

# Bible Translation Choice in Canada, 2013

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## Executive Summary

Canadians are blessed with an abundance of high quality translations of the Bible. This paper looks at the translation choices (or lack of choice) of 4,474 Canadians and the factors influencing their selection. The paper also looks at the role of several major Canadian Christian traditions: French Catholic, English Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical.

### King James Version and New International Version on Top

- The King James Version (KJV) and the New International Version (NIV) are by far the most commonly read translations in Canada. The KJV is the most popular Bible, but the NIV is most often read.
  - The KJV is the preferred translation of one in three Canadian Bible readers (32%); however, these readers do just one-fifth (21%) of the Bible reading in Canada.
  - The NIV is preferred by almost one in ten (9%) Bible readers but accounts for one-quarter (23%) of Bible reading by Canadians.
  - No other translation was preferred by more than 3% of Canadian Bible readers.
- Of the hundreds of Bible translations that exist, only 14 translations were identified as the preferred translation by at least 1% of Bible readers. Of these 14 translations, the bottom 12 combined were preferred by just 17% of Bible readers. All other translations combined, apart from these 14, were preferred by only 7% of Bible readers.
- About two in five Canadians (38%) say they read the Bible. Only one-quarter of Canadians both read the Bible and are able or willing to identify the translation they read.

### Influence of Christian Tradition

- Most readers of a particular translation are drawn from just one Christian tradition or a few.
- Translations that tend to be read by Evangelicals are read more frequently than translations read by other traditions.
- Protestants, especially Evangelicals, are more likely than Catholics to report reading from multiple versions of the Bible.

### Discontinuity of Translation Choice

The growing slate of translations published in the last few generations has produced substantial discontinuity in intergenerational translation choice and between the translations used in private and in public worship services.

- Only two in five Canadians who read the Bible say they read the same translation as their parents.
- Only two in five Canadians who read the Bible and self-identify as Christian say they read the translation of the Bible that is used in their church's worship services.

- The readers of more recent translations such as the NLT and the ESV tend to be younger, whereas the readers of older translations such as the Jerusalem Bible and the KJV tend to be older.

#### **No Clear Link between Reading Difficulty and Translation Choice**

- Although reading difficulty informs some translation choice, there is no clear link between reading difficulty and a preference for easier-to-read translations.
- There is no clear link between a reader's education level and the reading level of their translation choices.

#### **Conclusions**

Although there are two dominant Bible translations, this dominance does not translate into a translation consensus among Bible readers. Each Christian tradition in Canada (English and French Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical) has a small set of translations that it tends to prefer. With a few notable exceptions these are preferences that are not widely shared with other traditions.

Despite being blessed by an abundance of quality translations, the majority of Canadians take a pass on all of them. All evidence points to churches being the primary influencers of Bible engagement. Whatever the translation, it will have the most impact when it is engaged by a church eager to know the God who inspired it.

Find resources to help individuals and churches strengthen Bible engagement at [www.bibleengagementstudy.ca](http://www.bibleengagementstudy.ca).

## Introduction

Most Canadian Bible readers choose one of just 14 translations, although hundreds of English translations of the Bible exist. Two in five Canadian Bible readers choose the King James Version (KJV) and the New International Version (NIV). After these two, no other translation was preferred by more than 3% of Bible readers.

While there are two dominant translations, this dominance does not translate into a translation consensus among Bible readers. Each Christian tradition in Canada (English and French Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical) has a small set of translations that it tends to prefer. With a few notable exceptions these are preferences that are not widely shared with other traditions.

While tradition influences the set of choices its members tend to make, this does not mean that Bible readers are using the same translation of the Bible in private that is used in their churches' worship services. In most cases, they are not. Some of this cleavage between private and corporate translation use can be traced to the rush of Bible translation since the 1970s and the differences between corporate and personal adoption rates of these new translations.

The translation preference landscape looks very different if it is weighted according to how often these translations are read. Here the translations preferred by Evangelicals move to the fore, while those used by other traditions retreat; Evangelicals simply read the Bible far more frequently than those from other traditions. Evangelicals are also more likely to read from several versions of the Bible than readers from other traditions.

Although some readers choose a translation for ease of reading, there is no clear relationship between readers finding the Bible difficult to understand and their choosing a translation that is easier to read. People tend to choose one of the translations their tradition uses, and the biggest contribution to understanding the Bible comes from congregations themselves rather than the translation.

Just 38% of Canadians read the Bible at all. Of these readers, one in three (32%) were either unable or unwilling to identify the translation they prefer to read. Only one-quarter of all Canadians identified the translation of the Bible they preferred, and those who did were more likely to read the Bible than those who did not.

This report is based on the groundbreaking Canadian Bible Engagement Study (CBES) of 4,474 Canadians conducted by Vision Critical on its Angus Reid Forum, and qualitative interviews. It surveys the translation choices of Canadians and some of the factors that influence those choices. This report is the second in a series based on the CBES data. The first report, "Confidence, Conversation and Community: Bible Engagement in Canada, 2013" looked at the factors that promote Bible engagement. See the Appendix for more information on the study.

The Canadian Bible Forum and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada sponsored the CBES, with funding participation from Stronger Together Grants. The members of the Canadian Bible Forum are the Bible

League of Canada, Canadian Bible Society, Every Home for Christ, Gideons Canada, OneBook, Open Doors Canada, Scripture Gift Mission Canada, Scripture Union Canada, and Wycliffe Canada.

