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# Bible Versions for Public Worship

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I am making two assumptions in this article. Firstly, I presuppose an unconditional acceptance of the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Secondly, I am assuming that the issue to be considered is not one about the text of Scripture, whether we prefer a 'received', majority or eclectic text, but the principles involved in the translation of that text.

It has to be said by way of introduction that some pastors and churches make the choice of the version used for public worship not on the basis of any real principles, but on the grounds of prejudice dressed up as principle.

## Evangelical attitudes to Bible versions

### 1. Pathological Conservatives

Erasmus complained in his day that 'some people are too conservative to change their shoes or their underwear or eat fresh eggs'<sup>1</sup>. In the same way, James Buchanan lamented the tendency of some to argue, 'what is new in Theology is not true, and what is true is not new'<sup>2</sup>.

Their attitude is best summarised by the adage that 'what has been is best, what is now is decadent, and what shall be is unthinkable'. Pathological conservatism is a hysterical commitment to tradition. Every age has its portion of pathological conservatives. Sutor of the Sorbonne opposed Erasmus' intention of correcting the Vulgate on the grounds that if he did so, 'the entire authority of Holy Scripture would collapse, love and faith would be extinguished, heresies and schisms would abound, blasphemy would be committed against the Holy Spirit, the authority of theologians would be shaken, and indeed the Catholic Church would collapse from the foundations'<sup>3</sup>.

A year after the Authorised Version had been published, Hugh Broughton wrote his book, 'A Censure of the Late Translation for our Churches', in which he declared that the AV translation 'was so poorly done that it would grieve him as long as he lived. He insisted that he would rather be tied between wild horses and torn apart than let it go forth among the people'<sup>4</sup>.

It is no surprise to find in the twentieth century this tradition of hostility to new translations continued. Indeed, Professor J P Lewis has noted, 'that the feeling towards the KJV when it was new was no different from that shown towards new versions in the twentieth century'<sup>5</sup>.

### 2. Pathological Progressives

These have their home base in Athens where they spend 'their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas'<sup>6</sup>. They are often young men, although not always, and view everything said, done or produced before yesterday as belonging to the dark ages. They see today as the best day in which to have been alive so far and tomorrow as full of potential and promise.

These 'Athenians' are great enthusiasts for Bible versions. The latest is always the best. Each new version is the last word in skilful translation technique and absolutely magnificent. Each new translation is viewed as even better than the previous ones which were also lauded as best.

Pathological progressives are every publisher's dream. They supply such enthusiastic quotable quotes that readers are left wondering whether the latest version has introduced at least the millenium, if not eternity!

### 3. Uncomplicated Traditionalists

Some people are honest enough to admit that their choice of Bible version arises out of nothing more than tradition. They love their old version. God has used it to do them and others much good. They want no change and see no problem with their version which is unable to be overcome by those who want to use it. To change the old version seems to them as distressing as 'seeing a carbuncle on the face of an old friend'.

To simple traditionalists - and I use the term 'simple' not as a pejorative term nor in the patronising way - new versions do not look, feel, sound or even smell like the old version.

Each age has had its uncomplicated traditionalists. Thomas Fuller remarked with regard to the Authorised Version that, 'some of the brethren were not well pleased with this translation'<sup>7</sup>. Professor Lewis explains why: 'Published without notes, it seemed lacking in comparison with its rival, the Geneva Bible'<sup>8</sup>. Indeed the AV 'did not meet with early acceptance and most Puritans for the next three generations preferred the Geneva Bible'<sup>9</sup>. It is false to claim that the AV was the Bible of the Reformers and the Puritans. It was not. It post-dated the Reformers and was largely disdained by the Puritans for the Geneva Bible. They loved the old Bible, not the new one.

### 4. Pliable Progressives

Some people may be termed pliable progressives because they do not adopt a version because of principles but because of lack of backbone. They find it impossible to swim against any tide, to resist any trend or to refute any theory and so when the young people, or that most frightening of all spectres, *la femme formidable*, requires them to adopt a new version they meekly obey. Pressurised pastors can be pliable rather than principled and make translation choices because of popular demand rather than thoughtful choice. And so of some it must be said that, 'Molluscs have taken the place of men and men are turned to jelly-fishes'<sup>10</sup>.

