



Modern Versions: The Root Cause of America's Decline

Because Every Word Matters

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America is in decline. The evidence is all around us. The traditional understanding of marriage has been challenged, sexual morality has been radically redefined, the authority of parents has been weakened, respect for human life has diminished, biblical Christianity has been pushed out of public life, and the idea that moral truth is determined by God has increasingly been replaced by the idea that each individual has the right to determine his own truth. Americans argue about the symptoms constantly. Conservatives point to the breakdown of the family. Christians point to secularism. Others point to the sexual revolution, the public schools, Hollywood, the courts, or the rise of political liberalism. All of these observations contain truth, but they miss the foundation beneath them. The fundamental question is not what caused secularism, sexual immorality, or the collapse of biblical morality. The fundamental question is why those things were able to gain such widespread acceptance in a nation that was once profoundly influenced by the Bible. The answer begins with the authority of God's Word. And the weakening of that authority is inseparably connected to the replacement of the KJB with modern versions of the Bible.

For centuries, the English-speaking world had a Bible that provided a common standard of biblical language and authority. The KJB became deeply embedded in American life. It was read in homes, churches, schools, and communities. Its language shaped American literature and public discourse, and its teachings provided a moral vocabulary by which right and wrong could be understood. Historians have documented the extraordinary cultural influence of the Bible in America and the central place the KJB held in that history. Mark Noll has described the Bible as having played a central role in the development of American culture, while studies of the KJB's place in American history demonstrate that it functioned for generations as far more than a religious book sitting on a church shelf. It was a cultural and moral authority.¹

That common biblical foundation began to change dramatically during the twentieth century. Modern English translations multiplied, and eventually they displaced the KJB as the Bible most widely used by American Protestants. The National Endowment for the Humanities notes that by 1986 the New International Version had overtaken the KJB as the best-selling Bible translation in America. The significance of that change goes beyond sales figures. America had moved from a culture in which one Bible had provided a dominant biblical voice to a culture in which multiple translations presented Scripture in different words and, in some cases, different textual forms, which led to altered doctrines.²

The defenders of modern versions frequently describe this change as nothing more than an effort to make the Bible easier to understand. There is

certainly nothing wrong with wanting people to understand Scripture. But that explanation does not tell the whole story. Modern versions did not merely replace archaic English with contemporary English. Many were produced from different underlying Greek textual traditions and employed translation philosophies different from those used by the translators of the KJB and the Bibles before it. As a result, modern versions contain numerous differences from the KJB that go beyond vocabulary. Words and phrases are omitted, passages are bracketed or footnoted, and statements are sometimes rendered in ways that alter their grammatical emphasis and their doctrinal interpretation.³

Can two books that contradict each other both be the Word of God? The answer is no. The KJB and modern versions do not merely differ in vocabulary or sentence structure; they differ in words, phrases, and passages of Scripture. Words found in the KJB are sometimes omitted from modern versions, passages are sometimes omitted from the main text or relegated to footnotes, and statements are sometimes changed so that the wording no longer agrees with the KJB. These differences are not imaginary, nor can they be dismissed as simply making the English easier to understand. When one book contains words that another book removes, or when two books give different readings of the same passage, they cannot both be the identical Word of God in that place. God does not contradict Himself. Therefore, the question before us is not which Bible a person prefers, but which Bible faithfully contains the words God gave His people. Until Christians understand the magnitude of these differences, they may believe the controversy is merely about style or preference. Once they see the differences, they must confront the more fundamental question of biblical authority: Which words are God's words?

Is God capable of preserving His Word as He promised? Scripture repeatedly presents God's Word as something He would preserve, not something He would allow to disappear until scholars centuries later reconstructed it from competing manuscripts. God declared that His words would be preserved from generation to generation, and Christ Himself said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." If God is capable of creating His Word, inspiring His Word, and giving His Word to mankind, He is certainly capable of preserving His Word. The question is therefore not whether preservation is possible, but whether God meant what He said when He promised it. If God's people must ultimately depend upon textual critics to determine which words belong in Scripture and which do not, then the certainty of God's promise of preservation has been replaced by uncertainty in man's reconstruction. The KJB stands as a historic testimony to the conviction that God did preserve His words for

English-speaking people. Modern textual criticism, by contrast, has produced English Bibles that repeatedly depart from those preserved words. The issue, therefore, reaches beyond manuscripts and translation methods: Do we believe God kept His promise to preserve His Word?