**Table 1. Abbreviations and language of translations discussed in this paper**

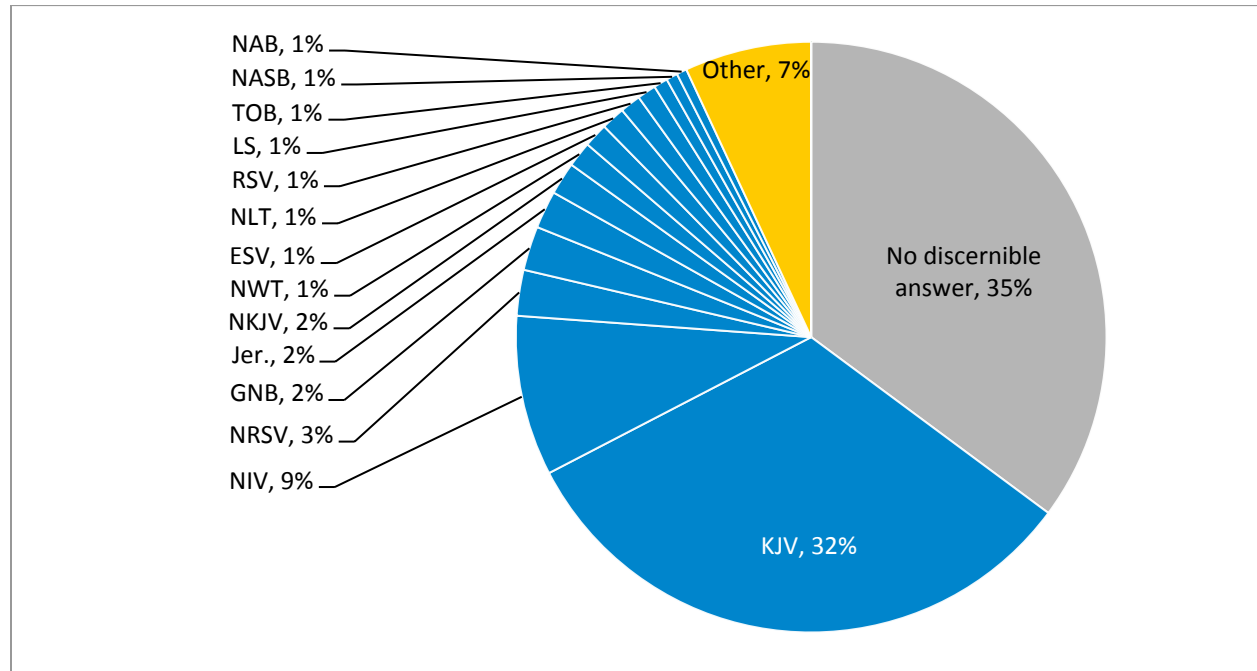
<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Language</b>
D-R	Douay-Rheims	English
ESV	English Standard Version	English
GNB	Good News Bible	English
Jer.	Jerusalem Bible	English / French
KJV	King James Version	English
LS	Louis Segond	French
Message	The Message	English
NAB	New American Bible	English
NIV	New International Version	English
NKJV	New King James Version	English
NLT	New Living Translation	English
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version	English
NWT	New World Translation	English / French
Ost.	Ostervald	French
RSV	Revised Standard Version	English
TOB	La Traduction oecuménique de la Bible	French

## Translations Preferred and Read

We asked Canadians to tell us what version of the Bible they most commonly used.<sup>1</sup> This paper is going to talk about their responses as “preferences” instead of as usage in order to avoid confusion with Bible reading frequency.

Chart 1 shows translation preferences of Canadians who read the Bible. About one in three respondents (35%) were either unable or unwilling to name the translation they read, or they provided an answer which we were unable to link back to a specific translation. If we take into account the 62% of Canadians who told us they never read the Bible then **only 25% of Canadians both read the Bible and were able or willing to say what translation they read.**

**Chart 1. Translation preference (“What version of the Bible do you most commonly read?”) for Canadians who read the Bible *at least seldom***



The KJV is clearly the dominant translation in Canadians’ stated preference, indicated by almost one in three respondents (32%) who read the Bible. The NIV is the second most popular translation, indicated by almost one in ten (9%). After these two translations, however, no other translation was indicated by more than 3% of those who read the Bible at least occasionally.

In the same way that religious affiliation (i.e., What is your church?) doesn’t tell us about religious participation (i.e., How often do you attend that church?), a stated preference for a translation does not tell us how often it is read. We wanted to know, not just the translation preference, but the Bible engagement practice, so we asked Canadians how often they read the Bible. To gauge the significance of these preferences, this study weights Canadians’ preferences according to their reading frequency. Each

<sup>1</sup> Not asked of those who said they never read the Bible.



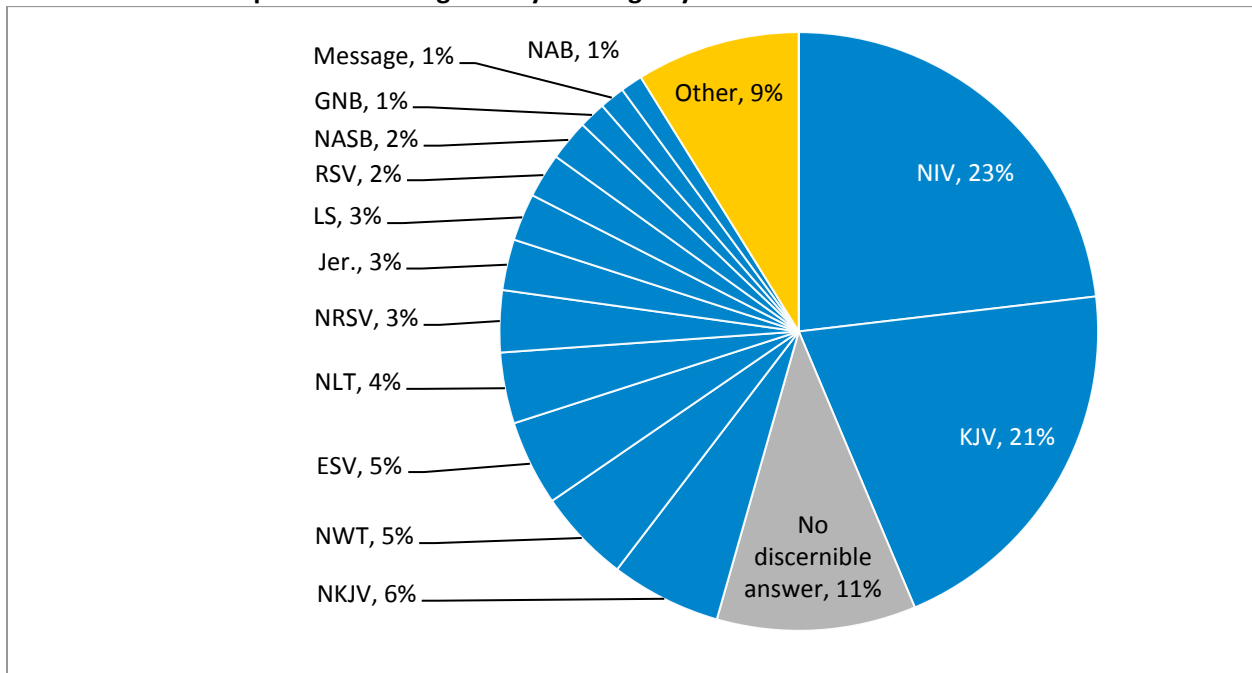
reading frequency response is assigned a number of reading days (see Table 2). A daily reader, for example, was assigned 365 reading days in a year (one for each) and a weekly reader 52 reading days (one for each week).

**Table 2. Reading days assigned to various Bible reading frequencies**

Bible Reading Frequency	Number of Reading Days Per Year
Daily	365
A few times a week	156
Once a week	52
Once or twice a month	18
A few times a year	4
Seldom	2
Never	0

Chart 2 shows the data from the stated reading preferences from Chart 1 weighted according to respondents' reading days.

**Chart 2. Translation preference weighted by reading days**



See Table 2 for reading day assignments.

There are several striking differences between the results of stated preference and translation reading frequency in Charts 1 and 2.

First, **the Bible translation most frequently read is the NIV, at 23%**. The NIV and KJV are almost tied as the translations with the highest number of reading days, although the NIV is slightly higher than the KJV's 21%.

