



CHOOSING A GOOD BIBLE TRANSLATION

A good translation must be faithful to the original languages, accurate especially in doctrinal passages, and easy to read and understand.

David P. Kuske

“Which Bible translation do you use?” In the 1970s people often asked this question. A number of new translations had appeared (e.g., NASB, NIV, NEB, LB), and Christians were naturally interested in them. These translations were easier to read and understand than the King James Version, so more and more people began to use them.

Recently another group of Bible translations has appeared (NIRV, TNIV, NRSV, REB, GW). Not surprisingly, we are asking questions about Bible translations again. What about these new translations? Why did our synod choose to use the New International Version (NIV) in our publications? And the question we will begin with: What makes a good translation?

Faithful to the original languages

A translation must be faithful to the original languages of the Bible: Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament. But word for word translation from one language to another is not always good translation. Our English language doesn't always express things in the same way or with the same word order as the Hebrew or Greek languages do. For example, a word-for-word translation of Ephesians 2:8 would be: “By the for grace are you saved by faith, and this is not from yourselves. From God it is a gift.”

Even if paraphrasing is necessary sometimes, it is not good when a translation paraphrases too much. The literal translation of the words of

Ephesians 1:18 would be “the riches of the glory of the inheritance from him.” It would be better to paraphrase like this to make the meaning clear: “the glorious riches of the inheritance he gives us.” But the paraphrase in the Living Bible is too far removed from what the Greek actually says: “the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians.”

Accurate especially in doctrinal passages

A second way to test a translation is how it handles passages that deal with doctrine. If doctrinal passages are not translated accurately, the translation might throw a cloud over doctrines such as Jesus being true God and true man in one person, Jesus dying as our substitute, justification, creation, and inspiration. For example, 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching” (NIV). But when a translation changes this and says, “Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching” (New English Bible), it gives the impression that not every passage of the Bible is inspired, but every one that is inspired is useful.

Another example comes from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, the Greek word *koinonia* is used twice. This word says that two things come together in a union. In this verse, this means that the cup of blessing (wine) is united with the blood of Christ, and the bread with the body of Christ. This passage teaches us that we receive both the wine and the blood, the bread and the body, when we participate in the Lord’s Supper. Note that this truth is missing in the New Living Translation: “When we bless the cup at the Lord’s Table, aren’t we sharing in the benefits of the blood of Christ? And when we break the loaf

of bread, aren’t we sharing in the benefits of the body of Christ?”

It is hard to teach doctrine in children’s catechism classes, in adult Bible information classes, and in sermons and Bible classes if the doctrinal passages in a translation change the meaning or leave the meaning unclear.

Easy to read and understand

The third quality a good translation has, in addition to being faithful to the original languages of the Bible, is that it puts the meaning of the original languages into simple, understandable English. A translation doesn’t do us any good if we read it but can’t figure out what it is saying.

Some things in the Bible are “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). But these passages usually deal with miracles of God, which by their very nature are beyond our understanding. No translation should make things hard to understand by the words or the sentence structure it uses. Some of the words used in the King James Version, together with its many long sentences, gradually made this translation harder for younger people to read with understanding.

Some of the rules today for writing good, understandable English are to use

- simple declarative sentences,
- the active voice,
- short paragraphs, and
- plain conversational language.

If translations do not follow these rules, they will make the Bible difficult for us to read and understand.

The sentences in the original Greek, especially in the New Testament epistles, are long and involved. For example, Ephesians 1:3-14 is one sentence the way Paul wrote it. It is not easy to translate sentences like this into simple English. But a good translation has

to find a way to do this and still remain faithful to the original languages of the Bible.

But simplicity in a translation is not enough. A translation must also have a dignity and style that make it both easy and fitting to read out loud in our church services. Slang doesn’t retain the dignity we are accustomed to when worshipping in God’s house. If a translation has a style that results in a rather choppy delivery when it is read out loud, it would make it difficult for us to listen to the Scripture readings and sermon text as they are read in our church services.

Importance of a good translation

Perhaps you might look for some other qualities in a good translation, but these three are basic: faithful to the original languages, accurate especially in doctrinal passages, and easy to read and understand.

2 Timothy 3:16 has this to say about the Bible: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” Since God gave every word of Scripture by inspiration, we want a translation that will tell us as carefully as possible in our language what was said in the original languages. How can we use the Bible for the four things Paul mentions in this passage if a translation changes or clouds what the Bible says in doctrinal passages? And how can each of us read the Bible daily and meditate on all God says to us in his Word if it isn’t easy to read and understand?

How the Bible is translated is important. The translation of the Bible we choose to use must be a good one.



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How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson One

Foundations for Interpreting Scripture

1. The foundation of faith
2. The foundation of keeping Christ at the heart of Scripture
3. The foundation of faith in the inspiration of Scripture
4. The foundation of believing that the Bible means what it says

Worship

God wants nothing more than for us to trust in him as his dear children. As you read the following passages, focus on this truth.

