

Romans: The Good News of God

Choosing a Bible Version

Romans 3:2

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Scripture

The past few Sundays we have been looking at Romans 3:1-2. I would like to do so again today.

The Apostle Paul asked, “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” (3:1). How responded by saying, “Much in every way!” (3:2a). And then he stressed the first advantage of the Jew which, incidentally, is also the advantage of every child of God throughout the ages. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 3:2b, our text for today:

^{2b} First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. (Romans 3:2b)

Introduction

The Apostle Paul said that the Jews—and, indeed, all Christians—have been entrusted with **“the very words”** of God, as it is expressed in the *New International Version*. In Greek the expression **“the very words”** is *logia*. Most other Bible versions translate *logia* as “oracles.”

Today, I want to consider **“the very words”** of God, particularly in the English language.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, except for approximately 10 chapters in Daniel (2:4b-7:28) and Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26), which were written in Aramaic.¹

The New Testament was originally written in Greek.

Over the years, the Bible has been translated into over 2,000 of the world’s languages. John Wycliffe published the first com-

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 99.

plete Bible in English in 1382.² Since then there have been approximately 50 complete translations of the English Bible, with many more partial translations.

My question then is this: Since we have been entrusted with **the very words** of God, which version of the Bible should we use? How should we choose a Bible version?

Lesson

Today, I want to examine how to choose a Bible version. I aim to proceed by asking and answering a series of questions.

I. What Is the Goal of Bible Translation?

Let's begin by asking: what is the goal of Bible translation?

The goal of any translation is to translate the source language into the receptor language in such a way that the receptor language accurately conveys the meaning of the source language.

Thus, the goal of Bible translation is to translate the source languages (the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) into the receptor language (in our case, English) in such a way that the English translation accurately conveys the meaning of the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts.

One of the very earliest English translators, King Alfred the Great (whose language was Old English), said that he translated “sometimes word for word, and sometimes meaning for meaning.”³

In this statement we have set before us the two major approaches to Bible translations. One approach is a “word for word” approach, also known as an “essentially literal” approach. The other approach is a “meaning for meaning” approach, also known

² J. I. Packer, Merrill Chapin Tenney and William White, *Nelson's Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995), 55.

³ Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 56.

as a “thought for thought” approach. Sometimes the essentially literal approach is also called “formal equivalence,” and the meaning for meaning approach is called “dynamic equivalence.”

Now, it is important to note that English Bible translations were all essentially literal translations until 60 years ago when J. B. Phillips translated the New Testament (1947-1957). For several hundred years prior to 1947, the goal of Bible translation was an essentially literal approach. So scrupulous were the translators that when they could not translate a word exactly or if they had to add a word to make the English version intelligible, they added the word or words in *italics* so that the reader knew that the word or words was not in the original language. You can see this, for example, in any *King James Version* or *New King James Version*.

Technically, the *J. B. Phillips’ New Testament* was not a translation but rather a paraphrase. That is, Phillips simply paraphrased the New Testament into more colloquial English rather than translate the New Testament Greek into English. Leland Ryken correctly notes “that dynamic equivalence would never have achieved the prominence it did if Phillips had not whetted people’s appetite for a loose and colloquial English version.”⁴

II. Does God Say Anything About How His Word Should Be Translated?

That brings us, then, to the second question, which is, does God say anything about how his Word should be translated?

Is God silent on the matter of Bible translation? Does it matter to God whether we use an essentially literal approach or a dynamic equivalent approach to Bible translation?

I humbly submit that God is extremely interested and concerned about how his Word should be translated.

The Apostle Paul said in our text today that the Jews had been entrusted with “**the very words**” of God (Romans 3:2).

⁴ Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 52.

Moreover, Jesus said that “Man does not live on bread alone, but on *every word* that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). My Greek professor, Wayne Grudem, says that the Greek term for “word” is *rhema*, which is the term Jesus used to refer to the actual words spoken by God. The expression “*every word*” coupled with the fact that the words proceed from “the mouth of God” places further emphasis on the very words themselves.⁵

Even the Old Testament places emphasis on the individual words themselves. For example, we read in Proverbs 30:5, “*Every word* of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”

Dale Ralph Davis published a commentary last year titled, *Joshua: No Falling Words*. I love the title of that commentary because it is taken from Joshua 21:45, where we read, “*Not one word* of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (ESV). The Hebrew for “not one word” literally says “not fall a word,” from which Davis gets the title of his book, *Joshua: No Falling Words*. That, of course, is the theme of Joshua: not a single word of God fell; thus, God preserved his promises to his people, and each one came to pass.

There are many other passages in the Bible where God stresses the importance of *words*. But let me leave you with one final one from Revelation 22:18-19, where the Apostle John wrote, “I warn everyone who hears the *words* of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes *words* away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” John is stressing that judgment will fall on anyone who tampers with the very words of God.

