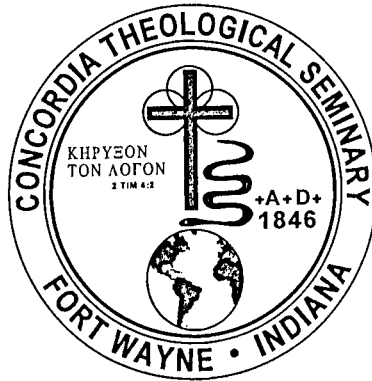


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Theology and the Great Tradition of English Bibles

Cameron A. MacKenzie

When I was a young man, on two separate occasions my father surprised me with gifts. I expected a present upon graduating from high school and then from college, but I did not expect the gifts that he gave me. On the first occasion, he presented me with a copy of the Concordia Triglotta and on the second, with a facsimile of the first edition of the King James Bible (1611). The surprising element on these two occasions was certainly not in the giver, my father; I knew well his commitment to the Lutheran Confessions and to the Holy Scriptures, especially in its Authorized Version. No, the surprise was entirely on my part—and I remember thinking upon both occasions: Now what am I going to do with that? And for some time I really did nothing at all with either except to keep them safe and sound—unread and unexamined.

But I suppose my father knew me better than I knew myself, or else the gifts themselves planted a kind of seed that would sprout some years later when I was called into the holy ministry and would pledge myself to the Book of Concord and later still when I would undertake the study of English Bible versions as a part of my service to the church at Concordia Theological Seminary. So upon reflection, both commitments seem rather natural or even providential.

Of course, what my father had done is what Christians are always doing—handing down the faith that they have received from others. But as each generation appropriates the Christian tradition, it not only receives, it modifies its heritage—emphasizes certain elements while neglecting others, reinterprets the faith according to its own circumstances, and, in sum, makes its own contribution to the story of the church.

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Describing, analyzing, and explaining not just the story, but the process that creates the story, is the task of a church historian.

My own particular interest in the broad sweep of Christian history has been the English Bible. It is a commonplace among Christians of all sorts that theology must somehow be rooted in the Bible. What is not always recognized, however, is that theology also shapes the Bible, that is, the Bible as most Christians experience it, the Bible in translation—and not only theology, but also values, beliefs, attitudes, and culture. For those who undertake to translate the Scriptures arrive at the task with certain commitments already about the nature and purpose of their work, and those commitments influence the outcome of their labors. So a central theme in my work has been to show the significance of such factors upon the form of English Bibles, that is, to analyze the various versions of the English Bible for what they reveal about the ideological or theological milieu in which they were produced.

For the most part, my work has focused on the sixteenth century, the first great period for the production of Bibles in English. This investigation is equally valid for the nineteenth century when the Revised Version was produced, and is still true today when the variety of English Bibles is greater than in any previous period. People produce new translations for reasons that are evident in the texts that they publish.

Furthermore, even today, some of the more popular versions are a part of the Great Tradition of English Bibles; they deliberately attempt to retain something of the language and diction of the Authorized (King James) Version. A careful examination of the editions that belong to this tradition reveals similarities and differences that reflect particular attitudes toward the divine word. In other words, the ongoing efforts to put the Bible into English without sacrificing entirely whatever it is that people admire or are accustomed to in the older versions have resulted in a family of Bibles going back to William Tyndale and extending to the New American Standard Bible (Updated Edition, 1995).

Each of these versions in its own way represents a reappropriation of the Christian tradition; but in each case the translators have approached the text with a double commitment—first, to the work of predecessors in the Great Tradition, but second, to what they believe is true about the Bible in their own situation. They may be motivated by concerns regarding the adequacy of the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts, or by the clarity of communication in the English text, or by the changing sensitivities of the English-speaking reader. In every case, however, they are convinced that the truth as they understand it no longer is found quite so readily in the earlier versions of the English Bible. So in reworking the tradition—accepting, modifying, or discarding it—they reveal their own fundamental commitments—intellectual, theological, and cultural.