Second, the one-third of respondents in Chart 1 (35%) who did not or could not name the translation preferred generated only 11% of the reading days in this study. It is likely then that **many of those who cannot name the translation they are reading are not, in fact, reading it very often.**

Third, the KJV, NRSV, GNB, and Jerusalem Bible translations all slipped in rank order when reading days were accounted for, indicating that those who prefer these versions are less likely to read them than those who prefer other versions such as the NIV, ESV, NKJV, or NLT.

The NWT, a publication of the Jehovah's Witnesses Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, merits special comment. The Jehovah's Witnesses are generally considered to be outside of the bounds of Christian orthodoxy by other traditions. **One percent of those who ever open the covers of a Bible prefer the NWT; however, the NWT generates 5% of all the Bible reading days, more than the NLT, NRSV, LS, or Jerusalem.** The Jehovah's Witnesses, who make up less than half a percent of the Canadian population, are known for their proselytism, and clearly their efforts have caused their translation of the Bible to have influence beyond their numbers.<sup>2</sup>

### **Discussion Questions**

- *Why do you read the translation of the Bible that you prefer? What is it that draws you?*
- *What do you think influences why some translations are read so much more frequently than others? Is it something to do with the translation itself or other factors?*
- *What do you think makes someone pay attention to the translation they are reading?*
- *Did the most commonly read translations surprise you? Why or why not?*

## **Translations and Traditions**

The study looks at four major Canadian Christian traditions: French Catholics, English Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelical Protestants by religious affiliation. Table 3 shows the translation preference and reading frequency for different Christian traditions. There are several striking differences between the two sets of data. For example, while half of Mainline Protestants prefer the KJV, the KJV accounted for only one-quarter of Mainline Protestant reading days. Conversely, while only 8% of Mainline Protestants stated a preference for the NIV, NIV readers contributed 23% of Mainline Protestant reading days.

The distribution of Evangelical translation preferences, however, more closely matched the reading day weighting of those preferences.

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<sup>2</sup> See "2011 National Household Survey: Data tables," <http://bit.ly/1mqSNYa>.

**Table 3. Distribution of stated translation preference, and translation preference weighted by reading days, by tradition<sup>a</sup>**

Version	Preference				Preference Weighted by Reading Days			
	Catholic Fr.	Catholic En.	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic Fr.	Catholic En.	Mainline	Evangelical
KJV	2%	22%	50%	32%	0%	15%	25%	22%
NIV	0%	2%	8%	29%	0%	5%	23%	35%
NKJV	0%	0%	1%	7%	0%	2%	2%	9%
NRSV	0%	4%	4%	2%	0%	13%	10%	1%
ESV	0%	0%	1%	5%	0%	1%	6%	7%
NWT	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
NLT	0%	0%	1%	5%	0%	1%	2%	7%
Jer. <sup>b</sup>	15%	2%	0%	0%	43%	5%	1%	0%
LS	3%	0%	1%	2%	6%	0%	1%	2%
RSV	0%	1%	3%	1%	0%	11%	4%	1%
GNB	0%	3%	6%	0%	0%	5%	6%	0%
NAB	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	9%	0%	0%
TOB	6%	0%	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%	0%
Ost.	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Message	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	3%	1%
Other	8%	6%	7%	8%	8%	11%	10%	9%
Missing, don't know, unclear	65%	56%	19%	9%	32%	20%	6%	3%

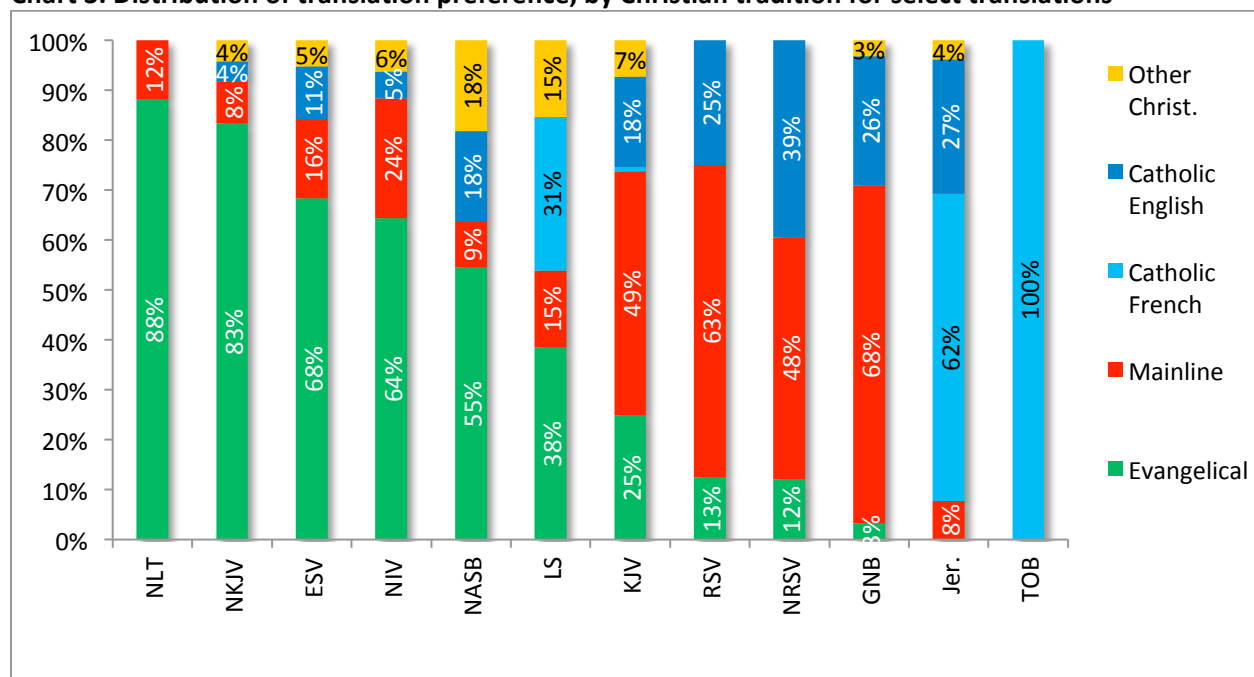
<sup>a</sup> Responses only for those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom.

<sup>b</sup> The Jerusalem Bible has both English and French editions, and respondents may in some cases be conflating the New Jerusalem Bible with the Jerusalem Bible.

Columns may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Translations tend to draw most of their readers from just one Christian tradition (see Chart 3 below). For example, of those who stated a preference for the NIV, 64% were Evangelical. Similarly, of those who preferred the RSV, 63% were Mainline Protestant. **Only the KJV in English-speaking Canada and the Louis Segond (LS) in French-speaking Canada draw significant constituencies from across traditions.** Significantly both of these translations are over a century old and, unlike more modern translations that are typically targeted to a particular constituency, were intended for broad audiences.

