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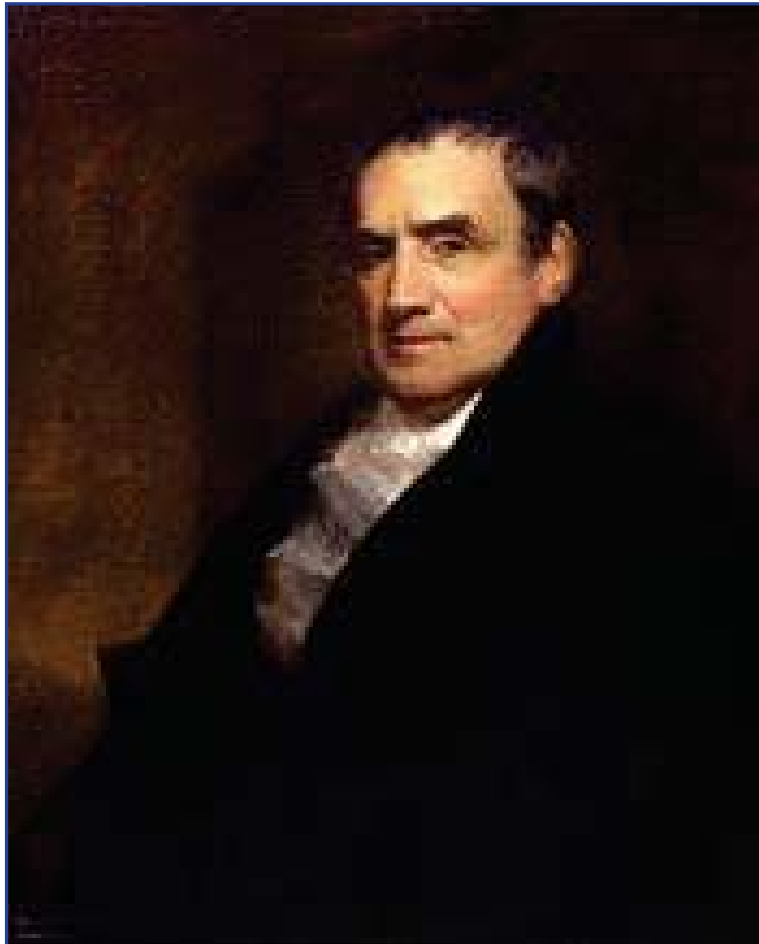
"...you have known the Holy Scriptures..."

2 Timothy 3:15 (NIV)

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The Disciples' Literal New Testament: A New Perspective into the NT Writings

By Michael Magill

“What could possibly motivate someone to go to all the time, trouble and expense of producing a new translation?” asks William E. Paul in his *Bible Editions & Versions* article titled “Why Do People Continue to Produce New Bible Translations?” (vol. 4, issue, pp. 15-18). He suggests 14 answers to this question, among which are to achieve accuracy with readability; to utilize modern language; to amplify the meaning; to improve grammar; or to maintain exact literalness. The fact that a translator would need to reach for such goals at all points to the central problem with translations: compromise.

All translations are a compromise. The meaning, implications, style, culture, and feel contained in and behind the words, idioms, grammar, sentence structure, and flow of thought in one language are simply not directly transferrable in the same form to another language. They must be recast into the forms and structures of the new language. True, a computer can translate if a basic surface-level translation is enough. But where the meaning is critical, it cannot be done without compromise. Think of the 1964 movie *Fail Safe*. When world survival is on the line, the President tells his Russian translator that he needs to hear more than the words; he needs to hear the meaning behind the words, the mood, the intangibles. In real life the President would have a group of translators doing this, each trying to make sure no nuance was missed. So the root answer to Mr. Paul’s question lies in the fact that the meaning intended by the original writers and the ultimate Writer of the Bible is absolutely critical. Therefore, translators choose a balance of translation goals they wish to pursue in their quest to effectively communicate that meaning in English.

The standard translations such as the NKJV, NASB, and ESV seek the perfect balance between the two languages. They seek to stay as close to the words and grammar of the original as they can while rendering the text in beautiful, elegant English forms and grammar. We love these for their accuracy. Others such as the NIV put more emphasis on the English side than on retaining the forms and structures of the original. We love these for their readability. Others focus even more on the English, and seek to communicate the fuller meaning by expanding or amplifying or paraphrasing the text. The Living Bible, Phillips, and The

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Message are examples. We love these for their liveliness and striking phrasing. Each translation makes a compromise on what can be achieved and then presents us with its result.

