

Choosing a Bible

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For the rest of our time this morning, we're going to be doing something a little different. Instead of talking about the Bible, we're going to talk about Bibles: translations, formats, and which ones are best for our purposes. About a month ago, I asked on the Joliet Facebook page whether people would be interested in a sermon on this topic, and enough people said yes that I decided to go ahead with it.

Even though this won't be a doctrinal sermon, I still think the study is worth our time. After all, 2 Timothy 2 tells us that we are to be workmen who know how to accurately handle the word of truth, and if that's our occupation, Bibles are the tools of our trade. Let's look, then, at how to choose a Bible.

Translations

Within this overall subject, the first topic that we must address is the topic of translation. Go to the Bibles section of christianbook.com, and you will be greeted with thousands of different Bibles in a veritable alphabet soup of translations. How do we know which of those are suitable for our purposes?

First, we must acknowledge that translation is **AN ART, NOT A SCIENCE**. This is a conversation that I've had many times over the years, often with my father. He is an engineer by training, and he will think like an engineer until the day he dies and maybe thereafter. This means that he expects the world to operate with mathematical certainty, and that includes Bible translation. He continually expresses frustration that various English translations "don't say what the Bible says!"

The reality is, though, that the process of translation isn't as simple as that. Language is complicated, and there are no $2 + 2 = 4$ rules that always apply in every instance. As those of you who know more than one language can testify, other languages don't line exactly up with English, and that's certainly true of Koine Greek, which is the language of the New Testament. Sometimes five different Greek words can be translated by the same English word. Sometimes a single Greek word is most accurately translated by five different English words, and you have to choose which one is the best fit by looking at the context. There are Greek-specific idioms, grammatical peculiarities, divergent manuscripts, and a host of other differences great and small, so that regardless of what translation we use, it has a whole lot of judgment calls in it.

To many Christians, this is a disheartening realization. If we don't know Greek, how can we possibly know what the Bible says? In this regard, we should take comfort from the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a translation of the Old Testament into Greek executed in about 300 BC. As translations go, it's not nearly as close to the original Hebrew as many of our modern Bible translations are to the original Greek.

However, despite these differences in wording, every book of the New Testament that quotes from the Old Testament quotes from the Septuagint. Sometimes, the inspired authors tweaked the wording a little bit, but by and large, the Holy Spirit determined that even this so-so translation was good enough to use. Friends, if the Holy Spirit had that confidence in the Septuagint, we can have it in our translations today!

This takes us to the question, then, of what **DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS** we should use. There are hundreds of English translations available. Of those, there are probably five that a Christian might realistically look at buying and using: the King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version, the English Standard Version, and the 2011 New International Version.

I would like to talk about all of these, but if I did, we might be here until 2:30! Instead, I'm going to focus on the two I use most frequently in my study: the NASB and the ESV. Though I will look at the other three some, I prefer these two because the others have some problems. The KJV uses antiquated language, and the NKJV relies only on the manuscripts available when the old King James was translated in 1611.

As for the NIV '11, it's a different animal than the old 1984 NIV. It got rid of most of the "sinful nature" language that gave the NIV '84 a Calvinist bent, and I like it better overall. However, it does have a feminist slant in some passages. For instance, in Romans 16:1, Phoebe is identified not as a "servant" of the church in Cenchrea, but as a "deacon", with the implication being that she was a female church officer. All these translations have merit, but I wouldn't use any of them for my one and only Bible.

Instead, the first translation that I would use as a one-and-only is **THE NASB**. If you read any of the NASB advertising, it will hold itself forth as "the most literal", and there's some truth to that. If you want

a Bible in which each word in the English text lines up with a word in the Greek text, the NASB will take you closer to that than any other English translation. Of course, there are still plenty of judgment calls. One that drives my dad crazy is the way the NASB capitalizes the word “Spirit”, conveying the impression that the text is talking about the third person of the Godhead when sometimes it actually isn’t.