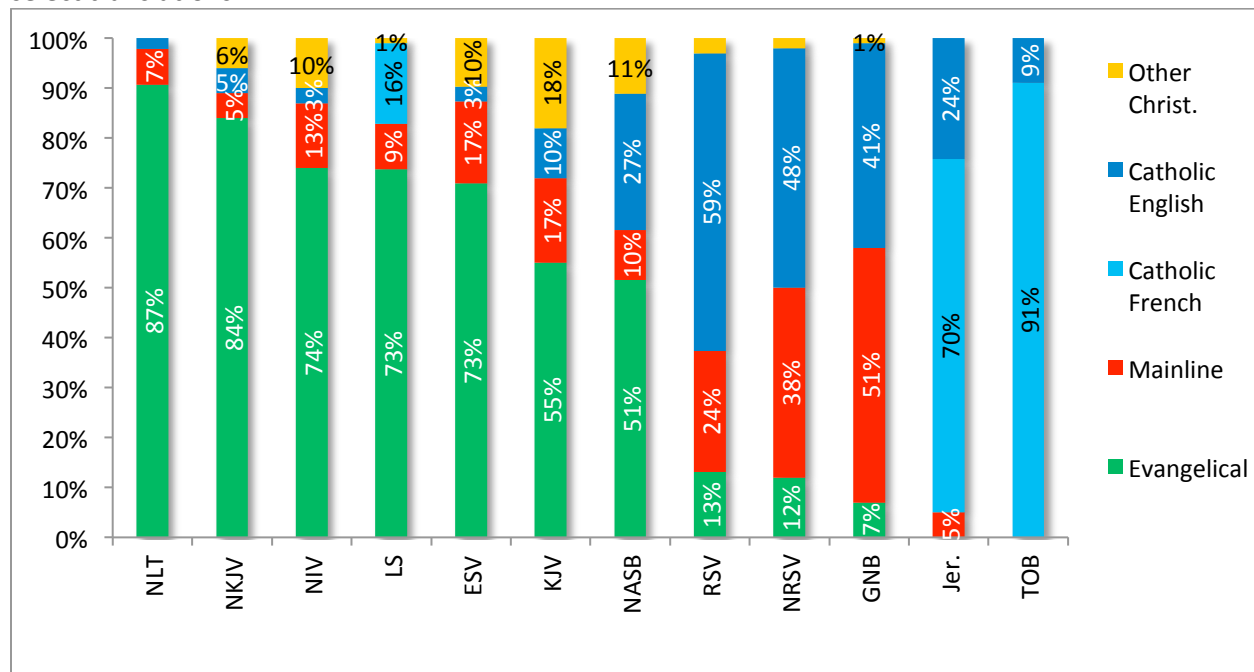
**Chart 3. Distribution of translation preference, by Christian tradition for select translations**



Columns may not add to 100% because of rounding.

The picture is far different if we weight these preferences by reading days (compare Charts 3 and 4). **Mainline Protestants’ share of any translations’ reading days lags behind their share of readers preferring those translations, meaning that Mainline Protestants tend to read less frequently than those from other traditions.** For example, Mainline Protestants make up 63% of those who prefer the RSV; however, they contribute only 24% of the RSV’s reading days. Conversely, English Catholics represent only 25% of those who prefer the RSV, but these contribute 59% of the RSV’s reading days. Evangelicals generally accounted for a larger share of a translation’s reading days than their share of its readers.

**Chart 4. Distribution of translation preference weighted by reading days, by Christian tradition for select translations**



Columns may not add to 100% because of rounding.

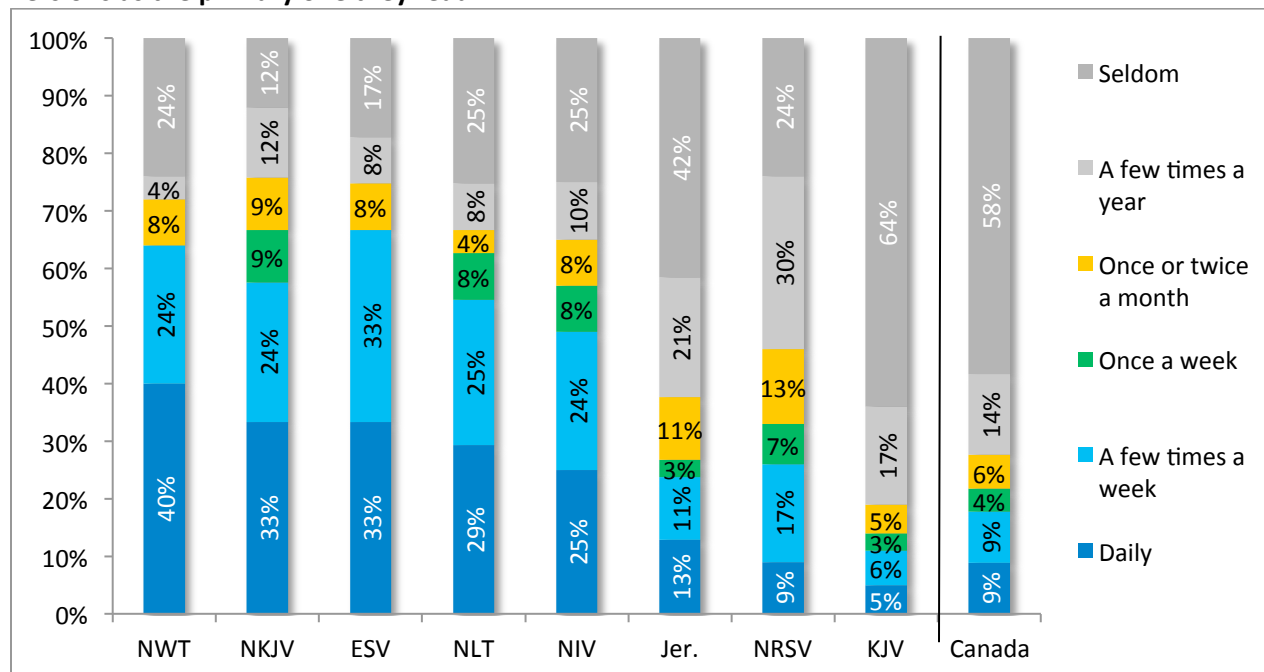
### Discussion Questions

- Does your church influence your choice of Bible translation? In what way?
- Do discussions of Bible translations come up in your church? What prompts these discussions?
- Have you changed which Bible translation you read? If so, why?
- What are the benefits of everyone in a church using the same translation of the Bible? What are the drawbacks?

