

## MODERN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

- with special reference to the  
New International Version of the  
New Testament.

*This article is a report of a special committee convened to consider the N.I.V. The report was commissioned and approved by the Council of The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches; as such, it does not express an official B.E.C. standpoint. We have included this report as a helpful basis for discussion of an important subject.*

### Part I The Basic Issues Raised by Modern Trans- lations

#### 1. What should a translation be?

a) Based on the best original text.

Discussion of what constitutes such an original is a complex area of Biblical scholarship. The article on 'Text and versions' in the IVF New Bible Dictionary covers 16 pages and the five pages on the NT indicate some of the main issues.

b) Faithful to the original

True evangelicals face a dilemma. Verbal inspiration accepts that actual, and so individual words are inspired. But 'word by word' translation is impossible. This is inherent in differences in structure in any two languages, e.g. Greek has an aorist tense with no direct equivalent in English.

c) Avoiding interpretation

Translators should not try to be wiser than the Holy Spirit who inspired the Biblical writers. Since there is purpose in what He chose to include there must also be purpose in what He chose to exclude from His written revelation.

d) Harmonious

Accepting differences in style of writing by

different human authors the One Divine Author does not contradict Himself. Even if the same word in the original needs varied translation in different places the root idea remains the same, e.g. Leon Morris on the essential objective reference to the wrath of God in propitiation, Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2

e) Acceptable to the receptor language

Terminology and style should be in contemporary use of the greater part of the population. Wycliffe Bible Translators use a textbook which suggests *"the goal should be a translation that is so rich in vocabulary, so idiomatic in phrases, so correct in construction, so smooth in flow of thought, so clear in meaning and so elegant in style that it does not appear to be a translation at all, and yet, at the same time, faithfully transmits the message of the original"*.

In practice difficulties arise due to variations in one language as a result of:- dialect areas, e.g. USA and UK; cultural groups, e.g. public schools and immigrants; generation differences. See further para 4.

## 2. What part does a translation play in our understanding the Bible?

To some extent this will depend on whether the translation is used for personal reading only or as a basis for preaching which includes explanation (Acts 8: 30-31). Current attitudes seem to include these:-

a) It is everything. The modern translation explains itself.

This view ignores 1 Cor.2:14 and the ordinance of preaching. In extreme form it amounts to the heresy of Pelagianism, assuming the sinner's unaided power to convert himself.

b) It is nothing. (Almost) any translation into English will do.

This seems behind the view that if the AV was good enough for Whitefield and Spurgeon (if not the Apostle Paul!) then it is good enough for us. This ignores 2 Cor.1:13 (NIV rightly has 'understand' for 'epiginosko')

cp. also para 4.

c) It is really something but not everything. Unless the translation conveys something to those speaking the receptor language it is useless. But some words and ideas have a specialised use in the Bible which requires the aid of the Holy Spirit for spiritual understanding. The day of Pentecost was characterised by Acts 2:37 as well as Acts 2:6.

Clearly the Holy Spirit can and does use both translations which some now call archaic and some called modern. But we can hardly be indifferent to the challenge of providing Him with the best possible translation available to us.

### 3. How important are the theological pre-suppositions of translators?

They all have some. There is no such thing as 'pure Science' or 'absolute objectivity'. We all view the world and our work from the standpoint of our own position. This is a material question for translators.

a) Their view of textual criticism will affect the foundation text from which they translate.

b) Any hesitancy about verbal inspiration will lead to less care about the accuracy of individual words.

c) Their doctrinal views will affect their rendering of disputed words, e.g. C.H.Dodd's well-known view on propitiation is reflected in NEB rendering of 1 John 2:2 as '*remedy*'.

d) An acceptance of 1 Cor.2:14 will mean a modest claim for the fruits of translation.

### 4. What is 'modern' English?

No language still being spoken is entirely static. New words and forms are always being introduced and exist alongside older forms. Some cultural groups develop their own jargon, some of which is absorbed into wider usage but some of which

eventually disappears.

a) Changes in meaning do occur. Words used in a previous way can be a stumbling block to understanding, e.g. 'prevent' in the AV of 1 Thess.4:15.

b) Changes in style occur. The ponderous has given way to the snappy. But to be racy and colloquial may be inconsistent with the dignity of the subject matter of the Bible. There is some truth in the dictum that "*the medium is the message*". Do we want the Bible to read like today's newspaper? Which newspaper?

c) Changes in usage occur. Already by the time of AV the forms 'Thou' and 'Thee' were no longer general terms of address for the second person although always used as honorific forms of referring to God. This was a form of English usage not dictated by the Greek language where no such distinction as thou/you exists. Today many older Christians do find the use of 'you' for God irreverent. But many younger people brought up without the AV find the use of 'Thou' a problem in understanding the Bible and spoken prayers. A new generation of youth leaders and preachers are dropping the use of 'Thou' and it is only honest to say that evangelical usage of 'you' for God is increasing.