The tradition itself begins not with the Authorized Version, but almost ninety years earlier with the work of William Tyndale, who inaugurated what we might call in the story of the English Bible, “the age of confessional Bibles,” the period that begins with the publication of Tyndale’s New Testament in 1525-1526 and concludes with the Authorized Version in 1611. This is, of course, the era of the Reformation when both Protestant and Catholic translators of the English Bible recognized that what they were doing and the way they were doing it were the results of their particular Christian confessions. Although Protestant versions dominated the sixteenth century, English Catholics subjected these versions to scathing criticism and in 1582 produced an English New Testament of their own, and in 1609-1610 also an Old Testament. The versions of this period, as well as what theologians said about them, demonstrate the importance of theological commitments to those who translated them.

But did it all begin with Tyndale? Tyndale, in fact, was heavily influenced by the great Reformer himself, Martin Luther. Many of Tyndale’s publications are a translation or paraphrase of a Lutheran original; and even in his translation of the Bible (the New Testament and major parts of the Old

Testament), though he worked from the original languages, Tyndale also employed Luther's German Bible.⁵

More important in terms of his Lutheranism was Tyndale's attitude toward the Scriptures. As is clear from the prologues, prefaces, and notes that accompanied his translations, Tyndale viewed the English Bible as a vehicle for teaching true religion, which he summarized in good Lutheran fashion as law and gospel:

All the Scripture is either the promises and testament of God in Christ, and stories pertaining thereunto, to strength thy faith; either the law, and stories pertaining thereto, to fear thee from evil doing. There is no story nor gest, seem it never so simple or so vile unto the world, but that thou shalt find therein spirit and life and edifying in the literal sense: for it is God's Scripture, written for thy learning and comfort.⁶

But how did such convictions regarding the purpose and message of the Bible influence the form of the translation? Did Tyndale's Lutheran convictions affect the words and phrases that appeared in his text? In the opinion of Tyndale's Catholic contemporaries and critics, the answer was clearly, "Yes."

Tyndale's first New Testament appeared in 1525-1526; and in 1528, Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London, licensed the humanist politician and Catholic apologist Thomas More to read heretical books for the purpose of refuting them. The result of that commission was a wide-ranging response to many elements in the Protestant program, including Tyndale's translation of the New Testament. More entitled his work, *A Dialogue . . . Wherein Be Treated Divers Matters as of the Veneration and Worship of Images and Relics, Praying to Saints and Going on Pilgrimage. With Many Other Things Touching the Pestilent Sect of Luther and*

⁵David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 111-124.

⁶William Tyndale, "Obedience of a Christian Man" in *Doctrinal Treatises*, Parker Society Edition (Cambridge: University Press, 1848), 310.

Tyndale, by the One Begun in Saxony and by the Other Labored to Be Brought into England.

What is it that Thomas More found so objectionable in Tyndale's version of the Bible? He did not reject the notion of an English Bible per se, but the specific version that Tyndale offered to the English-reading public. Further, while affirming the general value of a vernacular text, he objected to Tyndale's Bible as a deliberate perversion of the sacred word, prepared for the purpose of foisting heresy upon the unsuspecting:

It is . . . to me great mervayll that any good crysten man havynge any drop of wyt in his hede wold any thyng mervayll or complayne of the burnynge of that book yf he knowe the matter. Whyche who so callyth the newe testament calleth it by a wronge name excepte they wyll call it Tyndals testament or Luthers testament. For so had Tyndall after Luthers counsayle corrupted and chaunged it frome the good and holsom doctryne of Cryste to the devylysh heresydes of theyr owne that it was clene a contrary thyng.⁷

Although More went on to claim that deliberate mistranslation affected more than "a thousande textys" in Tyndale's work, the actual "mistakes" he enumerated were only seven. He charged Tyndale with having used the word "seniors" for the traditional term "priests"; "congregation" for "church"; "love" for "charity"; "favor" for "grace"; "knowledge" for "confession"; "repentance" for "penance"; and "a troubled heart" for "a contrite heart."⁸

Setting aside the question of accuracy, More was certainly correct in discerning a theological motive behind Tyndale's choice of terminology; for in each case, Tyndale avoided a term fraught with theological significance and instead used more neutral terminology. But the choice of a neutral term was itself

⁷Thomas More, "A Dialogue Concerning Heresies," in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, volumes 1- (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963-), volume 6, part 1, 285.

