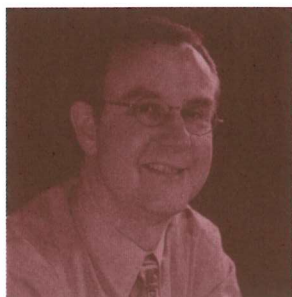


THE SIXTIES ICON THAT HAS BEEN GOOD NEWS TO THREE GENERATIONS

LINDSAY SHAW



Lindsay Shaw is Bible Society's Resource Development Executive. He writes Bible Society's weekly Newswatch digest and leads the Reel Issues film discussions project. His background is in editing, writing and teaching.

A GALE OF CHANGE WAS SWEEPING THE CULTURAL CLIMATE OF THE WEST, THE ENGLAND FOOTBALL TEAM WERE SOON TO LIFT THE 1966 WORLD CUP, AND MY HOME TOWN WAS CELEBRATING A THOUSAND YEARS OF EXISTENCE AMONG THE GREEN AND ROLLING SLOPES OF THE CHILTERN. Other than this, it was a day like any other when a slim booklet called *Good News for Modern Man: The Gospel of Luke* hit the doormat of my parents' house.

Aged ten at the time, I remember it not just because this booklet was given by my parish church to mark the town's millennium, but because it was a slice of the Bible presented in a radically new way. Wrapped in a white, newspaper-style cover, it contained lively-sounding text and unique-looking line drawings that would become legendary when the Good News Bible (GNB) later became the UK's most popular modern Bible version.

In 2004, as a new range of GNBs is being launched, this ground-breaking translation still retains its position as the UK's bestselling Bible in the high street.¹ Perhaps this is for three reasons: its quality as a popular, idiomatic translation; its imaginative production; and the triumph of popular over high culture that was a part of the sixties revolution.

From the contraceptive pill to recreational drugs, a maelstrom of forces was rearranging the face of Western popular culture in the 1960s: civil rights movements in the USA and Northern Ireland; mistrust of authority; permissive liberalism and technological change; growing affluence and increasing consumerism symbolised by icons like the mini car and the mini skirt; recreational drugs and student protests (France and USA, 1968).

In the midst of this social change, the arts abandoned romanticism for social realism in docu-dramas, while Andy Warhol and the pop art movement embraced everyday, consumer products and the mundane.

Amid this ferment, the Bible found a new voice too. *The New Testament of Good News for Modern Man* (it became the Good News Bible in 1971) was published in 1966, a year ahead of the emergence of the hippie-inspired Jesus Movement. (The full Bible was published as the Good News Bible in 1971.) Although the New English Bible had previously attempted to translate the thoughts rather than exact words of the Bible, GNB's use of spoken rather than literary English made it the first truly easy-to-read Bible. Its cover design fittingly declared that it was here to speak with the directness clarity of the daily paper.

“The goal of the GNB translators and its successors was to express the Bible in a way that was ‘natural, clear, simple and unambiguous’.”

NOTES

- 1 Nielsen BookTrack survey.
 2 Ronald Knox, *The Trials of a Translator* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), pp 14–15.
 3 BBC News magazine, 11 March 2004.
 4 BBC News magazine, 11 March 2004.

► The translation model used for the GNB was described as “dynamic” or “functional equivalence” and had been developed for the American Bible Society (ABS) by Eugene Nida, Executive Translations Secretary for the United Bible Societies (UBS). GNB, translated from the best manuscripts by a group of ABS scholars, broke with more traditional “formal equivalence” models. To various degrees, these attempt to preserve the vocabulary, syntax and tone of the original language. Instead, GNB was built on the recognition that each language has distinct characteristics and many things cannot be translated mechanically without a loss of effective communication. As earlier Bible translator Ronald Knox had written, “wise according to the flesh” is “Hebrew in English garb, it is not English”.²

The goal of the GNB translators and its successors was to express the Bible in a way that was “natural, clear, simple and unambiguous”. Unashamedly populist like many sixties innovations, the GNB boldly replaced the majestic, high language of older translations with a text that stripped away the mysticism of the past to help readers grasp what the text was actually saying.

The result was a hugely successful translation used by adults and children from all backgrounds. It became a

firm favourite in schools, churches and among individuals, selling 140 million copies by the 1990s.

Since the earliest edition, various revisions took account of feedback and new scholarship (a New Testament revision in 1971; a full Bible revision in 1976 and a revised edition in 1994 that aimed, among other things, to avoid male-only references in passages that are addressed to both men and women).

The more recent Contemporary English Version (CEV) translation, along with many UBS translations into other languages, build on the GNB tradition. One refinement has been the intention, pioneered by Barclay Newman, ABS Senior Translation Consultant, to produce more “ear-orientated” translations to take into consideration the needs of people to hear the Bible read aloud.

Apart from the text itself, some of the success of GNB has to be attributed to the artwork of its Swiss artist, Annie Vallotton. For GNB readers, her simple, universally appealing drawings have an iconic value. Producing illustrations that were a thousand miles from traditional religious illustrations, her aim was “to give maximum expression with a minimum of lines”. In her arabesque pen lines and outline silhouettes she found memorable ways of communicating the narrative and drama of biblical episodes. Bible Society’s co-publisher, HarperCollins, believe that Annie’s 500 illustrations, published over 140 million times, may even make her the bestselling artist of all time.³

Journalist Stephen Tomkins explains their appeal when he comments on one of her illustrations of the thorn-crowned head of Jesus. “Somehow this plain sketch conveys the desolation of Jesus far more powerfully than two hours of Mel Gibson’s blood-spattered film, *The Passion of the Christ*.”⁴

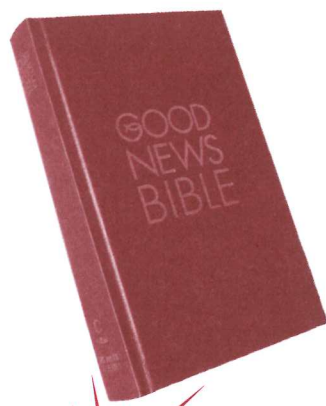
The popularity of the Good News Bible is likely to continue with the decision of HarperCollins to re-launch the range, starting this March by rejacketing in day-glo colours some of the most popular titles (the *Rainbow*, *Sunrise* and *New Life* editions). Even the more sober-covered church and standard Bibles released this June benefit from additional helps and new, extra-clear type and revised layout.

The 1960s may be a distant memory, but by the clarity of its translation and continually improving its format, this child of the sixties has grown up to be a trusted translation that is still good news to readers seeking spiritual life in the twenty-first century. ■

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