

A Bible translation for everyone?

It was the all-time paperback best seller. But *Good News* had its critics.

by [John Fea](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue



Illustration of Luke 9:15-17 by Annie Vallotton for the *Good News Translation*. © 1976, 1992, 2015 American Bible Society.

For a baby boomer named Rick, the cover of *Good News for Modern Man* evoked a flood of wonderful memories. Responding to an online survey that I conducted on the impact of this version of the Bible, Rick reported that in the late 1960s he was a member of a youth group in California which sang folk-rock Christian songs using acoustic guitars. Rick's church gave out copies of *Good News for Modern Man* like

candy. As youth group started each week, he and his friends would crowd together “and somebody would start tossing—literally tossing—the Testament and a brown Youth for Christ songbook” to everyone in attendance. Like typical adolescent boys, Rick and his friends got rowdy sometimes, and they used the copies of *Good News* to beat one another over the head until the youth pastor calmed everyone down.

Tom, another respondent to the survey, remembered that in 1972 he was a charismatic Catholic participating in an ecumenical Jesus People prayer meeting with Pentecostals. When they weren’t on the ground speaking in tongues (which Tom called a “joyous babble in the Spirit”) they were playing “Bible roulette” with their copies of *Good News for Modern Man*. Someone would randomly read a passage aloud, and one or two people in the group would comment on how the particular passage spoke to them.

Released by the American Bible Society in September 1966, *Good News for Modern Man*—subtitled *The New Testament and Psalms in Today’s English Version*—quickly became a cultural phenomenon and one of the most successful religious publications in American history. For the price of a quarter, the English-speaking public (and eventually the world) could read the Bible in a language that was (in the words of ABS publicity materials) “as fresh and immediate as the morning newspaper.”

Good News for Modern Man was the brainchild of Eugene Nida, an ABS linguist who pioneered the “dynamic equivalence” approach to Bible translation. At the heart of this theory is the idea that the best translation of a Bible text is one that allows readers to forget they are reading a translation at all. Nida was one of the first Bible translation theorists to take the linguistic position of the reader this seriously. A good translation, he argued, would arouse in the reader the same reaction that the writer of the text hoped to produce in his “first and immediate” readers. For Nida, the test of a translation is how well the readers understand the message of the original text, the ease with which they can grasp this meaning, and the level of involvement with the text that a person experiences as a result of reading the translation.

On the latter point, Nida wrote, “perhaps no better compliment could come to a translator than to have someone say, ‘I never knew before that God spoke my language.’” He was convinced that it was necessary at times to change the words of the Bible. Translators seeking dynamic equivalence were willing to move away from

a word-for-word approach toward a meaning-for-meaning or thought-for-thought approach.

Nida turned to Robert Bratcher, a Southern Baptist Bible scholar, to produce a dynamic equivalent translation of the Bible. Bratcher and his committee developed short and simple sentences, each containing “one or two ideas or statements of fact,” and they used a style Bratcher called “modern American vernacular.” He strove for clarity and refused to use archaic terms such as *thee* or *thou*, which the Revised Standard Version—produced at midcentury—still used when referring to God.

In the Today’s English Version, Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount does not say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (as he does in the Revised Standard Version) but “Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!” And instead of “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,” TEV’s Jesus says, “Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised!”

Within a few years, 30 million copies of the *Good News Bible* had been sold.

Bratcher also wanted his translation to be “precise.” All ambiguity was to be avoided. If there were multiple ways to translate a particular Greek passage, Bratcher would choose one and simply disregard the others. No alternative readings were listed in footnotes.

Good News for Modern Man was released after two and a half years of work. It was 608 pages long and appeared with a gray paperback cover filled with black lines, giving it the look of a newspaper page. The title was printed in bold red letters in the upper left corner protruding from what appears to be a tear or a hole in a newspaper. The subtitle was printed in smaller red letters within a similar jagged hole in the lower right. Scattered across the cover—both the front and the back—were the mastheads of international newspapers. The image suggests that “good news” is breaking through the depressing stories found in the daily newspapers. The message of Jesus Christ is breaking news for humankind.

The response to the work was overwhelming. The United Methodist Church bought 250,000 copies of the TEV Sermon on the Mount. The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention purchased 100,000 copies of *Good News*. In the first year of publication the ABS distributed over 5.5 million copies of the new translation

and by the end of 1967 that number had reached over 8.5 million. In May 1971 the book blew past *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care* (which had sold 25 million copies) as the all-time paperback best seller, and by the end of 1971 it had reached the 30 million mark.

Besides providing a fresh, readable translation, *The New Testament and Psalms in Today's English Version* included appealing illustrations. Bratcher received his share of accolades for the TEV, but the success of his translation brought international attention to 50-year-old Swiss artist Annie Vallotton. *Good News for Modern Man* included 378 of Vallotton's line drawings, done in a style Vallotton called "sparse" and "childishly naive."