A: Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. (Isaiah 49:15,16)

B: Here I am! . . . If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

A: But these [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

B: If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, as we begin this new course on how to interpret the Bible, open our hearts and minds to know why you have given us your Word. Remind us that each time you speak to us through your Word, you draw us to yourself and invite us to trust in you. Help us learn to interpret your Word according to your will. Amen.

Introduction

John threw his hands up in frustration. "The Bible experts can't agree on what this passage means," he bemoaned. "How can I ever figure it out?"

Have you ever felt this way?

Joan was in the middle of her early-morning Bible reading time. She had read about ten passages. All of them fit together in her mind. She was fairly certain she understood their basic meaning. Joan had been refreshed with the gospel and had taken to heart a point Jesus was teaching his disciples. But then she read a passage that made absolutely no sense to her; she could not understand how it fit into the

flow of thought. She skipped the passage and kept reading. But she felt a bit of frustration. How she would have liked to have that passage fit in with the rest of her reading!

Have you ever felt this way?

The purpose of this course is to help you learn some skills of Bible interpretation. You may always encounter “speed bumps,” or hard to understand passages, as you read God’s Word. But learning from Scripture how God wants his Word to be understood will help you read with greater understanding and confidence.

Studying God’s Word

The foundation of faith

Presuppositions play a big role in Bible interpretation. The foundations on which we build will largely determine how solid our building is. In this lesson we will look at some of the foundations Scripture lays for us as we seek to interpret the Bible.

Read John 3:16.

Can an unbeliever interpret and understand these words?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14.

1. What does Paul say about an unbeliever’s ability to understand God’s Word?
2. Compare both of your answers so far. How can we say that unbelievers can understand God’s Word and then say that they cannot understand God’s Word?
3. Agree or disagree: Unbelievers can interpret God’s Word just as well as Christians.

Both unbelievers and believers can interpret God’s Word if they read Scripture in an honest way using God’s gift of reason. However, because unbelievers don’t truly understand the message of the cross and believe it, they will have trouble understanding much of Scripture. Their sinful nature rebels against the message of Christ, and unless the Holy Spirit works faith in their hearts, they will misinterpret Scripture’s clear words.

The foundation of keeping Christ at the heart of Scripture

How Christians view the importance of Jesus Christ will largely influence how they interpret Scripture.

Read John 20:31.

1. Why did God give us his Word?
2. Dave loves to read his Bible. In it he finds everything he needs to live by. The Old Testament commandments give him guidance for life. Jesus' words about love help Dave in his relationships. The epistles present many fine rules to live by. But Dave has missed the heart of Scripture, Christ. How might this lead to faulty interpretations?

The person who knows that Christ is the heart of Scripture will not misinterpret the many passages that speak about salvation through him.

The foundation of faith in the inspiration of Scripture

How people view the source and nature of Scripture will largely determine how they interpret it.

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

1. What are some of the uses of Scripture?
2. While taking a required college course in ancient literature, Julie had learned that the Bible is like any other great book, a creation of human genius. She respects the Bible as such. However, she is unwilling to let it determine her course of action, particularly because she wants to divorce her husband. Julie wonders why she should be corrected by someone who lived many years ago in a different culture. She interprets many of the Bible's statements as outmoded thoughts of an ancient culture. How do Julie's preconceptions influence how she interprets Scripture?
3. Why will Christians want to be serious and honest about how they interpret Scripture?

Read John 10:34-37.

Consider the words *and the Scripture cannot be broken*. What is Jesus saying about the truthfulness of Scripture?

If interpreters believe God wrote the Bible and everything in it is true, they will want to avoid any interpretation that misrepresents what the Bible says.

The foundation of believing that the Bible means what it says

Who would argue with the title of this section? The fact is, though, that many people don't believe that the Bible means what it says.

For example, when Martin Luther was training to become a priest in the Catholic church, his teachers interpreted the Scripture using the allegorical method—all verses of Scripture contain symbolical meanings. Verses could be made to say just about anything the interpreter wanted them to say.

Scripture itself teaches us to look for the single, fundamental meaning of a passage.

Read Matthew 2:3-6.

When the Jewish leaders wanted to know where Christ was to be born, they turned to the prophet Micah and found the answer. Compare their way of handling Scripture with the way Luther's teachers handled it.

Read Acts 2:24-33.

How does Peter approach Scripture in these verses?

Read Romans 6:8.

How does Paul interpret David's words?

Read John 6:30-33.

How did both Jesus and the Pharisees interpret Moses' account of the miracle of the manna?

Scripture says what it means. The author wrote down exactly what he intended to say. Bible interpretation is nothing more than honestly describing, in other terms, the simple, basic meaning of what the text says.

Summary

How we interpret Scripture is influenced by our presuppositions. An unbeliever can interpret what Scripture says. The words of Scripture are clear, and they mean what they say. These words can lead an unbeliever to faith.

In practice, however, a Christian will be able to offer a more solid interpretation. Christians know that Christ is at the heart of Scripture. They believe that every word in Scripture comes from God himself, so they are careful about how they interpret it. Because Christians consider Christ their greatest treasure, they are willing to spend the necessary time to study Scripture carefully so their interpretation is well thought out. Christians will approach Scripture with the humble faith that it says what it means.

