

Community-Developed

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So Many Translations and So Little Time

NRSV, NIV, CEV, CEB, KJV, NKJV, ASV, ESV, NLT, NET and the list goes on!

Periodically I'm asked which translation of the Bible I recommend. And certainly I have ones that I prefer for various reasons. But one of the most helpful discussions on translation that I've found is in *The Bible: An Introduction* by Jerry L. Sumney (www.commonword.ca/go/1710). He doesn't just state which translation he likes and why, he lays out a framework for understanding the approaches to various translations so that we can make informed choices.

Basically Sumney lays out a scale or a spectrum. On one side we find "formal correspondence." Bibles at this end of the spectrum seek to present a translation as close to the original in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure etc. A pure formal correspondence translation would be very difficult to read, as you can probably imagine if you've ever tried using a word-for-word translator! The ASV is at the furthest end of this spectrum, while the KJV, NKJV and RSV are one step closer to the center.

At the other end of the spectrum we find "dynamic equivalence." Translations at the furthest end of this spectrum are really paraphrases such as The Message or the Good News Bible. These translations or paraphrases attempt to present the meaning they believe the text is trying to convey, using more contemporary speech and metaphors. Paraphrases give us more "the translator's interpretation of the text and less what the text actually says" (27). One step closer to center on this side would be the NASB and the NJB.

According to Sumney most of our translations fall somewhere between the two extremes, though clearly some lean more in one direction or the other. So in order to choose your translation, you'll want to identify the purpose of your reading. If you want to be able to do a word study, or in depth Bible study that explores context or even a careful reading in order to determine a text's particular meaning or instruction, you will want to lean toward formal

correspondence. If your desire is to read for encouragement or for more devotional purposes, then something closer to dynamic equivalence might be appropriate.

Again, different translations fall at different points along the spectrum. A really good Bible for in depth study will attempt to remain faithful in many ways to the original language and structure, while also being fairly easy to read (so not pure formal correspondence). This allows you to be able to read with a degree of comfort, but also see patterns in the text (repeated words, rhythms) that are mostly lost in a dynamic equivalence translation. Here you would find a translation such as the NRSV. However, at times such translations may feel more bulky or take more effort to read.

On the other hand, you may want a Bible for your own devotional purposes that enhances the meaning of the text or makes it more relevant to your own experience, such as the NEB or perhaps the NIV, CEB, or CEV (I'm guessing this is about where Sumney might put these last three since he doesn't include them). It is important to note that such translations do more to direct or limit interpretations whereas a formal correspondence translation would allow the ambiguity in the text to remain (discussion thus far drawn from Sumney 26-29).

Bibles at different points along the spectrum have their purposes, and not all are created equal. Some translations that lean toward dynamic equivalence do a good job of remaining faithful to the text, while others are laden with contemporary examples and inferences that virtually bury the message or any opportunity for the Spirit to be at work in your own interpretation! Often the small bits of commentary or devotional questions can carry a lot of underlying agenda that we might not pay attention to when choosing a particular translation. It may be an NIV, but who wrote those devotional bits! I say this because this morning I was reading Psalm 139 in an NIV student Bible and I noticed a little inserted box with a question clearly meant to convince me that the text had a very particular and clear position on abortion.

You may get the sense that I lean toward formal correspondence and you would be right. This is, quite possibly, because I've spent much of the last decade studying the Bible in more academic settings where the NRSV was the accepted translation. I do spend time with other translations like the CEB, NIV, CEV etc. when preparing to preach or for my own personal reading, however none feel quite as comfortable for me as an NRSV. I usually recommend that if you really feel drawn to a paraphrase or a translation more in the realm of dynamic equivalence, that you at least periodically delve into a more formal translation, especially if you want to really dig into a text. And if you only ever read scripture in an almost pure formal correspondence translation, occasionally it might be good to get your head out of the clouds! As per usual, I take more of a both/and approach ☺.