

Good News Bible translator dies; opposed inerrantists: Robert Bratcher supported dynamic equivalence

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

Robert Bratcher, the New Testament translator of the *Good News Bible* which became a best-selling version in the 1970s, died July 10 at a retirement community in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He was 90.

He became involved in controversy with Southern Baptist fundamentalists in 1981 by contending that belief in an inerrant Bible is idolatry and intellectual dishonesty. But it was an earlier argument with his denomination that led him into a new translating career.

Born in Brazil as the son of a longtime Southern Baptist missionary, Bratcher taught at Baptist Theological Seminary in Rio de Janeiro from 1949 until 1956. That ended when he resigned from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in a dispute over his teaching.

Bratcher went to work with the American Bible Society on a temporary basis, but the association lasted until he retired in 1995. The ABS had been looking for the best translation for people who speak English as a second language. Bratcher was tapped by Eugene Nida, who headed the ABS translation department, to do a New Testament translation.

Released with the title *Good News for Modern Man*, the ABS's New Testament was first issued in 1966. The complete Bible was published in 1976 as the *Good News Bible* (also known as *Today's English Version*). Bratcher's name appeared in early versions, but most people did not know he translated the New Testament and oversaw the Old Testament translations.

The *Good News Bible* used a theory of translation termed “dynamic equivalence,” in which the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek are expressed in a translation “thought for thought.”

The *Good News Bible* passed what had become a litmus test for so-called liberal translations, translating Isaiah 7:14 to refer to a pregnant “young woman” instead of the traditional rendering of “virgin.” (The NRSV uses “young woman.”)

Bratcher said the Hebrew word used by Isaiah means a young woman of marriageable age, though not necessarily a virgin. When Matthew 1:23 quotes the passage as prophesying the birth of Jesus, the word is *virgin*, implying that the New Testament author used a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Bratcher drew the ire of Southern Baptist fundamentalists in 1981 over his critical remarks at a seminar in Dallas. “Only willful ignorance or intellectual dishonesty can account for the claim that the Bible is inerrant and infallible,” he said. “No truth-loving, God-respecting, Christ-honoring believer should be guilty of such heresy. To invest the Bible with the qualities of inerrancy and infallibility is to idolatry it, to transform it into a false god.”

The translator’s comments made it into the *New York Times*, setting off a controversy that prompted many conservatives to stop giving to the American Bible Society, which led to a financial crisis.

Determining him to be a liability, ABS officials decided that Bratcher should be dismissed, but overseas colleagues in the United Bible Societies, the umbrella fellowship of 145 individual Bible societies, including ABS, supported him. Bratcher did resign from the ABS but continued to do the same job as a consultant for the United Bible Societies.

Bratcher was a longtime member and Bible teacher at Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill. –*Bob Allen, Associated Baptist Press*