In the following lessons, we will consider three principles that will help us interpret Scripture faithfully.

- Scripture interprets Scripture.
- We must pay careful attention to the grammar of Scripture.
- We must carefully consider the historical setting of Scripture—letting Scripture itself describe that setting.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 27-47.

Consider reading Professor Kuske's entire book during the duration of this course. Reread the listed pages in the "During the week" section to review the lesson you just studied.

How to Interpret the Bible

Lesson Two

Let Scripture Interpret Scripture

1. Use the immediate context
2. Use the wider context
3. Let clearer passages determine the meaning of more difficult ones

Worship

Read Psalm 119:97-104 responsively.

A: Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

B: Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.

A: I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

B: I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

A: I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word.

B: I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.

A: How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

B: I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you have given us your Word. Now help us interpret it in a God-pleasing way. In a world where there are so many different and conflicting interpretations, give us insights from your Word about how you want us to approach it and interpret it. Amen.

Introduction

Imagine that you are on a deserted island. You have enough food and shelter and clothing, but you have nothing else—except your Bible. You have no commentaries, no Bible dictionaries, and no one to teach you what the Bible means. Would you be able to interpret the Bible accurately?

Studying God's Word

Use the immediate context

Many of the rules of interpretation found in the following pages are not derived from a Scripture passage. They are simply commonsense rules of interpretation, which apply to any book. Therefore, you will not always find a section of Scripture quoted to back up the point being made.

The first rule of Scripture is one that you instinctively follow as you read a Sunday newspaper or best-selling novel. You let the context determine the meaning of the passage.

Use the immediate context—the verses immediately before and after the verse you are thinking about—to help you determine the meaning of a passage.

Read John 3:16.

What is the meaning of *the world* in this verse? How does the context help you interpret those words?

Read 1 John 2:15.

What is the meaning of *the world* in this verse? How does the context help you interpret those words?

Most Scripture passages can be interpreted simply by observing the immediate context.

Use the wider context

Sometimes only the wider context of Scripture will help you discover the meaning of a verse. The wider context might include other sections of the book you are reading, other writings by the same author, or the Bible as a whole.

Read John 21:15.

The setting is in Galilee after Jesus' resurrection. The disciples were in their boats fishing. They had caught nothing. Jesus told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and they caught many fish. The disciples and Jesus had just finished eating breakfast. Jesus asked Peter if he loved Jesus "more than these."

1. What might the word *these* refer to in the immediate context?
2. Read John 13:37,38; Matthew 26:33. What is a better interpretation of the word *these* in light of these passages?

3. In the light of this discussion, why can we say that regular Bible reading and studying help us grow in our ability to interpret Scripture?

Many Scripture passages can be interpreted using the immediate context; however, many can be interpreted only using the wider context of Scripture. The better we know the wider context, the better we will be able to interpret Scripture.

Let clearer passages determine the meaning of more difficult ones

Some passages seem difficult or obscure. When you come across such a passage, be patient. Seek out other passages in Scripture that clarify the one you are having difficulty with.

Read Matthew 7:1.

Many want to use this passage to escape being labeled as sinners.

1. True or false: In Matthew 7:1 Jesus tells us that under no circumstances should we ever judge anyone else's actions or motives. Before you answer this question, work through the following questions and use the context of Scripture to help you interpret this verse.
2. Read verse 2, the immediate context. What does it tell you?
3. Read verses 15 and 16, the wider context of the chapter. What light do these verses shed on our question?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, the wider context of Scripture. What light do these verses shed on our question?
5. Answer the question we started with. What is the meaning of Matthew 7:1?

Read Romans 8:29,30.

Paul refers to God's foreknowing us and electing us to come to faith. These verses have been difficult for many to interpret. How does Ephesians 1:3-6; 11-14 help us interpret Romans 8:29,30?

Read 2 Peter 3:16.

1. How does this verse encourage us to search patiently the whole context of Scripture in order to understand difficult passages?

2. Sometimes Christians may differ in their judgment on what a passage means. In some cases there is room for such differences of opinion. However all opinions must pass certain tests:
 - They must never confuse law and gospel.
 - They must be based on a completely logical understanding of the text.
 - They must never contradict any statement of Scripture.
 - The reasons for the interpretation must come from Scripture itself.
 - The interpretation must say nothing other than what Scripture says in other places.

In the case of difficult passages, we must always let clearer and more thorough treatments of the topic help us interpret them in a God-pleasing way.

Summary

When you study Scripture, allow Scripture to interpret itself. Pay special attention to the immediate context of the verse under study. But realize that the verse may best be understood in the light of other passages of Scripture. In the case of passages that don't readily reveal their meaning, proceed patiently. Grow in a knowledge of God's Word; rule out wrong interpretations that go against clear teachings of Scripture; discover other portions of Scripture that may offer clues.

During the week

Read *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, by David Kuske, pages 113-137.