### 5. Principled Conservatives

We turn from those who make their choices on an unsatisfactory basis to men of principle. It has been correctly asserted, 'What is the pre-eminent trait of a good Bible translation? The answer must be accuracy of translation'<sup>11</sup>. Conservatives have argued that accuracy of translation can only be gained by allowing the *source* languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) to control the *receptor* language (in our case, English). Hence the original language dominates the language into which translation is made. Let me illustrate this by suggesting five principles called for in a consistent translation:

a) Hebrew and Greek grammatical structure is imposed on the English form.

This will be the norm as far as is possible without making nonsense of the English

sentence. The original languages of the Bible do not shrink from using long and complicated sentences. The 202 words making up Paul's sentence in Ephesians 1:3f have been said by Hendriksen to roll 'on like a snowball tumbling down a hill picking up volume as it descends'<sup>12</sup>. The sentence consists of a mass of inter-related dependent clauses. It is a highly evocative sentence. However in modern days, 'few languages customarily use such long sentences'<sup>13</sup>. Should the translator then break up the long sentence into shorter ones or impose Greek syntax on the English? Consistent conservative principles follow Greek and Hebrew rather than modern English usage.

The AV generally illustrates this approach. In the 19th Century, John Seldon commented that in the AV 'the Bible is rather translated into English words than into English phrase'<sup>14</sup>. Hence the sentence structure of the AV is Judeo-Hellenistic rather than English.

In the same way, Hebrew often begins sentences with *WAW* and Greek with *kai* or *de* meaning 'and'. It is good Hebrew and Greek, but in the modern world 'completely contrary to good English usage'<sup>15</sup>. The conservative translator, however, allows 'and' to remain in the English text at the beginning of sentences because the source language rules the receptor language.

b) A literal word parallel is used wherever possible.

A word for word literal translation is not always possible. Dr M C Fisher gives a literal translation of Genesis 33:14, 'As for me, let me lead my gentleness to the foot of the business which is to my face and to the foot of the children that I shall come to my lord to seir'<sup>16</sup>. A word for word translation would be meaningless. A translation of equivalent meaning is necessary.

Commenting on the opening words of Philippians 3:8, Dr Hendriksen reminds us that a literal, word for word, rendering in English would be, 'But, indeed, therefore, at least, even...'<sup>17</sup>. Again a translation of equivalent meaning is needed.

The conservative translator, recognising the difficulties of complete parallel on all occasions, seeks verbal parallels wherever it is possible without making a nonsense of the English. Of course, in many cases it *is* possible.

c) Technical vocabulary is retained.

For many of those involved in developing translation theory, the retention of technical terms such as 'redemption, propitiation' etc is of no importance. They argue that a correct translation does not mean one that conveys the original technical word into English, but 'correctness must be determined by the extent to which the average reader for which a translation is intended will be likely to understand it correctly... The new focus has shifted from the form of the message to the response of the receptor'<sup>18</sup>. Additionally it is an axiom of modern translation theory that in translation the understanding of 'non-Christians has priority over Christians'<sup>19</sup>.

The conservative translator ought to respond to this in a number of ways. Firstly, he ought to accept that a limited amount of the Bible is written to non-Christians, eg John's Gospel<sup>20</sup>, but the Scriptures are primarily directed towards the church. Secondly, he should recognise that the original Scriptures contained technical language even for the people of its day and necessarily so.

Dr Fisher argues the case well. 'Since the Scriptures, like any other particular discipline or field of study, contain a unique and highly specialised message, they

employ a vocabulary or terminology peculiarly suited to their purpose. A physician does not prescribe “some of that fizzy green stuff” for his patient but uses the exact chemical formula or manufacturer’s trade name for the required medication... The lawyer, the engineer and others must express themselves in terms totally mystifying to the untaught in order to specify accurately the exacting requirements of their services. There are, similarly, matters of the spirit for which our language has the means of precise and adequate expressions as well, and each new generation of believers needs to be taught the significance of such terminology’<sup>21</sup>.

