

Fulton County Gospel News

Good News About Christ And His Church For All Of The World

“... Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body.” - Ephesians 5:23

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400 YEARS OF THE KING JAMES VERSION

by Lee Moses

2011 is a significant year for English-speaking Bible believers. It was four hundred years ago, in 1611, that the King James Version (KJV) was first printed and made available to churches and the public. As we point this out, we are not issuing a call to observe a special holiday. However, as multitudes of our brethren continue to flock forgetfully and ungratefully away from the KJV and toward modern translations, perhaps an improved appreciation of the KJV, “the most important book in the English language,”¹ might serve us all well.

When the KJV translation was first undertaken, the translation of the Bible into English was still a fairly novel concept. The Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England had vehemently opposed efforts to translate the Bible into the vernacular, knowing that if the people came to an understanding of Scripture, they would also grasp the discrepancy between Scriptural teachings and the lives and teachings of the clergy.² Also, for generations the English had disdained their own language, favoring French and Latin over English for any remotely formal use.³ What few English Bibles had been produced enjoyed very limited printing and circulation, particularly with the earlier ones done in underground fashion. Thankfully, numerous factors—some religious, some political, some technological—converged to provide the opportunity to produce a masterful translation with widespread circulation.

The motivations of King James I of England in authorizing a new translation of the Bible were primarily political. He desired harmony between the established Anglican Church and the puritans, and a new translation was one

concession to which he would agree to placate the puritans. A translation committee was formed to collaborate in the undertaking. Although translation committees had been used previously, they would commonly assign individual books to individual translators. This, in part, led to shortcomings in the KJV’s predecessors.⁴ Sections of Scripture were divided among six companies of translators, those translators representing the best scholarship of England—and, perhaps, some of the best scholarship of all time.

As Gordon Campbell marvels,

The learning embodied in the men of these six companies is daunting. It is sometimes assumed that people in the twenty-first century know more than the benighted people of the seventeenth century, but in many ways the opposite is true. The population from which scholars can now be drawn is much larger than that of the seventeenth century, but it would be difficult now to bring together a group of more than fifty scholars with the range of languages and knowledge of other disciplines that characterized the KJV translators.⁵

The scholarship in England at that time was very impressive, particularly as suited for Bible translation. It was not uncommon for scholarly families to instruct children in numerous languages, particularly in the languages of the Bible and its early translations.⁶ Campbell points out that in the seventeenth century, most learned men had the Syriac translation of the New Testament in their libraries, and the Arabic translation of the Psalms was also

common. These are much rarer in the libraries of “learned men” today. “[T]he study of Greek, and of the oriental tongues, and of rabbinical lore, had then been carried to a greater extent in England than ever before or since.”⁷ As Campbell observes, “We may live in a world with more knowledge, but it is populated by people with less knowledge.”⁸ And in that day, **Biblical** scholars were the *crème de la crème* among all scholars. And the KJV translators were among the best of the best, all collaborating and given time to ensure that no stone be left unturned in the process.

Nothing comparable had been attempted since antiquity, when the elders of Israel gathered in Alexandria to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek, and created a Greek text (the Septuagint) with consistent principles and a remarkably even style. The KJV translators were determined to improve upon that precedent.⁹

Not only were the KJV translators themselves unsurpassed scholars, but they also took an approach to translation that built upon the scholarship of the past. While our modern era pridefully esteems innovation and originality above all else, the KJV translators held to the renaissance view that they could see better if they would humbly become “like dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants.”¹⁰ As such, the translators followed prior English translations, particularly the Bishop’s Bible, and made as little alteration as the original Hebrew and Greek would permit.

While the KJV’s popular predecessor, the Geneva Bible, provided a number of interpretive notes in the margins, it was specified from the outset that the KJV would provide very limited marginal notes. Marginal notes were provided where there was uncertainty about the correct reading or translation. As the KJV translators said, “They that

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are wise had rather have their judgments at liberty in differences of readings, than to be captivated to one, when it may be the other.”¹¹ Verses to cross-reference were also provided. Otherwise, the rules for the KJV translation strictly forbade the inclusion of marginal notes, apparently in an effort to avoid theological bias imputed by a source other than the text itself.¹² The wisdom of this is seen as Bibles were thereafter printed without notes for centuries, until the Scofield Reference Bible was released in 1909. While the Scofield Bible included the KJV text, it also included notes that propagated the false doctrines of Dispensational Premillennialism, the Gap Theory, and other such nonsense. But thankfully, KJV readers have for the most part been able to come to an understanding of God’s word without the intrusion of human opinions printed directly in their Bibles.