Others, though, will criticize the NASB for not making enough judgment calls. They say that the translation is more like Greek using English words than it is like an actual translation, and it is certainly true that sometimes the NASB is harder to understand than other translations. Look, for instance, at 1 Thessalonians 4:4. The idea of “possessing his own vessel” is a Greek idiom that doesn’t appear in English, so if you show that to someone who has never studied the Bible, he might think it’s talking about a coffee cup! It’s easy for us to overlook these problems if we’re used to the Bible, but they are very real.

By contrast, we might think of **THE ESV** as sort of an NASB-lite. It has the same word-for-word translation philosophy as the NASB, but it doesn’t carry it as far. This has a couple of consequences. First, it means that the ESV reads more smoothly than the NASB and is easier to understand, while still remaining suitable for close study. However, sometimes the ESV makes more judgment calls than I’m comfortable with. Look, for example, at the way it translates 1 Thessalonians 4:4. On the plus side, this is a lot easier to understand than “possess his own vessel”. On the minus side, I happen to think that it’s not the correct translation of that Greek idiom. I think the passage is talking about a man’s marital relationship with his wife, not control of his own body. The point is certainly debatable, but the ESV leaves the impression that there’s nothing to debate. I used an ESV as my church-building Bible for five years, and even though it didn’t give me any major problems, I did notice several places where I thought it over-translated. What you give up, then, in exchange for the added smoothness, is some of the word-for-word rigor of the NASB.

Which Bible?

Now that we’ve gotten some of the more abstract stuff down, let’s look at which Bible we should choose. First, I’m going to do something a little counter-cultural here. I’m going to encourage everyone to take a second look at **PAPER BIBLES**. Here, as elsewhere in the brotherhood, a lot of people have switched to Bibles on tablets or smartphones. There’s certainly nothing wrong with that.

However, I don’t think making the switch is a no-brainer. Paper Bibles and e-Bibles aren’t the same thing, even if they contain the same text, and some things get lost in transition. Let me give you one example. I commonly hear Christians say that they have trouble remembering where things are in the Bible. They know the Bible says X, but they can’t give you book, chapter, and verse.

E-Bibles may actually be making that problem worse. Most of us know that different people have different learning styles. Some, like me, are very verbal and written. Others are very visual and kinesthetic. They learn by seeing things or by physically manipulating them. People in that category are probably going to learn better with a paper Bible, because a paper Bible is a physical object and an e-Bible isn’t.

On an e-Bible screen, a particular passage doesn’t have a physical location. Romans 12:1-2 can appear on the top, the bottom, or the middle of the screen. Not so in a paper Bible. I can tell you without looking that in the Foundation Side-Column Reference, which I used for years, Romans 12:1-2 is at the very bottom of the right-hand page. When I use that Bible, there is a visual cue as to where the content is located, and for visual thinkers, that visual cue will help them remember.

Likewise for kinesthetic learners. A Bible app doesn’t have a physical reality. It’s an idea off in cyberspace somewhere. You can see it, but you can’t touch it. You can touch a paper Bible. You can handle it enough that you get a sense of where things are in it, that this is what it feels like to turn to Romans 12. The more a kinesthetic learner uses a Bible, the stronger those physical cues become. However, if the same kinesthetic learner uses an e-Bible, those cues can never develop, with a resulting loss in memory retention. Now, I’m not saying that we all need to gather around after services and make a bonfire out of our iPhones. I’m simply saying that we need to make our choice of paper or electronic Bibles a thoughtful one.

If we do opt for paper Bibles, there are two main things we should keep in mind about **BIBLE CONSTRUCTION**. First, look for Bibles with sewn bindings. These are Bibles in which the pages are held in the Bible by binding thread instead of a strip of glue down the spine. Bibles that are bound with glue instead of thread are cheaper, but they are also much less durable. I suspect all of us have had a Bible that got a big crack down the middle and started losing pages about a year after we bought it. That’s a sure sign of a

glue-bound Bible. If we buy sewn Bibles, they won't do that. They'll last for years. It's possible to determine whether a Bible is glued or sewn by inspection, but for our purposes, let's just look at the Bible's description. The boxes of sewn Bibles will often describe them as "Sewn" or "Smyth-Sewn". Other giveaway terms are "Lay-Flat" or "Lifetime Warranty", because nobody's going to put a lifetime warranty on a glued Bible. If you don't see language like that on the box or website, don't buy the Bible. It'll just let you down.