The biblical scholar Raymond Brown, who was president of the Catholic Biblical Association when the TEV was released, told the *New York Times* that he found the "little stick men . . . kind of catchy." The simple style of the drawings were a perfect fit for a simple translation. Vallotton hoped that they would "open a door to the Bible" and provide "a springboard" for people to explore the word of God in a deeper fashion.

The ABS was quick to point out that Vallotton's drawings transcended nationality, language, and race. By omitting facial details, skin color, and other cultural indicators, Vallotton hoped that every reader would see in the illustrations their own Jesus, one that was "particularly right for him or her." The nature of these illustrations added to the ecumenical feel of *Good News for Modern Man*. This was a Bible for everyone.

Following Vatican II, with its renewed emphasis on biblical literacy, Catholics had begun looking for readable translations of the Bible, and many of them turned to *Good News for Modern Man*. Father Walter Abbott of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, a staunch defender of Protestant-Catholic relations based on a shared Bible, called it "the best modern version for the people that I have yet seen." Warner Hutchinson, who was serving as Asia consultant for the United Bible Societies, wrote to the ABS in May 1968 that *Good News* was being used in Catholic schools in New Guinea. He also reported that the bishop of Chile had purchased 2,000 copies for distribution among his parishes.

In March 1969, Cardinal Richard Cushing, archbishop of Boston, approved the TEV for Catholic readers and gave it an official imprimatur. The imprimatur edition was

blue with a small Maltese cross on the spine and front. ABS general secretary Laton Holmgren delivered Cushing's copy personally. *Good News for Modern Man* did, in fact, do a lot to bring Catholics and Protestants together.

Some enthusiasts believed that the accessibility of *Good News for Modern Man* made it an ideal tool for evangelism. Nida thought that it spoke directly to "those who have never become acquainted with the time-hallowed religious vocabulary and to those who have been alienated from established religious institutions." He thought that its use in evangelism was one of the reasons why *Good News* was so successful. Billy Graham informed Holmgren that he was now using the TEV in both his personal devotions and during his evangelistic crusades.

In 1968, the ABS produced 1.3 million copies of a special version of *Good News* for the Baptist General Convention of Texas as part of its participation in the Crusade of the Americas, a massive evangelistic campaign conducted throughout the Western hemisphere. It was the largest request for Bibles the ABS had ever received—a "Texas-sized order." Inside the special Testament was published a list of "steps to becoming a Christian." The list encouraged readers to acknowledge their need for God, recognize God's love, repent of their sins, accept Jesus Christ and his forgiveness as "the only way of encountering God," and commit to God's plan for their lives. The section ended with a prayer that readers could pray to receive salvation. There was a spot to write one's name and the date on which they accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior and Lord.

Not everyone was enthusiastic about *Good News for Modern Man*. Some scholars thought Bratcher's translation was simplistic, pitched at too low a level of reading ability. Evangelical scholars worried that a thought-for-thought translation rather than word-for-word translation amounted to a paraphrase of scripture and undermined the conviction that every single word of the Bible is inspired by God.

In 1969, E. L. Bynum, pastor of the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, wrote a pamphlet titled "Why We Reject This Version," arguing that the TEV undermined some fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, including the virgin birth of Jesus. He pointed out that it had used the word *woman* rather than *virgin* in translating the prophecy in Isaiah 7 about a woman giving birth to "Immanuel"—a prophecy picked up by New Testament writers when they affirmed that Mary, the

mother of Jesus, was a virgin. (Bynum's criticism resurrected a previous controversy regarding a similar decision made by translators of the RSV.) The TEV translators also removed the words *blood* and *redemption* from the text, playing down the traditional teaching that Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifice of animals as a means to the forgiveness of sins. It is hard to know what kind of impact Bynum's pamphlet had on the conservative opposition to *Good News for Modern Man* (he claimed that 700,000 copies of his pamphlet were in circulation), but it did not appear to hurt overall sales.

Good News for Modern Man drew other complaints. Rebecca Marchand, an ABS supporter from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was bothered by the gender exclusive title. "Why was *Good News for Modern Man* ever called by that title? Especially in these days when women are trying to find equality." The ABS responded by noting that the *man* in the title, "as any dictionary will convey," was used as a generic term that does not "of necessity connote sex—male or female." The ABS also noted that when the entire TEV Bible became available, it would be called the *Good News Bible*.

Nida's vision for a Bible in plain English language represented an important chapter in the post-Protestant Reformation quest to make the Bible accessible and readable to as many people as possible in the hope that their lives might be changed by its life-giving message. *Good News for Modern Man* set the stage for other dynamic equivalence Bibles and paraphrases such as such as *The Message*, *The Voice*, *The New International Version*, and *The New Living Translation*. It spurred a rise in Bible sales in the early 1970s, and made the American Bible Society a household name among Christians. Today the *Good News Bible* (often referred to by its official name, the *Good News Translation*) remains in print—and it remains a significant part of countless baby boomers' spiritual pilgrimage.

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