Many laud the literary quality of the KJV, and rightfully so. The translation was done during what Samuel Johnson dubbed “the golden age of our language,”¹³ when the English language had “ripened to its full perfection.”¹⁴ And

as the celebrated author Jonathan Swift exulted,

By the many beautiful Passages...I am persuaded that the Translators of the Bible were Masters of an English Style much fitter for that Work, than any we see in our present Writings, which I take to be owing to the Simplicity that runs through the whole.¹⁵

The poetic prose of the KJV has prompted some to wonder aloud whether Shakespeare himself were not involved in its composition. The meter of the translation at times is found to replicate the meter of poetry, or of Shakespeare’s plays.¹⁶ However, the translators never sought to achieve literary excellence.¹⁷ Their goal was to provide a faithful translation of the Scriptures. Ironically, while later translations prioritized literary excellence above accuracy, they have all fallen short of the KJV’s unintentional literary excellence.¹⁸

Room still remained for improvement from the 1611 KJV, as several new editions were made in the following decades. The text commonly in use today did not arrive until 1769, when Benjamin Blayney’s Oxford folio was published.¹⁹ However, following the publication of Blayney’s edition, virtually all criticism of the KJV that existed prior was brought to an abrupt halt.²⁰ And subsequent new editions have acquiesced to Blayney’s work.

Is the KJV perfect? No, it is not. At times, it uses archaic English that can confuse the modern reader. The KJV uses “let” and “prevent” virtually opposite of their modern meanings. Psalm 59:10 reads, “*The God of my mercy shall prevent me.*” Does this mean that God would **hinder** or **incapacitate** the psalmist, as we generally think of the word *prevent*? No, it means that God would **go before** him, thus enabling the psalmist’s desire to be realized—and ultimately, meaning the opposite of what a modern reader might initially think upon reading the word “prevent.” Second Thessalonians 2:7 reads, “*For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.*” A reader might be confused into thinking “he who now letteth” is one who **allows**,

when this actually refers to a force that **restrains**—the same word is translated “withholdeth” in the previous verse. There are numerous other archaisms as well. When Luke says, “[W]e fetched a compass” (Acts 28:13), he does not mean “we grabbed a magnetically-oriented navigational instrument.” When the Sadducees spoke of a man “*having no issue*” (Matthew 22:25), they were neither speaking of a man who had “no problem,” nor of a man whose magazine subscription had expired. Not only is the KJV’s language archaic to the modern reader, but some of it was even considered archaic when the translation was first published in 1611. That said, it should still be remembered that the KJV is placed at a 5th grade reading level. Most of the unfamiliar language can be easily understood from the context. Some of the language that might no longer be common lends a certain stateliness and poetry befitting God’s word that modern versions do not approach. Also, the English of the KJV better corresponds to the original Hebrew and Greek than does the English of modern translations.

Another shortcoming of the KJV is that it was translated from limited textual evidence. Older manuscripts were discovered in the following centuries that were not available to the KJV translators. Also, papyri found in the last 120 years or so have shed light on the Greek used at the time was the New Testament was first inspired. Unfortunately, subsequent translations that have had this information available to them have not made the best use of it. Some entirely disregarded the evidence of thousands of newer manuscripts in favor of very few older manuscripts. Others chose a very subjective “eclectic” approach, whereby the translators could choose whatever reading they liked best.

