

## **Preliminary report of the Translation Evaluation Committee: NIV revision**

An important decision is looming for WELS, since a major revision of the New International Version (NIV) is being published that will replace the NIV as we know it. WELS congregations and individuals who use the NIV will have to decide in the next year or two if they want to continue with the revised NIV or look for a different English Bible translation.

The revision has been referred to as the NIV 2011 in some preliminary publications, because the first copies are expected in March 2011. The year 2011 has significance for Bible translators because it is the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of 1611. The proper name of the revision, however, will simply be the "NIV" since it will replace the existing translation. Bible Gateway, the internet mecca of Bible translations, is referring to the revised text as NIV @ 2010 since it was finished and first distributed in 2010.

It is not surprising that a revision of the NIV has appeared. The Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) that prepared the NIV in the 1970s has been meeting annually ever since to consider possible improvements. The original NIV charter made provision for periodic updates so that the NIV would not become obsolete as the English language changes. The NIV text as we know it has been frozen since 1984, when the NIV that was first published in 1978 underwent a modest revision. NIV overseers say that it is time for an update, since it has been over 25 years.

The CBT has also prepared previous revisions. The CBT published a revision of the NIV in England in 1997 called the New International Version Inclusive (NIVI). In 2005 they published Today's New International Version (TNIV) in the USA. In both of these cases, however, the NIV text of 1984 continued to be published alongside the revision. The difference now is that the NIV 2011 will become the NIV and will replace the NIV of 1984. The organization that oversees the NIV, formerly the International Bible Society but presently called Biblica, is adamant that the existing NIV will not be published by anyone after 2011.

Although it complicates the lives of those who read and teach the Bible, it seems to be the new norm that English Bible translations will be revised periodically. Many other major translations have undergone recent revisions.

- New American Standard Bible (NASB): originally published in 1971, revised in 1995
- New Living Translation (NLT): originally published in 1996, revised in 2007
- English Standard Version (ESV): originally published in 2002, revised in 2007
- Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB): originally published in 2003, revised in 2009

And lest we complain too vehemently, we should remember that Luther himself kept tinkering with his German translation until the day he died. To a certain extent, the work of Bible translation is never finished.

To learn about the nature of the changes in the NIV 2011, one should read the "Notes from the Committee on Bible Translation" available at [www.biblica.com](http://www.biblica.com) and [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com). In this 11-page document, the translators state that the reasons for the changes fall into three basic categories: 1) changes in English, 2) progress in scholarship, and 3) concern for clarity.

Depending on how one calculates, about five to eight percent of the words of the NIV are changed. There are changes in about 39 percent of the verses of the NIV.

Under the microscope particularly will be the new NIV's use of inclusive language. When the NIVI and the TNIV were published, there was considerable criticism that their use of gender neutral language went too far. In response, the CBT reconsidered all of the 3,600 gender changes that were included in the TNIV. It altered some 1,100 of them in the NIV 2011. It remains to be seen if this toning down of gender neutral language will meet with widespread approval.

To its credit, the CBT conducted a major study of gender language in English using a 4.4 billion word database called the Collins Bank of English, so that its decisions could be based on actual usage and not on subjective opinions. It discovered, for example, that "the gender-neutral pronoun 'they' ('them'/'their') is by far the most common way that English-language speakers and writers today refer back to singular antecedents such as 'whoever,' 'anyone,' 'somebody,' 'a person,' 'no one,' and the like." In other words, it is considered normal to say, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24 TNIV).

A WELS committee began working in August 2010 to help the synod as it studies the NIV 2011 and makes a decision about what Bible translation should be used in WELS publications. Chairman of the committee is Seminary President Paul Wendland. Other committee members are John Braun (NPH), Kenneth Cherney (WLS), Thomas Nass (MLC), and Joel Petermann (COP). They have been scrutinizing the text of the NIV 2011 ever since it was published online on November 1, 2010. They welcome input from *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* readers on this issue.

The committee's preliminary opinion is that the new revision may be a possibility for WELS, but it would like the input of more WELS theologians. The committee is coordinating a review of all the changes in the NIV 2011, involving faculty members of WLS and MLC, NPH editors, and COP members, beginning in January 2011. The committee will also provide opportunities for study and input from the wider WELS ministerium as the year progresses. It seems apparent that there are many improvements in the NIV 2011, including Acts chapter 3, verse 21, which had long been criticized by Lutherans in the existing NIV. Lutherans will also applaud the NIV 2011's even clearer translation of Romans chapter 3, verses 23-26, which is so crucial for the understanding of justification. But admittedly there are some passages that have been weakened, and the question is whether any of these latter passages demand that the translation be rejected.

WELS, of course, does not mandate a Bible translation. Congregations and individuals are free to use whatever version they want. The only decision the synod needs to make is what translation will be used in its publications. NPH has been granted permission to use the existing NIV in new publications through the year 2013, but no longer after that. As the WELS convention in 1979 authorized the use of the NIV in the publications of WELS, so a future convention will have to make a similar decision again.

Without doubt, a change in our commonly used Bible translation is bound to cause some anxiety and agitation. Rather than cursing the multiplicity of choices in the modern English-speaking

world and demonizing the translations we don't prefer, however, we should be thankful that God has provided his Word to us in such abundance. We should work together in carefully evaluating our choices, and pray that God guide us to a wise decision in this important matter.

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