Thirdly, the conservative translator believes that the non-Christian comes to understand the message of the Bible through preaching not merely through reading. Philips are still needed to explain the Scriptures to Ethiopians’<sup>22</sup>.

d) Second person singular forms are imposed on the translation.

In his article ‘Thou or You?’, Dr O T Allis accepts that the Biblical languages and some modern languages have a plural and singular form of address. Historically the second person singular pronoun was ‘thou’. Dr Allis argues that in using ‘thou’ for singular persons, ‘the AV is not following Elizabethan or Jacobean usage but the language of the Bible. This means that the AV simply follows the biblical usage. Where the Bible used the singular, AV used the singular; and where it uses the plural, AV uses the plural’<sup>23</sup>.

On the conservative principle that the original language rules the receptor language, except where it creates nonsense, it is arguable that ‘thou’ should be retained in translation if it is not deemed to be nonsense in modern English.

e) Cultural norms should not be changed.

Translational procedures have often allowed the cultural status of the Bible to be changed into the cultural situation of the reader. The AV sometimes writes of pounds, pennies and pence and makes many a parable seem rather odd. Not even evangelical ministers today work a whole day for a penny!

A conservative approach to translation will require the retention of Biblical weights and measures, and presumably some marginal reference or table at the back to explain them. Attempts to put monetary amounts in will soon be rendered anachronistic by inflation. Modern children think yards, feet and inches went out with the ark, so marginal references would have to refer to metres and centimetres.

## **6. Principled Progressives**

Those who could be described as principled progressives have a great deal of hesitation about much modern translation theory and feel themselves to be progressive conservatives rather than wild-eyed radicals. They, however, are not convinced by some aspects of the conservative arguments.

Principled progressives accept the priority of the receptor language, English, over the originals in matters of grammar and form. They do not accept that Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, because they are Biblical languages, are in any sense special or primary. They concur with the opinion that, ‘The languages of the Bible are subject to the same limitations as any other natural language. Greek and Hebrew are simply languages, like any other language, and they are to be understood and analysed in the same manner as any other ancient tongue’<sup>24</sup>.

In addition, principled progressives note that the New Testament was written in Koine

Greek, the ordinary Greek of the day. This was not because classical Attic Greek was unavailable in the first century for, 'In the first century, books written for the literati were still written in Attic Greek'<sup>25</sup>. The use of Koine or Hellenistic Greek is significant because it was the language of the people. There are now less than 50 words in the NT without parallel in Greek literature, compared with 767 in 1886<sup>26</sup>.

It is the contention of the principled progressives that the Bible written in the ordinary languages of *its* day must be translated into the ordinary languages of *our* day. In five areas already considered, this means that a consistent translation on progressive principles calls for:

- a) English grammatical structures as far as possible without changing the meaning. Long Hebrew and Greek sentences will be broken down into shorter sentences, and English usage will be followed as to whether sentences should begin with 'and'. It is easy at this point for someone to scream out that such a procedure treats certain words in the original as 'surplus verbiage'<sup>27</sup>, unnecessary words. But that is a simple fact of translation from one language to another. In his Greek-English Concordance of the NT, J B Smith lists a hundred different Greek words left untranslated in the AV on a thousand occasions<sup>28</sup>. One language does not always translate to another word for word, idiom for idiom, grammatical rule for grammatical rule.
- b) A literal word parallel is used wherever possible. Principled progressives entirely concur with this principle as long as it is properly understood. Words only have meaning in their contexts, and therefore have many shades of meaning. In the full preface of the AV 'The Translators to the Readers' the translators commented, 'We have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing or identity of words...Truly that we might not vary from the sense of that which we had translated before, if the word signified the same thing in both places (for there be some words that be not of the same sense everywhere) we were especially careful'<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, in the AV one word in the Hebrew is translated by 84 separate English words, another by 60, another by 59; one Greek word is translated 17 different ways etc<sup>30</sup>.
- c) Technical vocabulary is retained. There is complete agreement here with the conservative position. Principled progressives do not approve of paraphrased explanations in the text. Of course, there is room for some debate over what is and is not part of technical vocabulary.
- d) Modern English usage is followed for the second person singular. In his article, Dr Allis tries to claim that 'thou' is modern English use<sup>31</sup>. He duly shoots himself in both feet, however, by acknowledging 'thou' and its parallel language forms as part of the 'quaint, old-fashioned' style of the AV, by regarding 'thou' as part of the 'vertical...language of reverence and humility' in contrast to 'colloquial or horizontal language'. He further suggests that most schoolchildren learn a foreign language and concludes, 'If they can do this they certainly should not have difficulty in mastering the thou-speech of the Bible'<sup>32</sup>. In other words, 'thou' is *not* modern usage. It is a 'foreign' language. It might, however, be asserted that 'thou' and its language form should be retained in the Bible because it is a reverent and Biblical way of speaking to God. There is no doubt it does help some people but not all, to be reverent. Praying, however, is