As a former college Greek instructor, my compromise is placed at a different point on the spectrum, and begins with the question: Why do people learn Greek? I

First, this book presents the same translation in paragraphs that are based on the flow of thought in the Greek. The reader is set free from the 460-year-old artificial chapter and verse structure present in all other English translations. If one is to display the Greek sentence structure in English, no other course is possible.

I learned Greek because I recognized that to truly understand the NT I must read it in its original language. Bible schools and seminaries teach their students the original languages so they can get behind the translation compromise to a better platform from which to view the intent of the original writers. Once I saw the Greek NT in all its glory, I began to wonder if more of its glory could be communicated to the English reader. Not so much the words themselves, because the available translations do a good job of rendering the words. In fact, if one compares the various translations, a pretty good idea of the range of meaning of the Greek words can be obtained. The main thing that cannot be seen in the available translations is the flow of thought contained in the Greek grammar and sentence structures and connections of thought. It comes down to the compromise. Greek is so different from English that any polished *English* translation must restructure the sentences, and in doing this many of the clues to the originally intended connections of

thought are lost. But just as the NIV gives up adherence to the Greek structures to produce a more pleasing and understandable English translation, would it be possible to give up proper English modes of expression in order to produce a translation that more fully reflects the Greek writing style?

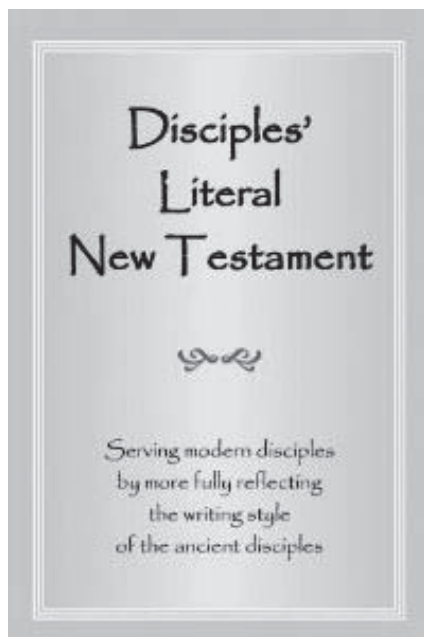
The answer of translation history was no. If one tried to retain any more of the Greek grammar and structure it would not be good English. But what if one set aside the routine matters of Greek word order and just focused on properly rendering enough of the Greek forms to make the original flow of thought clear in English? No again; it is still too foreign and hard to follow. Then an idea occurred to me. What if this Greekish translation were put in outline format? Then the outline structure could serve as a skeleton to display the connections of thought without adding words. The English reader could easily both understand the translation and see the flow of thought. In fact, they could then see the NT books from a whole new perspective—a perspective previously available only to those who were proficient in Greek. And thus the *New Testament TransLine: A Literal Translation in Outline Format* was published by Zondervan in 2002. This 1025-page book has the NT text in outline format on one page and detailed translation notes on the facing page. The notes provide translations of over 3000 textual variants, notes on the meaning and usage of the Greek words, and notes on the various views of the meaning of a phrase

or verse where needed— all in non-technical language for the English Bible student with no knowledge of Greek.

The *TransLine* is a very detailed book, too detailed for many people. And some people understand the connections displayed in the outline format, others do not. I next wondered whether there was a better way to present this perspective on the NT that would be more useful to more people. And so in 2011 the *Disciples' Literal New Testament* (DLNT) was published. First, this book presents the same translation in paragraphs that are based on the flow of thought in the Greek. The reader is set free from the 460-year-old artificial chapter and verse structure present in all other English translations. If one is to display the Greek sentence structure in English, no other course is possible. Second, the paragraphs are arranged in what I call “intelligent paragraph” format, which visually displays the main and subordinate thoughts by arranging the paragraphs in a simple outline format. Third, each paragraph has an interpretive heading which makes explicit the place of that paragraph in the flow of thought of the book. In fact, you can read just the paragraph headings of an epistle and quickly get a good understanding of the flow of the book. There are also a few translation notes at the bottom of each page to assist the reader. You can see samples of both books on my website, LiteralNewTestament.com.



Is the DLNT a better translation than the others? This takes us right back to the translation compromise— better for what? An Interlinear, the DLNT, the ESV, the NIV, and The Message, to use these as category examples of the spectrum of translations, are each better at what they seek to do than the others. So the answer depends on the need of the reader. If we understand the strengths and weaknesses of each category on the spectrum and use them accordingly, we will profit from them all. For example, the DLNT is certainly not a better *English* translation, precisely because it is a more Greekish, and thus a more foreign-sounding translation. It is not intended to be used for public reading in church!



