

*New  
International  
Version:*

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WHAT TODAY'S  
CHRISTIAN NEEDS  
TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
ORIGINAL

**NIV**

(1984)

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A REVIEW



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**Trinitarian Bible Society**

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Trinitarian Bible Society  
William Tyndale House, 29 Deer Park Road  
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# *New International Version:*

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## WHAT TODAY'S CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE ORIGINAL

# NIV

(1984)

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### A REVIEW

In the mid-1950s, Howard Long set out to witness to a business associate, only to have that associate break into laughter. The laughter came as the man read 'the gospel for himself—directly from the pages of the Bible'.<sup>1</sup> It made Howard angry, not that the man laughed at the Scriptures, but that Howard couldn't give him 'a Bible in [his] own language'.<sup>2</sup>

Howard's children, too, had trouble understanding a Bible written in something other than everyday speech. "We've translated the Bible into a couple thousand tongues," Howard said to his pastor. 'Someday we're going to translate it into English'.<sup>3</sup> Little did he know that his frustration would give birth to one of the most popular translations in the English language.

The New International Version was, in the words of James Powell, President

of the International Bible Society, "really God's project... His fingerprints are all over it, from the original dream to the final production".<sup>4</sup> Apparently many people agree. The International Bible Society, in league with several publishers in North America and the United Kingdom, has packaged the NIV in every style and binding imaginable, and for every group of people under the English-speaking sun. There are expensive, luxurious leather editions and cheap paperback editions, versions for children and versions for college students, whole Bibles and individual verses, Bibles with 'Holy Bible' stamped in gold on the cover and Bibles that are only discovered to be Scripture when read by those familiar with the NIV. In its relatively short lifetime the NIV has become the basis of commentaries, interlinears, systematic theologies, and concordances. Colleges and seminaries distribute it to their students and require

it in the classroom. Churches of many denominations and doctrinal persuasions use it in pew and pulpit. Bookshops claim that it is outselling the Authorised (King James) Version and everything else that claims to be Scripture.

Many versions of Holy Scripture claim to be literal translations (e.g., the AV, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible and the English Standard Version); others claim excellent readability (the paraphrases such as the Living Bible, the Good News Bible and Phillips New Testament), but the NIV claims both literalness and readability. The latter is definitely not in dispute; the NIV is written in a modern English that anyone—rich or poor, young or old, saved or unsaved—with a child's education can understand. The NIV is legitimately compared to a newspaper for comprehensibility. But with regard to the former, the literalness of translation, the NIV has come under increasing scrutiny, and in many ways has been found wanting.

It should first be noted that, had Howard Long interpreted his colleague's laughter in more Biblical terms, the NIV might never have come to be. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him' (1 Corinthians 2.14). Unless the Holy Spirit is working in a man's life, that man has no reason to react positively to the Word of God because of what it is—God's Word. Those in spiritual darkness will hide anywhere from the light, even in laughter.

This, however, may not have been the

case with Howard's children. They could very well have been born again. Just as it is the parents' responsibility and honour to bring their children to an understanding of salvation through Christ alone, so it is their responsibility and honour to help their children understand the rest of Scripture. That can be done no matter what translation the parents use. A child can learn to read with understanding the most difficult language, usually more easily than an adult can, as has been proven over and over in past centuries with dead languages such as Latin and *Koiné* Greek. While it is true that the NIV requires less adult supervision and guidance when being read, it may also deprive the parent of opportunities of spiritual interaction, opportunities that may never come again.

## **Philosophy of Translation**

The problems with the NIV, however, are more basic and far-reaching than this. The problems begin at its very core—the philosophy of translation held by its translators.

The NIV translators began with a very noble goal. Their wish was to produce 'an accurate translation' with a high degree of clarity and literary quality, one that meets standards of modern English but at the same time preserves 'some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating the Scriptures into English.'<sup>5</sup> To fulfil this desire entails, first, the belief that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the very Word of God, inspired by God and inerrant even down to the individual words. On the basis

of this belief, the words of Scripture are translated as literally as possible, with the goal being to reproduce in English what is written in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek of the original texts. The resultant translation should differ from the original texts and other literal translations only in idiomatic expressions, word order, and alternative definitions of words; the operating principle of this formal equivalence translation is 'as literal as possible, as free as necessary'. This philosophy of translation has been the standard of most translators throughout the centuries (discounting, of course, those who have paraphrased the Scriptures); the major differences between conservative translations since the late 19th century have been in the Greek text used and the cultural or theological biases incorporated into the translations.

In recent years, however, there has arisen a group of scholars who no longer believe in the importance, and often the inerrancy and inspiration, of the individual words of Scripture. These scholars believe instead that it is the thought or the truth behind the words that is important. (In the inerrancy controversy, this theory 'explains' such supposed problems as the diversity between Scripture and science. It is not what Genesis 1 says that is important, but the 'truth' behind what it says.) This view is called the dynamic view of Scripture; transferred into the realm of translation, this is referred to as dynamic equivalence. The aim in dynamic equivalence translation is not word-for-word accuracy, but thought-for-thought equivalence. Although the NIV translators would avoid using the

term dynamic equivalence in reference to their work, their aim was for 'more than a word-for-word translation,' their goal, instead, was for 'fidelity to the thought of the biblical writers'. They sought by 'frequent modifications in sentence structure and constant regard for the contextual meanings of words' to produce a translation that would speak to people in that people's own culture.<sup>6</sup>

The basic idea of the dynamic equivalence theory is to ask the question, 'How do we think Paul would have written his New Testament letters had he written them in English?' Or, 'How do we think a 1st-century reader would have understood the writings of Paul?' The dynamic equivalence translators want to produce the same response and reaction in modern readers. Thus, to them the thoughts, phrases, or truths expressed in the writings of men—even of 'holy men of God' speaking '*as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost' (2 Peter 1.21)—are more important than the actual words. Their desire is to give modern man what Paul and his colleagues would have written if they were writing today.

How can a man's thoughts be known apart from his words? Further, if his words do not express his thoughts, especially in Scripture, how can truth be known at all? Where can man find truth if not in the very words of God to man? How can man know what Paul's thoughts were apart from what he wrote? How can man know how the 1st-century readers responded, apart from what has been written about their responses? The attempt to answer these questions through dynamic equivalence can produce all sorts of

heretical extremes. We can be thankful that the NIV translators held to the basically conservative end of the dynamic spectrum.<sup>7</sup> However, it is distressing that, despite signing statements that they believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, they decided to use a theory of translation that in essence denies not only the inerrancy of Scripture, but also the need for Scripture to be inerrant.

## Modern Receptors

A great difficulty in the NIV translators' theory is the view of the importance of the receptor or receptor language over that of the original languages. The result is that the need of the reader takes precedence over fidelity to the inspired text. Sentence structure and word usage must be such that the reader will have no trouble understanding the author's intent, regardless of the author's actual words. Thus, in a translation aimed at a people in the Caribbean, Isaiah 1.18 would not be 'though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow,' but rather 'as white as a dove's feathers' or of something else in the reader's experience that is white. (Happily for us, the NIV translators assumed English readers would have seen snow; but, since the translators believe that 'there is a sense in which the work of translation is never wholly finished,'<sup>8</sup> one wonders what will happen in coming decades.)

With this in mind, the NIV translators have gone on to say that 'a present-day translation is not enhanced by forms that in the time of the King James Version were used in everyday speech, whether referring

to God or man.'<sup>9</sup> Thus they have done away with the use of 'thou' and 'thee', whether in narration or in prayer in the Scriptures. They would say that to use these terms for any reason, including when referring to Deity, serves no legitimate purpose. But it must be understood that the AV had no more linguistic necessity in using 'thou' and 'thee' than the NIV translators would have today. As can be seen in the works of Shakespeare, the terms were not in strict common usage during the 16th and 17th centuries. The AV translators, however, used these terms to express something that nearly every major language except current English expresses: the singular of 'you'. In Biblical Hebrew and Greek, there is a differentiation between 'you' (singular) and 'you' (plural). To distinguish the two in English, the AV translators employed 'thou' and 'thee' for 'you' (singular), 'ye' and 'you' for 'you' (plural). In this way the reader of Scripture understands 'the temple of God is holy, which *temple* ye are' (1 Corinthians 3.17), and thus is able to avoid the individualism so rampant in the church today—an individualism perpetuated by the NIV's lack of differentiation between singular and plural forms of 'you' in its rendition of the latter part of 1 Corinthians 3.17, 'and you are that temple'.