### Translations and Reading Frequency

Some translations are read more frequently by their most loyal readers than are other translations (see Chart 5). For example, those who prefer the NKJV, ESV, NLT, and NIV report that they read more frequently than those who prefer the NRSV, KJV, or Jerusalem Bible. Although the KJV is one of the most read translations, it also has the highest proportion of respondents who seldom read. **The translations that tend to be read more frequently are also the translations that tend to be preferred by Evangelicals.**

**Chart 5. Bible reading frequency for select versions of the Bible for those who identified these versions as the primary one they read<sup>a</sup>**

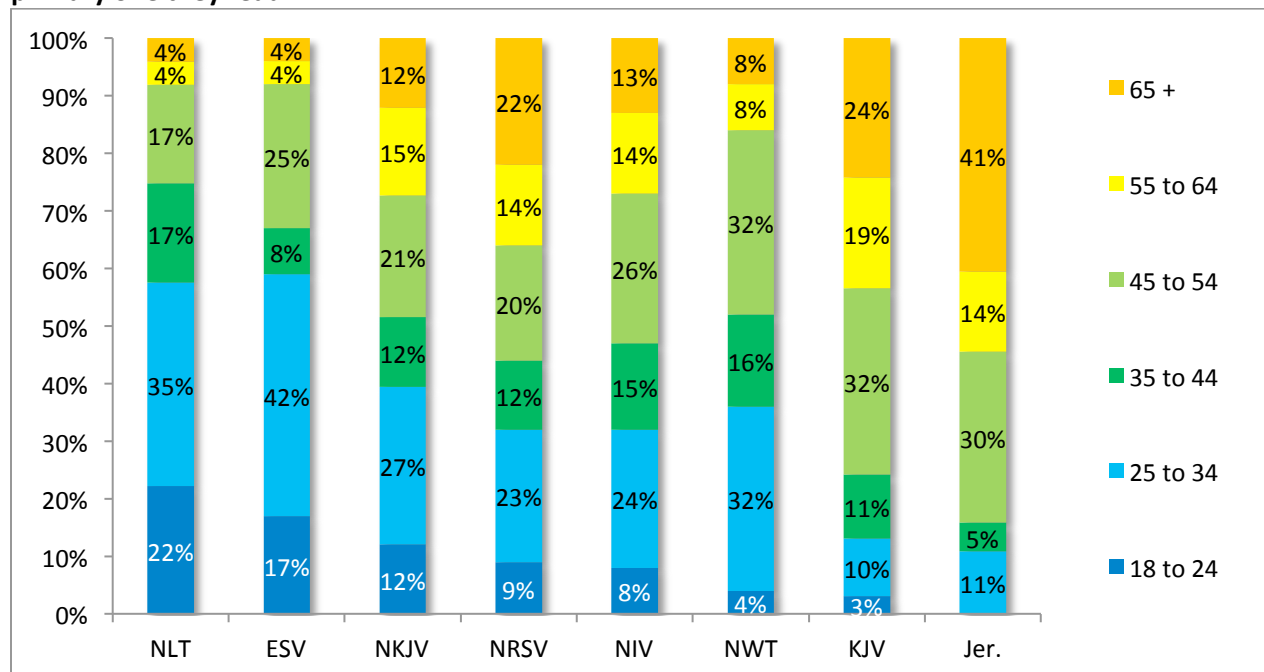


<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom.

## Translations and Age of Reader

Older and younger Canadians tend to prefer different translations. Older Canadians tend to prefer the KJV, Jerusalem, and NRSV, while younger Canadians tend to prefer the ESV and NLT (see Chart 6 below). Just over four in ten ESV readers (42%) were in the 25- to 34-year-old demographic. Here again the tradition of a translation’s readers helps to explain the variation in the data. **The translations preferred by younger Canadians also tend to be the ones preferred by Evangelicals.** The average age of Evangelical respondents tended to be slightly younger, 46, than those of other traditions (Mainline Protestants, 56; French Catholics, 51; English Catholics, 50). Different age profiles of a translation’s readers may, in part, simply reflect the age profiles of the traditions that prefer them.

**Chart 6. Age of readers for select versions of the Bible for those who identified these versions as the primary one they read<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said they read the Bible at least seldom.  
Bar labels may not add to 100% because of rounding.

## Translation Choice and Parents

We know from other studies that parents are usually the most significant spiritual influences in their children’s lives. We wanted to know if this influence extended to translation choice, so we asked Canadians who read the Bible if they read the same version as their parents.

**Only about two in five Canadian Bible readers report that they read the same Bible translation as their parents** (see Table 4). About three in ten say they do not, and another fifth say they are not sure. These data suggest that most Canadians are either not following the translation choices of their parents or are unaware of what their parents read. Given that we asked this question only of the 38% of Canadians who read the Bible at all, only one in six Canadians are reading the same translation of the Bible as their parents.

People who came of age after 1970 had a whole range of new translations to choose from (including the NIV, NRSV, NKJV, ESV, and NLT) than those who came of age earlier. While our research did not test the emotional attachment that people have to translations, our experience tells us that once a person has been using a translation for a period of time there have to be significant reasons to induce a change. Many of our life choices are set when we are young, so it is no surprise that new translations are often heavily marketed to young people. Hence the slate of choices available to us when we come of age is important.

People who have different slates of options available are likely to make different choices. Generally speaking, when the older respondents in our sample were coming of age they had a slate of translation

choices similar to what was available to their parents. By contrast, younger Canadians, and especially English-speaking Canadians, had the post-1970 rush of new translations to choose from.

Interestingly, more frequent Bible readers are slightly less likely than less frequent readers to read the same version as their parents. This may be explained partially by the fact that Evangelicals, who tend to read Bible frequently, are slightly less likely than those of other traditions to read the same version as their parents.

**Table 4. Agreement with the statement “I read the same version of the Bible as my parents,” by age<sup>a</sup>**

Age	Yes	No	Not Sure	Refused / Not Appl.
18 to 24	35%	25%	28%	12%
25 to 34	38%	26%	25%	11%
35 to 44	37%	27%	26%	10%
45 to 54	40%	28%	25%	8%
55 to 64	39%	32%	21%	8%
65 or older	51%	29%	12%	9%
All ages	41%	28%	22%	9%

<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom. Rows may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Although the relationship is not perfect, Table 5 suggests that older translations are more likely to be read across generations. These are also the translations that are more likely to be read by older Canadians.

**Table 5. Agreement with the statement “I read the same version of the Bible as my parents,” by select translations, for those who read at least monthly<sup>a</sup>**

Version (Year of First Publication of Full Bible)	Yes	No	Not Sure	Refused / Not Appl.
King James Version (1611)	62%	20%	15%	3%
New World Translation (1961)	61%	22%	3%	14%
New American Bible <sup>b</sup> (1970)	48%	36%	10%	6%
Jerusalem (1966)	40%	22%	33%	5%
Louis Segond (1910)	39%	37%	20%	5%
Good News (1976)	29%	29%	18%	24%
New Revised Standard Version (1989)	23%	54%	21%	3%
New International Version (1973)	21%	48%	25%	7%
Revised Standard Version (1952)	20%	42%	37%	2%
New King James Version (1982)	16%	53%	21%	11%
English Standard Version (2001)	9%	66%	20%	5%
New Living Translation (1996)	5%	62%	28%	6%
All versions	41%	28%	22%	9%

Rows may not add to 100% because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup> Only 19 observations: Use with caution.