Is the DLNT more literal than, say, the NASB? It depends on what you mean by “literal.” If you mean does it more fully reflect the Greek forms and sentence structure and flow of thought, then the answer is yes. If you mean does it more fully display where the Greek is more specific or less specific than normally rendered in English, then yes. If you mean does it reduce the clarification and interpretation normally included in good English translations, then yes. If you want to see the differences in writing style of the four Gospels, then yes. If you want to get deeper into the patterns of thinking and expression of the apostle Paul, then yes. Short of learning

Greek, I know of nothing better. But if you mean does it more accurately convey the full literal meaning into English, then the answer is no, because the question itself is misleading. All translations can be said to be literal translations of the meaning

It is possible, of course, to stray too far from the original, in which case the resulting version is not really a translation, but a re-writing of the text for cultural or political or theological reasons. For example, changing all the male pronouns referring to God to female pronouns so that God is "She" is re-writing the NT for cultural purposes. Others who reject the deity of Christ re-write certain verses for theological reasons.

of the Greek, each providing a different perspective to the reader. For example, which is more literal, to render *adelphoi* as "brothers" according to its Greek form as in the DLNT, or to render it "brothers and sisters" according to the fuller expression of its meaning in the context in today's English? Both are "literal" in a different sense of the word.

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The DLNT provides a simple, basic Greek perspective, the raw information used by all translators as a starting point. This can be quite useful for deeper Bible study. And for the first time English readers, not just Greek readers, have a benchmark from which to understand what the other translations are doing with the text in pursuit of their translation goals. The other translations provide a fuller, more

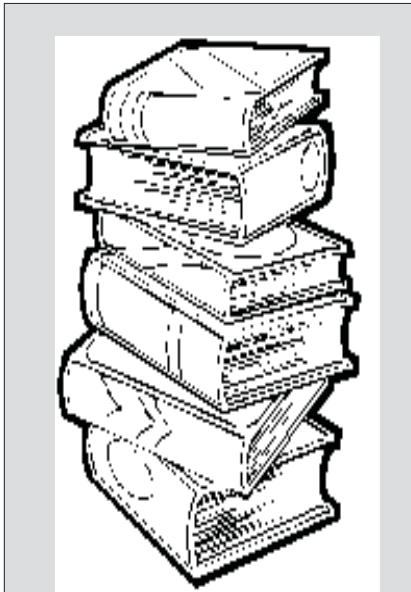
nanced and polished expression of the Greek together with its contextual implications and consideration for the history of English translation. This explains, in part, why we see differences of phrasing in the other translations— there is more than one way to properly express the literal meaning in English. This is also why these other translations are done by committees of scholars— finding that balance and polish simply cannot be done as well by one person.

The other translations also add more interpretation to the raw Greek text. For example, they often make explicit what is left implicit in Greek. In Rom. 1:21 the Greek form says "having known God" (DNLT). But the more explicit English meaning is "although they knew God" (ESV) or "even though they knew God" (NASB). They also clarify what is obscure in Greek. For example, the Greek form in Matt. 3:17 states "I was well-pleased" as in the DLNT, and a note explains how this might be interpreted. Most English versions simply give the reader one of the interpretations, "I am well-pleased." In other cases the English is less explicit than the Greek. In John 12:26 most modern versions say something like "If anyone serves Me, let him

follow Me. . . . If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.” But the Greek is more explicit. A change of word order changes the emphasis, which is displayed in the bolded text of the DLNT, “If anyone serves **Me**. . . . If **anyone** serves Me.” A paraphrase adds even more interpretation in order to flesh out the translator’s view of the full literal meaning of the text. Each category of translation provides English readers with a valuable perspective into the literal meaning of the NT, reflecting each translation’s choice on where to balance the translation compromise.

In conclusion, I would like to add another reason to Mr. Paul’s 14 reasons mentioned in the first paragraph. My motivation for engaging in this endeavor is summed up perfectly in the subtitle of the second book. *The Disciples’ Literal New Testament: Serving Modern Disciples by More Fully Reflecting the Writing Style of the Ancient Disciples.*

Michael Magill graduated Valedictorian with a B.A. in Bible from Biola University. He earned an M.Div. in New Testament from Talbot School of Theology, and received the Robert N. Oliver Award in Systematic Theology. He taught Greek at Biola University and Logos Bible Institute. He may be reached at Michael@LiteralNewTestament.com



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