⁸More, "Dialogue," 285-290.

an implicit rejection of traditional theology; and one can hardly fault More for supposing that Tyndale, following Luther in this respect, had stacked the deck against the Catholic position by choosing the terms he did. "Fyrste," More argued,

[Tyndale] wolde make the people byleve that we sholde byleve nothyng but playne scrypture in whyche Ponte he taketh a played pestilent heresies. And then wolds he with his false translacyon make the people wene further that suche artycles of our faythe as he laboreth to destroy and whyche be well proved by holy scrypture were in holy scrypture nothyng spoken of but that the prechers have all thys .xv.C. yere mysse reported the gospell and englyshed the scrypture wronge to lede the people purposely out of the ryght way.⁹

More's argument that Tyndale had employed a specific vocabulary in his translation in order to support Protestant theology is actually confirmed by Tyndale's response, an *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531). Although Tyndale defended his terminology on philological grounds, as well as by citing both Erasmus (More's good friend) and the Latin Vulgate, he also readily admitted that he had chosen his terms in order to correct erroneous theological opinions.

For example, Tyndale argued that by using the word "congregation" instead of "church" the people would understand "the whole multitude of all that profess Christ" rather than just "the juggling spirits"; and he defended his choice of "repentance" over "penance" on the grounds that his opponents used the latter term to teach the doctrine of justification by works of satisfaction whereas the biblical text conveyed "Repent, or let it forethink you; and come and believe the gospel, or glad tidings, that is brought you in Christ, and so shall all be forgiven you; and henceforth live a new life." For Tyndale, Bible translation was a vehicle for teaching true

⁹More, "Dialogue," 290.

doctrine. Its vocabulary should reflect that truth and avoid confirming error, even if traditionalists were displeased.¹⁰

Although Thomas More affirmed the desirability of an English Bible in his debate with Tyndale, the English Catholic community did not produce one until well into the reign of Elizabeth.¹¹ Instead, English Protestants dominated the field, and Tyndale's pioneering work was soon superseded by numerous additional versions, which, while incorporating large measures of Tyndale's prose, also revealed somewhat different attitudes toward the Bible.

A product of Henry's reformation, not Luther's, Cranmer's prologue avoids any explicit reference to Protestant positions regarding justification or the sacraments and does not explicitly reject the piety of the old church. Nevertheless, Cranmer does contend for lay reading of the Bible on good Protestant grounds, the sufficiency of Scripture:

Here may all manner of persons . . . of what estate or condition soever they be . . . in this book learn all things what they ought to believe, what they ought to do, and what they should not do, as well concerning Almighty God, as also concerning themselves and all other.¹²

Cranmer, however, avoids spelling out the content of the faith ("what they ought to believe") and goes so far as to warn the Bible reader against "frivolous disputation" regarding the Scriptures. He does not want the vernacular Bible to become an occasion for religious dissent or social discontent. Instead, its purpose is to promote virtue. From the Bible, husbands, wives, children, and servants may all learn their duties; and "herein

¹⁰William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: University Press, 1850), 14-16, 23.

¹¹More, "Dialogue," 332. By 1533, however, More had changed his mind since he did not believe the times were right for an English Bible. One may see his "The Apology," in *Complete Works*, volume 2, 13-14.