To be fair, it must be noted that in some passages the NIV attempts to indicate the differences between the singular and plural pronouns, but this is normally done by inserting words not found in the original texts (as in Luke 22.32, 'I have prayed for you, Simon,' and 1 Corinthians 3.16, 'you yourselves') but without indicating that the words were added;



or by adding footnotes (e.g., Luke 22.31, Isaiah 7.14).

The result of this modern dynamic view of translation is a Bible that reads like a newspaper, complete with short, chopped sentences. The idea behind this is that the modern reader of English is incapable of retaining more than a half-dozen words at a time; thus the paragraph-long sentence of Ephesians 1.3-14 is broken down into eight simpler sentences in the NIV and is even broken at verse 11 into separate paragraphs. The problem is, however, that this cannot be done without changing the normal interpretation of the passage as held by many evangelicals (as is seen in the break between verses 4 and 5 in the NIV: are we, as the AV has, holy and without blame before Him in love, or are we, as in the NIV, predestined in love?).

One advantage of having Scripture in a classical form is that the reader obtains a feeling of 'foreignness' when reading Scripture. The Bible is not only the Word of God to man, but is also a history of the people of God. Here we learn of the culture of the Jews, their way of living, the entire basis for the faith revealed in Christ. We learn also of our earliest brothers in the faith, of their struggles and trials and joys. But we also learn that, despite this 'foreignness', we are the same as they; man since the fall has not changed, his heart is still desperately wicked, his salvation still not of works. There is also the benefit of memorisation; it is much easier to memorise something with an unusual or unique wording (as in poetry) than it is to memorise a paragraph from a newspaper.

The NIV is more readable than, say, the AV or the American Standard Version of 1901, but many find it much less easily memorised and less easily 'hidden in the heart' as God would have it to be.

One further disadvantage of easy readability is speed of readability. The NIV is so easy to read that it is often read as one might read a newspaper: quickly and with little comprehension. An advantage of greater difficulty in reading is that one is more apt to read slowly and pick up nuances and meanings hidden from the rapid reader. (This is one of the great advantages of learning to read the Scriptures in the Biblical languages.) Skimming the newspaper may be acceptable, but skimming the Scriptures rather than in-depth reading and study is inappropriate.

One further word needs to be said regarding the receptors of God's Word. As was stated earlier, 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him.' No matter how a passage is worded, how closely or loosely translated, the unsaved man will never understand it unless the Spirit of God opens his eyes to its truth. In this respect, the Word of God is most definitely given to His people. Through it God gives instruction on how to live in a right relationship with Him. It is His Word to us, and must be treated, not merely as a glorious piece of literature, but as the very Word of God. The most important aspect of translation, therefore, is not the audience but the Author. It is with this in mind that we will consider individual translation problems in the NIV.

## Textual Problems in the NIV

The Word of God was originally penned in three languages: Hebrew and a small amount of Aramaic in the Old Testament, and *Koiné* Greek in the New. This not being an article on textual criticism, a full discussion of the problems associated with modern textual theory will not be undertaken here.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the problems of the NIV will be presented with the presupposition that the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament and the Greek Textus Receptus of the New are the most reliable texts of Scripture, and for further information reference is made to other publications of the Trinitarian Bible Society, such as *A Textual Key to the New Testament* and *The Lord Gave the Word: A Study in the History of the Biblical Text*.

## The Old Testament

In this light, something needs to be said about the origin of the Masoretic Text before discussing one of the NIV's most major problems: how it changes that text. In keeping with normal Hebrew usage, the original Hebrew manuscripts were not 'pointed', that is, the written text was made up of consonants, without the vowel signs that make words pronounceable (even today, modern Hebrew is still normally written without vowel signs). In the Hebrew Bible, along with the consonantal text, the spoken text was passed down through the centuries by the Hebrew priests and scholars who by their public reading of the Scriptures gave full understanding to the consonantal text. However, with the

destruction of the Temple, they became concerned that the resulting lack of public reading of the Hebrew Scriptures would make them incomprehensible. Thus, a Jewish sect known as the Masoretes, who worked primarily from the 2nd to the 11th centuries, set out to produce a standardised copy of the Hebrew Old Testament complete with vowel signs and accentuation, ensuring that the correct reading of the text was maintained.

Sometimes, however, 'in the judgment of the [NIV] translators...the vowel letters and vowel signs did not...represent the correct vowels for the original consonantal text'.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the translators have taken it upon themselves to change those readings, usually without indicating the change by footnotes.<sup>12</sup> It should be understood that, as with any language, changing vowels often changes words completely (for instance, 'dog' and 'dug' in English). Since these changes are not noted, there is no way of determining where the NIV has altered what has been the accepted Old Testament for centuries unless one compares each word of the NIV with a more accurate translation; and then, because of the theory that translation is never complete, comparison would have to be made with all other editions of the NIV also. The major concern here, though, is for God's Word. More than once in Scripture warning is given against changing His Word. Here the NIV treads on very dangerous ground.

It is true that there are places in which the Masoretic text is difficult to translate, and ancient translations such as the Greek Septuagint, the Aramaic Targums, the

Latin Vulgate, and the Syriac Peshitta, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls, can be helpful in determining the intended meaning. Most translations use the Masoretic Text as a basis, and look to these for additional light. The NIV, however, seems at times to hold these other translations, particularly the Septuagint, on an equal level with the Masoretic Text. This is done 'where accepted principles of textual criticism showed that one or more of these textual witnesses appeared to provide the correct reading'.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that not all scholars, particularly conservative ones, accept these principles of textual criticism; and the matter of providing a correct reading can be extremely subjective. In Genesis 4.8 the NIV adds 'Let's go out to the field' on the basis of the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and the Syriac. In verse 15 they replace the Masoretic Text's 'therefore' with 'not so' based upon the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Syriac. Psalm 145.5 is changed on the Septuagint reading alone, and Isaiah 33.8 on only a Dead Sea Scroll reading. The NIV corrects the Masoretic Text in Ezekiel 19.7 by using instead a Targum reading. Here the difference between the Hebrew Masoretic and the Aramaic Targum readings is only a small stroke or mark at the top of a letter; but this is an example of the very little that Jesus said would never pass away (Matthew 5.18).

In this same vein are those footnotes in the NIV which cast doubt on the Masoretic text, and on the translations that are based upon it. Judges 1.18 in the AV, following the Masoretic Text, reads, 'Also Judah took Gaza with the coast thereof, and Askelon with the coast thereof, and

Ekron with the coast thereof'. The NIV changes this to 'The men of Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron' but directs readers to a footnote which says, 'Hebrew. Septuagint "Judah did not take"'. Numbers 11.25 states, 'they prophesied, and did not cease'; the NIV reads 'they prophesied, but they did not do so again', but in a footnote reverses its translation with 'Or prophesied and continued to do so'. The purpose of these footnotes is unclear; their result is to cast doubt upon the veracity of God's Word.

The NIV also casts doubt in its notes on proper names. 'Eve', according to the major lexicons, means 'life'; thereby additional light is given on Genesis 3.20, 'And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living'. The NIV casts doubt, however, by stating in a footnote 'Eve **probably** means living' (emphasis added). Following the murder of Abel, Eve bore a son and named him Seth, 'For God, *said she*, hath appointed me another seed' (Genesis 4.25). To this name the lexicons give the meaning 'placing in the stead of another'. The NIV says in a footnote, however, that 'Seth **probably** means granted' (emphasis added). These names are meant to give added meaning to Scripture; the NIV in these footnotes and others only gives doubt.

