

ENGLISH OR GREEK?

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With our increased interest in Bible translations for the many Bibleless people groups also comes many questions about who should translate—and how. As Independent Baptists, we are very zealous for the pure Word of God and very opinionated, even dogmatic, about how it should be transferred into other languages. This position of strong conviction is a good place to begin, but to this zeal, we must add knowledge.

One question almost always comes up: Should a translation of the New Testament be based on the English King James Bible or on the Greek Text? One person argues: We have a perfect English Bible; let's just translate it into the ethnic language. Another insists an accurate translation can only come directly from the Greek. Which line of reasoning is correct?

When you read your Bible, you never think about the fact that it was translated from other languages; it sounds like God is speaking directly to you in your tongue, amen? That's exactly what we want people to feel when we give them a Bible in their tongue. Yes, it must be faithful to the original text, but it must also fit naturally into the vocabulary and grammatical structure of the target language. It must say what God says, and it must make sense and sound right to the readers. How do we accomplish this?

For the one who weighs in on the side of the Greek, let me remind you of the tremendous amount of Greek, let me remind you of the tremendous amount of Greek scholarship present in our Authorized Version. We probably have no Greek scholars today who could hold a candle to those of 1611. We believe they accurately translated the Greek into English. Also, when would a young missionary know Greek well enough to translate from it alone? We will never know Greek as well as he knows English, and besides, no one translates exclusively from the Greek. All English-speaking translators follow some English Bible, even as they translate the Greek. This being the case, their translation is based on both languages.

On the other hand, a translation taken only from the English might be less accurate than one also using the Greek, especially if it is done too literally. For instance, Revelation 3:20 says, “. . . if any man hear my voice. . .” This first-year Greek student can see at a glance that the word “man” is not found in the Greek phrase. The English uses the word “man” to mean any person; therefore “man” is a good choice. However, suppose that in the receptor language the word “man” can only refer to an adult male. Then a literal English translation would be an inaccurate one. Paul asks a ridiculous question in Romans 6:1, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” He answers his question with, “God forbid.” A look at the Greek shows that the word “God” is not found in this phrase and neither is the word “forbid.” The Greek uses a very strong word meaning “no” any other word meaning “to be.” The Spanish Bible translates this phrase as “in ninguna manera” (in not any way). The Greek, Spanish and English are all different; which is correct? They all are! By studying the Greek along with the English, the translator may get a better understanding of the text, something he desperately needs. He also sees that there is a certain amount of liberty in choosing the best word in the receptor language. Perhaps the receptor language best expresses it, “never, never.”

It is good for the translator to understand some Greek—the more the better. However, there are many books and computer programs written by experts that explain the Greek to us who know it little. By using these helps, the translator is using the Greek. Commentators might also help us understand the Greek and help us properly interpret a verse; you cannot translate what you don't understand.

Ecclesiastes 4:9 says, “Two *are* better than one;” In this case that would be English and Greek. But verse 12 says, “. . .and a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.” There is another strand that makes the translation even better and stronger. It is seldom discussed by people interested, but not involved in Bible translation. Let me explain it like this: Suppose an American missionary is translating the Scriptures into one of the Indian languages of Brazil. He must have native translation helpers. (Actually, they are the translators and he is the helper.) They know their language and culture but nothing of English and Greek; however, they probably do understand somewhat the Portuguese trade language. The missionary will study his English Bible and read the commentaries and Greek helps. Then he will explain the meaning of the passage to the native translators. They will have the Portuguese Bible in front of them; in their minds that is the Bible they are translating. The finished product will have the strength of not one, but three sources texts.

So, do we translate from the English or the Greek? Yes—and from the Portuguese too!