¹²G. E. Duffield, editor, *The Works of Thomas Cranmer* (Appleford, Berkshire, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964), 37.

may princes learn how to govern their subjects: subjects obedience, love, and dread to their princes."¹³

As the title page of the Great Bible indicates, those who authorized this version had in mind not so much a reformation in doctrine but the creation of a civil and obedient people. As the word comes from God (yes, He is there—above and smaller than the king), it passes to officials of both church and state who in turn mediate it to the people at the bottom of the page—men and women, young and old—who are all calling out, "Vivat rex. God save the king!"¹⁴ Ironically, then, the work of Tyndale who fled Henry's England was used to promote Henry's rule and power in England.

Perhaps closer in spirit to Tyndale were the Protestant exiles of Mary's reign who used his and Coverdale's work to produce yet another version of the English Bible, the Geneva edition of 1560. By that time, Geneva had become a center for Protestant biblical scholarship, especially under the influence of Theodore Beza.¹⁵ There, a team of English exiles led by William Whittingham, erstwhile scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, and soon to be Dean of Durham under Elizabeth, published an English New Testament in 1557, a psalter in 1559, and the entire Bible in 1560.

From the standpoint of the English text, their work is essentially a revision of previous English Bibles on the basis of the Hebrew and Greek (Tyndale's work was their starting point for the New Testament and the Great Bible for the Old). The influence of Genevan Reformed scholarship, however, is clear

¹³Duffield, *Works*, 37-38.

¹⁴*The Byble in Englyshe...* (n.p.: Grafton & Whitchurch, 1539), title page. One may also see the bibliographic description in T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible, 1525-1961*, revised edition by A. S. Herbert (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1968).

¹⁵S. L. Greenslade, editor, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, volume 3: *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 62-67, 119-122, 441-445. One may also see Irena D. Backus, *The Reformed Roots of the English New Testament* (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1980) for Beza's influence on the English versions.

as well. John Calvin has replaced Martin Luther, literally, in the 1557 New Testament, which utilized as its preface a translation of a piece by Calvin prepared originally for a French Bible in 1535.

The 1560 complete Bible does not include Calvin's preface, but his theology permeates the book—in annotations, prefaces, chapter summaries, and even running titles on the pages and the index. Its notes affirm justification by faith, double predestination, *sola scriptura*, and total depravity, while papal primacy, the sacrifice of the mass, the cult of the saints, and the use of sacred images are all condemned. By reading carefully, the student of the Geneva Bible could learn everything he needed to grow in knowledge of the true, that is, Reformed, faith, to avoid falling into error and heresy. And, unlike the Great Bible, the reader might find encouragement and confidence even when opposed by the powers of the state, for not only do the Genevan notes affirm that "if anie command things against God, then let us answer, It is better to obey God then men," they also instruct the clergy to model themselves after Elijah in his dealings with Ahab: "The true ministers of God ought . . . to reprove boldly the wicked slanderers without respect of persons."¹⁶

Several years later another version of the Great Tradition appeared, the Bishops' Bible of 1568. Essentially a reworking of the Great Bible on the basis of the original languages, it was prepared for use in the churches of England by Elizabeth's first archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. Although still a manifestly Protestant work, including Protestant notes and prefaces, it was a far cry from the Geneva version. Official England pervaded the book, including portraits of the queen on the title page and of her two chief advisors elsewhere.¹⁷

¹⁶*The Bible and Holy Scriptures conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament . . .* (Geneva: Rouland Hall, 1560), annotations on 1 Peter 2:18 and 1 Kings 18:18. For the theology of the Geneva versions, one may also see Cameron A. MacKenzie, "The Battle for the Bible in England, 1557-1582" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1991), 20-42.

¹⁷MacKenzie, "Battle," 105-130.

Already in the first years of Elizabeth's reign, then, there were two competing versions of the Protestant Bible, each incorporating Tyndale's work, but each also representing different versions of the faith. One hailed from Canterbury and articulated an erastian vision of Protestant religion that was dependent upon and perhaps even subservient to the state. The other was non-erastian, determined to spread its gospel by means of the divine word with or without the cooperation of the monarch.