<sup>b</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom.

To the extent that new translations continue to be commissioned, today's parents are less likely to be reading the same Bible as their children in the future.



### **Discussion Questions**

- *What would prompt you to switch to a new translation of the Bible? What qualities would you look for?*
- *Do you read the same translation as your parents or your children? Does that affect your discussions of the Bible?*
- *Did your parents read the Bible to you when you were a child or talk to you about the Bible? What do you remember most about these times?*
- *What is your hope for your children's engagement with the Bible? Does translation choice play a role in that?*

## **Translation Choice and Translations Used in Worship Services**

**About two in five Canadians who read the Bible and self-identify as Christian say they read the same translation privately that their church uses during worship services.** This was essentially the same for French Catholics, English Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelicals.

There are several notable exceptions. Readers of the New Living Translation (NLT) are less likely to find it used in their worship services than readers of other translations. Although the New Living Translation, a translation used almost exclusively by Evangelicals, was translated using a dynamic equivalence translation philosophy, its near-namesake, The Living Bible, was widely known among Evangelicals as a paraphrase. Evangelicals tend to prefer either literal or dynamic equivalence translations for teaching because they are considered to be closer to the original text. This may be part of the reason the NLT is less likely to be used in worship services.

The Revised Standard Version (RSV), a translation preferred by Mainline Protestants, was more commonly used in worship services until the New Revised Standard Version replaced it in many congregations. It is likely that many people continued to use the RSV at home while their churches adopted the NRSV for worship services.

Finally, NWT readers are the most likely to report using the same translation for private reading as is used in their worship services. No doubt, this is because the NWT is the only version that reflects the peculiar theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

**Table 6. Agreement with the statement “When I read the Bible privately I use the same version that is used during my church’s worship services,” by translation preference<sup>a</sup>**

Version (Year of First Publication of Full Bible)	Yes	No	Not sure	Refused / Not Appl.
New World Translation (1961)	89%	6%	3%	2%
King James Version (1611)	58%	26%	13%	4%
New Revised Standard Version (1989)	54%	40%	6%	0%
Good News (1976)	53%	33%	15%	0%
New American Bible <sup>b</sup> (1970)	51%	43%	6%	0%
English Standard Version (2001)	51%	32%	13%	4%
New International Version (1973)	47%	41%	10%	2%
Louis Segond (1910)	43%	37%	21%	0%
New King James Version (1982)	39%	47%	11%	3%
Jerusalem (1966)	34%	40%	22%	4%
Revised Standard Version (1952)	25%	52%	23%	0%
New Living Translation (1996)	25%	59%	14%	1%
All versions	43%	33%	18%	6%

Rows may not add to 100% because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom and who indicated that they were Christian.

<sup>b</sup> Only 19 observations: Use with caution.

### Discussion Questions

- *Do you know what translation is used in your church’s worship services? How do you know what it is? Is there one translation or are there several?*
- *How does it influence your worship experience to hear the scripture reading at church in a different translation than the one you read personally?*
- *If you could choose the translation(s) for your church’s worship services, would it be the same one that you read on your own? Why or why not?*
- *For English speakers: Would you rather say the Our Father (Lord’s Prayer) as it appears in a modern translation of the Bible or as it has traditionally been said from the prayer book? Why?*
- *Is it important for you to read a translation that is approved by your church? Why or why not?*

## Reading from Multiple Translations

Although we asked Canadians to tell us what version they primarily read (preferred), we also asked if they read from more than one version. As with all questions about Bible reading habits, we asked only those who told us they read the Bible at least seldom.

**Protestants are more likely to read from multiple versions than Catholics** (see Table 7 below). In our qualitative interviews several Protestants told us why they read from different versions of the Bible.

Anita is an Evangelical who uses different translations for different purposes. “For studying I use the English Standard Version or the New American Standard Version.” Revealingly she goes on to say, “I know I’m supposed to use the ESV, but for readability I really still like the New Living [Translation].” Why does Anita feel she is “supposed to use the ESV” and to prefer it to the NLT? Some of the answer is given

in the way she spoke about The Message, which she “pick[s] up to read for fun, but not regularly.” The ESV is for study; The Message is for fun. Somewhere in between the two she wants to read the NLT. Translation philosophies run from literal translations, e.g., the ESV, at one end of the spectrum to paraphrases, e.g., The Message, at the other.

An evangelical suspicion about paraphrases is explained by Bill, aged 56, who attends an evangelical church in Ontario. Bill reads the New King James Version because “it’s not paraphrase type version.” When he was asked why that was important, he said:

In a paraphrase, you know, the meaning of the verse or of the Scripture reading changes a little bit to make it easier to understand, but sometimes the meaning is changed a little bit too.

So people chose translations consciously for different purposes: for study, for devotional reading, or for fun. **In many cases they understand themselves to be making trade-offs between what they perceive to be translation accuracy and translation readability.**

**Table 7. Agreement with the statement “I read from several different versions of the Bible,” by tradition for those who read at least monthly and by reading frequency<sup>a</sup>**

Yes / No	Tradition				Reading Frequency	
	Catholic Fr.	Catholic En.	Mainline	Evangelical	Read at least monthly	Read less often
Yes	46%	53%	77%	78%	67%	34%
No	45%	38%	20%	20%	29%	54%
Not sure	8%	7%	3%	1%	3%	8%
Refused / NA	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%	5%

<sup>a</sup> Responses are only for those who said on the pre-screen that they read the Bible at least seldom. Columns may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Knowing about translations and translation philosophy requires a high level of translation literacy. Our interviews suggest that the principal reason people acquire this Bible translation literacy is to gain assurance that the translation is faithful to the original.

