

World Religions, Cults, and Aberrant Beliefs
Lesson 17 – King James Onlyism
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School
www.valleybible.net

Review

The standard evangelical definition of a Christian cult is any group that deviates from Biblical Christianity in fundamental doctrines of the faith: 1) the source of authority, 2) the nature of God including the Trinity, 3) the person and work of Christ, 4) the nature of man, and 5) the means of salvation. An “aberrant” belief can be defined as a doctrine that is held by some within the true church, but does not have adequate Biblical support.

Thus far we have studied world religions: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism and cults: Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Jehovah Witnesses, the International Church of Christ, Freemasonry, Christian Science, Scientology, the occult, Seventh Day Adventism, and Oneness Pentecostalism. We then began looking at aberrant beliefs: Arminianism, sign gifts, and deliverance theology. Today we continue the theme of aberrant beliefs and look at a teaching called King James Version (KJV) Onlyism (or KJVO). Much of this information is from the VBC position paper on the KJV.

Issue Statement

The KJV was completed in 1611 as an attempt to have the Church of England use one Bible translation rather than the several which were in use at the time. It soon became the primary version used in the English-speaking world for hundreds of years. It is an excellent, literal translation that has served the church well for many years. The translators provided a great service to the church by producing such a fine work in light of their limited resources.

Yet over time language changes. This is one reason for the popularity of more modern translations such as the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New King James Version (NKJV), and the New International Version (NIV). Many have found the KJV to be written in a style and with vocabulary that has become archaic. Not only has the style become difficult for today's reader, many of the words have lost or changed meaning. This becomes more significant when we learn of the KJV translators desired the Word of God to be readable for the common person. They write in the preface to the first edition,

"But we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of Canaan, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar [common person]."

Some have grown up reading the KJV and prefer its style to all other translations, though they are not opposed to other translations. This is simply stylistic choice. Unfortunately, a small but vocal minority claim the KJV is the only true Bible version available, making the use of it a test for theological orthodoxy. Some of the active proponents of this view use fiery words to attack those who disagree with them, thus making the issue of which Bible translation is used even more volatile.

In particular, some of the more conservative and better English translations have been targeted whenever they deviate from the reading of the KJV. The basic argument puts the KJV side by side with other translations to show them to have deviated from the standard. Most fundamental Christian doctrines, such as the Deity of Christ, are then described as having been corrupted by modern translations. It is interesting to note that this comparison of doctrinal teaching by KJVO advocates between the KJV and translations such as the NIV and the NASB only cuts one way. To no surprise, there are many cases where the NIV and NASB translate verses in a way which support orthodox doctrines, such as the Deity of Christ, more clearly (e.g. John 1:18; 3:13; 6:47; 9:35). This certainly demonstrates there is no attempted conspiracy by modern translations to corrupt doctrine. While some versions do have an intent to oppose true Christian doctrine, such as the New World Translation (the Jehovah Witnesses bible), these are not true conservative evangelical translations.

KJV	NASB
¹⁸ No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son , which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. John 1:18	¹⁸ No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained <i>Him</i> . John 1:18
¹³ And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven . John 3:13	¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. John 3:13
⁴⁷ Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. John 6:47	⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. John 6:47
³⁵ Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God ? John 9:35	³⁵ Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man ?" John 9:35

The issue at hand in Bible translation is not which translation is best for supporting certain doctrinal beliefs, but which translation best reflects the original text.

The KJVO movement is people and churches that believe that the KJV is the only one to use. They have various reasons for this. James White in "The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?" has divided the KJVO movement into five main classifications:

1. Stylistic – This group simply prefers the KJV to other translations because their church uses it, because they have always used it, or because they like its style. They simply like the translation.
2. Textual – This group concludes that the KJV is based on better manuscripts. They believe that the KJV's Hebrew and Greek textual bases are the most accurate. Many in this group may accept a modern version based on the same manuscripts as the KJV.
3. Received Text Only – This group believes that the Hebrew and Greek texts used in translating the KJV have been supernaturally (or providentially) preserved. The original manuscripts used by the KJV translation were supernaturally better than the ones we have today. The KJV is believed to be an exemplary translation, but it is also believed that other translations based on these texts have the potential to be equally good.
4. Inspired Translation – This group believes that the KJV itself was divinely inspired whereas other translations are not. They see the translation to be preserved by God and as accurate as the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts found in its underlying texts. Sometimes this group will even exclude other language versions based on the same manuscripts, claiming that the KJV is the only Bible.
5. New Revelation – This group claims that the KJV is a "new revelation" or "advanced revelation" from God, and it should be the standard from which all other translations originate. Adherents to this belief may also believe that the original-language Hebrew and Greek can be corrected by the KJV. This view is often called "Ruckmanism", after its primary adherent, Peter Ruckman.

