



Answers for a Changing Culture

09 Why Are There So Many Bible Translations?

God inspired Scripture in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; faithful English translations may use different words while communicating the same inspired meaning.

EMBARK

Every Bible translation has to answer two questions: **How closely should we preserve the wording and structure of the original languages?** and **How clearly should we express the same meaning in natural English?** Those goals are not enemies, but they can create tension. A more formal translation tends to preserve more of the wording and structure of the Hebrew or Greek; a more functional translation gives greater weight to expressing the same meaning naturally in English. Every translation has to balance both. Romans 6:1–2 gives us a simple example.

		Greek: μή γένοιτο (<i>mē genoito</i>)	
KJV	God forbid.	CSB	Absolutely not!
ESV	By no means!	NASB	May it never be!
		NKJV	Certainly not!
		NLT	Of course not!
Different wording does not necessarily mean different meaning.			

Notice that the KJV is not the closest to the Greek form in this example. Its translators chose an English expression that communicated the force of Paul's words. The wording is different, but each translation is trying to communicate the same forceful rejection. Which rendering stays closest to the Greek form? Which most naturally communicates Paul's meaning in English? **Can both approaches be faithful?**

1. When two Bible translations use different words, what is your first reaction?
2. What would make two different English renderings both faithful translations?
3. Does "more literal" always mean "more accurate"? Why or why not?

EXAMINE

READ 2 Timothy 3:14–17

4. What does Paul say about the source of Scripture?
5. What does this passage say Scripture is able to accomplish?
6. Where does Paul locate the authority of Scripture?

READ Nehemiah 8:1–8

7. What did Ezra and the Levites do besides simply read the words of the Law?
8. Why was understanding what was read important?
9. What principle does this give us for communicating God's Word to people who do not naturally understand its language?

READ Acts 2:5–11

10. What amazed the crowd about the way they heard the apostles?
11. What were they hearing in their own languages?
12. What does Pentecost suggest about whether God's truth is tied to one human language?

READ 1 Corinthians 14:6–12

13. Why does Paul insist that speech in the church be intelligible?
14. According to verse 9, what happens when words cannot be understood?
15. How should intelligibility shape the way we think about Bible translation?



COMING NEXT: In **Lesson 10**, we'll look at how the biblical text was preserved and why manuscripts sometimes differ, including the Byzantine and Alexandrian traditions, the Textus Receptus, and modern critical texts. In **Lesson 11**, we'll turn practical and ask how to evaluate English translations and choose one wisely for reading, study, and church use.

EXPOSE

We confuse inspiration with one English translation

The Bible teaches that Scripture is God-breathed. The inspired words were given in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. English translations faithfully convey the authority of Scripture as they accurately communicate those inspired words. We can honor an excellent translation without treating one English version as though it alone were inspired.

We assume different wording means someone changed the Bible

Different wording does not necessarily mean different meaning. Translators must make judgments about vocabulary, grammar, idioms, and sentence structure because languages do not correspond word-for-word. Faithfulness is measured by how accurately a translation communicates the original text, not by whether it reproduces the same English wording as another translation.

We confuse "more literal" with "more accurate"

A woodenly literal rendering can sometimes obscure meaning rather than clarify it. Faithful translation must account for both what the original words say and how those words function together. The goal is not simply to preserve form, but to communicate meaning accurately.

We make translation philosophy a loyalty test

Formal and functional equivalence are not two opposing camps. Every translation makes choices about when to preserve form and when to communicate meaning more naturally. Christians may reasonably prefer different translations without questioning one another's commitment to Scripture.

We can respect the KJV without making it exclusive

The King James Version is a reliable and historically important translation. Generations of Christians have read it, memorized it, preached it, and learned the gospel through it. The issue is not using or preferring the KJV. The problem comes when one English translation is given an exclusivity Scripture never gives it.

ENGAGE

Step 1: Begin with what God inspired.

Remember that the authority belongs to God's Word, not to the age, popularity, or familiarity of an English translation.

Step 2: Ask what the original expression means.

When translations differ, do not begin by asking which English wording you like best. Ask what each rendering is trying to communicate from the Hebrew or Greek.

Step 3: Compare before you criticize.

A different wording is not automatically a weaker wording. Compare several reliable translations and look for what remains the same as well as what differs.

Step 4: Use "literal" carefully.

Prefer accuracy, not wooden wording. A translation can reproduce the form of the original and still obscure its meaning in English.

Step 5: Choose a reliable primary Bible.

Use a trustworthy translation you can understand well enough to read, study, memorize, and obey consistently. Other translations can be valuable comparison tools.

Step 6: Respect legitimate preferences.

Someone may prefer the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, CSB, NIV, or another reliable translation for thoughtful reasons. Preference should not become a measure of another believer's faithfulness.

Step 7: Let translation differences drive you toward the text, not away from it.

When wording differs, become curious rather than suspicious. The goal is not to defend our favorite English phrasing but to understand as accurately as possible what God said.

COMPARE & MEMORIZE 1 Corinthians 14:9

KJV "So likewise you, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air."

CSB "In the same way, unless you use your tongue for intelligible speech, how will what is spoken be known? For you will be speaking into the air."

Remember... *Different English wording does not automatically mean a different Bible. God gave His Word in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and faithful translators must make real choices as they communicate that meaning in English. Honor good translations, compare them thoughtfully, and never confuse a preferred translation with the inspired text itself.*