### ■ *Archaeology*

The precise meaning of the biblical texts is sometimes uncertain. This is more often the case with the Hebrew and Aramaic texts than with the Greek...Archeological and linguistic discoveries in this [20th] century aid in understanding difficult passages.<sup>14</sup>

This statement of the New International Version translators is indeed true. But the statement must be tempered with the realisation that neither archaeology nor linguistics nor anything except the revealed Word of God can be considered infallible. This was vividly displayed when, for decades, critics claimed that Scripture was in error in its statements regarding the extent of the Hittite Empire. (Archaeology, it was said, had found no evidence of a great Hittite Empire; therefore, it cannot have existed and the Bible must be wrong.) And then, during the latter part of the 19th century, the ruins of the great Hittite Empire were discovered.

In the 20th century the ruins of Nineveh were discovered, but there was a problem. The Old Testament book of Jonah claimed that the city 'was an exceeding great city of three days' journey' (Jonah 3.3). However, archaeologists have determined that the city was important but definitely not large enough to require three days to traverse it. The NIV translators determined that, according to archaeology and the culture of the period, an important city would require a visit of three days in order to honour it properly. Therefore, the three days required of Jonah must have been in order to honour the city. Thus, the NIV renders Jonah 3.3 'Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days'—an interesting reading but one that is highly interpretative and not consistent with the text.

### ■ *Other Unsupported Changes*

Modern knowledge of ancient culture has also brought about other changes from the traditional readings, some of

which have little or no textual backing. Joseph's 'coat of *many* colours' in Genesis 37.3 is a prime example. Most scholars agree that the coat probably reached the ankles and had long sleeves, much like those worn by Middle Eastern nobility. The NIV, however, renders the phrase a 'richly ornamented robe,' with a footnote stating that the Hebrew is uncertain. The question arises as to the validity of changing a reading from that which has been accepted since the Reformation to a totally different one that at best is uncertain. It seems at times that the NIV changes wording just for the sake of change.

Another such change is that found throughout the NIV Pentateuch. The sacrifice of *shalom*, the peace-offering, is rendered in the NIV 'fellowship offering,' with a footnote stating that the phrase was 'traditionally peace offering.' Yet, in many other places *shalom* is given its traditional—and primary—translation of 'peace.' Job is told to 'be at peace' with God, not at fellowship with Him (Job 22.21). The reason for such inconsistency is unclear; while it is true that any word means what it means in its context, this sort of inconsistency is unnecessary and often hinders the English reader from seeing parallels in Scripture.

The NIV translators made numerous unwarranted changes strictly on the basis of the translators' judgment. When Rebekah's family spoke to Abraham's servant, asking him to let the young woman remain for a few more days (Genesis 24.55), the AV says 'after that she shall go.' The NIV changes this to 'then you may go.' In modern English, the

NIV reading could be thought to imply that Rebekah and the servant were both permitted to leave. However, while the Hebrew could be translated either 'she' (feminine singular) or 'thou' (masculine singular), it cannot be translated plural. Thus, 'you' in this passage would have to indicate that the servant—the only masculine singular noun to which the context points—was being permitted to leave alone. We know from the context that this is incorrect; thus the reading must be 'she'.

Genesis 34 also bears an unwarranted change. Dinah's brothers, in response to Shechem's desire to marry Dinah, gave requirements for the marriage to take place. If these requirements are met, the Jews will give their daughters and take the Hivites' daughters (v16). If not, the brothers will 'take our daughter' and go (v17). The NIV changes 'daughter' in verse 17 to 'sister'. While it is true that Dinah was the men's sister, the Hebrew word (and the wording of the preceding verse) requires the word 'daughter'. If inerrancy is based upon words, and Jesus Himself declared that even the smallest part of a letter would not pass away (Matthew 5.18), this sort of baseless change affects much more than just one verse; it has an impact on the whole of Scripture.

This impact is clearly seen in Hosea 12.4. The passage speaks of Jacob overpowering the angel and then making supplication to God. God found him in Beth-el, and as Hosea says, 'there he spake with us'. In Genesis 28.13, God spoke with Jacob alone; and it is assumed that this is why the NIV changes 'us' in Hosea to 'him'.

The context of Genesis 28 would make it so. But the Hebrew in Hosea is 'us'. Just as the priests, while 'yet in the loins' of their father Abraham paid tithes to Melchisedec (Hebrews 7.7-10), so in Genesis God speaks to not only Jacob but to all who were 'in his loins'—a statement that would include all the people of Israel in the sins and blessings of Jacob. To change the 'us' in Hosea to 'him' does away with the full force of the verse, not to mention the impact that God intended; again the final impact is upon the Bible itself.

### ■ *Problems in the Titles of God*

An area of change in the NIV which affects virtually all of the Old Testament is the translators' interpretation of the most common titles of God. Beginning in Genesis 15.2, they render *Adoni YHVH*, a form of the covenant name of God usually translated 'Lord GOD', as 'Sovereign LORD'. Indeed, the idea of God's sovereignty is found in this passage and throughout Scripture. But *Adoni* means 'my Lord', and the Tetragrammaton, *YHVH*, has the idea of 'being' (and usually in these instances has the vowel pointing from *elohim*—God). Rendering the name 'Sovereign LORD' tends to emphasise God's sovereignty only, while the context could very well be dealing with His mercy or justice or some other attribute, or might well include all of His attributes by the mere fact of His being God. Nor do the translators explain why they chose this one attribute to highlight; they only state that they do and leave the reasoning to the reader's imagination.

Another change in reference to the titles of God is from 'the Lord of hosts'

to 'the Lord Almighty'. This change is necessitated, the translators say, because for most readers today 'of hosts' has little meaning, whereas 'almighty' conveys the sense of the Hebrew 'he who is sovereign over all the 'hosts' (powers) in heaven and on earth'.<sup>15</sup> However, most people, and especially non-Christians (for whom also the NIV was translated) have little more understanding of the phrase 'Lord Almighty' than to consider it a mild expletive. There are places in Scripture where the Greek or Hebrew word for 'almighty' is used (for example, 2 Corinthians 6.18), and in these places it is only right and proper to translate the word 'almighty'. But the word the NIV translates as 'almighty' in many places in the Old Testament does not mean 'almighty'; it means 'of hosts'. The phrase 'LORD of hosts' at least makes sincere readers pause to consider its meaning, and is no problem for those who understand who the hosts in heaven and on earth are (as in Luke 2.13, which the NIV renders 'Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared...'—a phrase familiar to many, even non-Christians, as a part of the 'Christmas Story').

### ■ Poetry

Poetry, too, is not without revision in the NIV. Poetry is printed in poetic line to 'reflect the structure of Hebrew poetry. This poetry is normally characterised by parallelism in balanced lines,' however, as the NIV translators admit, 'scholars differ regarding scansion of Hebrew lines.'<sup>16</sup> Scholars also use the difficulties of determining metre and parallelism in Hebrew poetry to insert a diversity of meaning into Scripture, and translation

becomes a game that in the end proves to be detrimental to belief in the inerrancy of God's Word. Briggs in the *International Critical Commentary* proposes a number of emendations to Psalm 114, inserting and deleting words from the Hebrew in order to produce the parallelism he believes is proper for the Psalm.<sup>17</sup> Others use parallelism to dispute the Biblical teachings on Creation: in Genesis 1-2, 'did the author really mean to express two distinct thoughts...or did he regard the creation of man as part of the creation of the earth, so that his lines are really parallel statements...?'<sup>18</sup>

In the NIV, too, we find revisions in order to produce parallelism; although these changes are not nearly so detrimental as those proposed by more liberal scholars, they are nonetheless changes to the Word of God—changes not intended by the human authors and not by the original Author Himself. With the NIV translators' view of never-ending translation, who knows what other, more liberal changes may be incorporated into the next edition?<sup>19</sup>

Although the NIV stresses the need for parallelism and balance, it has failed to achieve either. Instead, the stately rhythm and flow of the AV, so familiar to Christians (and to non-Christians) for some four centuries is lost in the NIV's attempt to communicate. The translators manage to retain 'your rod and your staff/they comfort me' (Psalm 23.4) yet for the sake of unlearned readers change 'mercy' (v6) to 'love', resulting in the unfamiliar 'Surely goodness and love will follow me/all the days of my life'. Not only

does this lose the rhythm found with the additional syllable in *mercy*, it also loses the theological significance of *mercy* as found in the *mercy seat* in the tabernacle and so often in the lives of David and his spiritual kinsmen.