Therefore, by the time King James authorized a new translation of the Bible at the outset of his reign in 1604, the history of the English Scriptures was already quite complicated. The King James translators had a variety of options before them, including a New Testament prepared by Catholic exiles in Rheims, France, during Elizabeth's reign. Naturally enough, however, they decided upon the official Bible, the Bishops' version, as their base—"to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit." However, they also followed the Great Bible in eschewing all marginal notes of a doctrinal sort. Also like the Great Bible, the translators' preface is clearly Protestant in its attitude toward the Bible but does not spell out the content of the faith. Unlike both Rheims and Geneva, this version would not provide theological glosses upon the text.¹⁸

Still, the Authorized Version has a pivotal place in developing the Great Tradition, not only because of its popularity over so many centuries but also because of its attitude toward its predecessors. With the notable exception of the Catholic version, the translators for King James affirmed all of their sixteenth century predecessors as direct ancestors of their own work. In effect, they created the Great Tradition by specifying that "these translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible: viz., Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's [that is, the Great Bible], Geneva."¹⁹ Sensitive to

¹⁸Brooke F. Westcott, *A General View of the History of the English Bible*, third revised edition, (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 115.

¹⁹Westcott, *General View*, 116.

the charge of their opponents that Protestants were continually changing their Bibles, the translators responded, "Wee never thought from the beginning, that we should neede to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against; that hath bene our indeavour, that our marke."²⁰

In this way, the translators embraced a tradition that included both Geneva and Canterbury, a tradition that stretched back eighty years to William Tyndale whose work continued to be the foundation of their own. Indeed, in their preface, the King James translators identified the work of their predecessors with the word of God. "Wee doe not deny, nay wee affirme and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession [that is, Protestantism] . . . containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God."²¹ Ironically, then, Tyndale's work, designed to overthrow one tradition, had become the source of another tradition.

With the publication of the Authorized Version, for all practical purposes, the "age of confessional Bibles" in English came to an end and the next great period in the story of the Great Tradition of English Bibles would not emerge until the second half of the nineteenth century. By that time the intellectual climate was far different from that of the Reformation, so that the primary motive behind a new generation of English versions was the perceived need for an English version that was more accurate than the Authorized Version, especially in its underlying Greek text of the New Testament. Theology would continue to be a factor in translating the Bible but other issues would arise as well that would become even more important than the differences between Catholics and Protestants in accounting for differences in translations.

²⁰Alfred W. Pollard, editor, *Records of the English Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), 368-369.

²¹Pollard, *Records*, 362.

For want of a better term, we may call the period beginning with the Revised Version of 1881 "the age of scientific Bibles," since the principal motive behind the translations of this period often seemed to be contemporary and ostensibly objective scholarship in textual criticism, philology, and linguistics, rather than theology per se. Moreover, the fact that the translation teams that prepared the versions in this period were ordinarily cross-denominational is also an important indication of the declining significance of confessional commitments in the preparation of English Bibles.

The process resulting in the Revised Version began with a motion by the Bishop of Winchester in the 1870 Convocation of the Church of England to revise the Authorized Version "in all those passages where plain and clear errors, whether in the Hebrew or Greek text originally adopted by the translators, or in the translation made from the same, shall, on due investigation, be found to exist."

Convocation agreed and resolved "to invite the cooperation of any eminent for scholarship, to whatever nation or religious body they may belong." Thus, the revisors included members not only of the Church of England but also of other Protestant churches and even a Unitarian. A Roman Catholic was also invited, but he declined to participate. Scholarly credentials and not theological commitment were the criterion.²²

What motivated this revision was in large part a growing consensus in the academic and theological community that the underlying Greek text of the Authorized Version was not the original text of the New Testament. In the introduction to their work the translators indicated that "a revision of the Greek text was the necessary foundation of our work"; and among those who took part in the work were the eminent textual critics of their time, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort.²³ For them, textual revision was not a question of theology either Catholic or

²²Westcott, *General View*, 320, 322, and F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 134.

