

Charity

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THE KING JAMES BIBLE and the American Standard Bible are two excellent sources from which to draw for comparing words and determining the change and growth of the English language. The King James Bible dates from 1611, while the American Standard Bible dates from 1901. Between 1611 and 1901 the meanings of many words and phrases have changed.

Take, for example, the word "charity" from the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians. A famous portion of this chapter is the thirteenth verse which reads, according to the King James version, "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." In the language as it stands today, charity is the act of giving to the poor. It is very clear that this meaning of "charity" is not what Paul meant because in the third verse of the same chapter, King James Edition, it reads, "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." If we apply the modern meaning of the word "charity" to this passage, it would contradict itself. The passage would mean—"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . ." and not give to the poor "it profiteth me nothing," which makes no sense at all.

In the American Revised Edition the word "love" has been substituted. The word "love" itself has many different meanings and uses, among which is "good will." If this meaning is substituted in the third verse, it will have this meaning—"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . ." but do not have good will "it profiteth me nothing." This gives the passage a clear meaning for if one gives only because of necessity, the gift is not going to be worth as much as if one gives in the spirit of good will. So, in the American Standard Version, the thirteenth chapter reads, "But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love." The meaning seems a little clearer when "charity" is replaced by "love."

In 1611 the word "charity" was used to mean "good will." Today, only in a very slight sense does "charity" mean "good will"; now it commonly means "giving to the poor." By this example, it is easy to see how words change their meanings in the course of many years. One might wonder how the meaning of "charity" will be altered in the next few hundred years.