

Why We Need the MEV

No book has been read more, no work published as much and no source cited as frequently in history. Passed down for 2,000 years with a message that has supernaturally remained intact, it has shaped the world—from languages to governments to lives—like nothing else.

Yet today the Bible, by many accounts, is nearing a state of crisis in America.

In a nation founded upon God's Word yet on the brink of becoming "post-Christian," the Bible is increasingly seen as a mere relic with spiritual teachings far removed from daily life. God's Word has become a bookshelf ornament; the average American owns more than four copies of the Bible yet reads it no more than a couple times a year. Among Christians, the statistics aren't much better: 40 percent of church attendees read the Word only occasionally—as in once or twice a month.

With such a bleak reality, what difference can yet another Bible translation make? Why create a new version of the Bible in an already saturated publishing market if fewer people are engaging with God's Word in the first place?

Those are some of the difficult questions the team at Charisma Media in suburban Orlando, Florida, asked while preparing to publish the Modern English Version, the most contemporary translation produced in the King James Version (KJV) tradition in the last 30 years. Releasing this month by the same company that began publishing *Charisma* almost 40 years ago, the Modern English Version (MEV) is a word-for-word translation that maintains the beauty of the KJV language yet provides fresh clarity for a new generation of Bible readers.

It's that unique combination—clear, reverent and accurate—that has Christian leaders and readers alike believing this version comes at precisely the right time as God uses any means to re-

engage a lost culture with His sacred yet living Word. Some, like Samuel Rodriguez, sense this translation could be a catalyst not only in the church, but also the broader culture.

“I believe the Modern English Version has the ability and potential to re-engage the proverbial firewall of righteousness in this generation,” says Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. “We are living in arguably the most difficult times spiritually our nation has ever experienced. ... What we need is to re-engage God’s Word. We need the Word of God to once again emerge as the quintessential standard of morality, righteousness and justice. The Modern English Version serves that very purpose.”

Recalling a 400-Year-Old Need

This is not the first time the Body of Christ has found itself facing such a challenge. Nor are we the first society to feel as though the clarion call of God’s Word has grown faint in the hearts, minds and spirits of an entire generation of believers and unbelievers alike.

At the turn of the 17th century, the church faced a similar crisis. And in response to an outcry among Puritan ministers of the day, England’s King James I convened the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604. In addition to orchestrating peace between the episcopacy and Anglicans who were considered moderate Puritans, King James also commissioned a new translation of the Bible into the English vernacular. The king’s instructions were that this translation was to be satisfactory not only to the church hierarchy, but also to the moderate Puritans who believed the Bible should be accessible for personal study.

Using the Jacob ben Hayyim edition of the Old Testament and the *Textus Receptus*, William Tyndale’s translations from the Greek of the New Testament, 47 King James-commissioned

scholars applied their efforts not to making a new translation, but to making a good translation better. The result was a translation that for four centuries has served as the cornerstone of Bible translations, including the New King James Version, released in 1982. Today the KJV still remains the most popular version, more than doubling the New International Version (NIV) in readership.

In 2014, amid a culture that's abandoned biblical morals and is largely (and statistically) unengaged with the Bible, there is once again an outcry for a relevant version of the Bible that's accessible and easy to understand, for the sake of re-engaging people with God's Word. And once again, 47 of the world's most qualified Bible linguists responded to the call for a clear, reverent and accurate translation for their time.

Conceived by James F. Linzey, now a retired U.S. Army chaplain and graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, the MEV is a modern translation originally intended to be used among military chaplains for outreach. Linzey pulled together a team of 47 translators from a wide range of denominations—a miracle in itself, by many accounts—and began work in 2005. The New Testament was completed in 2011 for the 400th anniversary of the KJV and the Old Testament in 2013.

Part of the MEV's uniqueness is how it champions a change from mere Bible ownership to actual Bible engagement by removing the obstacles most frequently cited as hindrances to connecting more with God's Word. Designed as a formal equivalence (word-for-word) translation in today's language, the MEV facilitates understanding of the Bible's truths, history and background. As the Holy Spirit guides readers, they can connect to the meta-narrative of the Bible and experience its relevancy in their daily lives with ease.

"Not only is the English language changing, the culture is changing, and we need a translation that the ordinary person on the street will understand," said Stanley Horton, the MEV's

senior editorial advisor and a distinguished professor emeritus of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary who passed away in July. "The Bible doesn't intend that you have to be a Ph.D. to understand it. It was intended for the ordinary person, so as the culture changes and as the language changes, you'll find even the updates like the New King James Bible are already out of date even in 30 years or so, so that we do need to have translations that are suited to the people that we're trying to reach and minister to."

