrolls. Note that the KJV had to rely on previous versions in some sections where the information was limited. The NKJV translators made use of new findings of the Hebrew text in these places.

New Testament Text: Textus Receptus, with variations based on the Critical or Majority texts indicated in the footnotes

### **New International Version (NIV)**

Originally Translated: 1978, revised 1984, 2011

*The TNIV (Today's New International Version) was published in 2005 (NT in 2002), making use of gender-neutral pronouns. The 2011 revision attempts to bring these two together.*

Translation Method: Dynamic Equivalence

Old Testament Text: *Biblia Hebraica*, with input from the Dead Sea Scrolls and many other ancient texts.

New Testament Text: Eclectic approach but based on the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament. When readings between texts varied, the translators determined which to use. When the original was unclear, it was indicated in footnotes.

### **New Living Translation (NLT)**

*The NLT was designed to be an easy-to read translation that can be easily read aloud.*

Translated: 1996, 2004, 2007

Old Testament Text: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS 1977), comparing other ancient texts

New Testament Text: Greek New Testament (UBS 4<sup>th</sup> revised edition, 1993) and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA 27<sup>th</sup> edition, 1993)

Translation Method: Dynamic Equivalence

### **The Living Bible (TLB)**

Translated: 1971

The Living Bible is a rewording of the ASV by Kenneth Taylor.

Translation Method: Paraphrase

### **The Message**

Translated: 1993-2002

The Message is a rendering of Hebrew and Greek by Eugene H. Peterson.

Translation Method: Paraphrase

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Baker Book House, 1998), 225.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>3</sup> Metzger, Bruce, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 186-206.

<sup>4</sup> Roy E. Beacham and Kevin T. Bauder, ed. *One Bible Only? Examining Exclusive Claims for the King James Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Preface to New King James Version (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1982). Can be viewed at [http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/cms\\_content?page=186191&sp=57319](http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/cms_content?page=186191&sp=57319)

<sup>6</sup> Beacham, 67.

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Constantine Von Tischendorf, *When Were Our Gospels Written?* Translated by the Religious Tract Society [book online] (New York: American Tract Society). Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Constantin von Tischendorf. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/tischendorf/gospels.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Metzger, 99.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-100.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>12</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William E Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, reprint 1980), 385.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.compellingtruth.org/divided-Bible-chapters-verses.html>

<sup>14</sup> Beacham, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Harold J. Greenlee, *The Text of the new Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can you Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> D. A. Waite, *Defending the King James Bible: A Four-Fold Superiority* (Collingswood, NJ: The Bible for Today Press, 1992), 89.

<sup>21</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 126.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas K. Kutilek in Beacham, 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>25</sup> White, 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> White, 16-17.

<sup>28</sup> Robert W. Milliman, in Beacham, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991, Sixth printing, 1994), 24.