²³*The Revised New Testament* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1881), "Preface," xii.

Protestant, but a matter of science, of human ingenuity applied to ancient texts in order to determine the authentic New Testament text from the many manuscripts available:

Since the testimony [to the NT text] is full of complex variations, the original text cannot be elicited from it without the use of criticism, that is, of a process of distinguishing and setting aside those readings which have originated at some link in the chain of transmission.²⁴

The decision to revise the text accounts for some of the more noteworthy innovations in the translation when the New Testament appeared in 1881, especially the absence of many familiar passages, such as John 5:3b,4 (the angel at the pool of Bethesda), Acts 8:37 (Philip's interrogation of the Ethiopian eunuch before baptism), and 1 John 5:7 (the Johannine comma). The revisers placed these passages and others in the margins of their work, because they had concluded that they were not a part of the original Greek text.

However, so great was their respect for the language of the Great Tradition—although not its textual scholarship—that the translators agreed not only “to introduce as few alterations as possible into the Text of the Authorized Version consistently with faithfulness” but also to “limit . . . the expression of such alterations to the language of the Authorized and earlier English versions.”²⁵ Instead of trying to modernize the vocabulary and grammatical constructions, these nineteenth century revisers produced a deliberately archaic version of the Bible, designed to sound like the Authorized Version, although departing dramatically from it in the underlying Greek of the New Testament.

Of course, not everyone was willing to accept a critical text or the ideological commitments from which they proceeded. Preeminent among those who opposed the Revised Version was

²⁴B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek*, reprint edition (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 1.

²⁵“Preface,” *Revised Version*, x.

John Burgon, Dean of Chichester, who offered an explicitly theological rationale for retaining the Greek text represented in the vast majority of extant manuscripts and undergirding the versions of the Reformation period. Since God was at work in His church preserving His word according to His promise, Burgon argued, we can be confident that the text used and found in the church is the right one. He wrote:

Profane literature has never known anything approaching it, and can show nothing at all like it. Satan's arts were defeated indeed through the church's faithfulness because, (the good providence of God had so willed it) the perpetual multiplication, in every quarter, of copies required for ecclesiastical use, not to say the solicitude of faithful men in diverse regions of ancient Christendom to retain for themselves unadulterated specimens of the inspired text, proved a sufficient safeguard against the grosser forms of corruption.

As for Westcott and Hort's heavy reliance on two fourth-century manuscripts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, the one neglected for centuries and the other only recently rescued from a monastery waste basket, Burgon responded, "We incline to believe that the Author of Scripture has not by any means shown himself so unmindful of the safety of the Deposit."²⁶

Burgon's argument for the truth ensconced in sanctified tradition did not prevail. Subsequent translations, done in our own times and by conservative scholars such as the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version, have been based upon texts established using the canons of contemporary textual criticism. The notable exception is the New King James Version. But even with respect to this last version, its New Testament editor, Arthur L. Farstad, has not proceeded along the lines urged by Burgon. Farstad wrote:

²⁶John Burgon, "Revision Revised" in David O. Fuller, editor, *True or False? The Westcott-Hort Textual Theory Examined* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1973), 209, 213.

First the NKJV is an update of an historic version translated from a specific type of text. We felt it unwise to change the base from which it was made. . . . Secondly, in recent years the extreme reliance on a handful of our oldest manuscripts . . . has decreased. There is a greater openness to giving the so-called Byzantine manuscripts a fair hearing.

Farstad also pointed out that the vast majority of extant manuscripts support the readings of the *textus receptus*; but Burgon's argument from the providence of God at work in the church to guarantee the majority reading no longer appears.²⁷

In our own times, besides the New King James Version, other Bibles have also broken with the linguistic conventions of the sixteenth century while also attempting to retain something of the vocabulary and style of the Authorized Version. These include the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible, Updated edition. Besides accuracy in text and translation, these versions also valued familiarity—words and phrases, diction and style that had become traditional for the English Bible.

