

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION:
DECENNIAL OBSERVATIONS

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The 1988 decennial of the New International Version (NIV) provides appropriate occasion and useful distance for meaningful evaluation of what has become, in economic terms, a resounding success. If for no other reason than annual sales figures which show the NIV approaching the King James Version (KJV) in popularity, both detractors and defenders must agree that the production and marketing of the NIV have altered Bible publishing for a long time to come. The Zondervan Corporation seems to be enjoying a rather durable hold on the NIV publishing rights, and continues to pocket a handsome return on its timely and desperately needed financial backing of the NIV translation project.

Any meaningful evaluation of a Bible translation requires the distance of time to digest--rather than taste--the translation, in preparing sermons, Bible studies, exegetical lectures and commentaries. Initial reviews, positive and negative, have paved the way now for a new, more objective and thorough, possibly more relaxed, phase of NIV criticism. During these intervening years some exegetical handbooks and commentaries have been written which ought to assist current and future analysis of the NIV.

But these ten years have also witnessed marketed defenses of the NIV. One of the more informative is a look behind the scenes by fourteen of the original translators, *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986). This collection of essays is a memorial volume in honor of Dr. Edwin Palmer who was executive secretary of the Committee on Bible Translation and the first general editor of *The NIV Study Bible*. Remembering Dr.

Palmer may certainly have been the occasion for publishing these essays, but the book's substance suggests that its purpose was apologetic. Chapter titles include "The Rationale for an Eclectic New Testament Text," "Why Hebrew *She'ol* Was Translated 'Grave,'" and "Isn't the King James Good Enough? (The KJV and the NIV Compared)."

Nevertheless, the modern procedure and psychology of producing Bible translations make meaningful translation criticism difficult.¹ Both involve the prior question: To whom does the Bible belong? Simply to Christians? To a publishing company? To scholars? Or does it belong, in fact, to the church? Augustine's vehement reaction to Jerome's new translation of the OT from Hebrew into Latin indicates that these questions are by no means new. And the current role of Bible societies, altered from Bible *distribution* into Bible *translation*, suggests that these questions are quite relevant. Our answers to them have fascinating implications for an evaluation of the NIV.

But our purpose here is not to investigate the ecclesiological dimension of Bible translating.²

Instead, we wish to inquire into the curious history of one denomination (the Christian Reformed Church [CRC]) that hitched its wagon of disaffection for the Revised Standard Version (RSV) to the horses of evangelical, interdenominational scholarship, whose ultimate destination proved to be the NIV. What criticisms of the RSV spawned its participation in producing still another English Bible translation? Were these criticisms adequately avoided in the NIV?

The reader must understand, therefore, that ours is not a thorough linguistic, stylistic or material analysis of the NIV. Put simply, the question we seek to answer is this: Can the NIV satisfy the objections to the RSV raised by Reformed believers in the CRC, *which objections led to the production of the NIV?*

I. The CRC origins of the NIV

It can hardly be denied that interest in producing yet another English Bible translation arose out of dissatisfaction

with the RSV. The CRC was not alone in that dissatisfaction; many conservative Christian magazines and churches had been warning believers away from the RSV because of its alleged doctrinal and translational inaccuracies.

Yet, a study of official denominational (CRC) actions regarding the RSV yields some surprises. For example, the pursuit of a new English translation (the future NIV) did not spell the end of the RSV in the CRC. You will observe from Table 1 that the years 1953-1969 witnessed a denominational shift from flat rejection of the RSV for liturgical use to unqualified endorsement. Moreover, official dealings with what later became the NIV span the years 1956-1980, overlapping those years in which denominational opinion about the RSV shifted.

During the twelve-year period of dealing with the RSV, a standing synodical Bible Translation Committee investigated the possibility of cooperating with others in producing a new Bible translation.³ Representatives of this committee participated in an interdenominational Bible Translation Conference on August 26 and 27, 1965, at Palos Heights, Illinois, where participants decided that "the preparation of a contemporary English translation of the Bible should be undertaken as a collegiate endeavor of evangelical scholars." To formulate preliminary ground rules and principles for the work of translation teams the conference appointed a Committee of Fifteen. One fascinating but forgotten fact is that this committee was also "charged with exploring ways of establishing communication with the Committee of the R.S.V. [Standard Bible Committee] with a view to making suggestions for revision."⁴

Difficulties created by this ambiguity surfaced immediately. At its first working session, the Committee of Fifteen decided to request "its editorial committee, in process of translation, to build up a list of RSV and NEB passages to which objection is felt, for the purpose of making these available to the RSV and NEB committees at the proper time." In other words, remodeling the RSV and constructing a new translation would occur simultaneously! One of the CRC members appointed to the Committee of Fifteen

subsequently resigned because this plan and procedure failed to win his confidence.⁵

