

(Author: Max Aplin) A little over 400 years ago, an English version of the Bible was published that has come to be known as the King James Version or Authorized Version. At the time, it represented a big step forward as far as English translations of Scripture were concerned. However, using this version today is a mistake.

There are several reasons for this.

(1) It can make the Christian faith seem out of date

To begin with, there is the problem of the KJV's old-fashioned language.

Today in the 21st century there is nothing more relevant than Jesus Christ and the Christian message of good news. However, the old-fashioned language of the KJV can often give the impression that the Christian faith is rather out of date and irrelevant.

I have sad, personal experience of this myself. I was not raised in a Christian family, but, back in the 1970s when I was in primary school, a few times each year the whole school was sent off to church services. I found these times strange and puzzling.

Most of what I experienced in those services has faded from my memory now, but I do remember one thing clearly. It is hearing the Lord's Prayer being spoken in the KJV translation and having little idea what it was all about.

I especially remember being puzzled by the line, 'Our Father which art in heaven' (Matthew 6:9). I can remember thinking that 'which art' was probably a single word (something like 'witchart') and that I didn't have a clue what it meant.

It is sad, and ironic, that the prayer that Jesus gave His followers to address God as Father was spoken, and still is spoken in many churches, in language that is anything but the up-to-date language that children use when speaking to their fathers.

The result of my experiences was that I had no interest in the Christian faith until I became a believer at the age of 17. If I had been presented with something Christian that I could relate to when I was a boy, I wonder how my life might have been so much better when I was growing up. For me, old-fashioned church traditions, including the language of the KJV, had a very negative impact.

Someone might want to say in response to this that people are very different. They could point out that some are actually attracted to the Christian faith by old-fashioned traditions, and that I mustn't use just my own experiences to generalise.

It is true that some people are indeed drawn to the faith by old-fashioned traditions. Nevertheless, I am certain that many more are put off by such traditions than are attracted. I am sure that many of the non-Christian children when I was growing up had a similar attitude to Christianity to me for similar reasons. I am also sure that many of the young people today who drift away from God do so in part because of old-fashioned traditions which make it seem as if the faith is not really relevant for them.

(2) The English language has evolved

A second problem with using the KJV today concerns the evolution of the English language. There are many English words and phrases in the KJV that meant something quite different 400 years ago from what they mean today.

For example, in Luke 12:22 the KJV reads:

‘Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on.’

I think this was probably a good translation 400 years ago. Back then, ‘take thought for’ apparently meant what we would refer to as ‘worry about’. The Greek of this passage certainly means:

‘Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.’

However, in modern English not taking thought for something most naturally suggests not thinking about that thing at all. So today the KJV text of this verse can easily be misunderstood.

I have heard well-meaning Christians quote the KJV text of this verse and say that believers should not even think about what they are to eat or wear. This, however, is not what the Greek text is saying. Nor does it seem to have been what the KJV translators had in mind when they made their translation.

Another example of how the KJV is often misunderstood today can be found in John 14:16, where Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit. In the KJV this verse reads:

‘And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever;’

Here the KJV translates the Greek noun *parakletos* as ‘Comforter’.

This was a good translation in the early 17th century when the KJV was composed. At that time ‘comforter’ meant what we would refer to as ‘encourager’ or ‘exhorter’ or something along those lines. Translating *parakletos* into a single word is actually very difficult to do, but ‘Encourager’ and ‘Exhorter’ are good attempts at putting it into modern English.

However, since the KJV was published, the word ‘comforter’ has evolved in meaning, so that today it refers to a person who consoles someone in their distress. The result of this change is that the KJV translation of this verse is often misunderstood by modern readers. Frequently Jesus is understood to be saying that the role of the Spirit is to console Christians in their distress.

This, however, is not what the Greek text is saying. And it is not what the KJV translators meant when they translated *parakletos* by ‘Comforter’.

A further example of how the KJV can be misunderstood by modern readers is found in 1 Corinthians 10:16, where Paul writes about the Lord’s Supper. Here the KJV translates:

‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?’

It is from the influence of the KJV translation of this verse that the Lord’s Supper is known in many Christian circles as ‘Communion’.

I think the KJV’s translation of this text is probably another that was good in the English of the early 17th century. Apparently, 400 years ago ‘communion of’ meant what we would refer to today as ‘sharing in’.

The point that is being made in the Greek text of this verse is that all Christians who drink the wine and eat the bread are symbolically sharing as one in the blood and body of Christ. It seems that the

KJV translators understood this and translated appropriately in the English of their day.

The problem is that in modern English 'communion of' does not naturally suggest 'sharing in'. Instead, it seems to suggest communing with someone or something in some way.

To be fair, it does seem correct to say that the Lord's Supper is an occasion on which Christians commune in some respect with God and possibly with each other too. Nevertheless, this is not what the Greek of this verse is referring to, at least primarily. So using the KJV has the potential to cause misunderstanding.

Incidentally, I believe it would be helpful if Christians stopped referring to the Lord's Supper as 'Communion'.

(3) It makes many mistakes in translation

A third problem with the KJV is that it makes numerous significant mistakes in translation, many more than there are in modern English translations of the Bible.

For example, at 1 Thessalonians 5:22 the KJV reads:

'Abstain from all appearance of evil.'

Here 'appearance' translates the Greek noun *eidos*.

In fact, in this verse *eidos* actually means 'kind', i.e., a sort or variety of something, and the Greek of this verse means:

'Keep away from every kind of evil'.