### ■ *Omissions and Additions*

An unusual Hebrew particle found throughout the Old Testament is the word *na*. Classified by most Hebrew scholars as a particle of entreaty or exhortation, it is commonly translated ‘I pray thee’. This little word carries with it much more than just a simple request. Its implications are more in the way of earnest entreaty, as Moses’s request of God, ‘I beseech thee, shew me thy glory’ (Exodus 33.18); or it denotes urging, as when Abram urged his wife to deny their marriage (Genesis 12.13). The NIV, as stated earlier, has ‘striven for more than a word-for-word translation’, but in its attempt to catch ‘the thought of the biblical writers’<sup>20</sup> it has missed the significance of this Hebrew particle. The NIV has Abram telling Sarai, ‘Say you are my sister’, which is more a command than a request; in Exodus 33.18, Moses merely says ‘Now show me your glory’. The man of Gibeah who sought to protect his house guest from his kinsmen, in the NIV merely says ‘No, my friends, don’t be so vile’, in contrast to the AV’s ‘Nay, my brethren, *na*, I pray you, do not so wickedly’ (Judges 19.23).

Another Hebrew word that is often ignored is *hinneh*, usually translated ‘Behold’. Some scholars claim that this word serves no significant function in the Hebrew language, that it is merely an interjection rather than a meaningful

part of speech. The NIV translators make no comment on the word; instead they simply omit it (note Genesis 1.29, 12.11). Again, the major issue in the omission of this and other words is not so much laxity of translation. It is, rather, a matter of inerrancy. If the Bible is truly God’s Word, His admonitions against changing that Word must be heeded. Each word must be considered important, because God considers it important; otherwise, He would have omitted it.

There are some words that the NIV includes that would better have been omitted: paragraph and section headings. It is true, of course, that these can and do serve a useful purpose in helping the reader determine breaks and changes of subject; this is especially true in the Prophets, in which many concepts or ideas are foreign to the average English reader. Not all headings are bad; however, those of a questionable nature are better placed in commentaries or omitted. A good example of this confusion is seen in the footnote to the first heading in the NIV’s Song of Solomon, which says, ‘In some instances the divisions and their captions are debatable’. Debatable ideas perhaps have their place in interpretative commentaries, but their insertion into the Scriptures only increases the likelihood of misinterpretation of God’s Word.

Of course, there are places in both the Old and New Testaments in which words must be inserted to give sense to the English translation, as there would be in translating any written work from one language to another. The Hebrew



and Greek languages often omit words, particularly forms of the verb 'to be'. A fully literal translation of Genesis 1.4 would be, 'And God saw the light that good'. For Hebrew readers this makes perfect sense; for English readers a verbal form needs to be inserted, rendering the phrase 'that it was good'. However, in Scripture, again because of admonitions to keep God's Word pure, these additions need to be noted. This most translations do by italicising the added words. The NIV, however, does not do this. The theory of translation employed in the NIV is that it is the thoughts behind the words, not the words themselves, that are important; thus, there are in essence no added (nor subtracted) words possible in their translation. Every word in the translation would have been meant by the author, regardless of what he wrote. The writer of Genesis would have meant 'that it was good'. Thus, according to the NIV translators, the translation is accurate; there are no added words. But, as discussed above, a man's thoughts can only be known by his words, if then. And the average reader, unversed in the Biblical languages, deserves a translation based upon those words.

### ■ *Unacceptable Words*

The daily newspaper is full of accounts of the sins of men, and often people (even Christians) will read lengthy articles looking for a few more details of what happened. This is understandable with the unsaved man; his natural tendency is to progress further into sin, and the more decadent the better. The Christian, however, is admonished to be transformed by the renewing of the

mind, a transformation accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. The original writers sought to aid in this. Rather than detailing the sins of men, they spoke of men's sins euphemistically. In Judges 19, the old man of Gibeah who invited the Levite into the protection of his home was ordered by the wicked of the city to 'Bring forth the man...that we may know him' (v22). When the Levite's concubine (a term in itself that could be, and today usually is, put in more explicit words) was instead put out of the house, she was 'abused' (v25) until she died. Ezekiel 23.20 is more specific, but the Hebrew still speaks of 'the flesh of asses' and the 'issue' (literally 'scattering seed', whether in begetting children or planting crops) of horses rather than using more vivid terminology. Most translations follow the original authors by either translating literally or using euphemisms which express the idea of what happened without putting impure thoughts or pictures into the minds of readers, and without contributing to man's tendency toward sin.

The NIV, however, uses detailed language—language inappropriate for this paper and certainly out of place in a Book whose Author desires the transforming of the mind to His standards. It is doubtful that the descriptive language used in the NIV, particularly that mentioned above, would be used in family publications. It could certainly not be read to a child, and would only cause the mind of an unbeliever to stray away from the message of the Scriptures. Modernising the Bible is one thing; vulgarising it is uncalled for.



## ■ A Final Word

The NIV, in its determination to do away with words that might not be easily understood by modern readers, has changed one final word from the generally accepted translations of that word to one that fits in well with modern thought. For centuries *sheol* has meant either the physical grave (or death), or 'hell' as the abode of the dead. The NIV clings to that first meaning, but never translates *sheol* as hell. Thus, 'The wicked shall be turned into hell' is changed to 'The wicked return to the grave' (Psalm 9.17). God's omnipresence comes into doubt when 'if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou *art there*' becomes 'if I make my bed in the depths' (Psalm 139.8). His omniscience is limited when His perfection as high as heaven, 'deeper than hell' becomes 'deeper than the depths of the grave' (Job 11.7-8).

Probably the worst effect of limiting *sheol* to the grave is the heresy the idea supports. In recent years not only liberals but also those who would consider themselves conservatives have accepted the belief that hell does not exist, that at death is the grave (in which the soul is not conscious of pleasure or pain but merely sleeps) and then either eternal reward or annihilation. The belief has become so prevalent (and is so inviting—every Christian knows at least one person who has gone to a Christless grave), that even John Stott has voiced doubt regarding the historical Christian view of eternity.<sup>21</sup> The NIV does nothing to direct its readers—saved and unsaved—to a correct understanding of eternity for the unsaved. In the NIV, even Lucifer, son

of the morning, has been denied eternal punishment. No longer will he 'be brought down to hell,' but instead will be 'brought down to the grave' (Isaiah 14.15), to be with wicked Capernaum in 'the depths' (Matthew 11.23, which in the Greek has *hades*) as long as the depths and grave shall last.

## The New Testament

Before we begin this section, a word of explanation is in order to give a basis for this look at the NIV New Testament. Until the mid-1800s, the accepted Greek New Testament was based upon some form of what is called the traditional text. The text was comprised of readings from over five thousand manuscripts which were found all over the Mediterranean world and dated from the 5th to the 17th centuries A.D. This text, classified in later years as the Byzantine text type, is the basis for the Received Text, from which the AV and translations into a number of other languages were made. It was the New Testament of the Reformation and early Protestant church throughout the world. In the mid-1800s, however, the Received Text of the New Testament was abandoned and a new text was constructed. In this, the textual critics essentially abandoned the traditional Byzantine text for a handful of manuscripts found in Egypt, dating from the 3rd to the 15th centuries. Two of these Alexandrian manuscripts, dating from the 4th century, are considered by some scholars as being the best representatives of the original manuscripts on the basis of their relative age and several other subjective factors.

There would be no major problem in textual criticism if the Alexandrian manuscripts, particularly these two oldest, had not differed so greatly from the Received Text. However, the Vatican manuscript differs from the Received Text in 7,578 words, and the Sinai manuscript from the Received Text 8,972 times. Worse, the Vatican and Sinai manuscripts disagree between themselves more than three thousand times in the Gospels alone. As the 19th century textual critic John Burgon put it, 'It is in fact easier to find two consecutive verses in which these two MSS. differ the one from the other, than two consecutive verses in which they entirely agree.'<sup>22</sup>

Yet, scholars since the late 19th century have chosen, on the basis of their own reasoning, to abandon the Received Text in favour of a text based essentially on these two Alexandrian manuscripts. The newest edition of this text is the United Bible Society's Fourth Edition. Although the NIV translators were free to consider and incorporate readings from other Greek texts (thus rendering the basis of the NIV New Testament an 'eclectic' text), it appears that they followed the United Bible Society's Third Edition for their New Testament work.