Retaining a 400-Year-Old Legacy

It's no small feat to embark on creating a new Bible translation with no regard to past versions in an attempt to "update" God's Word with the most current language. In recent decades many have done exactly this in translating from a paraphrase approach (e.g., Eugene Peterson's *The Message* or *The Living Bible*) or a meaning-for-meaning, thought-for-thought approach (e.g., NIV, New Living Translation).

More complicated, however, is finding a balance between modernizing the Bible's language and the timeless reverence, depth and poetic language that countless students of the Word have come to love with the KJV. Yet that's exactly the challenge the MEV's 47 translators faced as they aimed for the perfect blend of relevance and reverence.

"The Modern English Version is a Bible translation that takes its King James heritage seriously," says Rudy Gonzalez, a New Testament professor and dean of the William R. Marshall Center for Theological Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. "Adhering to the principle of formal equivalence, the translators believed that fidelity to the same principles that guided our 17th-century forerunners is transcendent of time and circumstance. But the dynamic nature of communication requires sensitivity to making a translation meaningful to a 21st-century reader. Formal equivalence and sensitivity to the dynamic nature of communication worked hand-in-hand to shape

this authoritative translation of the Bible, which will serve God's kingdom well for generations to come."

The result is a translation that honors the KJV tradition, particularly in its reverence of deity pronouns. Like the KJV and NKJV, the MEV capitalizes pronouns referring to God such as *He* and *Him*. While seemingly minor, other modern translations such as the NIV and English Standard Version have parted from this style. The TNIV (Today's New International Version), which was infused with "gender neutral" language and cultural biases, stirred up such controversy in evangelical circles upon its release in 2005 that many anticipated those behind it would correct mistakes with an update in 2011. That wasn't the case, as prominent theologian Wayne Grudem and a team of reviewers found that 75 percent of the gender language problems in the TNIV had not been resolved in the NIV 2011. (In fact, Grudem and Vern Poythress catalogued 3,686 "inaccurate translations in the TNIV" related to gender language in *only two books*.) This, along with other issues, caused Grudem to conclude that "improvements to the TNIV have not been extensive enough in NIV 2011, and that some new changes represent a step in the wrong direction."

Both versions prompted such backlash that entire denominations boycotted them. Though the controversy raised awareness within the church about Bible translation, these recent examples of language modernization only aided in fueling skepticism among those who doubt the Bible's inerrancy. Because of this, those behind the MEV worked hard to create a translation devoid of cultural, social and political biases.

"Having previously worked with other translations and editions of the Holy Bible, I can tell you that this translation is excellent and second to none," Horton said, adding that the MEV is "the most scholarly and modern update of the King James Version."

Other renowned Bible teachers and scholars agree. Jack

Hayford, founder and chancellor of The King's University and executive editor of the Spirit-Filled Life Bible, says, "The MEV has credibility. I recommend it to other leaders for spiritual formation and discipleship."

Kent Ingle, president of Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, says the MEV "has captured the contemporary language while accurately preserving the rich heritage of the Scriptures. It is a valuable resource for all modern ministry leaders. It maintains the beauty and eloquence of the King James Version and precisely communicates the meaning of Scripture to the present-day generation."

And Charles Blake, the presiding bishop of 6-million-member Church of God in Christ, has endorsed the MEV, adding that he's excited about "educating our constituents about it in the days ahead."

The Cultural Challenge

Besides the influential support of Blake, Hayford and Rodriguez (whose organization represents 16 million Hispanic believers), Charisma Media is partnering with other large entities such as the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), OneHope, YouVersion and Bible Gateway. And with leaders trumpeting the MEV's uniqueness, the momentum is certainly there for this translation to make waves in the Christian community and with a new generation of Bible readers.

Yet that is only part of the battle when it comes to re-engaging America with a modern translation of God's Word. On one hand, Christians have reason to celebrate: the Bible is now available in 2,287 languages and downloaded or shared hundreds of millions of times on mobile devices across the social media spectrum. Even Hollywood has developed a fascination with God's Word and is producing a wave of Bible-themed movies, TV shows and game shows.

The full reality of today's "state of the Bible," however, is

best told through the optics of the American Bible Society's State of the Bible 2014. This annual study, designed by the Barna Group, signals a cause for concern in considering how shifting societal and generational trends are impacting the Bible's place in U.S. culture. The report found that while 79 percent of Americans cite the Bible as a holy book or sacred literature, only 46 percent read it more than a couple times a year.

"The typical American actually has 4.7 Bibles, yet only 37 percent of Americans use the Bible in a typical month," says David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group. "So we have a huge gap between awareness, penetration and usage of Scripture."

With the vast majority of adults living in households with a Bible, it's easy to assume that most dorms, apartments and homes have a Bible sitting on a shelf. But that's just the problem: The Bible remains on the shelf. Regardless of the version—KJV, NIV, ESV or any other—just over a quarter of adults admit to never reading God's Word, according to this year's State of the Bible study. These are the challenging realities facing the Christian community today.

