

Why Do I Use So Many Bible Translations?

written by Randy Starkey | 05/25/2016

There are more English translations of the Bible available today than ever before in our history. So how should we as believers approach that, and more specifically, how should churches approach that?

Some churches have an “official” translation that they “approve” of for regular use by their members (in many mainline Protestant churches it’s the RSV or NRSV, with some now also choosing the NIV or ESV), while many other churches do not have an “official” translation, and that is especially true among independent churches today.

I also find that different people like to use different translations for memorizing. Some still like the KJV for its poetic beauty, and I actually memorize a few verses in that translation still.

For reading, most people like a more modern English version than the KJV. (The language of the KJV is how they actually spoke in everyday life in 1611, with the “thees” and the “thous”, but it is NOT how we speak today! There is nothing inherently “holy” about “thee” or “thou”! Poetic yes, but holy, no.) Some now like the NKJV, which removes the archaic language. Some others like the NLT best as it reads so easily and is still a true translation. And some like the NIV or newer ESV or MEV. (FWIW, the NIV is by far the best seller.)

I think for memorization, people should simply pick their favorite. I always encourage memorization from a true translation normally, not a paraphrase, mainly for accuracy, although I do memorize some phrases or passages from some paraphrases that I think are really good expressions of the Scripture’s intent. Ephesians 1-3 in the Message Bible for instance is excellent.

In speaking of translations and paraphrases, there are actually 3 basic types of Bible translations: direct translations, dynamic equivalent translations, and paraphrases. Each has their strengths. And weaknesses. A direct translation (the NASB for example) is more word-for-word, but it can become a bit “wooden”, as language translation is never a direct word-for-word proposition anyway, but direct translation has value in staying close to the original text. Dynamic translations (like the NIV) attempt to solve the previous issue by conveying the meaning of the original language and not just a word-for-word equivalency. This can have the advantage of a better meaning being communicated, but it can also be prone to not being as accurate. Finally, a paraphrase (like The Message Bible) is not a direct word-for-word translation attempt at all, but rather it puts the meaning of the passage (as the translator(s) understand it) in very modern prose, as it might be used in common language or on the street today. This has the advantage of possibly conveying the richest meaning, but it has the disadvantage of being the farthest from the original languages actual words. However, when the meaning is caught and expressed right, it can be very powerful!

So, if each has their strengths and weaknesses, why should we pick just one? Instead, we should use them all! This is why in any given message here at Victory Church you could see and hear from multiple translations of the Bible. Never in the history of the Church have we had such a rich store of Bible translation! If you like a particular version for memorization, that is fine, and that can have value in consistency of language, which makes memorization easier, but please avoid the temptation to make that the “best” translation, or an “official” translation for your church. Or even for you! There IS no BEST translation – PERIOD! There are just many and varied ones to choose from with various strengths and weaknesses. (I will say, if ever I was marooned on a desert island, and HAD to exist with only one Bible, I would take a direct translation for accuracy, but even then there are many of those.) The old religious “KJV only” is just that – old and religious. If you like its poetic beauty, that is fine, but some of the manuscripts the KJV is based on are not even now the best or the most accurate! Newer ones have been discovered.

So, I use multiple Bible translations to seek to bring out the full richness of the Bible and its meaning in every way possible. We hope it encourages YOU to read multiple translations and to dig deeper into the Scriptures for yourself!

My wife Mary Jo has read the Bible through many times, and often in a different translation each year. She will tell you the richness she has experienced by doing that, and also how the Holy Spirit has used each one in her life!

We can for sure recommend a few good, basic translations like the ESV, NIV, NKJV, NLT and MEV, but there actually is no “best” or “right” version, except for the Greek and Hebrew original language manuscripts, which is what I compare all translations to when I study (and then even many of the NT authors quote from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, which can vary from the Hebrew OT!). Also, when it comes to the more modern paraphrase type translations, I compare those to the original language and also to multiple other direct translations, and I don’t use verses from those that I don’t think express the correct thoughts, but the ones that do are often very rich!

In your own spiritual growth and walk with the Lord, may you enjoy all our wonderful English Bible translations!