So, God is concerned, it seems to me, with the very words that he has given. Bible translators, therefore, have a responsibility to translate God’s words exactly, or as nearly exactly, as he has

⁵ C. John Collins, Wayne Grudem, Vern Sheridan Poythress, Leland Ryken, and Bruce Winter, *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 27.

given them.

III. Why Don't We Simply Use the *King James Version*?

I suppose one could ask, "Why don't we simply use the *King James Version*? After all, the *King James Version* is an essentially literal translation."

The *King James Version* was the standard Bible version for 350 years. However, there are two main reasons why I would not advocate using the *King James Version* as the main study Bible.

One reason is that the English language spoken today is significantly different than the English language spoken in 1611 when the *King James Version* first appeared. We simply don't speak in *King James* English any more.

The second reason why I would not suggest using the *King James Version* as the main study Bible is that many more manuscripts have been discovered in the last 400 years. Therefore, we can achieve a greater accuracy in Bible translation that simply was not possible to the translators in 1611.

So, even though the *King James Version* is a great Bible version, it is dated. And that is why I prefer not to use it as the main study Bible.

IV. What About the *New International Version*?

Well, what about the *New International Version*?

As you know, I have been using the *New International Version* of the English Bible. It is dynamic equivalent translation, and it is a very good Bible translation. I have used the *NIV* for almost 30 years. I have memorized hundreds of verses in the *NIV*, and I am familiar with it. And so, for those reasons, I have been reluctant to change my study, preaching, and devotional Bible.

However, I have come to believe that it is better to use an essentially literal translation rather than a dynamic equivalent translation. There are a number of reasons for doing so.

One of the main reasons is that dynamic equivalent translators give us a translation *plus interpretation*. Whereas the goal of an essentially literal translation is to give us the meaning of original words, the goal of a dynamic equivalent translation is to make the words meaningful to the recipient. Perhaps I can put it this way: an essentially literal translation is concerned to get the translation as accurate as possible from the *source's* perspective, whereas a dynamic equivalent translation is concerned to get the translation as understandable as possible from the *recipient's* perspective. I know this is over-simplifying the difference, but I do believe it is the heart of the difference. As Leland Ryken asks, “Who is calling the shots for these translations—the biblical author or the modern reader?”⁶

Leland Ryken shows how one can see the goal of dynamic equivalent translations by reading the prefaces to such translations. Notice the common thread (in italics) stressing the importance of the reader rather than the author:

- *New International Version*—“Because *for most readers* today the phrases ‘the Lord of hosts’ and ‘God of hosts’ have little meaning, this version renders them ‘the Lord Almighty’ and ‘God Almighty.’”
- *Good News Bible*—This translation seeks “to express the meaning in a manner and form easily understood by *the readers*.”
- *New Living Translation*—“Metaphorical language is often difficult *for contemporary readers* to understand, so at times we have chosen to translate [i.e. interpret] or illuminate the metaphor.”⁷

So, while the *New International Version* is an excellent Bible, I believe a better Bible is an essentially literal Bible.

⁶ Leland Ryken, *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Bible Translation Differences* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 8.

⁷ Ryken, *Choosing a Bible*, 8.

V. Why Trust an Essentially Literal Translation of the English Bible?

Finally, why trust an essentially literal translation of the English Bible?

Leland Ryken, in his excellent booklet titled *Choosing a Bible*, suggests the following reasons for trusting an essentially literal translation of the English Bible.⁸

First, you can trust an essentially literal translation to keep to the essential task of translation—namely, translation. An essentially literal translation seeks to translate the original as exactly, or as nearly exactly, into English. The translators will even coin new words, like William Tyndale did when he coined words like *intercession* and *atonement*, in order to be faithful to the actual words of the original authors.⁹ An essentially literal translation will not translate *plus interpret* the original text so that you have to wonder whether what you have in your English Bible is in the original or whether it is the view of the translator.

Second, you can trust an essentially literal translation to preserve the fullness of the original text. Sometimes, dynamic equivalent translations simplify the original text to the lowest common denominator of contemporary readers. They eliminate technical terms and substitute it with simplified non-technical vocabulary. They make interpretive decisions preventing the reader from making those decisions for himself or herself. And so on. The goal of an essentially literal translation is to preserve the fullness of the original text.

Third, you can trust an essentially literal translation not to mislead you by mixing translation and commentary. The translator is the steward of the text that someone else has written. His task, therefore, is to translate what the author has written. The translator of the text is not an editor, exegete, or commentator who needs to explain the text of the original author. Explaining the meaning of

⁸ Ryken, *Choosing a Bible*, 24-30.