What are the fruits of the KJB and the modern versions? The historical record provides the answer. For generations, the KJB stood at the center of English-speaking Christianity while biblical literacy, preaching, evangelism, missions, Christian education, and a distinctly biblical moral framework profoundly shaped churches and the societies influenced by them. Then, during the twentieth century, the KJB was progressively displaced by modern versions, while confidence in the absolute authority of Scripture simultaneously declined and theological liberalism, moral compromise, doctrinal uncertainty, and accommodation to the culture gained increasing influence within much of Christianity. This was not merely a change in the cover of the Bible. When the words of Scripture were increasingly subjected to the judgments of textual critics and modern translations replaced the established text, the church's confidence in the certainty and authority of those words was weakened. The result was not simply a different style of Bible; it was a different relationship to biblical authority. The modern versions did not merely appear during the decline of biblical Christianity—they became instruments through which that decline was advanced by placing uncertainty and alteration where previous generations had possessed confidence in a preserved text. The KJB and the modern versions therefore must be judged not only by what they claim to be, but by the fruit produced when each became the Bible placed before the people of God. The foundational cause of the decline was not merely a change in society that happened to coincide with a change in Bibles. It was the change in the Bible itself—the abandonment of confidence in God's preserved words—which opened the door to the erosion of the authority upon which Christian doctrine, morality, and culture had rested.

The Bible itself warns us about this process. In Genesis 3, Satan's attack did not begin with a wholesale denial of God. He began with a question: "Yea, hath God said?"⁴ Satan introduced doubt about what God had said. Eve then altered God's command in her response, and Satan ultimately contradicted God by declaring, "Ye shall not surely die." The progression is significant. First came questioning. Then alteration. Then contradiction. Then disobedience. Satan demonstrated that God's Word does not have to be rejected all at once to produce rebellion. It can first be questioned, then altered, and eventually contradicted.

The same principle appears when Satan tempted Christ. Satan quoted Scripture, but he did not faithfully present the entire statement of Scripture.

In Matthew 4, Satan cited Psalm 91 concerning God's protection, but omitted the words "to keep thee in all thy ways."⁵ He then used the altered quotation to tempt Jesus to act contrary to God's will. Jesus responded by quoting another Scripture: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." Satan did not have to deny Scripture to misuse it. He could manipulate it. He could omit something. He could change the application. He could make the Word say something that served his purpose.

That should make Christians take every alteration of Scripture seriously.

The problem with modern versions is therefore not merely that some verses are shorter or that some words have disappeared. The deeper problem is that changes in the biblical text can affect the certainty with which doctrines are presented. Some changes are obvious. Others are subtle. And subtle changes can be especially dangerous because they are easily overlooked.

Romans 10:9 provides an important example. The KJB says, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."⁶ A number of modern versions present the wording as a confession that "Jesus is Lord." The difference may appear insignificant to someone reading quickly. But it demonstrates precisely why every word matters. The KJB identifies the object of confession as "the Lord Jesus." Modern renderings can restructure the statement so that the sinner is explicitly required to make a declaration concerning Jesus' lordship. Christ certainly is Lord, and every Christian should confess that truth. But the question is whether Scripture presents that declaration as the condition that must be spoken before the sinner can be saved. The wording matters because salvation is not something to which man adds a work of his own. The sinner believes on Christ; he does not earn salvation by performing a preliminary act of submission.

The distinction can be illustrated by a man drowning in a lake. He has never met the man who is coming to rescue him. He only knows that someone is capable of saving him. He cries out for help. He does not first have to enter into a servant-master relationship with the stranger before the rescuer is permitted to save him. Likewise, the issue in Romans 10:9 is not whether Jesus is Lord. He is. The issue is whether the wording of Scripture changes the condition of salvation by placing a particular declaration or act before believing. A seemingly small grammatical difference can therefore have doctrinal implications.

The same principle can be seen in 1 Timothy 3:16. The KJB reads, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh."⁷ The explicit declaration is unmistakable: God was manifest in the

flesh. Modern versions commonly read, "He was manifested in the flesh." The doctrine of Christ's deity remains supported throughout Scripture, but the explicit identification of the person manifested in the flesh as "God" has been replaced by a pronoun. The reader must now obtain the identification from context rather than receiving it in the same direct statement. Again, the change may look small. The doctrinal significance of the statement is not small.

Colossians 1:14 provides another example. The KJB says, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins."⁸ Many modern versions omit the words "through his blood." Redemption and forgiveness remain in the verse, but the explicit reference to Christ's blood as connected with redemption is removed. The doctrine of Christ's blood has not vanished from the rest of the New Testament. But that does not make the change irrelevant. When an explicit doctrinal statement disappears from one passage, the textual testimony to that doctrine has been reduced. When such changes occur repeatedly, the cumulative effect can be substantial.

