

# Choosing a Bible Translation that Works for You

by Dr. Henry Oursler

A few months ago, I wrote an article addressing the “King James Version Only” controversy that is facing many Christians today. I circulated that article here in Raleigh and included it in one of my prayer letters to you and received much feedback and encouragement. The one question that still kept cropping up was, “*Which Bible translation is best?*”

The four English translations used most widely by evangelical Christians are the King James Version (KJV), The New King James Version (NKJV), the New International Version (NIV), and the New American Standard Bible (NASB). A new one, The English Standard Version (ESV) is quickly becoming equally popular.

The KJV is the oldest of the four and continues to be the favorite of many. It is known as the Authorized Version of 1611 because King James I approved the project to create an authoritative English Bible. Although it contains many obsolete words (some of which have changed in meaning), many people appreciate its dignity and majesty. The NKJV is a similar translation, taken from the same group of ancient manuscripts, that simply updates the archaic language of the KJV.

The NIV was completed in 1978. Its translators did not attempt to translate strictly word for word, but aimed more for equivalent ideas. As a result, the NIV does not follow the exact wording of the original Greek and Hebrew texts as closely as the KJV and NASB versions do. Nevertheless, it can be considered a faithful translation of the original texts, and its lucid readability makes it quite popular, especially for devotional reading. It is also the version that I find being used in the majority of churches in which I speak.

The NASB, completed in 1971, is a revision of the American Standard Version of 1901. It is a literal translation from the Hebrew and Greek languages, making it a favorite for serious Bible study. It has recently (1996) been updated and revised. This is the version that I see most serious Bible students using.

The ESV (2003) is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences in grammar between current English and the original languages.

Which version is the best for you to use? Ultimately, that choice needs to be made by each person individually. Here are several suggestions:

**1** **Take each translation for a “test drive.”** Read two or three of your favorite chapters in each translation. Which did you like best? Why? Each of the versions have their own strengths and weaknesses, but each are reliable translations of the Word of God. You will soon see your favorite.

**2 Learn to use the tools of Bible study.** Ideally, the serious student of Scripture should become familiar enough with concordances and word-study aids so that even without a thorough knowledge of the original languages, he or she can explore some of the nuances of meaning that arise out of the original texts.

**3 Use each version as you study a passage of Scripture.** One of the richest steps in personal Bible study is to compare how various translations render certain words and phrases. Seen in that light, the possession of several good Bible translations can be a definite aid to understanding God's Word. Perhaps God has given us so many good translations today, not to confuse us, but to deepen our understanding of His holy Word!

**For further study:**

James White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995)

Henry Oursler, *Bible Study Methods and Interpretation* — Small Group Seminary course, 14 tapes w/150 page notebook. To order, send \$55 plus \$5 shipping to *CrossTrainers*, 12725 Aston Oaks Drive, Ft. Myers, FL 33912.