Examples:

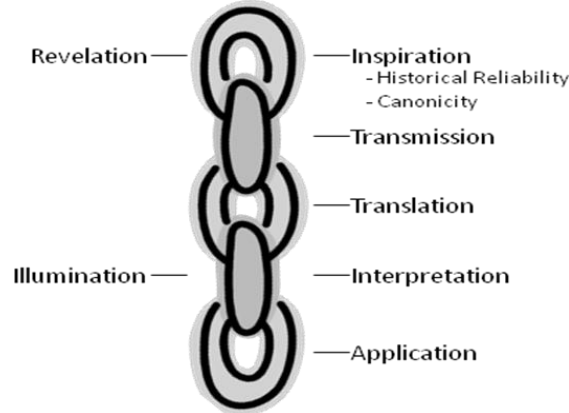
Lancaster Baptist Church: We believe God not only inspired every word, but has preserved them through the ages. We believe the King James Version is the preserved Word of God for the English-speaking people (Psalm 12:6-7; II Timothy 3:15-17; I Peter 1:23-25; II Peter 1:19-21). From lancasterbaptist.org/about/our-purpose-and-beliefs

Lancaster (PA) Independent Baptist Church: We believe that the best English translation, translated from the Byzantine manuscripts, is the King James Version, and it is the only version of the Bible used for all preaching and teaching. From lancasterministries.org/believe.php

KJVBible – Baptist Church Directory: We believe the AV 1611 King James Bible to be the perfect and infallible word of God. We believe the word of God is inspired in its origination and preservation; hence divinely preserved throughout its various generations and languages until it reached us in its present form. From kjvbible.com/agreement-of-belief

God Communicates to Man

We can compare the process by which God has/does communicate with mankind to a series of links forming a chain. The process begins with a desire on the part of God to communicate His truth to man and ends with the application of that truth to the heart of the reader.



Revelation

Revelation speaks of God's truth being unveiled to mankind. If we are to know God, He must reveal Himself to us. God has revealed Himself in two ways: general revelation through creation and specific revelation through His written Word. Specific revelation is only found in the Bible. God chose to communicate with man through language: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible is the only record of God's written revelation to man. General revelation is sufficient for *condemnation* (no one has an excuse, Rom 1:20), specific revelation is sufficient for *salvation*. In fact, it is necessary for our life of faith and our maturity toward godliness (2 Pet 1:3).

²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Rom 1:20

³seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. 2 Pet 1:3

Inspiration

Inspiration refers to God breathing out Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). God is the source of Scripture and as such Scripture takes on His qualities of inerrancy (without error) and infallibility (trustworthy). God superintended (moved) the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error in the words of the original autographs His only written revelation to man (2 Pet 1:20-21). Inspiration is verbal (extending to the very words) and plenary (including all of the words). This is shown by the Lord Jesus' and Apostle Paul's statements, usage, and arguments (Matt 5:18; 22:31-32; Gal 3:16).

¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. 2 Tim 3:16-17

²⁰But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, ²¹for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. 2 Pet 1:20-21