### ■ *Textual Problems*

The Greek text of the NIV provides the best that 'modern scholarship' has to offer—a scholarship that places the five thousand manuscripts represented, for the most part, by the Received Text into a single text family and relegates that family to an inferior position. Thus the Received Text of the New Testament has

virtually no place in the NIV. Instead the NIV reproduces many of the doctrinal errors and problems inherent in the United Bible Society's text. A few examples will be given, although many more could be cited. For simplicity's sake, the AV reading, based upon the Received Text, will be given as comparison with the NIV rendition.

In Matthew 5.44 the AV reads, 'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.' The NIV, however, says, 'But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' Supporters of the NIV argue that the NIV says essentially the same thing as the AV, just with fewer words. However, the NIV reading, particularly in our culture, would free Christians from actions and words that display the love of God, a love not of feelings but of activities toward the undeserving—a love that draws even enemies to the Saviour.

Another well-known problem in the NIV that finds its origin in the United Bible Society's text is 1 Timothy 3.16. The AV tells us that 'without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh...'. The NIV, on the other hand, says, '...He appeared in a body...'. Since the Reformation English readers have used this brief creed as a statement of belief in the deity of Christ: God was manifest in the flesh. In the NIV, however, this phrase is useless. 'He appeared in a body'; who appeared, Jesus? Of course He did, because He was a man. But was He God? Not from this verse; here Jesus is just another person who had a body. The

NIV supporters argue that there are plenty of other verses in Scripture that deal with Christ's deity; but there are none that affirm His Godhood as clearly and boldly as this does. It should be noted, too, that it is not just the traditional majority that include 'God' in this verse. Several copies of the Alexandrian manuscripts, a majority of lectionaries (Scripture portions used for worship services in the early church) and such Church Fathers as Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, Didymus, Theodoret, and Euthalius—some of whom predate the two major Alexandrian manuscripts—also include 'God'. But on the basis of the United Bible Society's omission, the NIV changes this passage from a creed to a statement of the obvious.<sup>23</sup>

The NIV, again on the basis of the Alexandrian texts, weakens another passage which teaches the deity of Christ. In the AV the last part of Romans 14.10 and verse 12 read 'for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ... So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God'. The NIV changes this to 'For we will all stand before God's judgment seat... So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God'. In the Received Text, all men are to stand before Christ, giving account to God; thus, Christ is being called God. The NIV changes 'Christ' in verse 10 to 'God'; thus verse 12 becomes merely a restatement of verse 10, without the affirmation that the Person of the Godhead who has the right of judgment is Christ. To compound the matter, the NIV gives no footnote to indicate the change. Thus someone referring to these verses in the AV would find an NIV reader totally

uncomprehending. Here a wonderful verse which plainly declares our Saviour's deity is done away with without the average Christian even knowing it. The deity of Christ is attested in this passage in some Alexandrian manuscripts, the majority of other manuscripts, many ancient versions, and at least ten Church Fathers. It is missing from only a handful of manuscripts (seven), which unfortunately for the church includes the two considered to be the best by a number of modern scholars: the Vatican manuscript and the 'original hand' (as opposed to the corrected) copy of the Sinai manuscript. The NIV, by this omission, does more than delete a few words; it reflects the high-handed approach to textual criticism threatening the church today.

Not only is the doctrine of the person of Christ affected by the NIV, but Christ's virgin birth is weakened in the text of the NIV. The AV in Luke 2.33 reads, 'And Joseph and his mother marvelled'. The NIV renders this 'The child's father and mother marvelled'. Of course, Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus, and in other circumstances this would not be a problem. An adoptive father is often more of a parent than a natural father. No doubt Joseph proved to be a good father to his wife's Son; Joseph was hand-picked by God for the position. But he was not the father of Jesus, neither physically nor spiritually, as exhibited in Jesus' visit to the Temple at the age of twelve. The reader of the NIV is given verses in which Joseph and Mary are freely put together as Jesus' parents; Joseph's association with Mary as 'His father and mother' tends to leave the reader with the impression that this

special parentage was equally shared by this human couple. Thus the NIV, with its use of the United Bible Society's text, casts doubt on the virgin birth of the Saviour.

Another verse which has problems in the NIV is Colossians 1.14. Again the person and work of Christ are involved. The AV reads, 'In whom we have redemption through his blood, *even* the forgiveness of sins'. The NIV changes this to, 'in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins'. The AV provides the important words 'through his blood' which are crucial to our understanding of redemption. It is by means of Christ's blood, the precious blood of the Covenant, that eternal redemption has been provided for His people. It is interesting to note that the NIV is seeking to communicate with modern man, yet omits in this instance the necessity of Christ's death and the shedding of His blood for man's salvation, a doctrine that modern man finds disagreeable.

In a related matter, Romans 1.16 in the AV says, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ...'. The NIV renders Paul's words, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel'. The phrase 'of Christ' is omitted, without a single note or comment, not only from the NIV but from the United Bible Society's text as well. What was the 'good news' of which Paul was not ashamed? Christ's own gospel is the only 'good news' man needs to hear; it is the 'good news' of which we must not be ashamed. Christ's gospel is the only one which is 'the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth'.

In addition to the doctrine of the person

and work of Christ being weakened, the NIV calls into question the integrity and inerrancy of Scripture by introducing mistakes into the very text of Scripture and by omitting portions of verses which show fulfilment of prophecy. In Mark 1.2 the AV says, 'As it is written in the prophets...' and then quotes from Malachi 3.1 and Isaiah 40.3. The NIV says, 'It is written in Isaiah the prophet...' and then proceeds to quote from both Isaiah and Malachi. The NIV thus attributes this Malachi quotation to Isaiah. Isaiah did not write Malachi. The AV has the proper reading with the plural 'prophets', since there were two of them, so that both Malachi and Isaiah are represented. Critical scholars would argue that, from their reason-based criteria, the United Bible Society's reading, as used by the NIV, is correct. However, by sheer reasoning, based on the presupposition that Scripture is infallible, one would imagine that Mark, being a knowledgeable Jew, would know when a prophecy was from Isaiah and when it was from Malachi. Even without that, the Holy Spirit's guidance would have eliminated the mistake of attributing a passage written by one prophet to another. In this day of unbelief, the United Bible Society's reading, and thus the NIV's, only gives the opponents of Scripture added reason to debase the Bible. Worse, it causes even Christians to doubt the veracity of the Word of God, leaving them without an anchor in this world.

Another problem in prophecy in the NIV is found in Matthew 27.35. The AV reads, 'And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet,

They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.' The NIV renders this, 'When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.' The NIV adds in a footnote, 'A few late manuscripts 'lots that the word spoken by the prophet might be fulfilled: "They divided my garments among themselves and cast lots for my clothing" (Psalm 22.18)'. Old Testament quotations in the New serve several very important purposes. They tie the two Testaments together, giving God's people one Word; they give to Christians a heritage that extends back to Creation and to the Jews a Messiah who fulfilled God's prophecy; they give us proof that God will do all that He has said He will do. Of course, there are some quotations that are questionable; some passages are worded in such a way that one group of Christians will insist that they are quotations while other Christians will say that they are not. It is a pleasure, therefore, when the New Testament tells us that a passage is a quotation, as it does in Matthew 27.35. It is a frustration when, on the basis of the United Bible Society's text, the NIV omits the fact, or as in this case relegates it to a vague footnote.

