

Advice for Lay Readers on the Use of Bible Translations in Worship

The Bible is a compilation of ancient books written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Since the earliest days, Christians have made it a priority to translate the books of the Bible into local languages. Jesus is our inspiration for this. Similarly, we also believe it is important for people to be able to hear God's word in a language they can readily understand. This is why today the Bible has been translated into many languages and dialects.

However, translating ancient texts into modern languages is not a simple exercise. There are many different schools of thought in Bible translation. It is also impossible for people to translate the Bible without imposing their own ideas, presuppositions, and theological biases onto the text. This is why there are so many English translations of the Bible available today, and some of them can sound so different to each other. One basic difference for the lay readers' awareness needs to be between literal and dynamic translations.

The aim of a more literal translation is to translate the words of the Bible as accurately as possible. They can, however, be harder to understand to an untrained ear, and they can also sound a bit more 'wooden'. This is because the translator has made a conscious decision to reflect the original structure of the text. They may also have included turns of phrase and expressions that may have made more sense to the original audience, but need to be explained to modern readers. Examples of more literal translations are the King James Version (KJV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the English Standard Version (ESV).

On the other hand, the aim of a more dynamic translation is to translate the sense of the text over against the original words and expressions. Dynamic versions will usually be more easily understood, and will take less work on the part of a modern hearer to comprehend the text. However, readers should always remember that the reason the text is easier to understand is because the author has already begun the process of interpretation. The danger of this is that the author's presuppositions and biases can more easily obscure the original text. The basic rule of thumb is that the more dynamic a translation is, the less accurate and reliable it is. Dynamic translations will often lose the original poetry of a text; the Psalms, for example, will sound quite bland in comparison to a more literal translation. Examples of more dynamic translations are the Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Good News Bible (GNB).

Paraphrases go even further. Paraphrases, such as The Message, have so much interpretation in them, that they can no longer be considered translation in the strictest sense. They are, in reality, a complete rewriting of the text. You will notice that many paraphrases will often omit the verse numbers, because the author has not even followed the original structure of the chapter. For these reasons, paraphrases are not suitable for the readings in public worship. For example, we cannot recommend The Message for use in worship; in fact, Peterson himself advises against people using it in this way.

In reality, all translations will utilise elements of literal and dynamic translation, just in different proportions. Moreover, no translation is without its faults. The conveners of the Worship Planning Page have decided to use the New International Version (NIV) as a default. This is not because we consider it to be the best translation available, but rather because we believe it to represent a good middle ground between literal and dynamic translation. As such, it should be able to be used in most LCA congregations without too much trouble.

The decision over which translation should be used is best made on a local level. If your congregation is largely well-educated with a good grasp of written English, it would be better to use a more literal translation, since people will often have the skills necessary for analysing complex texts. If, on the other hand, your congregation has a large number of people who have English as a second language, a more dynamic translation may be in order so that they may more easily grasp the meaning of the text. There are many other considerations, of course, so we encourage you to talk this matter over within your congregation. More detailed assessments of the most common translations are available on the Worship Planning Page.

It is very easy to change the settings in Bible Gateway to bring up your preferred translation. Simply click on the box with 'New International Version (NIV)'. This will bring up a drop down menu with many different translation options. Select the translation you want, and click search.

God bless you in your service of his church!

The Worship Planning Page team.

Approved by the Commission on Worship
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