

# Perspective

*Living Life From God's Point of View*

## Which Bible Translation Is Best?

By Dr. Henry Oursler

One of the most asked questions I receive comes from Christians who want to know which translation of the Bible is best. Which one comes closest to the original meaning? Which one should they buy? Is there one that is better for study and one that is better for reading? Why do two good translations come up with such a different rendering for a particular verse of Scripture?

There are two basic theories and/or methodologies of Bible translation.<sup>1</sup> The first has been called “*Formal Equivalence*.” This is the approach of the New American Standard Bible (NASB). According to this theory, the translator attempts to render the exact words (hence the word *formal*—form for form, or word for word) of the original language into the receptor language. The second has been called “*Dynamic Equivalence*,” a term coined by the eminent translation theorist Eugene Nida. This is the approach that the translators of the New International Version (NIV) have chosen. Nida has defined the ideal of translation as “*the reproduction in a receptor language [i.e., English] of the closest natural equivalent of the source language [i.e., Hebrew or Greek] message, first in terms of meaning, and second in terms of style.*” Nida, therefore, believes that a translation should have the same dynamic impact upon modern readers as the original had upon its audience. He elaborates on this as follows:

*Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose.*

Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence has become a standard or ideal that many modern translators have attempted to attain. Goodspeed expressed this desire about his *American Translation* when he said, “*I wanted my translation to make on the reader something of the impression the New Testament must have made on its earliest readers.*” Another way of speaking about a dynamic equivalent translation is to call it a thought-for-thought translation (as opposed to a word-for-word). Of course, to translate the thought of the original language requires that the text be interpreted accurately and then rendered in understandable idiom. Thus, the goal of any dynamic equivalent translation is for it to be exegetically accurate and idiomatically powerful.

A good translation must be reliable and readable—that is, it must reliably replicate the meaning of the text without sacrificing its readability. At various points in the Scriptures, there is evidence that the biblical documents were written to be read aloud, usually in public worship (see Nehemiah 8; Luke 4:16-17; 1 Timothy 4:13; Revelation 1:3). Undoubtedly those ancient hearers of the Word understood the message as it was delivered to them. Any translation should be just as fluent and intelligible to a

(over)

modern audience. This, of course, does not mean that translation can replace interpretation of difficult passages, as in the case of the eunuch who needed Philip's interpretation of Isaiah 53 (see Acts 8:28-35); but a good rendering minimizes the need for unnecessary exegesis (a technical term used by Bible scholars for "drawing out the meaning of the text").

Ever since the time of Jerome, who produced the translation known as the Latin Vulgate, there has been a debate over what is the best method to translate the Bible: the word-for-word approach or the sense-for-sense. In a letter to a person called Pammachius, Jerome exhibited this tension when he wrote:

*For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the Holy Scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word.*

When it came to translating the Scriptures, Jerome, contrary to his normal practice, felt the compulsion to render word for word; but, as is well known, he did not always do so in the Vulgate. Yet very few would now demand it of him because most agree that strict literalism can greatly distort the original meaning.

Martin Luther, the great reformer and translator of the German Bible, believed that a translator's paramount task was to reproduce the spirit of the author; at times this could only be accomplished by an idiomatic rendering, though when the original required it, word for word was to be used. Other translators have preferred to be very literal because they feared that in translating on a thought-for-thought basis they might alter the text according to their own subjective interpretation. Indeed, it is true that a word-for-word rendering can be executed more easily than a thought-for-thought one; for in doing the latter, the translator must enter into the same thought as the author—and who can always know with certainty what the author's original, intended meaning was? Therefore, a dynamic-equivalent or thought-for-thought translation should be done by a group of scholars (to guard against personal subjectivism), who employ the best exegetical tools. In this regard, Beekman and Callow give excellent advice:

*Translating faithfully involves knowing what Scripture means. This is fundamental to all idiomatic translation, and it is at this point that exegesis comes in. Toussaint, in an article in Notes on Translation, defines exegesis as follows: "Exegesis is a critical study of the Bible according to hermeneutical principles with the immediate purpose of interpreting the text." In other words, its immediate purpose is to ascertain, as accurately as possible, using all the means available, just what the original writer, "moved by the Holy Spirit," meant as he dictated or penned his words, phrases, and sentences. Exegesis thus lies at the heart of all translation work, for if the translator does not know what the original means, then it is impossible for him to translate faithfully.*

It is true that language is constantly changing. Archeology is also continually shedding additional light on manuscripts and textual criticism. Our Bible translations do have need of periodic revision and updating. My encouragement would be to choose a popular modern translation (or two) and to supplement it with a paraphrase or modern rendering of the Scripture, such as *The Message*, by Eugene

Peterson. When it comes to Scripture memory, stick to one translation. At the Classical Christian School we are involved in, we have students memorize verses in the NIV because of its readability and ease of understanding. At our church, I typically use the NIV when I preach, but find myself many times using the New American Standard Version because of its word-for-word accuracy in translation.

These translations are also available in many formats, some with study notes, which often prove to be a helpful guide to understanding. There are “children’s versions,” “youth versions” and “adult versions” with age-appropriate study notes and guidelines. Be careful, however, not to fall into the trap of bypassing personal study and simply reading the notes “to see what the Bible means.” As always, it is best to seek the counsel of the pastor(s) at your church for input and direction.

Choose a Bible that is best for you . . . and then carefully follow Paul’s admonition to “*be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.*” Now, if I can only remember which translation I quoted that from . . .

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Guide to Bible Versions*, Phillip W. Comfort (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1991.