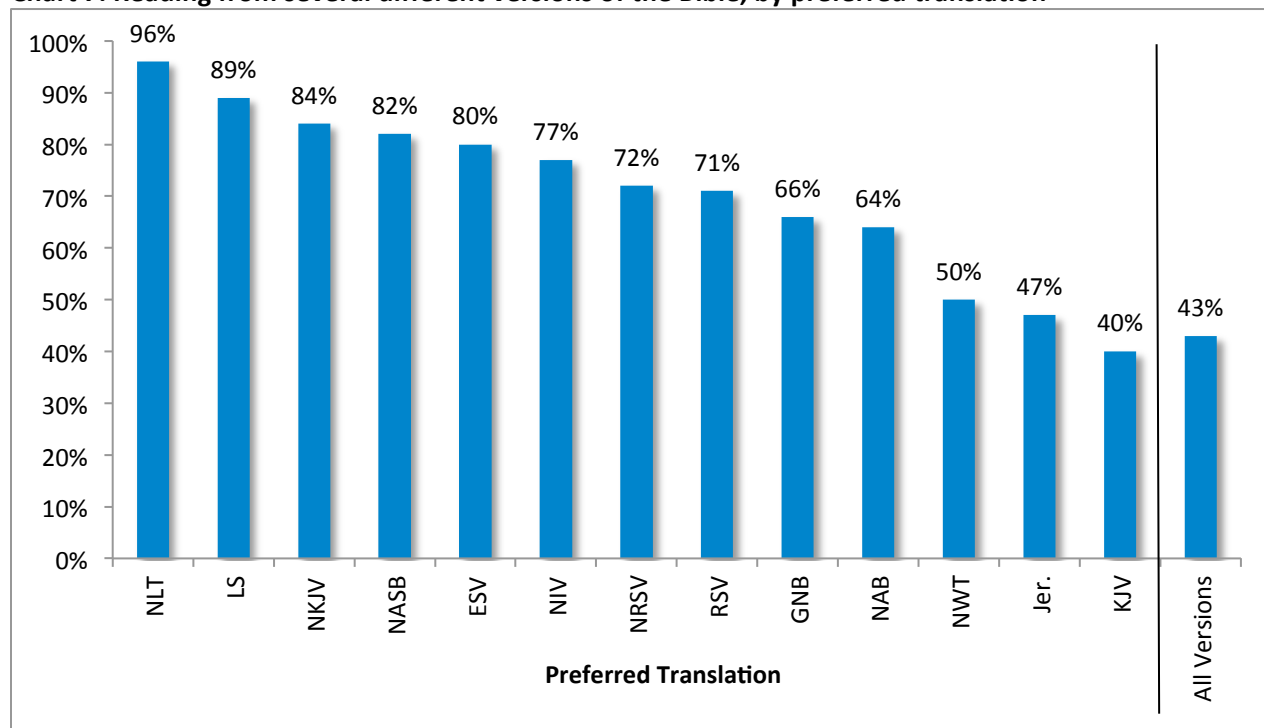
Among Catholics, translation fidelity is addressed by having church leaders approve specific translations of the Bible. Protestants, on the other hand, generally have no such ecclesiastical authority, so decisions about translation quality fall much more closely to the individual.<sup>3</sup> The higher proportion of Protestants who read from multiple translations, then, may in part be individuals discerning the “original” meaning of the Bible from the overlap in meanings between the versions they consult.

<sup>3</sup> While Protestants tend to lack formal translation approval processes, they do look to important teachers, preachers, and leaders for guidance.

Acquiring this translation literacy takes time and commitment, so it is not surprising that **Canadians who read from several versions of the Bible also tend to read the Bible more frequently** (see Table 7).

Chart 7 looks at the likelihood that respondents would read from multiple translations of the Bible based on what translation they prefer. The readers of the translations most commonly preferred by Evangelicals are most likely read from several different translations of the Bible.

**Chart 7. Reading from several different versions of the Bible, by preferred translation<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom.

### **Discussion Questions**

- *Do you read from several translations of the Bible? If so, which ones and why did you choose them?*
- *Do you read different translations to compare them or do you have other reasons?*
- *Is the translation philosophy of a translation important to you? Why or why not?*

### **Translation Choice and Difficulty Understanding the Bible**

Half of Canadians (52%) say they find the Bible difficult to understand. Those who find it difficult to understand contribute only one-third of Canada's Bible reading days, so difficulty understanding the Bible is clearly a barrier to Bible engagement.

Sebastian, aged 59, switched from the KJV to the NIV. Explaining his transition he says he enjoys

reading something I can understand [laughs]. So the change many years ago from the King James was, to me, very dramatic, and a good thing. ... I'm not hung up on one [version], ... usually it's an NIV.

Mary, aged 33, was also looking for “an easier English to understand,” where she doesn't have to “use a thesaurus to find out what certain words mean.” Many modern translations of the Bible such as the Good News Bible (GNB) or the Contemporary English Version (CEV) have been translated to address concerns such as Sebastian's and Mary's about readability.

There are various ways someone could overcome difficulty understanding the Bible, such as taking courses, consulting commentaries and Bible dictionaries, discussing the Bible with a friend, or selecting a translation of the Bible that is easier to understand. What evidence is there that translations are being selected based on how difficult they are to read?

Most modern translations have been assessed for their reading level, which is expressed as a grade. For example, if a translation had a Grade 7 reading level then a person with a Grade 7 education should be able to read the text without serious difficulty.<sup>4</sup> If there were a strong preference for easier-to-read translations we would expect to find that those who say they find the Bible difficult to understand or those who have less education might tend to prefer easier-to-read translations.

For select preferred translations, Table 8 presents the percentage of their readers who find the Bible difficult to understand along with the translations' grade reading levels. The translations in the table are sorted in decreasing order of their readers' perceived difficulty in understanding the Bible. There is, however, no clear parallel progression in the grade reading levels column. For example, both the GNB and the NLT have a grade reading level of about 6; however, 54% of the GNB readers find the Bible hard to understand, while only 27% of the NLT readers said the same. Similarly the NRSV and the NKJV have similar grade reading levels and different proportions of their readers who find the Bible difficult to understand. In our data there is no strong relationship between translation grade reading level and translation preference.

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<sup>4</sup> The Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level, which is based on words per sentence and syllables per word, is one such measure. The usefulness of such measures is debated and different scores are produced depending on which sections of the Bible are chosen for the evaluation.

**Table 8. Agreement with the statement “I find the Bible difficult to understand,” by select preferred translations<sup>a</sup>**

Version	Agreement Level	Grade Reading Level <sup>b</sup>
No discernible answer	54%	N/A
Good News Bible	54%	6.0
Louis Segond	53%	— <sup>c</sup>
King James Version	48%	12.0
New World Translation	41%	— <sup>c</sup>
Jerusalem	40%	— <sup>c</sup>
New Revised Standard Version	40%	10.4
English Standard Version	36%	7.4
Revised Standard Version	35%	12.0
New International Version	34%	7.8
New Living Translation	27%	6.3
New King James Version	23%	9.0
All versions	48%	N/A

