

## **Report of the Bible Versions Study Committee**

### **1. Committee Mandate**

In response to two overtures submitted to it, Synod 2005 made the following decisions:

- *To appoint a study committee to evaluate the current versions of the NASB and the NIV and recommend to the next Synod whether they should be approved as pulpit Bibles.*
- *That two other Bible versions be considered for pulpit use in our churches by the committee to study Bible Versions along with the NIV and NASB versions, namely the English Standard Version and the New King James Version.*

Synod 2005 appointed the following committee: Rev Reinier Noppers (Convenor) Rev. Leo de Vos, Rev. Jan Lion-Cachet, and Rob Vosslander. During the inter-synodical period, the Rev Lion-Cachet returned to South Africa, and was not replaced.

### **2. Recommendations**

- 1. That synod not approve the English Standard Version ('ESV') or the New King James Version ('NKJV') for use as pulpit bibles in our churches.*
- 2. That synod confirm that the authorisation given by Synod 1983 (art. 72) extends to the updated NASB and the ongoing revisions of the NIV.*
- 3. That the committee be discharged.*

The grounds for these recommendations are contained in the body of this report.

### **3. Background**

The question of Bible translations has been on the agenda of Synod from time to time since 1954. The status quo, viz. the adoption of the NIV and NASB for use in our churches, was confirmed by Synod 1983 (art. 72). Given that the KJV was already an approved version, its use continues to be permitted.

The Bible Translations Committee presented a further report (report 14) to Synod 1986. That Synod adopted the principles of literal accuracy, clarity, and bias, as reproduced in appendix 1 to this report (art. 63).

Synod 1986 also accepted the recommendation that the Pulpit/Study Bible distinction was valid (arts. 63, 66). However, given the statement that, "In a very real way the overall accuracy of the translation is vital for a pulpit Bible" (Report 14, Acts 1986, p. 57), the import of this distinction is not clear. In practice it would seem that the distinction is somewhat moot in our churches.

Synod 1986 further decided that, "the need for the committee to evaluate a particular translation must be decided by Synod in the first place, in response to an overture from a Session or Presbytery in which preliminary agreement with the principles of section 1 of this report and the demonstrated need for such a change of translation be given as the grounds for the overture." It is presumably on this basis that our Committee has been charged to evaluate the several translations before it.

### **4. Discussion**

#### **4.1 Approach**

The Committee did not meet in person. Rather, information was exchanged by email – an approach that proved to be efficient and effective.

We undertook the following:

1. A survey of the 19 congregations of our denomination to determine the status quo, to ascertain

whether there was any desire for change, and to obtain input from the churches.

2. A search for and review of relevant information on the various translations under review.

## **4.2 Survey results**

A survey was sent to the sessions, in order to gain an understanding of the mind and the present practice of the churches. Survey responses were obtained from 17 of the 19 churches. The survey instrument is reproduced in appendix 2.

We believe that five churches currently use the NASB as their pulpit Bible, with the balance using the NIV. It was clear from the survey responses that there was little, if any, interest in changing translations. Most, if not all churches appeared to be happy with the version currently in use and had no desire to change.

Rather, concerns were raised at the idea of changing translations, including:

- The cost to churches of replacing the pew bibles and to congregation members of replacing their personal Bibles.
- The loss of familiarity with the text, especially when it came to Scripture memorisation.
- The lack of any substantial justification for, or even desire for a change in translation.
- Potential pastoral issues that might arise where members were content with the existing translation but not with the (unfamiliar) new one.
- Possible increase in difficulty in language, especially where a significant number of members have English as a second or other language.

To our minds these are weighty reasons. Any new translation would have to provide substantial benefits to justify the cost and angst of such change. As noted below, we do not believe that either the NKJV or the ESV provide such benefits. To use the colloquial expression, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”.

We also asked whether it would be beneficial for the denomination to have only one denominationally agreed upon Bible version. Although a number of respondents noted advantages that would ensue (e.g. in liturgical forms, visiting preachers etc), most did not consider this either necessary or feasible. (One even commented, “Do we want war?!”)

## **4.3 NKJV and ESV as additional pulpit Bibles**

We were charged to consider the ESV and the NKJV for use as pulpit Bibles in our churches. We did spend some time as individuals using these translations, and in obtaining reviews of them.

We would recommend that our churches not adopt either of these translations, for the following reasons:

1. As previously noted, there is little interest in adopting additional Bible versions. Nor is there any pressing need to do so.
2. Our churches are committed to the principles of literal accuracy, clarity, and bias as reproduced in appendix 1. In general the NIV and the NASB meet these criteria. The NIV is certainly more clear or readable than the NASB, whereas the NASB arguably is the more literally accurate.<sup>1</sup> However, both have served our churches well over the past twenty years.