TABLE 1 CHRONOLOGY

1953	An evaluation of the RSV is requested, with a suggestion that if the RSV were disapproved, provision be made to work with other denominations on a new translation
1954	The synod rejects the RSV for pulpit use
1956	A committee is appointed to investigate the possibility of a new translation
1965	Representatives of the CRC committee and of the NAE agree to prepare a new translation and to explore possibilities for improving the RSV
1966	A new committee is appointed to recommend changes in the RSV and to review the decision of 1954
1969	The committee recommends changes in the RSV and the synod permits pulpit use of the RSV; a request for denominational financial support of the new translation is denied
1970	A request for denominational financial support of the new translation is denied
1976	A request for denominational financial support of the new translation is granted
1979	Three requests that the synod declare the NIV acceptable for pulpit use are received
1980	The NIV is endorsed for pulpit use

In its biographical brochure, *The Story of the New International Version*, the International Bible Society begins its narrative with the CRC synodical committee commissioned in 1956 to look into the possibility of a new translation. But the brochure ignores both the 1953-54 rejection of the RSV underlying the 1956 mandate, and the original assignment given in 1965 to the Committee of Fifteen that it recommend improvements in the RSV. Like most other publicity surrounding the NIV, *The Story of the New International Version* consistently circumvents these embarrassing

ambiguities by presenting the NIV as an alternative to the KJV rather than to the RSV, whereas the impetus and initiatives underlying the NIV really arose out of pronounced disaffection for the RSV.⁶

Nevertheless, the CRC was not quite ready to abandon the RSV. Having dismissed its Bible Translation Committee whose work was now being pursued on an interdenominational level, the 1966 synod appointed a new committee, in view of the revision of the RSV scheduled for 1970, to "prepare and present to the R.S.V. committee [Standard Bible Committee] its recommendations and suggestions regarding improvements, corrections, changes and modifications of the existing text of the R.S.V." Interestingly, this action was defended on the basis that the denomination was part of a broad Christian community that was making extensive use of the RSV. All of this generated a curious tension, indeed, since the CRC was also part of a broad scholarly community which was already busy producing an English translation to *replace* the RSV.

The new CRC committee's initial mandate was supplemented with instruction to advise whether or not reconsideration of the 1954 rejection of the RSV was desirable, in view of the fact that the RSV had been improved since 1954.⁷

In February, 1969, Edwin Palmer published an article for CRC readers which began by defending the need for a contemporary translation in terms of deficiencies in the American Standard Version (ASV), one of two versions synodically approved for pulpit use. After surveying other unacceptable private and team translations, Palmer continued by confessing his great respect for the RSV because of its beauty and dignity. But he evidently subscribed to the criticism that the RSV is unfaithful to the original languages, especially in the OT, as had been argued in 1954. Further, he criticized the RSV for not being a fresh translation, but merely a revision whose governing translational principle was to make only those alterations required by obscurity in the KJV or by changes in the English language.⁸

Reversal of the 1954 rejection of the RSV was won by the 1969 committee on the weight of its arguments that

- a. The examination by the study committee of the RSV gives sufficient reason to question the validity of some of the arguments presented in the report of 1954.
- b. The continued study of the RSV as well as its use by many individuals and churches has shown that the RSV is more acceptable to evangelical churches than was thought in 1954.⁹

Asserting that the RSV was "on the whole" superior to the KJV and ASV, and that the denomination needed a modern translation in the pulpit, the committee convinced the synod to approve the RSV for liturgical use, rather than to await the arrival of the NIV or to suggest disengagement from the NIV project.

The finale was played in the decade of the 1970s, when synods first denied, then granted, requests for funding the NIV through church offerings. But the closing notes still echo through the 1980s. Having taken *fifteen years* to move officially from rejection to endorsement of the RSV, the CRC took *only two years* after the completion of the NIV to grant official endorsement for its pulpit use. That the endorsement of the NIV took a relatively short time--*two years* from completion--can be explained by the apparent shift in application of standards for evaluating a Bible translation. In fact, it could be argued that this very shift had earlier made room for the RSV in the CRC as well.

II. CRC criticism of the RSV

The reader will recall the question serving as the focus of this essay: Can the NIV satisfy the objections to the RSV raised by the CRC which occasioned the production of the NIV?

Having surveyed the history of denominational dealings with both the RSV and NIV, we are prepared now to examine the precise criticisms leveled against the RSV.

You will recall that two different committees presented synods (1954 and 1969) with reports detailing RSV renderings considered objectionable. The 1954 report criticized twenty-nine RSV renderings, and did so on one or more of three grounds: 1) the questionable text underlying the translation; 2) inaccuracy of translation; 3) theological bias evident in the translation (see Table 2).¹⁰ Theological bias against the unity of Scripture and against the deity of Christ was alleged on the basis of the mistranslation of several key messianic passages.