"Can you imagine a Bible-less Christianity?" asks Roy Peterson, president of the American Bible Society (ABS). "Of course not. But when you look at the deep declines of Scripture engagement here in our nation, you start to consider this as an actual possibility. Think about the fact that despite the many, many Americans who are friendly to the Bible, only one in five are regular readers of it [reading it four or more times each week]. That represents about half the number of people attending our churches in the last month. Add to this the almost meteoric rise of Bible skeptics in our nation—numbers that have effectively doubled in just the last four years—and you begin to see the scope of the problem."

Millennials: From Society Shapers to Scriptural Skeptics

The nation's developing Bible illiteracy points to a drastic shift, and no segment of today's culture embodies this more than millennials. By sheer numbers alone, this demographic group is shaping America's attitudes about the Bible. At 95 million strong, millennials (those born between 1978 and 2000) make up the largest generation in the U.S., compared to the nation's 78 million Baby Boomers. Millennials' approach to the Bible, however, is worlds apart from their parents' and grandparents' generations. For the MEV's creators, these differing paradigms are a major factor in whether this new Bible translation can impact society outside Christendom.

"[Millennials] are less likely to say the Bible is sacred literature that's inspired by God," Kinnaman says. "They're also much less likely to have read the Scriptures like most older generations, even when those generations were the same age as millennials are today and approach it with much more skepticism."

Though such skepticism about the Bible isn't new, the rate at which it's currently growing is alarming. In 2011, the State of the Bible study found that 10 percent of respondents said they were skeptical of the Bible; today the number has almost doubled. This year's study shows that 19 percent of Americans feel the Bible is irrelevant, while 19 percent engage with it. This means that for the first time the number of people who are skeptics has caught up with those who actively engage with the Scripture.

Perhaps more troubling is that this trend is markedly more pronounced among younger Americans. According to ABS's study, millennials are:

- Less likely to view the Bible as sacred literature (64 percent vs. 79 percent of other adult groups)
- Less likely to believe the Bible contains all a person needs to lead a meaningful life (35 percent vs. 50 percent)

- More likely to never read the Bible (39 percent vs. 26 percent).

Ultimately, America's future movers and shapers are becoming defined by an absence of Scripture, as they increasingly view God's Word as outdated on current issues and no longer a source of truth.

"A critical question for so many within this rising generations is this: 'Why does the Bible actually matter?'" Peterson says. "And perhaps more pointedly: 'Prove that it does, right here in the hard stuff of my world.' That is the heart of the challenge we face, inviting the words of life in the Bible to become the center of life in our world today."

So how can a new Bible translation like the MEV possibly change this?

The answer is actually more hopeful than many believe—and is found in the silver lining from Barna's research. Though millennials are more skeptical of Scripture than other generations, they're also hungrier for how biblical truth might apply to everyday living—including topics like sex, finances and parenting.

"There is a huge opportunity for us to help millennials see the truth of Scripture with a new lens, a new set of eyes," Kinnaman says. "But in many ways millennials are looking for the Living Word to be more than just words on a page. They truly want to experience Scripture, understanding how it applies and how to respond to it. They want to hear the voice of God through the pages of Scripture. I think the Church and the Christian community have an amazing opportunity to respond."

Whether millennials hear God's voice depends on their understanding Scripture as they engage with it, and vital to that is the actual language used—which is where the modern language of a translation like the MEV comes in.

“Part of what we need to embrace as Christians is that updating the language of the Bible should be normative for us,” says Jason McMullen, publishing director for the MEV. “While it’s not like an oil change, happening at set intervals, it is our responsibility as believers to those who come behind to update language so spiritual formation can continue to happen. Some people wonder why we need another translation when there are already so many, but from a missional standpoint, it’s vital—especially considering the millennial thread. It’s our time now, and it will be their time to do the same thing later.”

A Bible Beyond the Page

Modernizing language will only go so far when it comes to engaging the next generation with the Bible, however, just as maintaining the spirit of the beloved KJV will only go so far for Baby Boomers. Both groups delve into the Bible for a deeper reason than just to process words; they want their lives shaped by God’s eternal truth, as expressed through His Living Word. In addition, both want a faith that extends beyond the page and impacts the numerous social justice issues confronting today’s believers.

Amid this desire, churches and ministries are shifting their approach to reach those who want to see an “active Word” that relates to their everyday lives with more than just a “Thou shall” or “Thou shall not” list. OneHope, a global ministry that to date has reached more than 1 billion children and youth with the gospel, is among those leading the way in stirring greater Bible engagement among U.S. millennials. Because of this, OneHope is partnering with Charisma Media to further the MEV’s impact.