---

<sup>1</sup> However, refer comments in Barker, K. L. (2003) Bible translation philosophies with special reference to the New International Version. In G. G. Scorgie, M. L. Strauss, & S. M. Voth, *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s word to the world* (pp. 51-64). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. They quote from the CanRC Report to General Synod Abbotsford 1995: “It was frequently our experience that very often when our initial reaction to an NIV translation was negative, further study and investigation convinced us that the NIV translators had taken into account all the factors involved and had actually rendered the best possible translation of the three versions.” (i.e. NIV, NASB and NKJV). They concluded that “the NIV is more idiomatic than the NASB and NKJV but at the same time as accurate as the NASB and NKJV.” (p. 59).

## Report 15 Bible Versions

Based on our brief review of the NKJV and ESV, we do not believe that either translation improves on the NIV and NASB in either clarity or literal accuracy. In particular, the English of the NKJV and the ESV strikes us as wooden and stilted, and we encountered a number of questionable translation choices. Given that both are revisions of previous translations (the NKJV of the KJV, and the ESV of the RSV), this is probably not surprising. As one survey respondent noted,

*The NKJV works from a different textual basis and can potentially lead to “contradictions” between versions. The ESV’s English is a little easier to understand than the NASB’s (although not without substantial problems) but it introduces a host of other issues – probably reflecting the haste with which it was produced.*

3. Although there was no clear desire for one translation to be adopted as the pulpit Bible in all our churches, we believe a degree of uniformity is desirable. We wonder what would be gained from having two additional versions used from the pulpit in our churches.
4. As noted above, there are substantial concerns about the costs (financial and otherwise) of adopting a new version.

### 4.4 Updated NIV and NASB

We were charged to evaluate the current versions of the NASB and the NIV and recommend to the next Synod whether they should be approved as pulpit Bibles.

At the outset it should be said that there is little option but to use the updated NASB and the current NIV, given that the original NASB and previous printings of the NIV are not able to be purchased.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.4.1 NIV

The publishers of the NIV, the International Bible Society (‘IBS’), has a policy of on-going review of the NIV. There is no one NIV text as such – rather the text is subject to on-going review, and has been since its introduction. These minor changes have not generally been noticed by our churches – they might only be noticed when a minister might be reading from a newer edition than that read along by someone with an older edition. We are not aware that this has caused any problems over the past twenty years.

More recently, the TNIV has been published, which has adopted a more explicitly gender-inclusive translation policy. We contacted the IBS on 12 July 2007 and asked:

*Our church uses the NIV for its worship. We note that a new version, the TNIV is widely available, but wish to continue using the NIV. Has the IBS any stated policy on continuing to publish the NIV? Or is the TNIV intended to replace the NIV?*

They replied:

*No. The TNIV offers a new choice in translations with contemporary language, but in no way diminishes the need for the NIV. Because of its tremendous following, Zondervan and IBS will continue to publish the NIV without change. The NIV is the leading modern English translation in the world. With more than 215 million NIV Bibles sold or distributed, the NIV will continue to be the translation of choice for millions.*

We would suggest that on the face of it, and subject to there being no changes to the underlying translation philosophy, there should be no principal issues with the continued use of the NIV. In fact, had we the expertise, we might adopt the proposal made to the Synod of the CanRC, who saw this translation policy as a positive approach, as it provided the opportunity for their churches to have input

---

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the KJV has a long history of on-going review - just try reading the original 1611 edition! And there is no guarantee that any other version (e.g. the ESV or the NKJV) would not similarly be revised over time, as corrections are made and new textual discoveries are made.

into the translation.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4.4.2 Updated NASB**

The NASB update is a more substantial revision of the text. Although the most obvious feature is the removal of archaic pronouns, the revision extends well beyond this, particularly in the New Testament, as a side-by-side comparison soon makes obvious. In general this has mitigated the woodenness of the original NASB.

Again, we have not spent time analyzing the changes. We do not have the expertise or time to do so. Further, we would submit that, given that no such detailed analysis of the original text of the NASB was undertaken by our churches, we would have to review both the original and the updated NASB in order to make a proper evaluation. Since the NASB has been in use in our churches since 1974, we are not sure that this is necessary.

### **5. Summary**

We recommend that synod take no action in approving revised editions of the NIV, as the approval given to it at Synod 1983 necessarily included any revised editions. In reality it is not practicable to identify successive updates, given the translation policy adopted. Rather, if there are concerns about specific translation decisions, these should be addressed as they arise.

We also recommend that the use of the updated NASB as a pulpit Bible be confirmed. The update does not substantively modify the translation policy of the NASB. We are not aware of any theological issues that have arisen from the update. Besides, the original edition is no longer available – hence those congregations that use the NASB have the options of using the updated NASB or changing over to the NIV.

---

<sup>3</sup> Refer CanRC Committee on Bible Translations. *Report to General Synod Abbotsford 1995: NASB, NIV, or NKJV: Which version now?*, recommendation 3: to “appoint a committee which would receive comments from churches and/or members about passages in the NIV in need of improvement, scrutinize those comments, and pass on valid concerns to the NIV Translation Center” (p. 34).

## **Appendix 1**

Excerpt from Report 8 of the Bible Translations Committee, as amended and adopted by Synod 1986 (article 66).