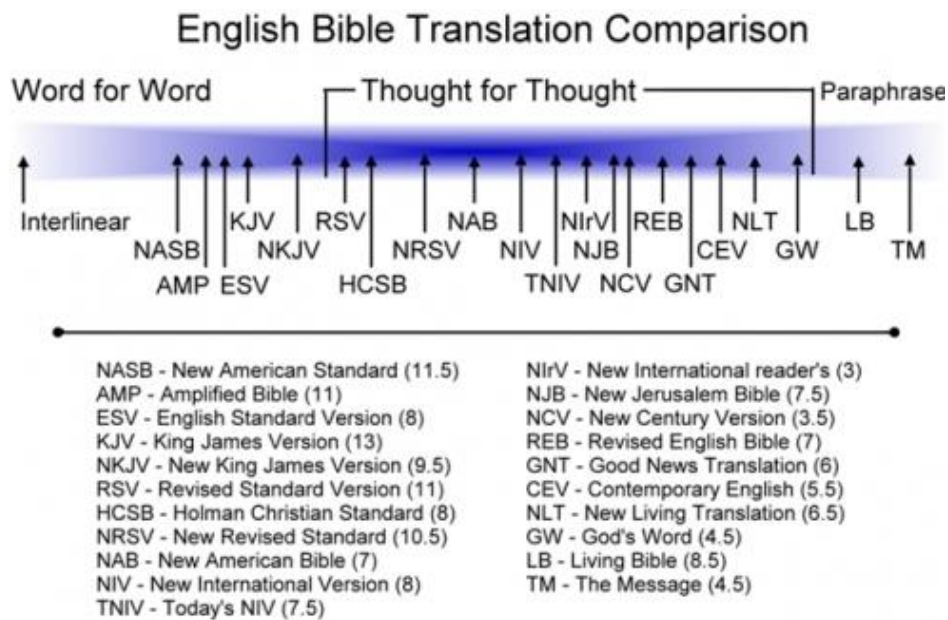
Transmission

The second link in the chain is transmission. This refers to the process in which the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts (and their copies) were copied as accurately as possible. As the church spread, more and more copies of the Bible were made. We have ~5,400 handwritten copies of parts or the whole of the Greek NT. In the 4th century, when Christianity received official sanction from the State, commercial book manufacturers hired trained scribes, Christian and non-Christian, to make mass copies of the NT. They were well paid and equipped, in contrast to those earlier copiers who served as a labor of love for God's Word. To ensure accuracy, a corrector was hired to proof read each copy.

In spite of the effort of those that loved God's Word and cared for its exact duplication and in spite of the hiring of professionals, the copiers did not make exact copies. The copies do not all agree with each other. In fact, few (if any) copies are precisely identical. Differences in NT Greek manuscripts are the result of errors in copying. While there are an estimated 10,000 places in the NT where there are textual variants, the significant variants are surprisingly few. The important point to take away is that the integrity of Scripture is maintained even with these variants. The clear consensus of Greek scholars is that very little teaching is affected by the variations that resulted from scribal error.

Translation

In order for God's Word to reach all nations (cf. Matt 28:19) it must be translated. God validated the work of translation by quoting the Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the OT extensively in the NT. If the NT can quote the Greek translation of the OT then translations of the Bible are important. If people are going to understand the Word of God, then Bible translations are essential. Translation involves seeking the most accurate rendering of the original language manuscripts into our own language. However, only the original manuscripts are inspired – not translations. God has maintained the integrity of the original through sovereignly bringing about the transmission of the original through scribal copying. The chart below shows the range of English translations from most literal to most paraphrased. (from defendingcontending.com/2009/08/31/bible-translation-comparison-chart)



Illumination and Clarity

Illumination refers to the Holy Spirit's ministry as He works in the believer to bring spiritual understanding, enabling us to perceive spiritual truth, and heart application of Scripture (John 7:17; 16:12-15; 1 Cor 2:7-15; 1 John 2:20). Because of illumination, any believer, by depending on the Holy Spirit and using the proper rules of interpretation, can study the scriptures for his own growth and edification, and lead others to salvation in Christ. Akin to the doctrine of illumination is the doctrine that the Scriptures are clear. The Scriptures are: 1) clear enough for the simplest person; 2) deep enough for those of the highest intellectual ability; 3) clear in essential matters; 4) obscure in some places to people because of their sinfulness; 5) understandable through ordinary means; 6) understandable by an unsaved person on an external level; 7) understandable in its significance by a saved person through the illumination of the Holy Spirit; 8) and available to every believer whose faith must rest on the Scriptures. Each believer is responsible to read and study the Scriptures for themselves and not depend solely on other individuals or an institution (Acts 17:11)

Interpretation

Interpretation has to do with discovering what the Scriptures say. It refers to how we understand what Scripture says by applying hermeneutics – or the art and science of Biblical interpretation. There are three general types of hermeneutical systems: Allegorical, Semi-Allegorical/Semi-Literal, and Literal (or Plain or Normal). Allegorical hermeneutics assigns symbolic senses to words, which results in a different meaning to the text, which the author never intended to convey. Literal (Plain or Normal) hermeneutics takes the plain literal sense while understanding the historical, immediate, and wider contexts, and the uses of figures of speech. This is also called the plain, literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation. This is the correct method of interpretation.

