

# Perspective

*Living Life From God's Point of View*

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## *Is the King James Version of the Bible the Only Proper Version to Use?*

*By Dr. Henry Oursler*

In the last two weeks, I have counseled with two people who have been confronted by Christians who believe the King James Version of the Bible is the *only* Bible that is authorized by God, that all other translations are both inferior and corrupt, and that believers today are being seduced by “modernism” infiltrating the Church through these new translations.

Does that sound surprising to you? It shouldn't. This controversy is nothing new. I remember twenty-six years ago as a college student attending a conference in Atlanta and wanting to visit First Baptist Church to hear Charles Stanley preach. Somewhere on Peachtree Avenue, we got lost and wound up driving around for 45 minutes. Finally, at 11:30, in an effort to salvage some degree of a worship experience, we drove into the parking lot of the next church we saw. To say the least, it wasn't what we were looking for. Among other things, the pastor spent half of his sermon railing against those who would use any other translation than the “Authorized Version.” It was my first of many experiences running into people for whom this was such a major issue that they were willing to “go to the mat” and fight for it.

My goal here is not to condemn the King James Version. It is a good translation. For some of you, it is the Bible you have grown up with and the only one you have ever used. All of the verses you have memorized are in the King James, and you know exactly on which side of the page some of your favorite verses are. That's great. I wouldn't want you to even think about changing translations.

But the question here is not one of preference. The question raised by the “King James Only” proponents is one of authority and divine sanction. Has God Himself authorized only one translation of His inerrant Word? Are all other translations the work of the devil? Let me quote from the letter I wrote to one of my friends this last week who was dealing with this situation. . . .

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You mentioned briefly that you were having some problems in your church with “King James only” believers. Though their case is built on very tenuous grounds, I have had very little success in dealing with these people — for the simple reason that they will not listen to logical reasoning. If they did, they would not even be in the situation they are currently in, for their position is indefensible. However, their minds are already made up — and you and I are then branded as infidels who “do not have the mind of Christ.”

Let me give you a little background to the controversy. Our English / American Bibles (and here I'm primarily speaking about the New Testament) are obviously translations from the Greek (with aid from the Latin and other mid-Eastern languages). Those Greek manuscripts (a manuscript is a hand-written copy over against a printed / xeroxed copy) are grouped in "families" based on similarity of content, age, geography, handwriting style, etc.

There are two key factors in a manuscript. *The first is age*, or closeness to the original. Obviously a translator would like to have a manuscript copy nearest to the autograph version (the one Paul / Luke etc. actually wrote). *The other factor is the number of manuscripts we have*. Let's say we have ten copies of a manuscript from family "A" and one thousand copies that are grouped in family "B." Obviously the weight would lean toward family "B" as being the better manuscript family and therefore more authentic, where there were differences between it and the family "A" manuscript.

The King James Version was first published in 1611 and was based on a type of manuscript called the "Textus Receptus," which to this day has a very high number of manuscript copies in its family. There are a fair number of scholars today who are "TR" (Textus Receptus) guys — people who say "*I go with the numbers — and there are so many TR manuscripts, that must be the best.*" The problem is that many of these manuscripts are hundreds of years removed from the first century. That presents a big problem — and it is why the majority of scholars today place a greater emphasis on those manuscripts closer to the first century. The *New International Version* and *The New American Standard Version* both fall into that category. That is why you will find some fairly significant discrepancies between the NIV/NASB and KJV.

Now, just a word about the KJV. Just because it is based on the Textus Receptus doesn't mean it is a bad translation. In its time, it was an honorable translation. In fact, it is still fairly good — just like a 1961 Chevy is still a fairly good car. But there have been engineering and technological advancements in the last 36 years that make today's cars better. Similarly, there have been archeological discoveries, linguistic advancements, etc., that make today's translations better.

For those who still argue "the numbers weigh heavy," there is *The New King James Version*, which is frankly a much more desirable translation than the old KJV. It takes modern scholarship and discovery into account, along with an updating of the archaic Elizabethan language, while still basing its translation on the Textus Receptus.

Now, having said all that, how do we respond to the folks who cry "*liberal,*" "*distorted,*" and "*compromising*" at anything that is not the tried and true King James? I would offer several responses:

1. God's Word is inspired and inerrant in its *original autographs*. It was the *writers and their writings* that were inspired. But we cannot and must not claim that same inspiration and authority for translators. That is nowhere supported in the pages of Scripture, even in the KJV!

2. Language changes. We do not speak 17<sup>th</sup> century English today any more so than Russians do. Russians need their own Bible translation, in the language they speak in 2001 — and so do we.
3. Some will argue, “*Yes, but the KJV has stood the test of time. It’s been around for close to 400 years.*” And my response is “*So what’s your point? The Arian heresy (the modern version is Mormonism) has been around for close to 2,000 years — that doesn’t make it right, does it?*” Simply to argue based on longevity is to erect a straw man that won’t hold up.
4. Finally, let me make one cultural observation. It’s one that I have experienced personally, and though certainly not true in all cases, it has been verified many times in my own experience: those who are all caught up in the “KJV only” fight are usually not interested in reaching the world for Christ or truly building other believers up in the faith. They are more interested in fighting in-house battles with other Christians and pridefully demonstrating why they are the only ones who are right. It’s my experience that all of my arguments fall on deaf ears because their minds are already made up — and my response has usually been to part peacefully and get on with the real business of the kingdom of God.

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I hope this discussion has been helpful and has highlighted for you some important issues. One of our goals in Grace Global Network is to help people think biblically: *to know what they believe and why they believe it*. God bless you as you strive to do the same.