In the first century, *eidos* often did mean 'appearance', but this is not the sense of the word in this verse. The KJV translators apparently failed to realise that *eidos* could mean 'kind' and mistranslated as a result.

Another example of an error in the KJV can be found in 2 Timothy 1:7. The KJV translates this verse:

'For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.'

Here 'sound mind' translates the Greek noun *sophronismos*.

In actual fact, *sophronismos* in this verse probably means 'self-discipline' or something very similar, which looks fitting in the context:

'... but of power and of love and of self-discipline.'

By contrast, the KJV's reference to a sound mind looks strange in combination with power and love.

Although it is not certain that *sophronismos* means 'self-discipline' in this verse, it certainly doesn't mean 'a sound mind'. It is true that some ancient Greek words that begin with *sophro-* have to do with mental health. However, there is no evidence that *sophronismos* ever had anything to do with this. The translators of the KJV apparently misunderstood the meaning of this word and mistranslated the verse.

(4) Its New Testament is based on a poor Greek text

A fourth problem with the KJV concerns the Greek text on which its New Testament is based.

When forming the KJV's NT, the translators used what is known as the Textus Receptus. The TR refers to a series of Greek NT texts, the first of which was prepared by the Dutch scholar Erasmus in the early 16th century. The TR was used by the translators of most Reformation-era Bible translations in various languages, including the KJV.

Importantly, the scholarly consensus of NT textual analysts today, including those who are devout Christians, is that the TR is a relatively very poor text. In fact, the TR even has some Greek readings that are not found in any Greek NT manuscripts from before the 16th century! What is more, in some of these cases all or almost all of the earlier manuscripts have the same wording as each other, i.e., they agree against the TR!

To suppose, as some KJV-only advocates do, that the TR text was the standard Greek text of the NT before the 16th century is therefore hopelessly implausible. To claim that it was means ignoring a mountain of evidence to the contrary. In short, the evidence is overwhelming that the TR is a poor Greek text of the NT.

One of the clearest examples of a wrong Greek reading in the TR, that has been followed in the KJV, can be found in 1 John 5:7-8. All modern versions of this passage read something close to what the English Standard Version has:

'7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.'

The KJV of these verses, however, reads:

'7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.'

This passage in the KJV should be regarded as a theological expansion of the original of this part of 1 John. The earliest Greek manuscript containing the text used by the TR (and therefore by the KJV translators) at this point dates from no earlier than the 16th century. Furthermore, there are hundreds of Greek manuscripts of 1 John that predate this manuscript, none of which is even remotely similar to it in this passage. We should not be in any doubt that at 1 John 5:7-8 the KJV has followed a poor Greek text.

There are many other passages too where the decision of the KJV's translators to use the TR has resulted in a poor translation.

Love of tradition

Given these four problems with the KJV, it makes no sense to continue use this translation today. Yet sadly there are still more than a few Christians who refuse to give it up.

In some cases believers are not aware of the problems involved in using this version. In other cases, however, they have allowed love for tradition to overpower love for God. People often feel safe with traditions and grow fond of them, and the traditions can then become entrenched.

Holding firmly to a religious tradition often outwardly looks very pious. God, however, wants our devotion to be to Him alone, never to tradition. So as soon as a tradition can be improved upon, even slightly, it is time to let it go.

Claiming that the KJV is a perfect translation

In the case of some Christians, their attachment to the KJV is more seriously wrong. There are some today who believe that the KJV provides a perfect translation of the Bible!

This is a strange and completely indefensible idea.

To begin with, there were several different editions of the KJV made within a few years of each other in the early 17th century, and the editions differ from each other in many ways. So those who say that the KJV is a perfect translation need to specify which edition is the perfect one, which they rarely, if ever, seem to do.

Second and much more importantly, we need to be crystal clear that if an edition of the KJV really were perfect, this would have to be the only perfect translation of the Bible there has ever been in any language. All Bible translations differ in terms of the precise Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts that they follow. And they all differ too in how they interpret parts of these texts. The KJV therefore disagrees in numerous minor ways, and probably in some more significant ways too, with every other Bible translation, including those that predate the KJV by over a millennium.

It is absurd to think that God chose to make a perfect Bible translation in English but not in any other language. Instead, it should be regarded as a fact that there has never been a perfect translation of the Bible in any language (even though most translations do a fine job and are thoroughly fit for purpose).

The idea that an edition of the KJV is perfect is actually idolatrous, and it brings to mind the error of Roman Catholics that is papal infallibility. It is ironic that those who claim that the KJV is perfect would often be the first to criticise the doctrine of papal infallibility.

I am sure that the translators of the KJV, working at a time when the dispute with Catholics over papal infallibility was a big issue, would have been troubled by the thought that anyone would ever attribute perfection to their work. I would strongly encourage any Christians with this view to immediately reject it.

Concluding thoughts

There is no doubt that, when it was first published, the KJV was a real step forward as far as English translations of the Bible were concerned. As such it was, and still is, a cause for real rejoicing.

It is true too that it is not dangerous for Christians today to use the KJV. A large majority of its passages are correctly translated in English that is not misleading in our day.

Nevertheless, this translation has long outlived its usefulness. There are now many better English translations in existence, such as the English Standard Version.

Insisting on using the KJV in the present day is therefore to insist on second best. God, however, deserves the best. So it would be better for those Christians and churches who have not already moved on from the KJV to take this step without delay.

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