Application and the Sufficiency of Scripture

The last link in the chain is application, bringing truth to bear on one's heart so that transformation results. This step is frequently left out. When it is, the chain is broken, and the communication process is short-circuited! This link emphasizes that truth should affect how we think and act. This should occur because the Scriptures are authoritative and constitute the believer's only source of faith and practice (Matt 5:18; 2 Tim 3:15-17; Heb 4:12; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Only Scripture is perfectly adequate for all matters of faith and conduct – for salvation and sanctification. Only Scripture is able to meet all the spiritual needs of God's people. It is all-sufficient in regards to the soul of man, in our relationship to God, and in our relationship to others. It is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks. (2 Pet 1:3; Matt 4:4; Heb 4:12; 2 Tim 3:15-17; 1 Pet 2:2; Psa 19:7-13; 119:9, 11; 119:24)

Textual Criticism

There are most likely no original biblical manuscripts in existence today. However, there are ~5400 manuscripts, some only fragments, dating back to ~150 AD. Textual criticism (or lower criticism) is the science that studies the ancient biblical texts in an attempt to identify and remove transcription errors in order to recover the original. Ancient scribes made errors or alterations when copying manuscripts by hand. Given a manuscript copy, several or many copies, but not the original document, the textual critic seeks to reconstruct the original text (the archetype or autograph) as closely as possible. The phrase "lower criticism" is used to describe the contrast between textual criticism and "higher" criticism, which seeks to establish the authorship, date, and place of composition of the original text.

The earliest NT manuscripts were written on papyrus and date back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries. During these early centuries, the Christian church was under persecution by the Roman Empire and Bibles were routinely destroyed by the empire. As a result, there are only 76 papyrus fragments from this era that have been discovered. The earliest dated portion of the NT is a fragment of the gospel of John (18:31-33, 37-38) dated to AD 125 to 130. This is earlier than some more liberal scholars thought John was even written. Other major Papyrus manuscripts date from AD 250 and contain nearly all of the NT. Another manuscript contains most of the book of John, Jude, and 1 and 2 Peter and dates to AD 175 to 225.

After Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the state religion of Rome. As a result, there are more manuscripts and more complete manuscripts that date from 4th to the 9th century. These manuscripts are mostly written on vellum and are contained in a primitive form of book known as a codex. These codices are called the “uncials” because they are written completely in upper case letters without any spaces between the words. There are 297 uncial manuscripts. Most were discovered primarily in monasteries around the Mediterranean. There are only two passages of scripture that show any major differences between these codices. Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 do not appear in the Codex Sinaiticus or the Codex Vaticanus, and most scholars today do not believe these passages to have been part of the original text.

After the 9th century, the writing of Greek came to include lower case letters. Manuscripts from this era, therefore, came to be called the Minuscules. There are 4,643 known minuscule manuscripts. These manuscripts have more variation than the uncials. The variations, however, have specific patterns that allow scholars to show relationships between the various manuscripts. As a result, scholars are able to classify the texts into three different manuscript families: Alexandrian, Western and Byzantine.

In the 19th century, there were a tremendous number of new manuscripts being discovered. This led to development of textual criticism and more reliable versions of the Greek NT. The first well-received Greek NT based on the critical text was edited by Westcott and Hort in 1881. Eberhard Nestle completed his *Novum Testamentum Graece* in 1898. His son Erwin Nestle continued his work, and with Kurt Aland continued to revise editions of the text. The standard Nestle-Aland text now is the 27th edition (NA27). The NA27 was prepared primarily for scholars involved in textual criticism. The United Bible Society (UBS) republished the NA27 with helpful notes for students and translators and without much of the scholarly apparatus. The UBS Greek Testament is the standard critical text today.