more than word forms. It is an attitude of heart.

More importantly, the argument for 'thou' cannot be said to be a Biblical way of speaking of God to any greater degree than it is a Biblical way of speaking to Satan or an individual man. The same 'singular person' reasoning which requires us to address God as 'thou' requires us so to address Satan and individual men. As modern English has no special form for the second person singular, and the Scriptures have no special form for addressing God, a translation may not impose one.

e) Cultural norms should not be changed.

Again there is no difference from the conservative position.

### **Three translations considered**

In the modern situation we are faced with the claims of three translations of the one Bible: the AV, the NKJV and NIV. There are numerous other versions but these three are the only ones of real significance in the evangelical constituency .

#### **1. The AV**

The AV is much loved by many uncomplicated traditionalists among whom are some of the finest Christians in our congregations and pulpits. The AV is idolised by the pathological conservatives. One such church accused its minister of heresy because he would not assert that where the AV differed from the Hebrew and Greek, the AV corrected them, not the Hebrew and Greek it!

Pathological progressives abominate the AV and pliable progressives prefer to forget it, except where someone formidable requires them to remember it.

Consistent principled conservatives have a high respect for the AV. They are pleased with its retention of the language structures of the original languages, technical vocabulary and old English form of the second person singular and its related language. They are generally happy with its attempts at parallel words, although aware that it can be improved and corrected and is misleading where it transculturises.

A principled conservative may use the AV but not uncritically. Preaching on Romans 6:2 and the phrase 'God forbid', he might comment, 'It is not a strictly literal translation. The Apostle did not use the word *God* at all' <sup>33</sup>. In the same sermon, commenting on 'We that are dead to sin', he might have to say, 'Unfortunately the AV, in this instance, has a bad translation' <sup>34</sup>. The very next week still preaching on Romans 6:1-2, he might comment on the word 'we'. 'Our AV does not bring out the power and force that the Apostle put into this word' <sup>35</sup>. And later on in the same sermon, 'The AV is most unfortunate at this point' <sup>36</sup>.

Principled conservatism respects the AV but does not worship it. It distinguishes between the Word of God in the original languages and the translation it holds in its hand, which is not inspired.

Principled progressives respect the AV but are dissatisfied with its imposition of original language grammar structures, its use of the old English second person singular form and join with conservatives in regretting some of its translations and transculturalisation. Principled progressives, however, respect its desire for parallel words and technical terms.

## **2. The NKJV**

Uncomplicated traditionalists will never accept the NKJV even though it is only a 'face-lift' rather than a new translation. They are emotionally attached to what they saw before 'plastic surgery' occurred.

Pathological conservatives sing only one tune, 'The old is best' and so, being blind, cannot look and assess. Pathological progressives hating the father will hate the son. Pliable progressives are waiting to see who shouts the loudest.

Principled conservatives will find much to commend in the NKJV. It retains the grammatical structures and language parallels of the AV, the technical terms, removes the transcultural mistakes and improves the translation so that the sermon series on Romans 6 would not have made three-quarters of its criticisms. The only loss to the principled conservative is of 'thou' and its associated language forms.

Principled progressives will applaud the removal of transcultural gaffes, translation inadequacies and old language forms, although doubting if the modernisation is thorough enough. The NKJV is clearly a revision but retains some peculiarities, eg the retention of 'begot' in genealogies. The NKJV does come a long way to meeting their objections to the AV although not far enough.