⁹ Ryken, *Choosing a Bible*, 6.

the biblical text is the task of the commentator, preacher, and teacher; it is not the task of the translator. Now, admittedly, there are places where it is difficult to understand certain portions of the biblical text, but the essentially literal translation will offer a suggested explanation in a footnote or in the notes, but not insert it into the translation itself.

Fourth, you can trust an essentially literal translation to preserve theological precision. An essentially literal translation will translate biblical and theological vocabulary into equivalent English words. The tendency with dynamic equivalent translations is to explain theological terms in simpler language rather than simply translate the theological terms into English. For example, the concept of justification is maintained in the essentially literal version of Romans 3:24, which says that “we are justified by his grace as a gift” (*ESV*). Some dynamic equivalent translations do not preserve the theological term of “justification,” and as a result the theological precision is lost. For example, the *Good News Bible* says that “we are put right with [God].” The *New Living Translation* says that “God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty.” And the *Contemporary English Version* states that “God treats us much better than we deserve.” Now, while each of these translations may tell us something about what justification is, the problem is that the person reading one of these translations does not know that the Greek term is actually “justification.” And that is a loss.

Fifth, you can trust an essentially literal translation to preserve an expository preacher from needing to correct the translation from which he is preaching. The task of an expository preacher is to explain the Bible text and apply it to his hearers. If he knows the biblical languages, he will often give an additional explanation about what the text is saying. However, I don’t want you to think that there is a difference between the original languages that the authors used to write their books and our English translations. I think that the difference between the original languages of the Bible and the English version of the Bible is like the difference between watching a movie in color and watching it in

black-and-white. The picture is the same, but the color picture is able to express in clearer, fuller ways what is actually happening. In the same way, the text is the same, but the original language is clearer and fuller. The difficulty, though, is that too often a preacher has to correct a dynamic equivalent translation in order to explain what the original actually said.

Sixth, you can trust an essentially literal translation not to resolve all difficulties in interpretation. Dynamic equivalent translators will attempt to make a translation that is understandable to the reader. Therefore, they are committed to resolving difficulties in interpretation so that the reader is not left with that obligation. However, an essentially literal translation will pass that difficulty on to its readers. Why? Because the author passed the difficulty on to *his* readers. So, it is not improper for translators to pass that difficulty on to us. Frankly, I don't want a translator deciding how to interpret a text for me. *I* want to wrestle with what the author wrote in the original and make that determination myself. Of course, since I have limited abilities, I need to rely on others to help me understand the meaning of the text. But I want to have the original text translated without interpretation. I remember years ago preaching on a difficult text. My entire argument hinged on what the original meant in Greek. The congregation listening to me simply had to take my word that I was correctly interpreting the Greek text myself because their dynamic equivalent translation was not clear on that point. I don't want you to have to struggle like that. I want you to be like the Bereans who "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). My job is to explain the Bible to you, and your job is to check and make sure that I am explaining it correctly. And you can do that best when you have an essentially literal translation of the Bible.

And seventh, you can trust an essentially literal translation to preserve the literary qualities of the Bible. The original texts have wonderful literary qualities. When I read John in Greek, I can easily tell his beautiful and simple writing is different from Paul's closely argued, theological treatises. Reading Isaiah in Hebrew

shows one his artistic prose and poetry as compared to the tight narrative of Joshua. Essentially literal translations seek to preserve the literary qualities of the original, particularly as they are read. One of the reasons the *King James Version* was the Bible of choice for almost 400 years is because the beauty of the original was preserved in English. The best modern essentially literal translations will seek to do the same.

Conclusion

At this point, you may be wondering where I am going with this message on “Choosing a Bible Version.”

A few weeks ago I proposed to the Session that the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church adopt an essentially literal translation, namely, the *English Standard Version*, as our preferred Bible.

Let me say again that the *New International Version* is an excellent Bible. It is the best of the dynamic equivalent translations. But, in my view, the *English Standard Version* is better, for the reasons I have just given. Earlier this week I mentioned to Dr. Johnston that I was going to preach on this topic. He asked if I was going to show some of the difficulties in the *NIV*. I said that I was not planning to do so. He immediately said, “That’s wise because we don’t want to undermine confidence in the *NIV*. The *NIV* is a good translation, but the *ESV* is better.”

Next week I will have some *ESV* Bibles available to you for purchase. I think you will discover that the *ESV* is very readable and easy to follow. Like the *NIV*, it is written at an 8th Grade level.

The main advantage of the *English Standard Version* is that it seeks to preserve in its translation **the very words** of God. I believe that as you use it you will appreciate the *ESV* as a Bible that is faithful, readable, and understandable. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that we have been entrusted with the very words of God.

O Lord, we know that we do not live by bread alone. But, in fact, we live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Enable us to hear your Word, to study your Word, to memorize your Word, and to receive your Living Word who is described in the Written Word so that we might have life eternal.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.