In addition to words and phrases being omitted from the NIV, whole sections of Scripture are not to be found in its pages, or are set apart and warned against. Mark 16.9-20 is the classic example of this. These verses are found in almost every manuscript of Mark 16 except the Vatican and Sinai manuscripts. The NIV includes the passage, but separates it from the rest of the text and inserts before it the note, 'The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark

16:9-20'. The same problem is repeated in John 7.53-8.11. At a conservative American seminary, one professor who uses the NIV stated that these and other 'questionable' passages are not to be preached or even read because they are not a part of Scripture. A full discussion of the textual evidence for including these passages is well handled in the works of John Burgon, and by the Trinitarian Bible Society in several of its articles and issues of its *Quarterly Record* magazine.<sup>24</sup> Here suffice it to say that the NIV's handling of these passages can do much to dissuade people from belief in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. By accepting as fact the liberal text-critical reasoning of men, Christians no longer have an authority on which to rest their faith.

In addition to these verses being omitted or called into question, a number of verses are deleted entirely from the United Bible Society's Greek text and thus from the NIV. These verses include:

- Matthew 17.21; 18.11; 23.14
- Mark 9.44, 46; 11.26; 15.28
- Luke 17.36; 23.17
- John 5.4
- Acts 8.37; 15.34; 24.7; 28.29
- Romans 16.24

Proponents of the NIV often argue that none of these textual 'variants' is particularly important and no doctrine is affected by these problems. They proclaim that we do not base doctrine on any one verse. This is true as far as it goes. But the problem is basically twofold. First we do not always have many perspicuous verses for any given doctrine. The doctrine may be inherent in all of Scripture, but explicitly

stated only once or twice. The omission of one verse will not destroy belief in the entire doctrine. But it makes teaching that doctrine to believers and documenting it to unbelievers more difficult.

It must be noted that the proponents of the NIV who believe that no doctrine is affected by the NIV's handling of Scripture are wrong. One major doctrine is very greatly affected: the inerrancy of Scripture. As stated earlier several times, if inerrancy is not based upon the words of Scripture, it has no basis at all. It cannot be based upon the original authors' thoughts, nor even on the thoughts of God Himself, for these are beyond man's ability to know. Inerrancy must be based upon words, God's words, as set forth by His servants. The Scriptures will remain inerrant no matter what man does to them; but man's belief in their inerrancy, and thus in their authority over his life, is damaged by the NIV's high-handed view of translation and the United Bible Society's liberal, 'reasonable' text-critical methods.

A second problem is found in the teaching or preaching of a passage of Scripture that is partially or completely omitted from the NIV and other translations based upon the United Bible Society's text. If a man is writing a systematic theology, in which he will draw from all over the Bible for information, it is true that he will find no doctrine affected. If, however, he is writing or preaching or teaching from a single passage, and that passage is one adversely affected by the United Bible Society's text, he will find that the proponents of the NIV are wrong; he will find it does make a difference. If the preacher uses a complete translation and his hearers one of

the others, there will be confusion among the hearers and an increasing lack of trust toward both the preacher and the Bible itself. If the teacher uses an incomplete translation such as the NIV, both he and his hearers are robbed of the teachings of the omitted verses, often without even being aware of it. If the preacher asks for a passage or verse to be read in unison, assuming that all translations have it in their texts, the resultant garble of voices will be a veritable Babel; in reading any translation together with the NIV, since there is no correlation between the NIV and anything else because of the NIV's looseness of translation, there can be no unison.

The NIV often includes footnotes in places where verses are omitted or changed, but some of these footnotes are too general, are misleading, or are actually incorrect. Following is a summary of footnotes given in the NIV New Testament,<sup>25</sup> with the number of times each is used.

- Some manuscripts - 82 times
- Some early manuscripts - 32
- A few late manuscripts - 2
- Some late manuscripts - 6
- Other manuscripts - 1
- Many early manuscripts - 3
- The most reliable early manuscripts - 1
- Many manuscripts - 4
- Some less important manuscripts - 1
- Two early manuscripts - 1
- The earliest and most reliable and other ancient witnesses - 1
- One early manuscript...other manuscripts do not have... - 1
- One early manuscript - 1
- Late manuscript of the Vulgate... (not found in any Greek manuscripts before the Sixteenth century) - 1

This betrays some of the bias on the part of the translators. They are vague and obscure when they want to be ('some manuscripts') but can be very specific when they wish ('Late manuscript of the Vulgate', etc.). There are occasions when the translators omit verses or words with no comment at all (e.g., 1 John 5.13).

One very surprising omission from this group of the variant readings is in the book of Revelation. For years the opponents of the Received Text have argued that there was a great weakness in the traditional Greek text of this book. However, the NIV gives only two occasions of textual variants in the footnotes in Revelation. In the United Bible Society's text there are ninety-two occasions of variants noted; and these ninety-two occasions are not exhaustive but selective. Some were not even indicated by footnote. It is interesting that in the NIV changes throughout the remainder of the Bible were designated by footnotes; in Revelation alone the NIV is inconsistent. It is assumed that only the variants considered important are noted; those classified as unimportant or insignificant are omitted. However, on the basis of Revelation 22.18-19, is there anything in God's Word that is unimportant?

### ■ *Synonym Problems*

As with the Old Testament change from 'peace offering' to 'fellowship offering', the NIV New Testament has found it necessary to change terminology long used by the English-speaking church to wording they consider more easily understood. Terms such as sin, grace, propitiation, and righteousness, terms with precise meanings that have been understood and

taught by the church for centuries, have been retranslated by the NIV into less precise, even ambiguous words. A few will be listed below, and the major ones will be treated separately afterward.

- grace becomes favour (Exodus 34.9; Psalm 84.11)
- glory becomes honour (Psalm 84.11)
- righteousness becomes 'does what is right' (1 John 3.7)
- believe becomes trust (John 14.1)
- Comforter becomes Counsellor (John 14.16,26; 15.26; 16.7)
- Advocate becomes 'one who speaks to the Father in our defence' (1 John 2.1)
- think becomes feel (Philippians 1.7— a real problem in this feeling-oriented age)
- mercy seat becomes atonement cover (numerous times throughout Scripture)
- tabernacle becomes tent of meeting (again numerous times)
- given by inspiration becomes 'God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3.16 — a translation not found in any of the six standard Greek lexicons)
- propitiation becomes sacrifice of atonement (Romans 3.25) or atoning sacrifice (1 John 2.2)

Some of these may seem minor, but none is. The older terminology has been understood and employed by the church for centuries. The Christian familiar only with the NIV finds the words of Christians of by-gone eras closed books. Suddenly the voluminous works of men such as Calvin, Owen, Hodge, Warfield, Poole, and Ryle are less intelligible. Also lost to these NIV readers are the concordances and lexicons and Bible dictionaries that employ this 'theological' language. The



great confessions of faith—Westminster, Heidelberg, and other 17th-century confessions, with their catechisms—what place will these have in the homes and lives of those whose faith is tied to the language of the NIV?

In addition to this, some of these synonyms are not fully synonymous. They do not convey the full idea of the original terms, often weakening the meaning of both the Greek and the English. Changing 'grace' to 'favour', and 'glory' to 'honour', are prime examples of this. It is by God's grace, unmerited and free, that we are saved. Favour carries with it the idea of something that can be earned or paid back. God's glory is another thing to which we can add nothing; we can, however, honour Him just as we can honour others of renown.

Associated with this is the problem of preinterpretation. The NIV translators assume that the education level of the reader is such that he cannot understand theological language, so the translators take it upon themselves to interpret the language for them. The Greek word for flesh, *sarx*, can mean sinful nature or it can mean flesh. Its translation has to be based upon its use in context. But as with *sheol* in the Old Testament, the NIV translates *sarx* consistently in one way—sinful nature. This is very interpretative but contradicts some standard expositions of Romans 6 and Galatians 5, as will be more fully discussed below.

### ■ *Unusual Translation*

The NIV translators did not seem to be concerned with following the traditional phrasing of the Bible, despite their

stated desire to maintain the tradition of previous translations. They wanted a fresh, contemporary translation which would be much like what the New Testament writers would have penned had they done so in modern English. As lofty as this idea may have been, the result at times borders on paraphrasing and is occasionally bizarre. A few examples will be cited.

In the last part of 1 John 3.7, the AV states, 'he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.' The NIV renders this, 'He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.' Implied in this is a righteousness obtained through works. Doing 'what is right' is not the same as 'doing righteousness.' Righteousness goes far beyond the 'does what is right' of verse 7, or the not doing 'what is sinful' of verse 8. It has been stated that, since helping an old woman across the street is right, this action would make a person acceptable to God. There are too many people today who think that God will accept them if their good works outweigh or outnumber their bad works. This translation tends to feed this idea.