##### 5. What dangers are there in a multiplicity of translations?

The C.L.C. catalogue currently lists 12 different English translations of the New Testament as well as a book called '*The New Testament from 26 translations*'.

a) The fascination of novelty. The latest may not always be the best. 'Translation tasting' could replace 'sermon tasting'.

b) Translations will be accepted because of commercial success and sales promotion rather than on their merits as translations. "*If everyone is using it, it must be good!*"

c) Doctrinal slants will appear. If doctrine should come before experience then accuracy must be more important than slickness.

d) The practice of memorising Scripture will be at risk where there is no standard text among Christians.

e) Difficulties are already being found where there is no agreed translation for group Bible study, pulpit exposition and the congregational reading of Psalms.

f) Local church unity can be harmed by a generation gap which polarises around translations. The devil is always looking for such a problem to exploit.

#### 6. How will a modern translation be used?

Already these trends are discernible among evangelicals:-

a) As an aid to understanding the message of Scripture alongside other versions in private use.

b) As a tool for evangelism, where direct contact with those unfamiliar with AV language is intended, e.g. posters, tracts.

c) As a complete replacement for the AV throughout the whole range of ministry in a local church. Some have "*gone over to the RSV*".

The entire replacement of the AV in dominant popularity and usage seems unlikely at the present. There are too many competitors for the title.

#### Part II A Consideration of the New International Version of the New Testament

The New International Version (NIV) was published in the USA in 1973. It is the first translation into English in the 20th Century compiled by a team of scholars who are "*all committed to the full authority and complete trustworthiness of the Scriptures, which they believe to be God's word in written form*" [Preface].

It has been adopted by the Gideons for distribution in schools in the UK and is in increasing use

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by evangelicals. Our concern has been to consider whether the translation itself lives up to what its users should expect from translators holding an evangelical view of Scripture.

The task is, to say the least, extensive. If there are about 8,500 verses in the Greek NT and an average of 30 words and textual or grammatical issues in each verse then the translators have been faced with a quarter of a million decisions to make. Although our Committee considered the whole of the NT, some parts were studied in more depth than others. Our conclusions are given here, each followed by further notes on the basis for our views.

### 1. The original text

In our view no translation should be disregarded solely because it is based on an original text which departs from the Textus Receptus. The NIV text does so depart from the TR but does not slavishly follow any one alternative text.

Notes The Committee approached this intricate and controversial subject with some care, conscious that our brief summary may over-simplify the issue.

Among many ancient manuscripts available to translators of the NT there is one copy found by Tischendorf at Sinai known as '*Aleph*' and another in the Vatican known as '*B*'. The so-called '*traditional text*' (Textus Receptus - TR) is the form of Greek original underlying the AV of 1611.

The NIV has been strongly criticised for its failure to adopt the TR. The critics argue that TR represents most closely the original and that texts such as Aleph and B contain variants introduced deliberately to weaken the doctrines of the Trinity and the Deity of Christ.

Evangelicals have not universally subscribed to this argument. Donald Macleod's article in the June, 1972 *Banner of Truth* quotes Warfield, Machen,

Cunningham and Spurgeon in support of an 'eclectic text', that is, one compiled from all available sources. It is clear that no strictly Biblical argument can be advanced for the primacy of any text. Nor does Scripture give the Church the authority to confer upon any text the status given for instance to the Vulgate Latin by Roman Catholics.

The principal argument for the use of an eclectic text is that, since no one text is sacrosanct, the use of established textual criteria is indicated to obtain the most authentic text. The NIV proceeds on this basis. This means in practice that in some cases NIV uses Aleph B texts in preference to TR. In other cases it uses TR rather than Aleph B. That is, NIV does not systematically attack TR but adopts each reading on its merits. The Committee did not, however, agree with all the textual conclusions of NIV, notably in Matthew 5:22; Mark 1:2; Luke 2:43 and John 1:18. While respecting the concern felt by the advocates of the primacy of TR the Committee believe that to dismiss the NIV on the basis of its use of an eclectic text is unjustified.

## 2. Footnotes

The NIV footnotes are not always helpful. The textual evidence is treated inconsistently and in our view sometimes wrongly.

Notes It seems unnecessary to be told so often that 'Christ' means 'Messiah' or that 'evil spirits' is literally 'unclean spirits'; in the latter case it would seem better to translate as the footnote.

More important is the textual evidence. In Matthew and Mark together there are only 43 footnotes drawing attention to MSS variations whereas the RSV has 80. (Moreover the textual variants might justify even more).