“This year at OneHope, we’ll reach nearly a hundred million children with God’s Word,” says OneHope President Rob Hoskins. “But it’s not just about the distribution of God’s Word—it’s about Scripture engagement. That’s why we are thrilled with

the Modern English Version. Not only is it incredibly simple for young people to understand, but it is also very credible with churches we are working with in the U.S. and around the world. We can't wait to see how God uses our partnership with the MEV to reach literally hundreds of thousands of children."

Other organizations have the same posture of expectation. Rodriguez's National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC) is also partnering with the MEV and has made Bible engagement its number one initiative for member churches, in part because of the alarming disconnect among younger Hispanics who, unlike their non-Latino millennial counterparts, view the Bible favorably yet have even less interest in reading it. Overall, an astounding 87 percent of Hispanics own a Bible, yet a mere 8 percent engage with it, according to another study commissioned by Barna, ABS, NHCLC and OneHope.

"Today's complacency is tomorrow's captivity," Rodriguez warns, adding that Hispanics, like the millennial generation, are reaping the "inactive faith" of previous generations, particularly when it comes to Bible engagement. "The multigenerational dependency on pastors and leaders to read and deliver that Word created today's unfortunate reality of a generation with a sense of 'biblical entitlement.' In other words, because we depend so much on our pastoral leadership, the layperson does not engage the Word daily as prescribed by God. ... We can't defend life, elevate biblical marriage, fulfill the great commission, educate, end sex trafficking, protect religious liberty or successfully equip the next generation if we stand captive by biblical illiteracy."

To break free of this pattern, partners of the MEV are making concerted efforts to ensure the new translation meets potential readers right where they are. For millennials, that means the digital arena. While studies such as Barna's point out that most millennials don't feel they can get real-life answers from the church, their efforts to find these answers

through technology, pop culture and their peers prove there is still an open door for many ministries willing to pioneer and develop new ways to engage those millennials on digital turf.

“Many millennials are skeptical of God’s Word because they are not engaging with God’s Word,” Hoskins says. “By creating digital formats for youth to engage with God’s Word [so they can] really experience it for themselves in a format they are used to engaging in on a regular basis, our hope is that they would see and experience its truth in a way like never before.”

Hoskins’ OneHope has already partnered with other churches and ministries to develop digital ministry tools such as The Bible App for Kids, developed with YouVersion, which drew more than 1 million downloads less than a week after its release last Thanksgiving. YouVersion itself is the leading online resource for stirring Bible engagement with believers and unbelievers alike. To date, the free digital Bible app has been installed more than 150 million times on smartphones and tablets, putting it up there with the likes of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

“The engagement and interaction we’re seeing is phenomenal,” says Bobby Gruenewald, innovation pastor of in Oklahoma, which created YouVersion. “People are embracing the Bible in a new way. We truly believe this generation can become the most Bible-engaged generation in history.”

Hoskins agrees, though he says seeing this vision fulfilled begins with equipping millennials with God’s Word in a language and format they can understand.

“By putting God’s Word into a format millennials prefer, they are more likely to engage with God’s Word,” he says. “Today’s generation of inherently expert and skilled digital natives basically requires that programming for them now be digitally enhanced. You have to speak the language of your audience.”

And that is exactly what the MEV is about. The new translation will be available on YouVersion, Bible Gateway and other leading Bible apps, as well as formatted for various digital Bible products and versions. Yet as Charisma Media releases the MEV under its Passio imprint this month, the goal is to make this new translation available in as many formats—digital or traditional print—as possible to as many different audiences.

Loosing the Lion

So can a new translation actually reverse the trends negatively impacting Bible engagement and its influence upon America? The answer to that question may not be seen for another generation. There are still signs of hope amid the current spiritual decay: Barna's 2014 study reveals that three out of five adults wish they read the Bible more, while half of those acknowledge that reading the Bible brings them closer to God.

What about the rest? How will the church reach those for whom the Bible is now a dusty relic symbolizing outdated values? Like a masterpiece hidden in the attic, the riches of the Bible are an unrealized treasure for Bible students, skeptics, millennials and Baby Boomers alike.

No matter what the problem—whether a person's everyday struggles or the plight of a nation in spiritual decline—God's Word is a sufficient cure. As noted 19th-century preacher Charles Spurgeon remarked when asked how he defends the Bible, "The Word of God is like a lion. You don't have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose and the lion will defend itself."

With the release of the Modern English Version, let us pray—for the sake of our nation and its future generations—that the relevancy of God's Word will reign triumphantly like a lion over the land.

Joel Ceballo *advances the Bible's causes as a consultant to Bible publishers and ministries in resource design, marketing, development and research. You can follow him on Twitter @joel_ceballo.*

Watch Michael Brown and a host of Bible scholars evaluate the MEV, plus discover more about its formation at