## **3. The NIV**

Uncomplicated traditionalists see neither need nor attraction in any new version, least of all this one. Pliable progressives are being told it is nearly indispensable and so, of course, it is! 'They' say so.

Pathological conservatives vent their spleen on this translation! Pathological progressives hardly know whether they are still in the body or in higher realms as they relish the delights of this 'definitive and truly monumental work'.

Principled conservatives have principled problems with the NIV. They view the loss of Hebrew and Greek grammatical forms on the English structure as a reduction of formal accuracy. They detect an unevenness in the translation which ranges from very formal parallels to occasional paraphrase. They are concerned about the small amount of erosion of technical vocabulary in NIV, although it is a small amount. They regret the total loss of old English form. They applaud the general lack, although not total, of transculturalisation.

For the principled conservative the NIV is a step too far in the direction of modern methods of translation. It needs revision back towards the more conservative position of the NKJV at least.

Principled progressives applaud the imposition of English grammatical forms on the text, although not always agreeing with the way it is done. They like the translation in general but also hesitate about those occasions when it tends towards paraphrase. They approve of the general retention of technical vocabulary but would prefer it to be total. They totally consent to modern English and the general lack of transculturalisation.

The principled progressive is willing to use the NIV making exactly the same type of critical comment in his exposition of the NIV text as the principled conservative does in his exposition of the AV text. He is not an unthinking enthusiast. He dislikes the 'hype' about the NIV but also the crass nature of much of the criticism. To him the NIV is neither so bad that it is unusable nor so good that it is unable to be revised.

## Concluding Comments

To those readers who may be pathological conservatives or pathological progressives I make this plea, based on Cromwell's statement 'I plead with you, by the tender compassion of Christ, to consider that you may be wrong'. If wrong, then how will you defend your abusive opposition to your opponents? Even if you should be right, has your spirit been right? The possession of the 'correct' Bible version, if such there is, is not an adequate replacement for lack of love.

To those who are pliable progressives I ask. 'Have you never read that *the fear of man brings a snare*'<sup>37</sup>? How can a man shaken by every breeze have respect for himself or respect of others? Principled behaviour is needed.

To the uncomplicated traditionalists I request that you do not bolster your tradition with the arguments of the pathological conservatives, nor pretend you are principled conservatives. Be honest enough to hold to your AV because you have grown to love it. Be big enough to allow others to love their version too.

To those conservatives and progressives who have worked out their position on the basis of principles, I make these requests:

- a) Look what you have in common: a shared doctrine of Scripture; a shared desire for accuracy; a common desire for the retention of technical vocabulary and verbal parallels wherever possible; a hesitancy about transculturalisation.
- b) Is it not possible for a middle way to be found as we approach the 21st century? Could not conservatives and progressives allow modern English language in a translation retaining original grammatical forms wherever possible? To put it another way, could not conservatives and progressives work on a revision of the NKJV and NIV that gives to the next century a conservative translation in progressive English?  
Of course, there are always those who would be on the extremes rejecting any such translation, but I am concerned to see the middle ground occupied so that people travelling from one conservative evangelical church to another will not need a suitcase with them full of versions which might be used!
- c) In the meantime, let us make our people aware of the principles which guide us and others in the choice of versions for our churches, so that prejudices may be removed and understanding increased.

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But now, what piety without truth? What truth - what saving truth - without the Word of God? What word of God, whereof we may be sure, without the Scripture? The Scriptures ... can make us wise unto Salvation. If we be ignorant, they will instruct us; if out of the way, they will bring us home; if out of order, they will reform us; if in heaviness, comfort us; if dull, quicken us; if cold, inflame us.

The Scriptures then being acknowledged to be so full and perfect, how can we excuse ourselves of negligence, if we do not study them? The Scripture is a treasury of most costly jewels ... a fountain of most pure water springing up unto everlasting life. And what marvel? The original thereof being from heaven, not from the earth; the Author being God, not man; the inditer, the Holy Spirit; penmen such as were sanctified from the womb, and endued with a principal portion of God's Spirit ... Happy is the man that delighteth in the Scripture and thrice happy that meditateth in it day and night.

*Selected from the AV Translators' Preface.*

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