The Textus Receptus

Many who hold to the KJV as the only true Bible argue their case from the Textus Receptus (or TR), under the theory that God must have preserved the original text completely intact. The Textus Receptus is the Greek text that formed the basis for the NT of the KJV. It is developed from a Greek text that was first compiled by Erasmus (1516), then edited by Stephanus, and again edited by Theodore Beza. It was based primarily upon half a dozen Greek manuscripts. Each made several updates of their respective works. The KJV translators made the largest use of Beza's editions of 1588-89 and 1598.

In 1633, two decades after the publication of the KJV, Bonaventure and Matthew Elzevir produced their second edition of the Greek NT. This edition mostly followed Beza's work but used other sources as well. In their preface, they claimed their Greek text was the "text which is now received by all." The Textus Receptus, Latin for the "received text," was born and is now considered by some to be identical to what was originally penned by the NT authors.

Of course, a declaration that this edition of the Greek NT is the received text does not make it so. Many of the same problems that come with viewing the KJV as the only inspired Bible are found with the idea of a received text, the Textus Receptus, as the identical replica of the original writings.

First, which text is the "Textus Receptus?" The term was first used by the Greek text produced by the Elzevir brothers, but their text is not identical to other Greek texts. Stephanus' 1550 edition of his Greek text has also been given the designation of Textus Receptus. When the term "Textus Receptus" is used today it normally refers to the Greek text that would reflect those textual choices made by the translators themselves rather than any one edition of a Greek text. Scrivener published a text in 1891 that is considered to be the Greek text that supports the KJV, thus the Textus Receptus.

It is important to emphasize that the KJV translators did not use the Textus Receptus. They used a variety of Greek texts and sometimes favored one text and sometimes another text. Therefore, no single Greek text identical to the Textus Receptus existed at the time of the translation of the KJV. When they finished their translation, they did not produce a Greek text that represented their textual decisions in cases where choices were necessary. Others have come behind them and have declared that their choices were providentially guided by God to completely represent the original writings of the biblical authors preserved by God.

In addition, the KJV translators used the same translation methods that are employed by most modern translations today, including the NIV and NASB. They worked by a committee, drew from all the Greek and Hebrew texts available to them rather than one text, and made decisions on which text had the best reading and how best to translate it into English so it would be best understood.

Even Erasmus, whose work set the foundation that others would build upon, compiled his text from several Greek manuscripts, not from a single manuscript. Erasmus could not find a manuscript that contained the entire Greek NT, so he used several for various parts of the NT. The oldest was from the 10th century, yet was considered to be the least reliable by Erasmus. Today ~5,400 handwritten manuscripts of all or parts of the Greek NT have been discovered, hundreds that are older than what was available to Erasmus.

Erasmus, like the KJV translators, did a superior job considering the resources that were available to him. However, clearly he was limited. For example, Erasmus had only one manuscript for the book of Revelation, which lacked the final leaf containing the last six verses of the book. For those verses, Erasmus relied on the Latin Vulgate translation. This explains why Rev 22:19 in the KJV reads "the book of life," while every known Greek manuscript reads "the tree of life." Yet it is claimed that the KJV has preserved the original Greek text in spite of this obvious error.

KJV	NASB
¹⁹ And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life , and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. Rev 22:19	¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. Rev 22:19

Another illustration of the same problem is in Acts 9:6 regarding Paul at the time of his conversion on the Damascus road, "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This was also added by Erasmus from the Latin Vulgate. This addition became part of the Textus Receptus, although there is no known Greek manuscript that contains this verse. It is apparently transferred from the parallel account in Acts 22:10. The result is the Textus Receptus includes a Greek sentence absent from all of the ~5,300 known Greek manuscripts. How can this possibly replicate the original text?

In addition, the men who worked to compile the Greek texts did not view themselves as producing an inerrant text for they each made several editions to improve their work. Stephanus placed variant readings that he felt to be credible in the margins of his text. Beza offered similar alternate readings. This is not done when there is a conviction regarding the accuracy of a work.

Furthermore, why should the Greek text behind the most widely used English Bible be the correct text? Why not the Greek text behind Martin Luther's German translation (the second edition of Erasmus' text from 1519)? One of the main arguments offered to support the Greek text underlying the KJV is its widespread and long use, which allegedly shows that God has preserved it. If this is compelling proof, then why not the Greek text behind Jerome's Vulgate (Latin)? Jerome's Latin translation has been used for 1,500 years and has been more widely spread.