However, a major impetus behind several other translations appearing over the past thirty years or so has been the conviction that using "Bible English" of this sort fails to communicate meaning adequately to the contemporary reader. Such language fails the test of accuracy because it does not create the same linguistic effect on its audience as did the original upon the first audience to hear it. In other words, those who desire the most accurate translation—which is the principal characteristic of the age of scientific Bibles—must pay attention not only to the accuracy of the original text and to the peculiarities of Greek and Hebrew grammar but also to how one communicates in contemporary English.

Eugene Nida, one of the great proponents of such sensitivity to the intended audience of the translation, has written:

²⁷Arthur L. Farstad, *The New King James Version in the Great Tradition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 110-111.

The competent translator actually goes through a seeming round about process of analysis, transfer, and restructuring. . . . The translator first analyzes the message of the *source* [*sic*] language into its simplest and structurally clearest forms, transfers it at this level, and then restructures it to the level in the *receptor* [*sic*] language *which is most appropriate for the audience which he intends to reach.*²⁸

This special attention to the language of the English reader of the translation has resulted in numerous versions that are independent of the Great Tradition of English Bibles. Versions ranging from the New English Bible to Today's English Version to the New International Version all aim at putting the Bible into the "current speech of our own time," or "in words and forms accepted as standard by people everywhere who employ English as a means of communication," or "clear and natural English . . . idiomatic but not idiosyncratic, contemporary but not dated."²⁹

Although the concern of such versions remains accuracy — just like the Revised Version — this new emphasis on the effect of the version upon its intended audience has perhaps sown the seeds for yet another generation of translations, so concerned with the contemporary reader that fidelity to the original has become secondary. I am suggesting that with the publication of the New Revised Standard Version in 1989 and the Revised English Bible in 1990, we have entered into yet another period in the story of the English Bible, "the postmodern age of English Bibles," in which translators freely reshape the biblical text to account for contemporary concerns not really present in the original.

Routinely, these versions employ feminist English rather than traditional forms and in so doing, they often change the grammar and the meaning of words in the original to

²⁸Quoted in Eugene H. Glassman, *The Translation Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 52; emphasis added.

²⁹New English Bible, New Testament, "Introduction," vii; Today's English Version, New Testament, "Preface," iv; New International Version, "Preface," viii.

accommodate certain cultural trends today. A fascinating example of this sort of Bible is the New Revised Standard Version, still another rendition of the Great Tradition. Like the Revised Standard Version of 1946-1952, the New Revised Standard Version is committed both to the latest findings of textual scholarship and to retaining as much of the old language as possible. According to its preface, "As for the style of English adopted for the present revision, . . . the directive [was] to continue in the tradition of the King James Bible, but to introduce such changes as are warranted on the basis of accuracy, clarity, euphony, and current English usage." Its efforts to accommodate the contemporary idiom, however, are strictly limited. And so Bruce Metzger, the chairman of its translation committee has written, "The New Revised Standard remains essentially a literal translation."

However, Metzger then added a significant exception, "Paraphrastic renderings have been adopted only sparingly, and then chiefly to compensate for a deficiency in the English language—the lack of a common gender third person singular pronoun."³⁰ Although this sounds like a grammatical point, it is actually an ideological one, since traditional English has been able to accommodate the meaning of the original for many centuries using the generic "man," "him," "his," "he," and so forth. And according to surveys and studies by Wayne Grudem, it still can.³¹

Moreover, it quickly becomes evident that the concern of the translators regarding gender applies to the original language as much as to the English. Consider, for example, the terms "son" and "brother," which are usually gender-specific in Greek as well as in English. Routinely, however, when these terms refer to fellow-believers in the New Testament, the New Revised Standard Version avoids translating them literally. Usually, "brothers" becomes "brothers and sisters" (one may compare

³⁰Bruce M. Metzger, "To the Reader," *The Holy Bible . . . New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 8-9.