Perhaps the most famous example is 1 John 5:7. The KJB reads, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."⁹ The statement is extraordinarily clear. The Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost bear record in heaven, and these three are one. Most modern English versions either omit this wording from the main text or place it in a textual note. The doctrine of the Trinity does not depend upon one verse alone, but that is not the issue. The issue is that an explicit Trinitarian statement found in the KJB is no longer presented to the reader in the same way. The reader is introduced to uncertainty concerning whether those words belong in the biblical text. A doctrine that once had an unmistakable statement in the text has become, in the modern Bible-reading experience, a question of textual evidence.

The ending of Mark presents the same problem. The KJB includes Mark 16:9–20. Many modern versions place those verses in brackets or accompany them with notes explaining that some manuscripts do not contain the passage.¹⁰ Whatever position one takes concerning the manuscript evidence, the practical effect on the ordinary reader is obvious: the reader is told that the authenticity of a substantial portion of Scripture is disputed. The reader has moved from simply reading God's Word to evaluating whether the words before him actually belong to God's Word. Again, the question becomes, "Hath God said?"

That question is at the heart of the modern textual controversy.

Doctrine determines how Christians understand God, salvation, sin, marriage, human life, morality, worship, judgment, and the Christian's

responsibility toward the world. If the words establishing those doctrines are altered, omitted, weakened, or questioned, the doctrines themselves can eventually be reexamined. Once doctrine is reexamined, practice follows. And when Christian practice changes, morality changes.

The history of American Protestantism demonstrates that the battle over biblical authority has been real and consequential. Higher criticism and theological liberalism challenged traditional views of biblical inspiration and authority. Churches responded in different ways. Some resisted. Others accommodated the new approaches. The result was a growing shift from the conviction that Scripture itself was the final authority toward approaches that gave greater authority to scholarship, historical criticism, experience, reason, and cultural judgment.¹¹

The Southern Baptist Convention has at times taken strong stands against theological liberalism and against particular modern translation practices, but this should not be confused with a return to the historic KJB. The SBC itself commissioned and promoted the HCSB, now the CSB, a modern translation based upon the critical Greek text. Thus, even where the SBC has resisted certain forms of doctrinal or cultural liberalization, it has not maintained the KJB as the standard English Bible.

Any genuine effort to restore the churches and, ultimately, to help restore this nation must begin with a return to the purity and authority of God's Word. It is not enough to oppose liberal theology, defend traditional morality, or attempt to restore Christian influence in society while accepting a Bible that has itself been altered, weakened, or stripped of words that God preserved. The church cannot faithfully correct error if the standard by which error is judged has been compromised. Nor can a nation be called back to biblical righteousness if the churches calling it back have themselves moved away from the words of Scripture. If the Word of God is the foundation upon which doctrine, morality, and righteous government must rest, then restoring those things requires restoring confidence in the very words upon which they rest. The battle for biblical morality and the battle for the purity of God's Word cannot ultimately be separated. If we want to restore the churches and see this nation turn back toward righteousness, we must first return to the Word of God as He preserved it.

The issue is not whether every Christian who reads a modern version will immediately abandon biblical morality. Clearly, many sincere Christians who use modern versions continue to believe and practice much of the truth preserved in the KJB. Neither is it necessary to prove that every modern translation was deliberately produced with the intention of destroying Christianity. Such questions of individual motive do not settle the matter.

The issue is whether the words of Scripture have been changed, omitted, weakened, or otherwise altered, and whether those changes affect what the reader sees as the Word of God. A sincere reader can be sincerely wrong if the text placed before him has been changed. The question, therefore, is not the sincerity of the reader or the stated intentions of the translators, but whether the modern versions faithfully preserve the words God gave.

America's decline therefore should not be viewed as a series of unrelated events.

The pieces fit together.

First came a weakening of confidence in the precise authority of Scripture. Then came increasing freedom to reinterpret Scripture. Reinterpretation produced changes in doctrine. Changed doctrine produced changes in Christian practice. Changed Christian practice weakened the church's resistance to cultural change. Cultural change transformed the nation's understanding of morality. And once the culture no longer recognized biblical authority, the moral restraints that had once governed American society could be discarded openly.

The chain is straightforward:

God's Word → Biblical Authority → Doctrine → Morality → Culture → Nation

If the Word is weakened at the beginning of that chain, everything downstream becomes vulnerable.