### **1. Literal accuracy**

This principle is drawn from the fact that the Bible is inspired in all its parts (plenary inspiration). This means that God's superintendence over the finished product extended even to the very words which were written. Paul, for example, demonstrates that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham, that in his seed all the families of the earth will be blessed, by an appeal to the singular form of the original (Gal 3:16). And the Lord Jesus, threatened with being stoned for calling himself the Son of God, defended himself by quoting Psalm 82 where (apparently) the judges of the land are called 'gods' (Ps 82:6 compared with John 10:34-36 – note particularly his phrase 'and the Scripture cannot be broken').

Because, therefore, ALL Scripture is breathed out by God (II Tim 3:16, 17) it is necessary that any translation which is to be used in the pulpits of our churches should be accurate with respect to the words of the original text. And, since the final appeal in all controversies is to the original tongues, if we wish to use the translation generally it should reflect the words of those tongues.

Furthermore, it is clear from Scripture itself that the original writers did not necessarily understand the full implications of what they had written. (I Peter 1:10-12). The application of this principle would have us check the original and, where the words of the original are clear and make sense, they should be exactly reproduced. We cannot be sure that our attempts to supply meaning to the text will be any better than the original writers and so it is your committee's opinion that the best translation is that which keeps interpretive alterations to the text to a minimum.

### **2. Clarity**

Since Scripture is all we need to 'be thoroughly furnished to every good work' (II Tim 3:17) it is clear that any translation which is going to be used in our pulpits must also be readily understood by the people. This principle is the basis of all attempts to produce a new translation (in the common language of the people). It also led the work of preaching (or explaining the meaning of the written word of God (Neh. 8:7, 8, 12) in the hearing of the whole congregation.

From this principle it is obvious that SOME interpretation is necessary since the idiom of one language is sometime incomprehensible to someone of another. But it also ought to be plain that, since God intended his word to be understood, it will be in thought forms which are able to be understood by all common folk.

The twin concerns mentioned above should make it obvious that both accuracy and clarity are essential. However, where the meaning is unclear (or ambiguous) but the text is clear the translation should follow the text. Where the meaning is clear and the text unclear (or obscure) the translation should give the meaning. But, in all cases where that is done, it ought still to be quite clear what has been added to make the text clear – since further light is constantly being shed on the text of Scripture by the excavations being carried out in Israel and other Near Eastern countries.

### **3. Bias**

It is impossible to avoid the effects of theological bias completely. Even the KJV – excellent though it is – showed bias in translating Acts 2:47 as if it said 'the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved ...' instead of '...such as were being saved ...' In effect the Reformed translations should be the most clear from bias since the Reformed Faith is just that system of doctrine the Bible itself teaches – but theological neutrality is not altogether possible. Better, in that case, a translation which has a clearly seen bias than one which gives the impression of none.

## Appendix 2

### Survey instrument



## REFORMED CHURCHES OF NEW ZEALAND BIBLE VERSION STUDY COMMITTEE

25 July 2007

Clerks of Session  
Reformed Churches of New Zealand  
*by email*

Dear Brothers

#### Bible translations

Synod 2005 made the following decisions:

- *To appoint a study committee to evaluate the current versions of the NASB and the NIV and recommend to the next Synod whether they should be approved as pulpit Bibles.*
- *That two other Bible versions be considered for pulpit use in our churches by the committee to study Bible Versions along with the NIV and NASB versions, namely the English Standard Version and the New King James Version.*

Our committee, comprising Revs Reinier Noppers, Leo de Vos, and myself, was appointed by that Synod to carry out these decisions. We hope to have completed our task prior to the next synod.

Given that any subsequent decisions of Synod on Bible translations will affect the practice of our churches, and particularly the worship services, we believe it would be helpful to receive input from the churches themselves. This feedback would also assist us in making our recommendations, and, we hope, minimise the risk that we have overlooked relevant considerations or information.

We would therefore kindly ask your session to take the time to consider and provide comment on the following questions. It may be easiest for you to type your replies directly beneath the questions and then email it to [rob.andy@xtra.co.nz](mailto:rob.andy@xtra.co.nz) no later than **Friday 31 August 2007**. Alternatively, replies may be sent by snail mail to:

R Vosslander  
34 Oregon Place  
Christchurch 8061

We look forward to your comments, and thank you for your assistance.

With Christian regards

Rob Vosslander  
for the Committee

**Report 15**  
**Bible Versions**

Name of congregation: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact phone number \_\_\_\_\_

1. Which translation do you currently use in your worship services?
2. What do you consider to be the strengths of this translation?
3. What do you consider to be the weaknesses of this translation?
4. Did your session study the matter of Bible translations prior to adopting the version currently used? If so, may we have copies of any reports that were prepared?
5. Has there been any suggestion in your congregation/session that a different translation be adopted? If so, on what grounds?
6. How difficult would you consider it to be to change to a different translation? What issues might arise?
7. Would you consider it beneficial for the denomination to have only one denominationally agreed upon Bible version? Why? What might prevent this?
8. Which translation do the members of your congregation use personally, in Bible study groups, etc?
9. Has your session come across any particularly helpful articles or books that deal with the four translations being reviewed? If so, please advise (i.e. author name(s), title, source).
10. Do you wish to make any further comments?