Another inaccurate statement of the NIV is found in Titus 1.2. The AV reads, 'In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.' The NIV says, 'a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.' Aside from the obvious paraphrase, the surprising statement of 'God, who does not lie...' is hard to accept. There are things which God cannot do. He cannot sin, He cannot deny Himself, etc. He also cannot lie. The phrase 'does not lie'



implies that God is able to lie but usually does not, or at least is not at the moment. 'Cannot' denotes an inability; 'does not' includes a volitional aspect. It is much the same as saying 'I cannot steal' ('I am unable to do so', which would indicate that the speaker could not do so even if he wanted to), or 'I do not steal' ('by the grace of God, I do not steal because I have, at least for this moment, overcome the desire to do so'). It is not apparent whether this translation is based on English style, is trying to settle a theological issue, or is just carelessness. In any event, the weakening of the reading is more than unfortunate; it borders on heresy.

Another problem passage is the great Christological reading in Philippians 2.7. The AV states, 'But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant...'. The NIV renders this, 'but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...'. Many have sought through reinterpretation of this passage to support the heresy that Jesus was not fully God. They do this by translating *kenoo* to read 'emptied'—Jesus emptied Himself of His deity and thus was not fully God. The NIV valiantly tries to avoid this error by translating *kenoo* 'made himself nothing'. This phrase, however, is worse than 'emptied'.<sup>26</sup> The obvious meaning would be that Jesus, either as God or as man, ceased to exist, because 'nothing' indicates a lack of existence. Thus the NIV, it is hoped unwittingly, simply eliminates the problem of interpretation in this passage by translating the Saviour out of existence.

In James 3.1 there is an NIV interpretation which is very typical of the translation style and approach of the translators. The

Greek literally reads, 'Let not many become teachers, my brethren.' This the NIV renders, 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers...'. The NIV interprets the Greek to mean that the problem is one of presumption to become teachers rather than that a teacher will be held strictly accountable for what he teaches. The translation itself is presumptuous; although the NIV's interpretation is a possibility, it is unfair to Scripture and to its readers to give one interpretation as the only possibility.

The same sort of preinterpretation problem occurs in the last phrase of 1 Corinthians 7.1, where the AV reads, '...*It is good for a man not to touch a woman.*' The NIV renders this, '...*it is good for a man not to marry.*' The literal meaning of 'not to touch a woman' is a euphemism for abstaining from immorality. The word 'to touch' has connotations of intimate contact. What is in view is not abstaining from marriage, but from immoral intimate contact. Although marriage is mentioned later in the passage, and some have interpreted the entire passage in that light, the context is still one of abstaining from immorality—an immorality which is not found in marriage. Again, the NIV rendition is more than simple translation; it is an unfair interpretation which could cause some to abstain from the holy and honourable relationship which God intended for most of His children (note Genesis 2.18; 1 Corinthians 7.9; 1 Timothy 4.3; Hebrews 13.4).

In another passage verb tense or form is changed, seemingly at random. Galatians 6.1 in the AV reads 'Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are

spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted'. The NIV says, 'Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted'. Several problems must be noted here. First is the problem of 'restoring'. In the Greek and the AV the verb 'restore' is a direct command to be obeyed. The NIV gives the idea that 'restoring' is something which ought to be done, not something that must be done.

Second, the substitution of 'gently' for 'in the spirit of meekness' is hard to understand. The 'spirit of meekness' relates directly to the way in which you are 'considering yourself'. If the Christian has this spirit of meekness, he will not be overbearing or proud and place himself in the position of being tempted. 'Gently' refers to the way of restoring and does not seem to relate to the attitude of the restorer.

Third, the verse in Greek is one sentence. It carries one full, uncomplicated thought. Here again the NIV, in order to make the Scriptures more readable to modern man, takes longer sentences and divides them into short, chopped up ones (cf. Ephesians 1.3-14; Acts 1.1-5; Hebrews 1.1-4). The problem is, they also break up shorter, uncomplicated sentences. There are times, however, when it is crucial for the reader to realise that one main idea is being conveyed; by inserting unnecessary punctuation and taking liberties with verb forms, the translator runs the risk of obscuring God's intended meaning, the meaning conveyed by the words of the

original Greek and Hebrew texts. It may be easier to read, but the issues of the text that God intended to be understood may be altered.

Along the same line, the NIV obscures the natural reading of the text in 1 Thessalonians 4.14. The AV reads, 'For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him'. The NIV has, 'We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him'. The difference here seems minor, just the omission of the two little words 'for if'. However, the words are in the Greek and are there for a purpose. The sentence is not a statement of fact, although it has the underlying idea of being true. It is instead conditional: 'If we believe this (and we do)' we believe these other things as well. Again, since God moved Paul to include the conditional, can sound Christians in translation legitimately do otherwise?

In 1 Thessalonians 4.12 the NIV changes statements into what would normally be their results. Here a comparison is in order:

**AV:** That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and

**NIV:** so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and

**AV:** *that* ye may have lack of nothing.

**NIV:** so *that* you will not be dependent on anybody.

This is the equivalent of taking a statement ('he hit the rock') and rendering it as its

effect or result ('the rock was broken'). In this passage, whereas the original desire was for Christians to 'walk honestly toward them that are without', the NIV would have the believer 'win the respect of outsiders'. While the AV would have the believer 'lack nothing' the NIV wants him not to have to depend upon anyone. In the NIV, the desire is for pride and respect, and for total independence, two things considered improper in other passages of Scripture. Here again is another reason for formal equivalence translation. By the NIV's subtle changes, accomplished no doubt to aid the English reader in understanding the Scriptures, it is not only terminology that changes, but also syntax and form, and in the end interpretation.

One most frustrating misinterpretation is produced in the NIV in John 20.27. Here the AV says, '...and be not faithless, but believing,' which the NIV renders 'Stop doubting and believe.' The passage is that of 'doubting Thomas,' the apostle who did not believe that the Lord had risen from the dead. The problem is, from the Greek Thomas was not doubting; he was in rebellion. The Greek employs a double negative here, resulting in emphasis. Thomas does not just say, 'I will not believe'; he says, 'I will **not** believe!' His is not doubt, it is rebellion. Thus he does not need to stop doubting, he needs to stop being faithless and unbelieving. The NIV's 'stop doubting' only perpetuates the cliché of the 'doubting Thomas,' but not according to the correct reading of God's Word.

A second problem in this passage is that the second half of the clause is separated

from the first in the Greek by a 'but'. This is not just a weak connective or conjunctive word, but a strong adversative, showing a strong contrast between the two phrases. Thomas is not to be faithless, **but** he is to be believing. Again the NIV makes an unwarranted change, and in doing so weakens the Scriptures.

One common problem with which most Reformed Christians find difficulty in the NIV is the consistent use of 'sinful nature' for the Greek word *sarx*, flesh. Doing so produces such translations as '...live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature' (Galatians 5.16), and 'I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature' (Romans 7.18). This reflects the two-nature view held by some Christian groups, that there is a constant battle between the 'two dogs' that figuratively inhabit the soul (as commonly referred to in the USA): that there is a constant battle between the Adamic nature, which they believe remains unchanged after a man is saved, and the new nature which now shares the saved man's soul. This battle is being won by whichever 'dog'—whichever nature, the new or the Adamic—that the Christian 'feeds.' This two-nature view is quite opposed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, which in Chapter XIII states,

...the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified... This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every

part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

It would be better to translate *sarx* 'flesh' and leave it to the commentators to sort out whether it is 'flesh', 'body', 'living creature', 'physical nature', 'sinful nature', or something else. Better yet, let the word be translated as it should be and let the individual Christian study the Scriptures for himself to determine what the passage teaches. Leave preinterpretation to the paraphrasers.<sup>27</sup>

One almost humorous example of the NIV's preinterpretation of *sarx* is found in 1 Corinthians 5.5. The AV reads, '...deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh...'. The NIV renders this 'hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed'. It is interesting to note that those who have been given over to Satan no longer have a sinful nature. Of all the explanations for ridding the believer of sin this is the most creative. In actuality, though, this is not humorous. This really goes far beyond what a Christian should have to endure in modern translations.