TABLE 2 RSV PASSAGES CITED IN 1954

TEXT:	Gen. 1:1; Ex. 12:40; II Sam. 1:21; Ps. 2:11-12; Matt. 1:16
TRANS:	Gen. 2:17; Gen. 3:4; Gen. 3:19; Gen. 9:26; Gen. 22:18; Gen. 26:4*; Jud. 5:11; Ps. 109:8; Isa. 7:13-14; Mic. 5:2*; John 3:16*
BIAS:	Gen. 12:3; Gen. 18:18; Gen. 28:14; Jud. 5:11; Ps. 45:6; Ps. 109:8; Ps. 110:1; Prov. 8:22-23; Isa. 7:13-14; Mic. 5:2*; Zech. 6:12-13; Matt. 14:33; Matt. 16:16

*The NIV rendering is similar to this RSV translation. See below.

Since the RSV could not have benefited from the recent discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the 1954 committee argued, its primary claim to superiority rested on its presumed literary excellence. In spite of that claim the committee judged that "on the basis of literary style and on the basis of literal accuracy. . .the RSV is inferior to the KJV or AV from a literary point of view and. . .the RSV is inferior to the ASV from a literal point of view."¹¹

The 1969 committee evaluating the RSV agreed with only nine of the twenty-nine objections presented by the 1954 committee. Moreover, it reported on several changes that had already been communicated to the Standard Bible Committee (some of which were to be incorporated in the 1970 revision). To all of these it added criticisms of other passages, some textual or translational criticisms, others too diverse to classify (see Table 3).¹²

TABLE 3
ADDITIONAL RSV PASSAGES CITED IN 1969

TEXT:	Deut. 11:14-15; Deut. 33:7; Job 31:33; Ps. 51:8; Ps. 52:9; Ps. 80:15; Ps. 88:1; Ps. 91:9; Ps. 97:10; Ps. 106:7; Ps. 144:2*; Matt. 21:44; Lk. 24:3,6,12,36,40,51-52
TRANS:	Gen. 9:20; Gen. 22:17-18*; Ps. 68:4*; Ps. 73:1; John 1:18*; John 5:18; Rom. 5:5; Rom. 8:11; I Cor. 7:26; Gal. 4:3; Eph. 1:14; Col. 2:8,20; Titus 3:5; Jas. 2:7
VARIA:	Ex. 8:12; Ex. 28:32a; I Kings 8:12; II Chron. 36:9; Isa. 42:10; Isa. 52:2; Ezek. 5:7; Ezek. 19:8; Ezek. 21:22; Ezek. 25:10; Mic. 5:6b; Mic. 7:4; Mk. 3:14,16; Lk. 14:5; Lk. 17:24; Lk. 19:8; Lk. 22:19b,20,43-44

*The NIV rendering is similar to this RSV rendering. See below.

The 1969 committee disagreed most significantly with the 1954 judgments about Psalm 45:6, Isaiah 7:14 and Zechariah 6:12-13. Translations of these texts had been the basis, in 1954, of alleged theological bias against the unity of Scripture and the deity of Christ.¹³

III. *The NIV in light of criticism applied to the RSV*

The principal criticism of the RSV was that it lacked *literal accuracy*. Although the 1954 report offered various judgments about its *literary quality*, neither praise nor criticism of this feature was found in the committee's conclusion or in the synodical decision itself.

Fairness requires that the canon of CRC criticism employed to discredit the RSV be applied now to its replacement, the NIV. We shall attempt that application in three ways. We look first at the NIV renderings that are quite similar to the RSV passages listed in Tables 2 and 3. Next, we discuss some additional NIV renderings which are vulnerable to the same objections which the CRC laid against the RSV. Finally, we inquire briefly into the possibility of applying the 1954/1969 CRC standard of "translational accuracy" to a dynamically equivalent translation.

NIV renderings similar to the RSV (italics added for clarity)

Genesis 22:17:

RSV: I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your *descendants* as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your *descendants* shall possess the gate of their enemies,

NIV: I will surely bless you and make your *descendants* as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your *descendants* will take possession of the cities of their enemies,

Genesis 26:4:

RSV: I will multiply your *descendants* as the stars of heaven, and will give to your *descendants* all these lands; and by your *descendants* all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves:

NIV: I will make your *descendants* as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give *them* all these lands, and through your *offspring* all nations on earth will be blessed,

One of several mistranslations alleged against the RSV is the replacement of the collective noun "seed" with the plural "descendants." This translation becomes significant for NT usage in Galatians 3:16, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but, referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ."

The same Hebrew word used in Genesis 22:17 and 26:4 is found in Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 22:18 and 24:7, where the NIV surprisingly employs the collective noun "offspring"! Moreover, the word for "seed" appears three times in the Hebrew of Genesis 26:4, and is translated with three different words ("descendants," "them" and "offspring") by the NIV. The 1954 objection to the RSV is surely valid against the NIV here.

Psalm 68:4:

RSV: Sing to God, sing praises to his name; *lift up a song* to him who rides upon the *clouds*; his name is the Lord, exult before him!

NIV: Sing to God, sing praise to his name, *extol* him who rides on the *clouds*--his name is the Lord--and rejoice before him.