Those who support the Textus Receptus do so because of their commitment to the KJV. Instead of working from the Greek text to construct a translation, they work backwards from the translation to construct a Greek text from it. Then, in spite of the fact that the resultant Textus Receptus is not identical to any published Greek text or hand written manuscript available at the time of the publication of the KJV in 1611, it is considered to be God's providentially preserved text.

Logic

If the KJV is the only true, inspired Bible, ...

...what was God's true Word before 1611? There were many English Bibles used by the people at the time of the publication of the KJV, such as Wycliffe's, Tyndale's, the Bishops' Bible, and the Geneva Bible. Were any of these inspired by God? If so then the KJV is not the only true Bible and if not, then those who lived in 1610 and before could not possess a true Bible. And why choose the KJV as the standard from among these?

... is English the only language that has God's inspired Word? Do people who speak other languages have to learn English in order to read the KJV? Or can the Bible be translated into their language? Amazingly, some people have actually translated the KJV into other languages, instead of translating from the original language.

... which edition of it is the absolute standard? After the first edition in 1611, subsequent editions were produced in 1612 and 1613. Over the years many editions were printed, each with slight changes in the wording of the text. The American Bible Society examined six editions of the KJV in the nineteenth century and discovered around 24,000 differences in the text and punctuation. Most KJVs used today follow a revision from 1769 by Benjamin Blayney. Since not every KJV is identical with every other KJV, when they deviate from each other, which is the one that is not corrupted?

The KJV translators themselves clearly did not believe they were working on the only inspired English version. In contrast to those who condemn the use of other translations, the KJV translators actually advocated the use of other translations in the preface of their work by writing,

"For as it is a fault of incredulity, to doubt of those things that are evident: so to determine of such things as the Spirit of God hath left (even in the judgment of the judicious) questionable, can be not less than presumption. Therefore, as St. Augustine saith, that *variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures.*"

The translators also considered other translations to be the Word of God, not just the KJV,

"we do not deny, nay we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession, (for we have seen none of theirs of the whole Bible as yet) containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God."

Some of the translators used earlier English versions after the publication of the KJV; even quoting the Geneva Bible in the KJV preface. This also shows that they did not hold to their version as the only reliable text.

The KJV translators also included variant readings in the margins, indicating their uncertainty concerning the correct reading. The original 1611 edition contained 4,223 marginal notes giving a more literal translation and another 2,738 alternative readings that in the opinion of the translators were "not very less probable than those in the text." These marginal readings indicate that the translators did not consider their work to be impossible to be improved upon. Indeed, they considered the marginal readings to be potentially valid renderings of the original text by writing in the preface of the KJV,

"They that are wise, had rather have their judgments at liberty in differences of reading, than to be captivated to one, when it may be the other."

When the translators finished their work they did not see their translation as being perfected. They considered it wise to improve upon translations by writing,

"Yet before we end, we must answer a third cabil and objection of theirs against us, for altering and amending our translations so oft; wherein truly they deal hardly, and strangely with us. For to whomever was it imputed for a fault (by such as were wise) to go over that which he had done, and amend it where he saw cause?"

Finally, the translators included the Apocrypha in the original KJV. Few, if any, advocates of the KJV as the only inspired Bible would accept the Apocrypha as inspired. Few even seem to be aware of this fact. If they were consistent, they would include the Apocryphal books as inspired by God.

Conclusion

While the KJV is a solid word-for-word Bible translation, it suffers from two significant weaknesses. First, its style and vocabulary has become difficult for modern readers as the English language has changed over the past 400 years. Second, its translation was based on a few manuscripts rather than the thousands that we now possess. While the methodology of the translators was similar to what is used today, they simply did not have the oldest and best manuscripts available to them. While no doctrinal issues were affected by the limitation of the KJV, even the translators themselves understood that their work could be improved upon as time moved along.

Even if the KJV is preferred, it is wrong to condemn all modern versions as corrupt because they deviate from the KJV. It is also wrong to attack those men who have served the church in providing more current translations that assist in understanding the Bible. While we do not defend all modern translations or translators, the issue is simply how faithful a translation is to the original text, not whether it differs from the KJV. It is also wrong to judge believers who use translations other than the KJV. God's Word has been preserved, now it must be understood and applied.