Are more Bible versions bad for the Good Book?

by Daniel Burke in the November 16, 2010 issue

If you stacked all the Bibles sitting in American homes, the tower would rise 29 million feet, nearly 1,000 times the height of Mount Everest.

More than 90 percent of American households own a Bible and the average family owns three, according to pollsters at the Barna Group. The American Bible Society hands out 5 million copies of the scriptures each year; 1.5 billion Gideon Bibles are available in hotel rooms worldwide.

Scripture outsells the latest diet fads, murder mysteries and celebrity bios year after year. Evangelical publishers alone sold an estimated 20 million Bibles in recession-battered 2009, raking in about $500 million in sales, according to Michael Covington, information and education director of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.

Experts say it's nearly impossible to calculate exactly how many Bibles are sold each year. But one thing is clear: the Good Book is great for business. "Bibles are in many ways a cash cow," said Phyllis Tickle, a former longtime religion editor at *Publishers Weekly.* "The Bible is the mainstay of many a publishing program."

However, some Christian scholars wonder whether too much Good News can sometimes be a bad thing—as a major new translation and waves of books marking next year's 400th anniversary of the venerable King James Bible inundate the market.

The assortment of translations and "niche Bibles" (think, The Holy Bible: Stock Car Racing Edition) sow confusion and division among Christians, invite ridicule from relativists and risk reducing God's word to a personal shopping preference, some scholars say.

"I think we are drifting more and more to a diverse Babel of translations," said David Lyle Jeffrey, former provost of Baylor University and an expert on biblical translations. Jeffrey believes that Americans need a "common Bible"—a role the King James Version played for centuries—to communicate the grandeur of scripture without reducing it to "shopping-center-level" discourse.

"When we have so much diversity we lose our common voice," he said. "It is in effect moving away from a common membership in the body of Christ into disparate, confusing misrepresentations of the rich wisdom of scripture, which ought to unify us."

Leland Ryken, an English professor at Wheaton College, a leading evangelical school in Illinois, was more blunt. "When there is wide divergence among Bible translations, readers have no way of knowing what the original text really says," Ryken said. "It's like being given four different scores for the same football game, or three contradictory directions for getting to a town in the middle of the state."

Despite the Bible's ubiquity, Americans are not necessarily reading or absorbing the contents, said Paul Franklyn, associate publisher of the Common English Bible, a new translation sponsored by five publishers for mainline denominations—the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ.

For example, half of Christians cannot name the four Gospels and a third cannot identify Genesis as the Bible's first book, according to a recent study conducted by the Pew

Forum on Religion & Public Life.

The new Common English Bible aims to present an easy-to-read translation from the "theological center," Franklyn said. Its New Testament debuts this fall; the entire Bible is due next year.

Despite the profitability of Bible publishing, penetrating the crowded and competitive market is a "big risk" requiring equal parts scholarship and salesmanship, Franklyn said. The Common English Bible publishers spent $1 million on the translation and will dole out another $3 million to get people to "pay attention" to it, he said.

Scholars estimate that at least 200 English translations have been published since 1900—many of them revisions of earlier texts. Sorting out the differences between the New American Bible and the New American Standard Bible, for example, can be daunting even for experienced readers.

The market can be so confusing and crowded that half of the customers who visit Christian stores to buy a Bible leave without one, according to a study presented to Christian retailers in 2006.

"Heck, I'm overwhelmed and I'm supposed to know what the hee-haw I'm doing," said Tickle, author of *The Great Emergence,* a well-regarded book on the future of Christianity. "Bibliolatry is not a word I use very often, but we are probably veering very close to it." —RNS