Two translation inaccuracies in the RSV were challenged by the 1969 committee: the verb meaning "cast up a highway" (Heb. root *sll*, heap up, lay out [a road]: Isa. 62:10; Jer. 18:15; Job 19:12; 30:12; Prov. 15:19; and pile up [sheaves], Jer. 5:26) is translated "lift up a song," and "deserts" is changed to "clouds." The NIV follows the RSV here.

Psalm 144:2:

RSV: my *rock* and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge, who subdues the peoples under him.

NIV: He is my loving *God* and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.

Instead of "my rock" the RSV should have read "my steadfast love." Its emendation of the text is unwarranted, according to the 1969 committee. But neither is there in the text a word for "God," as the NIV inserts.

Micah 5:2:

RSV: But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose *origin* is from of old, from ancient days.

NIV: But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose *origins* are from of old, from ancient times.

The RSV translation of “origin” was criticized because the Hebrew word is a plural, and because Christ’s divine nature has no “origin,” but rather “goings forth” (KJV). The NIV offers the footnote “goings out,” but retains the objectionable “origins.”

John 1:18:

RSV: No one has ever seen God; the only *Son*, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

NIV: No one has ever seen God, but *God* the only *Son*, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.

The 1969 committee judged that textual evidence required the translation “the only God” rather than “the only Son.” There is no manuscript reading that supports the NIV rendering “God the only Son.”

John 3:16:

RSV: For God so loved the world that he gave his *only* Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

NIV: For God so loved the world that he gave his *one and only* Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The 1954 committee argued that “only begotten Son” is better than “only Son.” The NIV employs “the One and Only (Son)” when the Greek adjective applies to Christ, a translation that still omits the latter part of the Greek word *monogenes*.

Additional NIV passages

Next, we mention additional NIV renderings which fail to meet the “literal accuracy” standard applied to the RSV. Keep in mind that what follows is only a sampling of NIV criticism, not intended to be exhaustive in any sense, only illustrative.

Isaiah 53:11: After the suffering of his soul, he will see *the light of life* and be satisfied;. . . .

The NIV places the words “of life” in partial brackets, and directs the reader to a footnote which reads, “Dead Sea Scrolls (see also Septuagint); Masoretic Text does not have *the light of life*.” Two comments are required. First, there is no Septuagint reading supporting the NIV rendering, contrary to the impression given in the footnote. Secondly, the NIV has resorted here, as in many other OT passages, to *textual emendation* for the sake of clarity of translation.¹⁴ How does this differ from the misbehavior alleged against the RSV?

John 17:6,26: I have revealed *you* to those whom you gave me out of the world. . . . I have made *you* known to them, and will continue to make *you* known in order that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them.

In both of these verses the NIV has replaced the object of revelation, “your name” (Greek: *to onoma sou*), simply with “you,” alerting the reader to this change with a footnote to v. 6, but not to v. 26; older English translations have “your name” in both verses. Comments in *The NIV Study Bible* at John 2:23 inform the reader that “in ancient times an individual’s ‘name’ summed up his whole person.” That opinion may well be true, but the fact remains that the NIV offers us here not a translation, but an interpretation. Incidentally, this example illustrates the frustrating futility of doing concordant word study with the NIV; anyone studying the Bible’s use of “name” or “God’s name” would never be directed to John 17:6,26.

Acts 2:39: The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call.

Paedobaptists may surely be disappointed by the NIV’s omission of the word “for” (Greek: *gar*). Peter’s reply to the Pentecost crowd’s question, “Brothers, what shall we do?” is that they must repent and be baptized and that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit--“*for* to you is the

promise, and to your children and to all who are far off. . . .” According to the NIV translation, there is no explicit covenantal connection between 2:38 and 2:39, no explicit redemptive-historical basis for the demand of repentance. Perhaps we may surmise a stylistic correction in the NIV, eliminating an extra “for”; but the translators are functioning here as correctors of the text, eliminating one of those frequent “little words of the Bible” that have served historically in shaping the church’s dogma. On this basis some would charge the NIV with theological bias here.¹⁵

I Corinthians 7:1: Now for the matter you wrote about: It is good for a man not to *marry*.

The difficulty with the NIV translation is that the words “not to marry” appear to be equivalent to the Greek phrase *gunaikos mee haptesthai*, literally: “not to touch a woman.” But there is no linguistic evidence suggesting that this phrase means what the NIV says it means.¹⁶ If the apostle had wanted to forbid marriage, he could have employed the Greek verb *gameo*, as he did in I Corinthians 7:9, 28 and 34, where the NIV translates each time with a form of “marry”!

Hebrews 11:11: By faith *Abraham*, even though *he* was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a *father* because *he* considered him faithful who had made the promise.

A footnote contains a reading similar to that of most earlier English translations; but note the New King James Version: “By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.” A textual disagreement about whether or not the word for “she bore a child” (Greek: *eteken*) belongs in the text led the NIV translators to omit it. This choice in turn generated a new grammatical possibility, permitting the NIV to replace Sarah with Abraham as the subject of the verse.

Jude 4: For certain *men whose condemnation was written about long ago* have secretly slipped in among you. . . .