This is why the common explanations for America's decline are inadequate by themselves. The sexual revolution explains a great deal about sexual immorality, but it does not explain why the sexual revolution was able to overcome a culture once strongly shaped by biblical teaching. Secularism explains the removal of biblical ideas from public life, but it does not explain why the churches became increasingly unable or unwilling to defend those ideas. The decline of the family explains an important symptom of cultural collapse, but it does not explain why the biblical definition of the family lost its authority. Political liberalism explains particular policies, but it does not explain why millions of Americans came to accept those policies as morally legitimate.

The deeper explanation is the collapse of the authority of God's Word.

And that brings us back to modern versions.

The answer, therefore, is not simply to complain about America's decline.

The answer is to return to the foundation.

America does not need another political slogan. It does not merely need better laws. It does not need another election to solve a spiritual problem. If the foundation remains broken, political victories will only provide temporary relief. A nation cannot permanently restore biblical morality while abandoning the biblical authority upon which that morality rests.

The church must return to the authority of God's Word.

And that requires taking the words of Scripture seriously.

It requires Christians to stop treating textual changes as insignificant merely because the differences are small. It requires us to recognize that doctrine is built from words, that meaning is communicated through words, and that changing words can change meaning.

A single word can matter.

A pronoun can matter.

A phrase can matter.

A sentence can matter.

A verse can matter.

A footnote can matter.

Every word matters.

That is why the question of the KJB is not an argument about nostalgia or literary preference. It is not merely a debate between people who like old English and people who prefer modern English. It is a question of whether God's people possess the very words of God with confidence.

The KJB does not tell the reader to begin by asking what God might have said.

It speaks with authority.

"Thus saith the Lord."

That is the foundation America desperately needs to recover.

The decline of America is not fundamentally a political problem. It is not fundamentally an educational problem. It is not fundamentally a media problem. It is not fundamentally a family problem. It is not fundamentally a sexual problem.

Those are manifestations of a deeper problem.

America's foundation was biblical authority, and biblical authority depends upon confidence in the Word of God.

When the words of that authority are changed, omitted, questioned, or placed under the judgment of man, the foundation is weakened.

And when the foundation is weakened, eventually everything built upon it begins to fall.

Modern versions did not merely change the way Americans read the Bible. They helped change the way Americans understood the authority of the Bible. Once biblical authority was weakened, doctrine could be changed, morality could be redefined, the church could be reshaped, and the culture could be transformed.

That is why modern versions must be examined not merely as alternative translations, but as a foundational issue in the history of America's moral decline.

The question is not whether every person who reads a modern version will reject biblical morality.

The question is what happens to a civilization when the authority that once established its moral foundation is progressively weakened.

The evidence demands that we take that question seriously.

America changed because America first changed its relationship to the authority of God's Word.

And at the center of that change stands the modern Bible.

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Because Every Word Matters.

Endnotes

1. Mark A. Noll, *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911* (Oxford University Press); see also the Oxford Academic discussion of the Bible's central role in American history and culture.
2. National Endowment for the Humanities, “The Everlasting Bible,” documenting the historical dominance of the KJB and the rise of modern English translations, including the NIV's overtaking of the KJB as America's best-selling Bible translation in 1986.
3. Cambridge University Press, *The King James Bible after Four Hundred Years*, discussing the transition from the KJB's dominant position to a multitude of modern translations and biblical voices.
4. Genesis 3:1, KJB.
5. Matthew 4:5–7; Psalm 91:11, KJB. Satan's quotation in Matthew 4 does not include the phrase “to keep thee in all thy ways.”
6. Romans 10:9, KJB. For comparison of the wording among the KJB, NIV, ESV, and NASB, see BibleGateway's parallel translations.
7. 1 Timothy 3:16, KJB. Comparative modern-version renderings can be examined through the parallel translations available at BibleGateway.
8. Colossians 1:14, KJB. Compare modern translations at BibleGateway.
9. 1 John 5:7, KJB. For comparison with modern English translations and discussion of the textual issue, see BibleGateway and scholarly treatments of the Johannine Comma.
10. Mark 16:9–20, KJB. Many modern translations identify the textual question in brackets, notes, or introductory comments.
11. Michael J. Lee, discussions of the erosion of biblical certainty and the development of historical-critical approaches in American Christianity.
12. Baptist Press, Southern Baptist Convention history concerning the 1925, 1963, and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message revisions, including the Conservative Resurgence and the strengthening of statements concerning biblical authority, family, homosexuality, pornography, sexual immorality, human life, and gender roles.