

THE KING JAMES “ONLY” DEBATE

By Jim Mersereau

Perhaps one of the most controversial and hotly debated issues in the Christian community today, especially here in the Bible belt, is the King James Version of the Bible. Now let me say upfront that I think the KJV of the Bible is a fine translation. The language is beautiful and I sometimes use it in my own personal study. So I have nothing against the KJV itself. The problem I have is with the King James “only” crowd. There are many who try to make the case that the KJV is the only legitimate and acceptable English language translation of the Bible. I have even heard them say “If you don’t have a King James Bible then you don’t have a Bible!”

That’s nonsense. The truth is that although the KJV is a reasonably good translation of the Bible, it’s actually one of the least accurate English language translations available today. The reason is that the original 1611 KJV was based upon the manuscripts that existed in that day. It was based upon Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Latin manuscripts that had been copied, recopied, and handed down over the course of almost 1600 years.

But in the early 1900s the science of Biblical archeology was developed. At that time archeologists began doing excavations in the Holy Land and when they did, they began uncovering portions of scripture that dated all the way back to Biblical times. When they compared those newly discovered documents to the documents that the 1611 KJV of the Bible was based upon, they realized that in some areas the King James language didn’t do the best of jobs of accurately reflecting the clear meaning of the earliest and best Biblical manuscripts.

There were no significant theological errors in the KJV, I don’t mean that. But with the help of those more ancient Biblical documents, Bible scholars realized there were other ways of translating that would more accurately communicate the original meaning to modern readers, and that is what prompted the newer more modern translations to come about. Those modern translations are based upon the older, more reliable manuscripts.

The other major problem with the KJV today is that it is written in a form of the English language that nobody has actually spoken for centuries. So Bible readers are faced with the problem of trying to understand the Word of God in a language that they don’t actually speak. That’s a problem for a lot of people – especially for new believers.

The advantage of modern translations like the New International Version, or the Holman Christian Standard Bible, or the New Living Translation, is that they are highly accurate and reliable translations of God’s Word, and they are in the language that we do use in everyday life.

Communicating the Word of God in the language that people actually speak is consistent with what the Holy Spirit has been doing across the world since the earliest of Biblical times. Since the

beginning, when God first began giving His Word to His people to be recorded and preserved, the Holy Spirit has been moving across geographic, cultural, generational, and language barriers to provide the Bible to people in the languages that they speak and use in their daily lives.

Communicating the written Word of God, in the language the people of God use and understand, started in the Old Testament when God moved the Biblical writers to write down his words in the language His people used every day. In their case it was Hebrew. Then again in New Testament times He made sure that the New Testament was written in the common language of the people, in that case it was Greek. Although many of the people in Palestine spoke Aramaic, and other people groups spoke other languages, the common language they all shared was Greek. As a result, the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament were written in the language the people could easily read and understand. So originally the Bible was written in the language the people actually used. That's a pretty good reason for us to do so as well.

There is also historical evidence to support this. In the 1500's, in order to correct what the Catholic church had done by putting the Bible into Latin only, and thereby preventing the common person from reading it, the Holy Spirit spurred translations into German first, and then into the King James English, because those were the languages that people actually spoke in those days.

Since then Bible translators have been at work continuously translating the Bible into thousands of languages and dialects so people could read it in the languages they use everyday. And, as the use of language has changed from generation to generation, within a particular language group, new translations have come about so the Word of God would remain in the easily understood languages that people were actually using in their daily lives. The Bible is intended by God to be accessible and easily understood by the average person in the language they actually speak.

Now, please do not take this as an attack on the KJV. It is not. I personally like the KJV. The language is beautiful and poetic and also, the KJV has played an important role in the history and development of the Christian faith in the English speaking world. If the KJV of the Bible is the version that is most helpful to you personally, then I encourage you to use it. My argument is not with the KJV. My argument is with the King James "only" crowd. They're wrong. It's legalism run amuck. It's modern-day Pharisee-ism.

We're fortunate in our country to have such a rich heritage of religious freedom. That freedom has resulted in the USA having the best and most extensive system of Christian higher education that exists anywhere in the world. Therefore some of the greatest scholars of the Biblical languages over the last 200 years have been trained in our seminaries, and it is their faithful labor, conducted over many years of diligent study, which have brought us the abundance of very good English translations of the Bible which we enjoy today.

The English language version of the Bible any individual should choose for his or her personal use is the one they understand the best and are most likely to use. If that choice happens to be the KJV for you, terrific. Use it. Read it. But please don't insist it's the version that everyone else must use too. Not only would you be insisting upon the least readable and hardest to understand of all the English language

translations available today, but you would also be advocating for something that runs counter to the work the Holy Spirit has been doing around the world, across generations and language barriers, for almost two thousand years.