The phrase in question is "men whose condemnation was written about long ago" (Greek: *hoi palai progegrammenoi eis touto to krima*), which might be rendered literally, "the ones long ago written (about) beforehand (un)to this judgment." The NIV footnote is closer to the original: "men who were marked out for condemnation," though it too ignores the significant *touto* ("this condemnation"). This combination of verb and preposition is found in Romans 15:4, while the verb is used also in Ephesians 3:3. In all three instances the force of purpose behind the past writing is emphasized in the original--a force completely obscured by the NIV rendering of Jude 4.

Jude 20-21: But you, dear friends, *build* yourselves up in your most holy faith *and pray* in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in *God's love* as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ *to bring you* to eternal life.

The NIV translation contains several inaccuracies. First, the Greek subordinating participles are translated as main verbs, as imperatives: "build" (Greek: *epoikodomountes*) and "pray" (Greek: *proseuchomenoi*). The syntax suggests, however, that the main verb, "keep" (Greek: *teresate*), is explained by the subordinating, circumstantial participles. How are believers to keep themselves in the love of God? By building on their faith, by praying in the Spirit, and by waiting for the mercy of Christ.

Secondly, the phrase rendered by the NIV as "in God's love" (Greek: *en agapei theou*) should be translated, "in the love of God" or, less preferably, "in love of God." The NIV translators made an exegetical choice for their readers when they determined that the Greek phrase is an objective genitive (God's love for believers) rather than a subjective genitive (believers' love for God). Either is grammatically and exegetically possible; but the choice should be left to the readers, not made by the translators.

In connection with this second inaccuracy, Edwin Palmer once reported that where NIV translators held diverse opinions about an exegetical ambiguity, the ambiguity was retained in the translation (cf. Rev. 1:1). But if unanimity of

opinion favored a particular exegetical choice, that choice became the translation (cf. II Cor. 5:14).¹⁷ This fact characterizes the NIV as something other than a textually accurate translation.

Finally, the words "to bring you" are absent in the original Greek. This illustrates the *tendency*, in contrast to occasional practice, of the NIV to paraphrase.

To these selected renderings we may add a number of others, among them translations criticized in the otherwise laudatory 1980 CRC report (see Table 4).¹⁸

TABLE 4
ADDITIONAL NIV PASSAGES CITED IN 1980

TEXT:	Gen. 4:8,15; I Sam. 13:1; I Kings 6:16; Gal. 3:20
TRANS:	Gen. 1:8,9,14,17,20; I Sam. 1:14; I Sam. 2:8; Ps. 16:10; Ps. 68:4; Matt. 4:4; Matt. 13:32; Lk. 4:4; Lk. 6:32-34; Lk. 7:34; John 2:4; John 7:3,21,30; John 8:20; John 10:25,32,38; John 14:11; John 20:30; Gal. 1:15; Gal. 3:22; Col. 2:11-12; Heb. 2:7,9; Heb. 10:37; Rev. 20:5

More than these thirty-nine faulty translations were identified in the 1980 report. But it is worth noting that *The NIV Study Bible*, published in 1985, contains the translation copyrighted in 1984 in which not one of the CRC suggestions was followed! The Preface to the NIV was modified in 1983, but the translation itself appears impervious to suggestions for improvement.

Translational accuracy and dynamic equivalence

Finally, we inquire into the possibility of applying the 1954/1969 CRC canon of "translational accuracy" to a dynamically equivalent translation. By "translational accuracy" we mean the quality of textual and verbal equivalence in a translation, equivalence to form (textual, linguistic, grammatical and syntactical) as well as content (meaning).

This is our understanding of the criterion applied by the CRC in 1954 to the RSV, the violation of which occasioned the NIV.

But we encounter a dilemma at this point, perhaps best stated in the words of the 1980 CRC advocates of the NIV:

It is interesting to note how *the standards of accuracy have changed* in the last several decades. When the principle of dynamic equivalence is adopted, *accuracy no longer requires word-for-word translation*. Whether or not certain words are omitted is determined primarily by what constitutes good English style.¹⁹

Herein lies the burden of this essay: the standards of accuracy did change and the primary canon of translational accuracy has now become "good English style."²⁰

Herein lies also the stunning paradox of the 1980 CRC evaluation of the NIV. If a dynamic-equivalent translation like the NIV is to be judged apart from the canon of "word-for-word translation," primarily in terms of the requirements of English style, why take the trouble, as the 1980 report did, to identify renderings judged deficient because of translational (yes: *verbal*) inaccuracies? We can't have it both ways. We cannot point out verbal inaccuracies in the NIV similar to those found in the RSV, while applauding the NIV's rejection of that very standard of translational accuracy!

Evaluating the NIV's accuracy is something like defining a cloud's shape. The term "accuracy" has become unusable, at least in its historic sense. "Accurate" used to mean "according to the *form* of the text." But for the NIV, accuracy equals "according to the *meaning* of the text." As one critic has put it,

Given the use of the principle of dynamic equivalence, a translator exposes himself to greater criticism, since he is making some interpretive (and at times subjective) judgments in his rendering.²¹

The NIV is disqualified for liturgical use, in his view, because it resembles a paraphrase which necessarily

“involves major interpretive judgments which place the reader at the mercy of the theological bias of the translator.”²² In other words, the NIV’s most appropriate claim for itself would be that it is a *Good News for Modern Man* in evangelical scholarly dress.