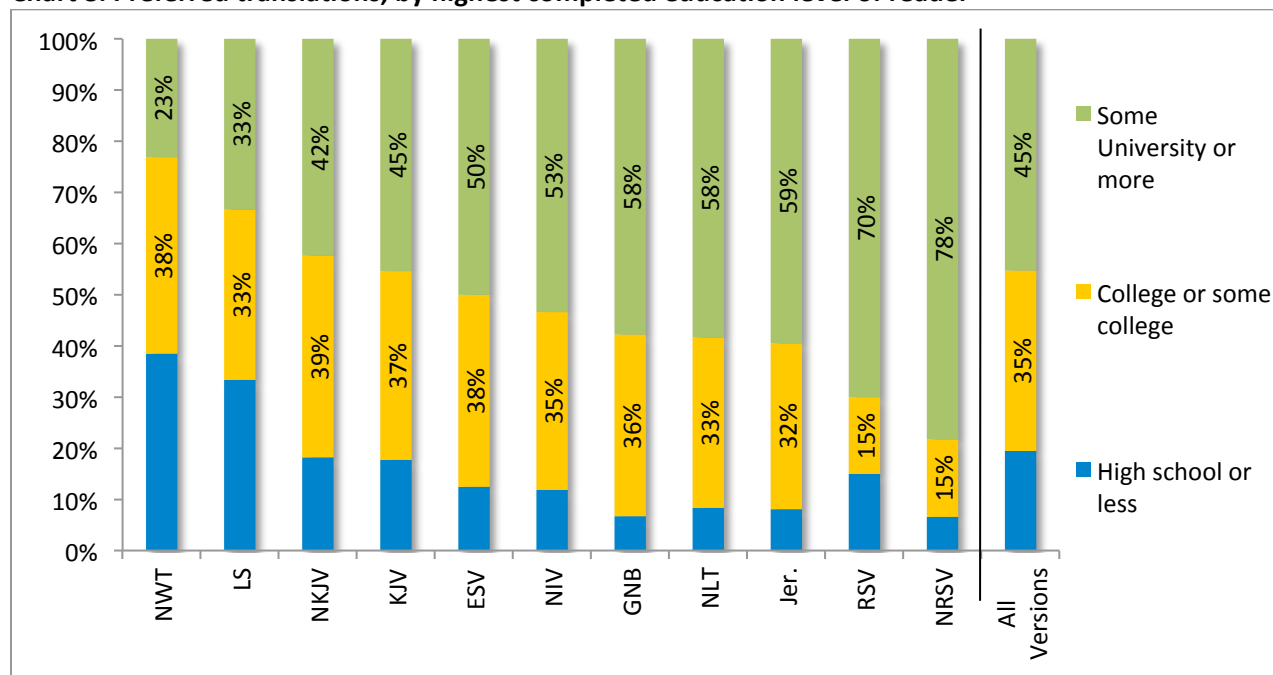
<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom.

<sup>b</sup> See [http://www.biblesociety.ca/sites/default/files/scripture\\_resources/HowOurBibleCameToUs2013.pdf](http://www.biblesociety.ca/sites/default/files/scripture_resources/HowOurBibleCameToUs2013.pdf) and <http://www.crossway.org/blog/2005/08/readability-grade-levels/>.

<sup>c</sup> Not available.

Chart 8 looks at the highest completed education levels for those who prefer various translations. The translations in the chart have been sorted in increasing order of their readers’ education level.

**Chart 8. Preferred translations, by highest completed education level of reader<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> Asked only of those who said on the pre-screen they read the Bible at least seldom. There were a small number of observations for the RSV and NLT: Use with caution.

As with translation choice and reading level, there is no clear link between translation choice and education level. For example, the LS and KJV are both relatively difficult translations to read, yet their readers are less educated than readers of the GNB or the NLT, which are easier to read and are more likely to be preferred by Canadians with higher levels of education.

Certainly for Sebastian and Mary having a translation they can understand without having a reference book at hand was important in their translation choice. Overall, however, our data provides no clear link between perceived reading difficulty and translation choice or between education level and translation choice. This does not mean that reading difficulty is not influencing translation choice – in many cases it clearly does – rather, there are other more important factors at play.

### ***Discussion Questions***

- *What helps make the Bible easier for you to understand?*
- *What is your experience with easier-to-read translations? What do you find to be their benefits or drawbacks?*
- *Do you find the translation you read easy to understand? Was that a factor in why you chose it?*
- *Do you find parts of the Bible or the Bible as a whole difficult to understand? If so, how does that affect your Bible reading?*

## **Conclusion**

People tend to read the translations used by those in their Christian tradition. This is by far the most significant finding of this paper. Tradition is a more important influence on translation choice than translation philosophy, reading difficulty, or even what our parents read.

This does not necessarily mean that Canadians are reading the same translation that is used in their church's worship services. The wave of modern translations beginning around 1970 altered the choices available to all major Christian traditions. Where congregants and congregations differed in their adoption of these modern translations, this obviously produced a discontinuity between private reading and public worship.

The new wave of translations also contributed to a substantial intergenerational discontinuity in translation choice as children encountered far more translation options than their parents had had.

In the same way that tradition influences choice, it also influences Bible engagement. The translations preferred by Evangelicals are far more likely to be read than the translations preferred by other traditions.

Although reading difficulty informs some translation choice, there is no clear link between reading difficulty and a preference for easier-to-read translations.

Each new translation sets out to remedy a felt deficiency in the existing translations. While we should celebrate what is gained with each new translation, we also should give some consideration to what is lost. What happens to Bible memorization, for example, when the words are different between one

person and the next in the pew or in Sunday School? Is translation continuity between church and home or between parents and children important? It will take further study to find out.

What is clear from the data is that congregations have enormous influence over translation choice in particular and Bible engagement in general. This influence can be used to help connect Canadians to one of the Bible translations available to us and ultimately to the God who inspired the Bible.



## **Appendix: About the Study**

The Canadian Bible Forum (CBS) and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) sponsored the 2013 Canadian Bible Engagement Study (CBES), with funding participation from Stronger Together Grants. The members of the Canadian Bible Forum are Bible League Canada, the Canadian Bible Society, Every Home for Christ, Gideons Canada, OneBook, Open Doors Canada, Scripture Gift Mission Canada, Scripture Union Canada, and Wycliffe Canada.

The CBES is a multi-phase study including

1. a literature review
2. a consultation with senior leaders from the Canadian Bible Forum
3. 44 semi-structured qualitative interviews in English and French
4. an Angus Reid Forum national survey (N = 4,474).

The literature review included Bible engagement studies from the past 40 years that were national in scope, from Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States, and Canada.

Of the 44 interviewees, 33 were recruited from Vision Critical's Angus Reid Forum (ARF) online research panel, and an additional 11 were recruited to augment the representation of recent immigrants or to take advantage of the investigator's travel to various parts of the country. Of the 33 ARF interviews, 5 were from Quebec, and 4 of these were conducted in French.

The national survey was completed in two stages. First, a Bible reading frequency question was added to a May 2013 omnibus ARF survey to "pre-screen" in order to facilitate sampling quotas. We established quotas of 2,000 responses from those who read the Bible at least monthly (Readers) and 2,000 responses for those who read the Bible less often (Non-Readers). The survey ran on the ARF between June 26 and July 30, 2013, resulting in 2,038 Reader and 2,436 Non-Reader responses. Nineteen times out of 20, results for Readers will be accurate within 2.2%; and for Non-Readers, within 2.0%.

Rick Hiemstra of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and Bruno Déscorcy of Direction Chrétienne were the investigators for the English and French components of the study, respectively.