Many of the eighteenth-century pioneer preachers pled for a true revision of the KJV, if not for a new translation altogether. Alexander Campbell repeatedly lamented the deficiencies of the Common Version. Men such as “Raccoon” John Smith and Jacob Creath, Jr. favored the *Living Oracles* translation edited by Campbell. In 1888, brother D.R. Dungan observed in his volume on *Hermeneutics*, “A correct translation would conduce towards a

reliable exegesis.”²¹ However, I believe those men would have retracted their words, or at least qualified their words, if they could have seen the “Babel of Modern Versions”²² that has arisen in the 20th and 21st centuries. As Leroy Brownlow dejectedly observed, “We have had a rash of translations to break out among us in which very little has been added to truth, faith, and stability, but much has been added to error, doubt, and instability.”²³

The American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901, while done from a flawed textual philosophy, made improvements at places. As brother Foy E. Wallace, Jr. noted, “It completed all the revision of the Authorized Version that scholarship required.”²⁴ It also had some shortcomings, such as reading at 2 Timothy 3:16, “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable...” This might leave the reader with the impression that some Scriptures are neither inspired nor profitable, in contrast to the KJV’s clear “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable.*”

However, the shortcomings of neither the KJV nor ASV approach those of the modern versions that have proliferated since. The Revised Standard Version sought to eliminate the prophecy of Christ’s virgin birth from the Scriptures (Isaiah 7:14). The New English Bible sought to eliminate a prophecy of Christ’s crucifixion (Psalm 22:16). The ironically named “Living Bible” changes Isaiah’s prophecy of the church (Isa. 2:2-4) into a prediction of a worldly kingdom, and changes baptism from what “saves us” into a “picture” to “show that we **have** been saved” (1 Peter 3:21). The New American Standard Bible allows any kind of “immorality” as grounds for divorce and remarriage, instead of the specific “fornication” (*porneia*) of the KJV (Matthew 19:9). The English Standard Version implies premillennial doctrine by speaking of Christ and His apostles reigning “in the new world” instead of “*in the regeneration*” (Matthew 19:28); that is, the Christian age (compare with John 3:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Titus 3:5). It also twists the words of Paul from speaking about belief and confession leading one **toward** salvation into having salvation occur at that very point (Romans 10:10). As for the New International Version,

that will have to wait for another day—space simply will not allow us to begin to address the error of that filthy Calvinistic rag. The other modern translations briefly mentioned above also have numerous other errors that we could address, but space prohibits.

Despite the well-intentioned pleas of pioneer preachers for a new translation, the KJV remains the best English translation in widespread use. This is not to support the “King James Only” movement that emerged in the United States in the 1970’s. Some have gone so far as to say that the KJV constitutes a “third revelation,” on par with, or even **superseding**, the authority of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. The KJV translators were not inspired, but they did their work well as they rendered the inspired Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into English. No comparable scholarship has been assembled for the purpose of Bible translation since the KJV, except perhaps the ASV (and its British counterpart, the English Revised Version of 1881). However, the ASV now exists only in very limited publication and use. And as well done as the ASV was, it is debatable whether it ever surpassed the KJV. Even one whose scholarship led to the ASV, B.F. Westcott, acknowledged the supremacy of the KJV:

From the middle of the seventeenth century, the King’s Bible has been the acknowledged Bible of the English-speaking nations throughout the world simply because it is the best. A revision which embodied the ripe fruits of nearly a century of labour, and appealed to the religious instinct of a great Christian [sic] people, gained by its own internal character a vital authority which could never have been secured by an edict of sovereign rulers.²⁵

That authority lay in the inspiration of Scriptures themselves, an authority conveyed into the English because of the KJV translators’ insistence on fidelity to the original. “The KJV translators preferred literal fidelity to interpretive translating.”²⁶ As such it can be called “Scripture” (Luke 4:21), and as such is the inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). Not so with most modern

translations—they favor paraphrase, or “dynamic equivalence.” The word-for-word philosophy tends to lead to more stilted English. Yet, amazingly, the English of the KJV is of unsurpassed literary excellence.

The plethora of modern versions encourages, and perhaps is partially a product of, the postmodern thinking that there are innumerable truths and innumerable roads to heaven. If someone does not like what one Bible tells him he must do, he can simply find another that changes it. And sadly, because of the modern versions’ low view of inspiration and loose approach to translation, human opinions to match one’s own often work themselves into the text of these supposed “translations.”