Second, look for Bibles with polyurethane covers. Various manufacturers describe these as TruTone, DuoTone, or "imitation leather". I recommend poly Bibles for two reasons. First, they're cheap. A poly Bible will cost less than half as much as the same Bible in a genuine-leather cover. Second, they're fairly durable, much more so than Bibles with paperback, hardback, or bonded-leather covers. Starting in 2008, I used a poly Bible as my every-day church-building Bible, and it took five years for that cover to start looking shabby. If you aren't using a poly Bible for hours every day like I did, it'll last three times as long. Poly Bibles do have one flaw, though. They melt when exposed to heat and sunlight, so if you leave one on your car dashboard in the middle of July, you'll wreck the cover. Even with that, though, they're a good buy.

Finally, I'd like to make several **BIBLE RECOMMENDATIONS**. The first is the Foundation Side-Column Reference NASB. I like it for several reasons. Its text is in 11-point font, which is big for a Bible. It's in verse-by-verse format, which makes locating verses extremely easy if you're preaching or teaching a Bible class. It has a robust system of cross-references for running down Old Testament references and the like. It's even a good reading Bible.

On the minus side, though, it's a big Bible, which makes it a lot harder to stick in a glove box or the side pocket of a laptop case. Also, even though the layout is utilitarian, it's pretty cluttered, which some might find distracting. The SCR comes in both a narrow-margin trim, like mine, and a wide-margin, for those of you who like to write lots of notes in your margins. Americanbiblesales.com is the best place to pick one of these up, and even though the narrow-margin is out of print at the moment, you can find the genuine-leather version in the "On Sale" section there for \$25, which is an astonishingly good deal.

Next, I would recommend the Zondervan Thinline NASB. Do not be alarmed by the pink! It comes in just about any color you can imagine. I like this Bible because it's small and handy. In fact, it's the smallest Bible I'll be recommending. You can't put it in your pocket, but it will fit easily just about anywhere else. Also, I believe Zondervan did an excellent job on the layout, which makes it easy to read and use. However, it doesn't have cross-references, and the 7.8-point font might give some people trouble. I would look to buy one of these at christianbook.com, and you can expect to pay around \$20 for it.

Third, in the realm of the ESV, I would recommend Crossway's Personal Reference Bible. The one I have is the slightly older Personal Size Reference, but the two Bibles are closely related. This one is also small and easy to carry. Despite its size, it has a full suite of cross-references. It's a decent reading Bible, and because it's formatted with a single column rather than a double column, it reads especially smoothly in the poetry of the Old Testament. As for its negatives, you're looking at an 8-point font, which is fairly small, and the way that Crossway formats its verse numbers makes them somewhat difficult for me to find. You can buy a PRB at wtsbooks.com, which is the cheapest place online to buy an ESV, for \$15.

Finally, I would recommend Crossway's Value Thinline. Its main selling point is its price. You get the durability of the polyurethane cover and the sewn binding, but at wtsbooks.com, you get them for \$7.50, which, as far as I am aware, is the cheapest price on a sewn Bible in a good translation anywhere. If I'm buying my kid a new Bible, I'm buying them a Value Thinline. The layout of the Bible isn't phenomenal, but it's solid, and it makes a great first Bible. On the down side, at that price, the Bible leaves out a lot of extras. It doesn't have maps, it doesn't have a marker ribbon, and so on, but for \$7.50, who cares?

Of course, all of these are general recommendations. If you have specific needs, like a Bible with *really* large print, we can visit together about that after services. Likewise, feel free to look through any of mine, and if you fall in love with any of them, that's probably the one to buy. It's important for us all to use Bibles that we like, because the better we like it, the more time we're going to spend with it.