³¹Wayne Grudem, "Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture? Yes," *Christianity Today* (October 27, 1997): 27-32.

Romans 1:13; 7:1; 8:12; 10:1; James 2:1, 5, 14); but in James 2:9, "brother" becomes "believer"; and in Matthew 18, an erring "brother" becomes "another member of the church."

Similarly, "sons" usually becomes "children." This is even the case when a theological point is being made as in Galatians 4, where Paul argues that after God sent His Son, He sent the Spirit of His Son so that we—male and female alike—might be adopted as "sons." In the New Revised Standard Version believers have become only "children" by adoption, although Christ does remain a "Son."

Additional changes abound. "Fathers" become "parents" (Exodus 20:5) or "ancestors" (John 4:20); singulars become plurals (Psalm 1:1; 10:4; 14:1; Psalm 37:13); third person becomes first person (Psalm 37:23, 24); and in the Old Testament, "son of man" becomes "mortals" in Psalm 8:4, "O mortal" in Ezekiel 3:1, 4, 10, 17, and just plain "human being" in the critical "son of man" passage (Daniel 7:13).³²

Clearly, the New Revised Standard translators have sought to accommodate the Great Tradition to our current cultural climate, although not necessarily to promulgate some new theology. However, just as Thomas More noticed that Tyndale's version promoted Protestantism, it is evident that the accommodations of the New Revised Standard Version may have profound implications for theology, even if unintended. For if man is free to adapt the text of the Bible to the concerns of today, perhaps he is also free to adapt the doctrine of God that he finds in that text to those same contemporary trends. And indeed, that is precisely what is happening in one of the most recent editions of the English Bible, actually a special and even more culturally accommodating edition of the New Revised Standard Version, entitled: *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*.

³²For these and other examples, one may see reviews of the New Revised Standard Version by Paul G. Bretscher in *Logia* 3 (1994): 55-58, and John H. Stek in *Reformed Review* 43 (1990): 171-188.

Besides deciding to “replace or rephrase all gender-specific language not referring to particular historical individuals, all pejorative references to race, color, or religion, and all identifications of persons by their physical disability alone,” this version has also chosen to identify God as our “Father-Mother,” to call Jesus the “Child of God” not the Son and the “Human One” not the Son of man, and to minimize such expressions as “king,” “kingdom,” and “Lord.” Not the text itself, but the translators’ convictions about what the text should say account for such decisions. Openly, the translators refer to the “interpretive” character of their version, but that is hardly the same thing as faithfulness to the original text, which was the principal motivation of the revisers of 1881 and 1611.³³

Clearly, the concern of those who prepared the *Inclusive Version* was as much ideological as the Geneva translators or William Tyndale’s even if it does seem that the sixteenth century scholars were more respectful of the text. Nevertheless, both then and now, people’s convictions regarding the Bible and its place in the church have affected the form of that Bible in the English language. Even within the confines of the Great Tradition, a variety of attitudes toward the sacred text has produced a variety of Bibles. Protestantism, erastianism, textual criticism, antiquarianism, and feminism have all left their mark on the English Bible. Or should we say, “English Bibles”? For in leaving their mark on the tradition, ideology, culture, and theology, these have created distinct and differing versions of the sacred Scriptures in the passage of time.

For that reason, those of us who value what we have received from our fathers, not only on account of its familiarity but especially because of what it is, in this case, the word of God, will have a marked interest and concern for what in fact has been done with that heritage. Therefore, as a professor of historical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, I pray that God will continue to bless my work not only in telling the story of the church’s past but also in participating in the

³³“General Introduction,” *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii-xxii.

church's ongoing task of appropriating her heritage in a way that is faithful to the One who originally gave it. For, after all, when we use the Bible in English, we want to hear God's voice and not garbled echoes of our own.