Is it possible for another English translation to surpass the KJV? The answer is unequivocally, **yes**—it is possible. The KJV translators never saw the KJV as the English translation to end all English translations. It would be wonderful if a widespread translation were willing clearly to say, “**Be immersed**” instead of the “**Be baptized**” that some continue to apply to sprinkling infants. It would be wonderful if translators of integrity, scholarship, and a high view of inspiration could be assembled such as those brought together for producing the KJV. Unfortunately, while it is **possible**, the **likelihood** of another translation surpassing the quality of the KJV within the lifetime of this writer or of the reader is not great. Most of the factors that led to faults in the KJV would still exist in any other major translation project that was undertaken—politics and denominational bias would still be a problem. In the meantime, we can be very thankful that we have a sublime and accurate rendering of God’s word in the King James Version, and we can be very thankful for the souls it has led to eternal salvation.

1 Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611-2011* (London: Oxford, 2010), p. 2. This is a thought repeated countless times from different sources, and one on which there is virtually unanimous agreement.

2 Alister McGrath, *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2001), p. 19. At the Council of Valencia (1229), the Roman Catholic Church placed the Bible on their *Index of Forbidden Books*, decreeing, “We prohibit also the permitting of the laity to have the books of the Old and New Testament, unless any one should wish, from a

feeling of devotion, to have a psalter [the Psalms, LM] or breviary [book containing the Roman Church's prescribed worship for the day, LM] for divine service, or the hours of the blessed Mary. **But we strictly forbid them to have the above mentioned books in the vulgar tongue**" [emphasis LM]. Quoted by Eddie Whitten, "The Intolerance of Catholicism," in *Roman Catholicism* (Spring, TX: Contending for the Faith, 2000), p. 364.

3 McGrath, pp. 23-28.

4 Campbell, p. 56.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

7 Alexander W. McClure, *Translators Revived* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1853), p. 63.

8 p. 55.

9 Campell, pp. 39-40.

10 John of Salisbury; quoted by McGrath, pp. 176-177.

11 "The Translators to the Reader," in *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, n.d.), xxiv.

12 Undoubtedly, the displeasure of the English royalty and clergy with the Geneva Bible's copious marginal notes also played a significant role in this decision.

13 Quoted by McGrath, p. 254.

14 McClure, p. 63.

15 *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712); quoted by

Campbell, p. 144.

16 Campbell, pp. 2, 80.

17 McGrath, p. 253.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

19 Campbell, p. 4.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

21 *Hermeneutics* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light, n.d.), p. 24.

22 As described by brother Foy E. Wallace, Jr., *A Review of the New Versions*, by Foy E. Wallace, Jr. (Fort Worth, TX: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Publications, 1980 printing), p. 575.

23 Foreword to Wallace's Review, p. xi.

24 Wallace, p. 575.

25 B.F. Westcott, *A General View of the History of the English Bible* (1911 edition), p. 121; quoted by McGrath, p. 207.

26 Campbell, p. 81.

27 In this passage, Jesus had just quoted from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Although the translation process itself was not inspired, Jesus called it "Scripture." The NT repeatedly quotes from this translation and calls it "Scripture" just as assuredly as the Hebrew OT. As such, we can have confidence that a faithfully rendered English translation, such as the KJV, is Scripture just as assuredly as are the Scriptures in their original languages.

GOD'S AUTHORIZED WORSHIP
- COLOSSIANS 3:17

1. **LORD'S SUPPER** - The New Testament and early church history record that Christians met on the first day of every week (Sunday) to worship God and remember Christ (Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 11:23-34; 16: 1-2).
2. **PRAYERS** - (Acts 2:42; Philippians 4:6-7; I Thessalonians 5:17-18).
3. **SINGING** - God's word authorizes only vocal music and specifically singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12). The New Testament shows no use of mechanical instruments of music in worship to God by the church Christ established. Church history notes no such use for nearly 700 years after the New Testament was completed. It is an innovation of men, not of God.
4. **GIVING** - Free-willed, cheerful, generous, and every week (Acts 20:35; I Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9).
5. **PREACHING OF THE WORD** - The gospel of Christ, not men's doctrines nor entertainment, saves and strengthens us (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Romans 10:17; I Corinthians 1:18-23).

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