In 1980 many of the same members of the CRC Bible Translation Committee who had roundly criticized the textual and translational inaccuracies of the RSV defended the principle of dynamic equivalence: “The translator attempts to take *the meaning of a phrase or sentence* in Hebrew or Greek and render it as accurately as possible in understandable English.”²³ When asked about his translational goals for the NIV, Burton L. Goddard stated it this way:

More than anything else we wanted to do full justice to the meaning of Scripture while meeting the requirements of idiomatic modern English. . . . We tried to avoid making a mechanical word-for-word rendition, which is the tendency in some versions that stress faithfulness to the original languages. Our translators always asked, “Knowing what the original writer was trying to communicate, how would we say the same thing today?”²⁴

But this raises more questions than it answers. Why is a translation seeking to be faithful to the original words of Scripture caricatured as “mechanical”? If Goddard and company sought to avoid following the example of “some versions that stress faithfulness to the original languages,” what then does the NIV stress? If the original writers apparently succeeded only in *trying* to communicate, whom does that leave to tell us what they meant but didn’t really say?

Precisely here the theological claims and rhetoric of the NIV’s promoters ought to be reviewed. Claims that the team of scholar-translators held to “a high view of Scripture,” to “the infallibility and authority of Scripture” and the like, quietly circumvent the implications *for translation* of Scripture’s *plenary verbal inspiration*. The 1980 CRC evaluation applauded the NIV’s liberal variety of English words for the same Hebrew or Greek word, but at the same

time skirted the very issue that ought to be debated when it asserted that "using a variety of English words to capture the richness of *important concepts* makes passages more easily understood, but it makes word study more difficult."²⁵ That issue is: What is it that must be translated? Meaning? Important concepts? What then prevents a translation from becoming simply a repository of the current exegetical opinions of scholars about concepts they judge to be important? Moreover, what was it that the Holy Spirit inspired: the text and words of Scripture, or biblical-theological concepts?²⁶ The latter is product, the former is raw material. So-called biblical theology results from reflection on the Scriptures. The distinction between the two seems to challenge the validity, in terms of verbal inspiration, of the dynamic-equivalence translation of Scripture.

All of this affects our understanding of biblical inerrancy and infallibility. What must be translated--words or ideas--depends on what is inspired, and only what is inspired is infallible and inerrant. Perhaps this decennial is as good an occasion as any to reflect on the question hitherto ignored: How do the principles that produced the NIV comport with that doctrine of inerrancy espoused by "evangelicals"? Is the view of infallibility embodied in the NIV and employed to sell it indeed the same understanding of infallibility that led many "evangelicals" to reject the RSV and invest in the NIV?

It is true that all translation involves interpretation. But whereas the aim of former generations was to restrict interpretation within Bible translation as much as possible, it appears that the NIV translators envisioned precisely the opposite. They wished to make the Bible understandable with as little interpretive effort as possible, or at least to ensure understanding within the parameters of up-to-date textual and exegetical opinions. "But if this aim is to be achieved," someone has said, "then it seems clear that a new Bible will have to be produced for every generation--each one probably moving us further away from the original text, now that the initial break has been made."²⁷

Given, then, that all translation involves interpretation, what makes for a legitimate mixture of the two? What makes a rendering that contains more interpretation and less translation illegitimate?

Perhaps the best answer to these questions is an appeal to the NIV renderings both tabulated and criticized above. These examples involved textual alterations (Isa. 53:11; Jn. 1:18; Heb. 11:11), verbal disparities not justified by the context (Gen. 22:17; 16:4; Ps. 144:2; I Cor. 7:1), obscured syntactical relationships (Acts 2:39; Jude 4; Jude 20-21), inserting the translators' exegetical opinion *at points where a neutral English translation would suffice* (Mic. 5:2; Jn. 17:6,26; Jude 20-21). Note the disquieting similarity to the 1954 catalog of RSV deficiencies!

The assertion of its promoters that the NIV lies a bit to the left of the RSV on the continuum of paraphrastic translations is both misleading and surprising. This claim is made by lining up *The Living Bible* and *Good News for Modern Man* on the one side, and the KJV and ASV on the other side. The NIV and RSV are "better" than the KJV and ASV, but not as "bad" as *The Living Bible* and *Good News for Modern Man*. But the promotional pitch misleads in two directions. First, it obscures practices of text alteration and verbal inaccuracy common to both the NIV and the RSV; and secondly, it ignores the fact that the NIV regularly surpasses the RSV in giving the reader exegetical opinions *as though they were faithful translations*.