In the Gospel according to John there are several examples of over-translation or misinterpretation which need to be cited. In John 14.1 we have the familiar

AV words, 'Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me'. The NIV says, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me'. The word 'trust' has a sense of the will involved. 'Believe' has the idea of assent, understanding, and will involved. It would be better to keep the normal use of 'believe' or even 'faith' rather than to put 'trust' in the text. Also note that the NIV breaks this one Greek sentence into two sentences, making a major break between not having troubled hearts and believing in the Father and the Son.

In John 16.31 the AV reads, 'Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe?' This the NIV renders, "'You believe at last!' Jesus answered". The NIV has changed this from a question about belief to an exclamatory statement of belief. Here is another example of a translation which, if done literally as the AV and many other translations do, could be understood by almost anyone. If the phrase were figurative, perhaps the sort of translation done by the NIV would be necessary; but this is not the case.

One final example of the unusual translation practices of the NIV will be cited. In Luke 1.34 the AV reads, 'Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?' (The Greek is literally, 'since I am not knowing a man'.) The NIV changes this to, "'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'Since I am a virgin?'" It is true that 'know' in this sense is to have intimate relations. This euphemism is familiar to most who read Scripture, and to many who do not. The statement, however, was that Mary was

not having relations with a man. The NIV makes this statement (which in the Greek is a present tense) a simple declaration that she was a virgin. It is true that Mary was a virgin at this time and at the birth of Jesus, but that is not what Mary said, as reported here by Luke. Since the doctrine of the virgin birth is under great attack in this present day, a clear and precise translation of these passages is needed for a proper understanding and defence of this doctrine.

Before concluding, there is one verse which clearly illustrates the high-handed methods of textual criticism and interpretation which characterise the NIV. The verse is found in Hebrews 11.11.

**AV:** Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

**NIV:** By faith **Abraham, even though he was past age**—and Sarah herself was barren—**was enabled to become a father because he** considered him faithful who had made the promise. [bold added for emphasis]

It must be noted that the parts of this verse in the NIV which refer to Abraham (those in bold) are found in no Greek manuscript at all, not even one. There is not even a note in the United Bible Society's text to indicate anyone even considered such a reading as that in the NIV.

However, scholars have become concerned with the notion that Sarah is not a good example of faith. So they

use the argument that, in the Greek, the word 'to conceive' seed is normally used of a male begetting and not of a woman conceiving.<sup>28</sup> While this is true, the context surrounding the word speaks of Sarah, not of Abraham. But, as F. F. Bruce states, 'According to the transmitted text, as commonly translated, we now have a statement about the faith of Sarah. There are difficulties in the way of the traditional interpretation.'<sup>29</sup> He admits that it is not the Greek text, but the translators' interpretation, which forces it in a different direction. Translators, however, are not free to build or create their own Greek text based upon their interpretation of a passage; they are only to translate the text that is before them. Here an interpretation based upon subjective belief becomes the actual text of the NIV. No longer is Sarah the focus of the passage, but instead Abraham is given the place of prominence. The correct reading is relegated to a footnote, "or 'by faith even Sarah, who was past age, was enabled to bear children'". The problem with this is that the 'or' makes it sound as if either rendering is correct.

It is hard to understand how people can claim extreme accuracy for the NIV when at times the NIV translates and includes as text passages without any Greek textual support at all. Furthermore, in case one thinks that the problems mentioned above are exhaustive, it should be noted that these same problems are encountered on almost every page of the NIV, along with some difficulties not mentioned. This does not aid the Christian in his walk with the Lord, and it certainly does not honour God. One can only wonder at such travesty.

## **Conclusion**

So where does this bring us? The NIV is a fresh, free, dynamic, unique translation whose strengths include its clarity and readability. It was translated so that anyone could read and understand the Bible. To this end its translators have succeeded in producing a version which is understandable to the masses. Perhaps this would be good for learning Bible stories much the same as a Bible story-book would. But a Bible story-book is not the Word of God.

As far as accuracy and fidelity to the texts of the original languages are concerned (even ignoring the problems of its textual basis), the NIV is found to be lacking. It rearranges sentences and verses, leaves out verses and phrases, paraphrases, and introduces material which is not in the original languages. The reader can never be sure if the words he is reading have the inspired words of God behind them or not. He never knows when sound or unsound interpretations are a part of this English text. He can never be sure that, when doing word studies, he has a word to study!

As for its use in worship, the NIV is not a version that has reverence for God as its cornerstone. With its contractions, short chopped sentences and paragraphs, its terseness, its vulgar language, it may communicate well but it lacks the dignity and cadence not only of the AV but of the original languages as well.

As for memorisation, why would a Christian want to memorise something which is possibly only the fancy of the

interpreter or translator? When a verse in effect denies the deity of Christ, or uses vulgar language, or holds the use of archaeology above Scripture, why should it be the object of memory work? But then, it is the observation of many that in spite of the plethora of versions on the market today, all claiming to communicate the Word of God in understandable English, few people seem interested in even studying the Word, much less memorising it. Despite the 'improvements' in Scripture in recent decades, Christians seem much less interested in God's Word and much less set apart for Him in their daily lives. One wonders how much the blessing of God rests upon these versions; one also wonders, given the NIV's lack of concern for the original language texts and high-handed treatment of the Scriptures, if anyone cares whether a supernatural blessing attends his reading or not.

It must be stated that the NIV is the product of some of the finest of conservative scholarship, a scholarship, however, that is mostly American, which tends to raise questions regarding the international scope of the work. But with current trends in and acceptance of dynamic equivalence in language studies, linguistics, English style, and textual criticism, it is not difficult to understand how such a free and loose translation as the NIV could come into being. Furthermore, with the huge expenditures for advertising and packaging made by the publishers, it is not hard to understand the translation's widespread acceptance.

Perhaps today Howard Long's friend would not laugh if Howard were to

hand him an NIV, bound in one of its inoffensive covers designed specifically for the unsaved. Perhaps that man would be saved. After all, God has drawn straight lines with crooked sticks before. The NIV

contains enough truth to be used of the Holy Spirit to draw a man to the Saviour. But, although it contains truth, is it the very Word of God? If not, Christians must be urged to return to the truth. ■

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## Endnotes

1. Richard K. Barnard, *God's Word in Our Language: The Story of the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Lamplighter Books, 1989), p. 15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

5. Edwin Palmer, et al., ed. *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1984), p. ix.

6. *Ibid.*

7. However, this may not always be the case; and indeed a shift away from conservative Christian thought is already being seen in the publication of various 'offspring' of the NIV, particularly in Today's NIV—a gender-inclusive edition.

8. Palmer, p. x.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Please see the Society's article no. 104, *What Today's Christian needs to know about the Greek New Testament*, for further information.

11. Palmer.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

18. *Ibid.*

19. This has been partially answered. See the Society's article 'The NIV Inclusive Language Edition', published in *Quarterly Record* no. 534, January to March 1996,

and 'Today's New International Version' in *Quarterly Record* no. 561, October to December 2002, for further information.

20. Palmer, p. ix.

21. David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL, USA: InterVarsity, 1988), pp. 314–15.

22. Dean John W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (Fort Worth, TX, USA: A. G. Hobbs Publications, 1983), p. 12.

23. For a broader discussion of this passage, see the Society's Article no. 103, *God was manifest in the flesh*.

24. Particularly Article no. 106, *The Authenticity of the Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to Mark*.

25. These are based upon an earlier edition of the NIV, but a survey of subsequent editions has shown little change in these notes over the years.

26. Please see the Society's article 'The Problematic Translation of "emptied himself" as found in Philippians 2.7', found in *Quarterly Record* no. 538, January to March 1997, for further information on this passage.

27. For further information regarding the origin and problems of the two-nature view in light of the NIV's translation of *sarx*, see Robert Martin, *Accuracy of Translation and the New International Version* (Carlisle, PA, USA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), pp. 32–38.

28. F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 299–302.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 299.



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