

Divine Word Smorgasbord

August 2010

All around you brothers and sisters in the midst of the morning sunrise gently whisper to one another, "He is risen!" while their counterparts respond, "He is risen indeed!" The common Church greeting part of a beautifully woven orchestra of worship, prayer, and teaching from the apostles. You end up standing for the whole service, knowing also that you will be on your feet in the fields on this first day of the Roman work week, Sunday. So you and your fellow believers in Christ have gathered earlier than ever to worship Christ before your work.

You settle in to some beautiful hymns, some old from the Psalter and some new because of the change that Christ has wrought in the world, but that's not the best part. The time of prayer is well-felt by all, but that is not the best part. No, the most exciting part of the service, this very special service today is that one of the apostle Paul's letters has finally arrived in the church! You have been waiting to hear from his letter to another church which is being passed around because it is the only new news you get to hear for a while until another letter makes its way to your church.

Throughout the years, the Bible has been kept between the priests, cardinals and popes. And why not? You cannot read it. You only know your native tongue. What would you do with a Latin Bible? Beyond that, the priest has made it well aware the Scriptures are much too weighty for you to interpret. The Bible is something you learn about at church, but don't take home with

you. All of these are examples, the first of the early church in the second and even third generations, and the second up to the 1500s right before the Reformation. In fact, the invention of Guttenberg's printing press catapulted not only the Bible, but other literary works as well into the limelight of copydom.

Along with this technological jump came the theological jump that Luther blasted into full explosion when he stated that the Bible should be written in the common language so that the normal person and the layman could understand it. This was not an original thought, for the English had already started moving in this direction, but unlike England, Germany was more in the view of the Holy Roman Emperor and thus more in a hotspot to see the backlash from the Roman Catholic Church. But there was one more innovation this overachieving little monk demanded, that the theological arguments also be made available through the common language of the people. No longer would a theological argument shut out the common person by being argued only in Latin, a dead language.

We live in a world that does not even come close to understanding the precious commodity of God's Word. We have ready access to the Bible. There is no hindrance to having a full copy in book form of God's love letter to each of us. So I often receive the question by many, "What is the best translation of the Bible?" Such a question takes discernment, for some people simply wish to start an argument about the KJV

Only while others are genuinely searching for a proper and helpful version to read and study the Bible.

Let me start the answer the same way I answer before explanation with any of them. “It depends on your needs.” they usually look at me quizzically and wonder why the pastor didn’t give them a straight answer. But as you can imagine, virtually no answer is short with me, and this question of the “best” version of the Bible takes on several facets, mainly translational methodology, translational philosophy, the needs of the individual, and the purpose of the Bible version you choose. Let’s look at these so I can help you choose the “best” Bible for you.

I know those are some large words, and that there are four elements I have mentioned to consider to choose well, but let me break it down for you. First of all, you must take into account translational methodology. By this I am speaking of the way a Bible is translated, the texts that are used from original languages, the amount of translators, the way they interact, and how much interpretation comes with the translation. Each version that is produced is either produced by an individual translating the whole Bible, such as Wycliff, Young’s Literal, or others, or it is done by a committee in which a group of scholars gathers and assigns different books and sections, and then deliberates the individual work as a group until a consensus is reached.

Another point to ponder within this section of understanding is that you must also take into account the basic theological leanings of each person or committee. Some translations are meant for a certain denomination, like the Holman Christian

Standard Bible (HCSB) for the Baptists, or maybe the comments and notes are aimed at a certain group, such as the Fire Bible for Pentecostals. A certain leaning will weigh into the interpretation of more choppy passages where decisions must be made not just in translation but in meaning and interpretation to make sense to the English reader. Another important point, and one of the reasons we continue to see new versions of the Bible, is the growing amount of Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts, the contributions of other ancient writings and Scriptural works such as the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), the Vulgate (Latin Version) and the Dead Sea Scrolls. So much of these help us to gain an even more accurate translation and closer to the original text and intent of the authors.

Next, we move on to the second element of comparing Bible versions, the translational philosophy. Essentially, there are two extremes and a host of balancing middle points to translate the Bible. You can translate extremely literal on one side, word-for-word comparisons, or on the other side of the extreme, a completely concept-for-concept based translation. Some formal, or word-for-word versions include the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, YLT, etc. On the other side of the scale are informal, or concept-for-concept Bibles such as the NIV, NLT, CEV and others.

It is my opinion that the word-for-word should be grown into by newer believers but will become a necessity for deeper Bible study. It is good to start out with a concept based Bible that helps us understand the main points of the Bible and the text, so that we get the forest instead of the trees, the general over the overwhelming specifics. Both have their place. There is a third type which is outside of actual translation called

a paraphrase. A translation attempts to stick with the thought patterns and concepts of a text, and go down to word-for-word. But a paraphrase will be even less specific than a concept-based translation, a paraphrase is designed for very basic use. The paraphrase may attempt to neglect the culture of the day and replace our own cultural norms to help us understand more easily.

The needs of the individual seeking a good Bible version are also important. For instance, if you are a new Christian, a good study Bible with notes that explain what's happening can be indispensable. If you are an older Christian, word study Bibles can be of great help in cutting down study time. If you just want to read the text, there's no need for chain references or study Bibles. But if you like chasing themes and types around as they develop from Old to New Testament, you want to have a chain reference Bible. It all depends on the need of the individual. Also, what is the age of understanding of the individual. There are special Bibles written at certain grade levels for children through teenagers and even a couple from beyond college level reading grades. You must pick a translation you are comfortable reading and that you understand. Don't get a Bible with thee's and thou's if you don't get those. Also, it's my opinion that since English is a living language, you need to keep an updated English Bible. For those who are partial to older Bible versions, like the KJV, the NKJV is a good update. A Bible is no good to you if you cannot read or understand what is said to you by the Lord!

Finally, what is the purpose for getting a Bible? Is it just for devotional reading and for toting to church? Is it for study and in-depth analysis of God's Word to grow deeper in your relationship with Him? Why

do you want a Bible? If it is for study, especially word study, a more literal translation is better, because when you look up a word, it is almost certain that word will be in the original and you can study it. However, in a concept based Bible, like the NIV or the CEV, you may want to study a word that is added to help with context and concept that may not be in the original. I will never forget looking up the word "guaranteed" in Ephesians 1 where the Spirit is a seal "guaranteeing" our salvation in the NIV and finding that this word did not exist in the original! It was added by the translators to give the concept of the text. So find out what the purpose of your Bible is. If it is for devotional reading, make it so that it flows well and is easy to read, and at a good reading level that suits you.

You can find out about some of these elements in the introductions to most Bibles shortly after the Table of Contents. Most Bibles tell you who contributed, their backgrounds, whether it was a group or person, whether it is a word for word (formal) translation or concept for concept (equivalent) translation. It never hurts to ask your pastor or a knowledgeable person who won't just push their favorite on you. That may not be the best for you. But seek advice before making your choice. Much more important than the version of the Bible you choose is that you get into God's Word with an unmatched fervor. Don't let your fervor for comparing Bible versions be greater than your fervor to love God and His Word all the days of your life! Happy hunting!