The surprise in the claim that the NIV is just like the RSV, but a bit to the left in terms of paraphrasing, emerges with the obvious question: If that's true, then why do we need the NIV? Apart from stylistic features and in terms of the deficiencies alleged against the RSV, the NIV was a luxurious, very expensive re-tread, twenty-six years later, of the RSV. To someone who might argue that in contrast to the RSV, the NIV is a return to the original, the necessary reply is: Yes, but with what objective benefit that is now lacking in the RSV?

Finally, if modern Bible versions are to be characterized as *exegetical* translations to a greater degree than their predecessors, with what confidence can the church receive them? Because the NIV pursues clarity and understanding often at the expense of faithful translation of the original form and language of Scripture,

one must question whether a version employing the principle of dynamic equivalence can be used liturgically in the church. Obviously, this issue has not been adequately addressed by our liturgists and biblical scholars.²⁸

Here is the source and basis of the "interesting note" made by the 1980 CRC report that "the standards of accuracy have changed in the last several decades." There had (and has) been little discussion *in the church*, in contrast to talk among scholars, of the implications of this change in standards.

A proper evaluation of the NIV requires recognition of the fact that translators today have assumed for themselves a responsibility for restructuring the biblical text in terms of the receptor language. Paul's letters are made to sound as if they were written in the twentieth century rather than the first. Narrative and discourse structures in the receptor language, rather than the structures of the author's text and language, shape the translation. Aiming at understanding by the reader instead of faithfulness to the original words, modern translators have become the new exegetes for the church, placing themselves between the church and the Scripture.²⁹

The danger present in the NIV lies beneath its surface. Believers are unaware that the NIV they hold in their hands is not merely a new Bible version, but a version crafted with a novel, twentieth-century agenda and method, a version inherently immune to any criticism on the basis of translational accuracy. The NIV has travelled further in the interpretive process than older versions, so that its reader is given *without his knowledge* an exegetical paraphrase shaped by the conclusions of mutable scholarship.

It is difficult to imagine that the CRC, who in 1954 and 1956 turned away from the RSV to pursue another English

translation, could be satisfied with the NIV. Yet, history shows how it happened: during the early years of the NIV project, while advocates of the RSV were still working for its acceptance, standards of translational accuracy shifted sufficiently both to permit endorsement of the RSV and to prepare for a speedy approval of the NIV. Reasons for such haste between the NIV's 1978 completion and its 1980 endorsement remain speculative. But this shift, which received little or no discussion among the church, embodies something far beyond the inner working of one small denomination. It seems to represent a shift in thinking about Scripture's inspiration among "evangelicals" wearied by debate about biblical inerrancy and infallibility. This new theory and practice of *translation* may finally have "freed" those tied to old formulations of *dogma*.

Since, on the basis of its own testimony and principles, the NIV is not wholly accurate either textually or verbally, and since the NIV has become the Bible of "evangelicals," we might pause to ponder, during this NIV decennial, the status of the "evangelical" doctrine of infallibility and inerrancy.

ENDNOTES

1. This difficulty is occasioned in part by the fact that the translation was produced by committees in various phases. *The Story of the New International Version* (East Brunswick, NJ: International Bible Society [IBS], 1978), the IBS's own biographical narrative of the making of the NIV, charts the progress of the NIV from the translating "teams," to Intermediate Editorial Committees (five to seven members each), then to General Editorial Committees, and finally to the Committee on Bible Translation. For a similar narrative, see also Edwin H. Palmer, "New International Bible," *The Banner* 107 (January 28, 1972) 15.
2. We refer the interested reader to an excellent primer on this subject, *The Future of the Bible*, by Jakob Van Bruggen (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1978). A helpful bibliography of periodical articles evaluating the

NIV is contained in Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation*, 3rd printing (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 405-408.

3. *Acts of Synod 1966* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Publishing House, 1966) 378-383; included here is a helpful survey of CRC involvement in the Bible translation project that led eventually to the NIV.
4. *Acts of Synod 1966*, 375.
5. Bastiaan Van Elderen, "More Thoughts on Bible Translations," *The Banner* 101 (June 3, 1966) 14-16; see also his "Minority Report on Bible Translation," *Acts of Synod 1966*, 384-385.
6. Note, for example, the final essay in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, entitled, "Isn't the King James Good Enough? (The KJV and the NIV Compared)." The assumption appears to have evolved that since the RSV had already been effectively discredited or belatedly welcomed, the only remaining obstacle to evangelical scholars scoring this publishing triumph was the KJV. Still, the claim cannot be suppressed that "now, despite deficiencies which could never be laid against the RSV, the NIV has been accepted near-blindly" ("News and Views," *Banner of Truth* [Issue 272, May, 1986] 2).
7. *Acts of Synod 1966*, 58.
8. Edwin H. Palmer, "ACT: A Contemporary Translation," *The Banner* 104 (February 4, 1969) 4-6. A call to produce a new version had been issued earlier by John H. Stek, "KJV, ASV, RSV, NEB, NASB--or what?" *The Banner* 101 (March 18, 1966) 4-5; Stek announced the need "to gather the ripest fruits of all these extensive and varied labors [represented by the multiplicity of English translations] into a single version, ecumenical in appeal, fully modern in style and idiom, up-to-date in biblical scholarship, equally fitted for public and private use, and faithful to the demands of Scripture that it be

