

New Bibles and old debates

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In

March, U.S. publishers released new editions of two of the most widely read English-language Bibles: the Catholic New American Bible and the evangelical New International Version. These updates are intended to reflect modern idioms and the latest scholarly research, while also responding to changes in the (niche-philic) scripture marketplace.

Since

its inception in 1965, the [Committee on Bible Translation](#)--the group responsible for the NIV changes--has aimed to represent the best in evangelical biblical scholarship and confessional integrity across multiple traditions. The original NIV charter requires the group to monitor developments in biblical scholarship and changes in English usage.

Based

on the number of word changes, the new NIV text remains about 95 percent the same as the 1984 version it replaces. But there is a lot to be said about that 5 percent.

Perhaps

most controversial is the partial rescinding of gender-neutral language that publishers appropriated into *Today's New International Version* (2005), the publication of which was soon halted amid criticism. (For more on conservative opposition to the TNIV, see this Southern Baptist [resolution](#) and this Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood [statement](#).) In the new version's rendering of Genesis 1:26, God says, "let us make mankind in our image." The 1984 NIV said "man"; the TNIV went with "human beings."

Elsewhere

the language is softer, more equivocal, than in the 1984 version. When it comes to ecclesiastical authority (Romans 16:1-2, 1 Corinthians 11:10, 1 Timothy 2:12, 1 Timothy 3:11), the new NIV prohibits women not from "exercising" it but from "assuming" it--language that delegates final interpretation to the individual. The nature of sin is even an open question: "flesh" replaces "sinful nature" in several instances. (1 John 2:16 now reads "the lust of the flesh" instead of "the cravings of sinful man.") It's up to the reader to determine whether sin is inherent or an external force.

The

CBT [reportedly](#)

[mined](#) the Collins Bank of English--a database of more than 4.4 billion words drawn from text publications and spoken-word recordings worldwide--for objective, statistically significant data on modern English. This helped to arbitrate the use of generic pronouns and determiners.

But

did the CBT compromise on "controversial" verses to appease critics?

Any

judgment should keep in mind that a single, univocal version of the Bible is not really an option. Instead, our democratic impulses and consumer culture create demand for multiple [dynamic-equivalence](#) translations that attempt to keep a critical distance with regard to history--while updating syntax and grammar. This is clearer than ever [today](#), when we have ready access to not only different translations but adventure Bibles for children, "FaithGirlz" Bibles that tell young girls that they sparkle and *The Bible Experience*, an audio presentation by almost 400 actors and musicians and others.

It's

also important to remember that the CBT isn't a magisterium--it represents no single tradition, and it makes no claim to absolute authority. It is, however, a representative body, comprised of evangelicals from across national and denominational lines. As such, the CBT isn't really in the business of

silencing popular opinion.

There

are other reasons to trust the committee's process as well. It isn't beholden to publisher agendas--neither Zondervan (the U.S. publisher) nor Biblica (the worldwide one) has a seat. And its voting procedure is wholly democratic: any change must be ratified by a 70 percent majority vote. This process is innately conservative, erring on the side of responsible skepticism toward change.

If

you take as a given that translation should be a well-informed and relatively open process, then it's difficult to argue with the CBT's work.