One particularly misleading footnote is on Matthew 5:44 which says, "Some late MSS add, 'bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you'" But another 18.

clause, "*those who despitefully use you and*", has as much MSS support as the two clauses mentioned; two of the MSS referred to cannot be classed as 'late' and the 'some' masks the fact that almost all Greek MSS include these words.

### 3. English style

In general the accuracy of translation renders the original meaning in good, flowing modern English, giving special help with difficult passages.

Notes The narratives of the Gospels read well and there are many good and helpful renderings, e.g. Matthew 1:19, "*did not want to expose her to public disgrace*", and Matthew 3:14, "*But John tried to deter him*".

The doctrinal reasoning of the Epistle to the Romans comes through well, e.g. the first and second Adam in 5:12-21, the two natures in chapter 7 and the debate about practical issues in chapter 14.

Typology is handled in clear fashion, e.g. Melchisedec in Heb.7. Down-to-earth clarity brings us face to face with the essential issues for application to our present day in the faith and works debate in James 2.

The Committee acknowledges that the NIV use of 'you' for God would limit its usefulness among some at the present time but does not consider this factor justifies its rejection.

### 4. Liberties taken

In narrative passages particularly, more liberty is taken with the original than we consider to be justified.

Notes The preface tells us the translators "*have striven for more than word-for-word translation*" and this has led to a greater freeness than seems warranted, e.g. Mark 3:6 omits '*immediately*', Matthew 1:20 and elsewhere omits the dramatic effect of '*behold*'. Matthew 21:33ff the same word is

translated 'farmers' and then 'tenants'. Matthew 6: 25 the word 'important' is added. Matthew 15:9 "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" becomes "their teachings are but rules made by man".

Many more examples could be given and of alterations of sentence structure. Singly they are often not vital but taken cumulatively they indicate a freer handling of the text than might have been expected.

Our review also produced examples of places where the translation of verb tenses can be faulted, e.g. Acts 19:18 'confessed' (past for present), Romans 4: 2 'had' (past for present), Romans 11:7 'sought' (past for present).

#### 5. Closer accuracy in the Epistles

In the Epistles and Revelation less liberty is taken and the closer rendering retains the necessary theological precision.

Notes NIV retains for the most part the accepted

English theological terminology such as justification, atonement, reconciliation, wrath etc. An exception is 'credited' for 'imputed' in Romans 4 but this seems reasonable. 'Sinful nature', is an improvement on 'flesh' in Romans 7 and 8. So is 'slaves' for 'servants' in Romans 6. It is difficult to find any NIV rendering of the meaning of terms for which there is not some justification. Passages in the AV which can cause readers to lose the thread are rendered more clearly without loss of accuracy, e.g. Romans 2:25-27; 5:12-19.

In the great majority of instances NIV is an improvement on AV in the matter of tenses, e.g. Acts 2:47 'who were being saved' [pres. part], Romans 6:4 'we were buried' [aorist], Romans 5:12 'all sinned' [aorist], Romans 9:17 'I raised you up' [aorist], Romans 10:3 'they did not submit' [aorist], 1 Cor.1: 18 'are perishing, are being saved' [pres. part] 1 Cor.2:6 'are coming to nothing' [pres. part], Rev.

1:5 'him who loves us' [pres. part].

## 6. Doctrinal purity

No major doctrinal issue is raised by any deviations we could discover from the original text used by the translators.

Notes In fact their choice of original text is not dictated by doctrinal considerations. See para 1 above.

There are deviations from the Greek which the Committee would criticise as we have indicated. But we could find no renderings of root meanings or choice of tenses which seemed motivated by an heretical doctrinal position.

The absence of the term '*propitiation*' will disappoint some, but '*atonement sacrifice*' which replaces it retains the necessary objective reference lacking in other modern translations.

An overall study of the NIV NT would not bring the reader into heresy. Under the blessing of the Holy Spirit it could bring him to believe in Him who said, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples*" John 8:31.

FOOTNOTE A detailed investigation of the New International Version translation of 1 Corinthians has been made also by the Rev John Cook. His "*serious reservations*" concerning it arise not from the literary form but the "*failure in many places to translate the Greek accurately and faithfully despite the claim in the preface that 'their first concern has been the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the New Testament writers' and their avowed objective 'to be faithful to the original text in Greek, and ... retain only what the original languages say, not inject additional elements of unwarranted paraphrasing'*"

Mr Cook wants the NIV "*translation of 1 Corinthians to be revised in the interests of accuracy and fidelity. It is a matter of great regret that what*

*has been promoted as an evangelical translation should have such major faults and inadequacies"*  
One reason, he suggests, for the failure to translate accurately is the use of "literary consultants who are not New Testament scholars, the avowed aim to be accurate and faithful in translation is jeopardised by this concern for literary style and acceptability in Modern English, such a procedure tends to subject the wisdom of God's revelation to the 'wisdom of this world' contrary to the apostolic method insisted upon in this very epistle."

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