'handled' (also in translation) as the Word of God." How to do this? A "commission of scholars" who have high respect for "the tested results of recent biblical scholarship" must produce a version "embodying the best of [the twentieth-century's] relevant scholarship." Stek was not alone in being enamored of scholarship's role in the NIV. Burton L. Goddard, chairman of the translation project, characterized the uniqueness of the NIV this way: ". . .no previous translation of the Holy Scriptures was ever subjected to such painstaking and repeated editing, by so many scholars" ("Why Burton L. Goddard Calls NIV Unique," *Eternity* 25 [March, 1974] 47).

9. *Acts of Synod 1969*, 278.
10. Though the report *numbIrs* twenty-five different passages, it *criticizes* twenty-nine. John Vander Ploeg wrote in 1965 against pulpit use of the RSV by summarizing the arguments used in 1954; see "Why Keep the RSV Out of our Pulpits?" *The Banner* 100 (Dec. 10, 1965) 8-9.
11. *Acts of Synod 1954* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Publishing House, 1954) 435.
12. *Acts of Synod 1969* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Publishing House, 1969) 265-280.
13. Others agreed with this allegation; see R. Laird Harris and Stanley E. Hardwick, "Do Evangelicals Need a New Bible Translation?" *Christianity Today* 12 (September 27, 1968) 10-15.
14. Cf. D. Stark, *Prove All Things*, 3.
15. Cf. J.W. Scott, "Dynamic Equivalence and some Theological Problems in the NIV," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986) 351-361; this author exposes a bias against paedobaptism in the NIV by examining its renderings of "household" in Acts 16:34, 18:8, 21:5, etc.
16. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 275; in this massive

volume Fee disagrees frequently, and at times vehemently, with NIV renderings.

17. "NIV Report: Interview with Edwin Palmer," *Eternity* 29 (October, 1978) 30,42.
18. *Acts of Synod 1980* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1980) 254-262.
19. *Acts of Synod 1980*, 258; italics added. Our observations in the text about the 1980 evaluation of the NIV and its effectiveness should be seen in light of the fact that much of the committee report had appeared *four years earlier*, word for word, in *The Banner* 111 (July 23 and 30, 1976) 12-13 and 14-16 respectively--before the translation of the Old Testament had been completed.
20. But *did* those standards change? Robert G. Bratcher would answer in the negative:

The NIV is closer in style and form to the RSV than to any other English version. It is an irony worth pondering: this Bible came into being as the result of the repudiation of the RSV by the majority of conservative Protestants in this country, and now that it has appeared it closely resembles the RSV. The principles that guided it in textual, exegetical, linguistic and stylistic matters are hardly distinguishable from those which guided the RSV.

Cf. *The Word of God: A Guide to English Versions of the Bible*, Lloyd R. Bailey, ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 165.

21. *Acts of Synod 1980*, 267.
22. *Acts of Synod 1980*, 268. Related criteria in evaluating a version for liturgical use include clarity, diction, vividness and rhythm; for a critical view of the NIV's performance in terms of these, cf. Leland Ryken, "The Literary Merit of the New International Version," *Christianity Today* 23 (October 20, 1978) 16-17.

It is significant that at the later stages of the translation process, English stylists ("writer[s] and editor[s] of

long experience") were permitted to vote as members of editorial committees. The fact that "style" played such an important role in the production of the NIV seems to have placed the *translation* virtually beyond criticism, for style is "taste" or, finally, preference. Once a translation loses its grounding in the original languages and is subjected to remodeling by those unable to judge faithfulness to the original, the translation becomes impervious to *meaningful* criticism.

23. *Acts of Synod 1980*, 257; italics added.
24. Burton L. Goddard, "Why Burton L. Goddard Calls NIV Unique," *Eternity* 25 (March, 1974) 62.
25. *Acts of Synod 1980*, 258; italics added; earlier the committee's judgment had been that doing concordant word study with the NIV was "impossible" ("The New International Version," *The Banner* 111 (July 23, 1976) 13.
26. J.W. Scott argues in "Dynamic Equivalence and some Theological Problems in the *NIV*" (see note 15) that "the doctrine of Scripture also comes up short in the *NIV*'s rendering of Acts, despite the translators' express commitment to the full inspiration and infallibility of Scripture" (358). He alleges that words and phrases in the original that underline the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture are mistranslated in Lk. 1:70 and 3:18,21, in Acts 2:16, 7:38 and 13:40.
27. Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1983) 12-13.
28. *Acts of Synod 1980*, 268-269.
29. For a balanced and thorough introduction to these matters, see Jakob Van Bruggen, *The Future of the Bible*, 67-168. Far too uncritically D.A. Carson discusses some of the assumptions underlying dynamic-equivalence in his essay "The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence in Bible Translation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (July, 1985) 200-213.