

Some Thoughts on the ESV and Bible Translation

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Introduction

The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod made a very significant decision at their October 27-28, 2003 meeting. They decided to recommend to the 2004 LCMS convention that the English Standard Version (ESV) be used in the upcoming LCMS hymnal, to be called the *Lutheran Service Book*. This was a shift from *Lutheran Worship*, the LCMS hymnal published in 1982, which used the New International Version (NIV). The decision to recommend the ESV was made after receiving input from the 35 districts of LCMS and the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). This recommendation was approved at the 2004 LCMS convention.

Concordia Publishing House (CPH) has subsequently made the ESV the default translation for all Concordia publications. They have done this even though the 2004 convention resolution did not mention any publications other than the new hymnal. CPH undoubtedly has figured that if the LCMS hymnal is using the ESV, then it would make sense for its other publications to follow suit. CPH also has leaders like Rev. Paul McCain who definitely favor the ESV.

What this means for us in WELS is that whenever we buy materials from CPH—bulletins, educational materials, or *The Lutheran Study Bible*—we now will be confronted with the ESV. The question may be asked among us: Should we in WELS shift to the ESV as the Bible translation for our publications, especially as we are encountering a major revision in the NIV?

In this paper I'd like to explain the background of the ESV and to give a critique, with a view toward whether or not this translation is a wise choice for the publications of WELS at this time.

The ESV—A revision of the RSV

The ESV, to put it simply, is a revision by conservative Christians of the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Depending on whose statistics you use, between 91-95% of the text of the ESV is identical to the 1971 edition of the RSV.

The origin of the ESV can be traced to a May 1997 meeting in Colorado Springs called by James Dobson to discuss inclusive language in Bible translations, after the publication of the New International Version Inclusive (NIVI) in England. At this meeting the possibility of a new translation was informally discussed. Some months later, Professor Wayne Grudem and Crossway President Lane Dennis negotiated with the National Council of Churches for rights to produce a revision of the RSV. Permission was granted, a revision committee was put together, and in 2001 the ESV was published. ESV critics have pointed out how rapidly the ESV was prepared, wondering how thorough the revisers were in examining the RSV text over against the originals.¹ At any rate, one should be aware that the foundation of the ESV is very definitely the RSV.

The Revised Standard Version itself was a revision of a revision of a revision. The RSV came out on September 30, 1952 as a major reworking of the American Revised Version (ARV) of 1901. The ARV was a revision of the Revised Version published in England in 1885, which of course was a revision of the King James Version of 1611. As a result, the ESV can legitimately boast that it is in the “great tradition” of Bible

¹Allan Chapple, “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” originally published in *The Reformed Theological Review*, 62:2 (August 2003), 61-96. This information is on pp. 24 and 27 of the online version.

translation going back to Tyndale and the KJV.² There is a direct lineage: Tyndale to KJV to RV to ARV to RSV to ESV. This means that the ESV may be a good choice for people who want a Bible that still reflects the KJV.

The fact that the ESV is a revision of the RSV may have contributed to the openness of the LCMS to the ESV. Unlike WELS, there were many LCMS congregations that used the RSV in the 1950s and following. For many older LCMS Christians, therefore, the ESV may be like going home. It is also true that the LCMS had six scholars who participated in the editing process of the ESV, although they were not on the fourteen-member Translation Oversight Committee. Those who served as Translation Review Scholars were seminary professors Daniel L. Gard (Fort Wayne), Walter A. Maier III (Fort Wayne), Paul A. Raabe (St. Louis), James W. Voelz (St. Louis), and Dean O. Wenthe (Fort Wayne), together with CPH editor Christopher Mitchell.

It is important to know that the Revised Standard Version, the base text of the ESV, received a mixed review when it was first published in 1952. The RSV was carefully done by the leading scholars of the day and was in general quite highly regarded as a translation. In the following decades it was the best-selling translation apart from the KJV. The RSV, however, was strongly criticized and avoided by many conservative Christians. The committee that prepared the RSV had liberal translators who followed the higher-critical method, and their liberal theology showed up occasionally in the translation, especially in Old Testament messianic prophecies and New Testament passages about the deity of Christ. WELS seminary professor Joel Gerlach wrote, “While the RSV has many things to commend it to the church, yet it must be noted, as the *Quarterly* has done in previous issues, that there is an evident introduction into it of concepts peculiar to and favoring neo-orthodoxy, and that numerous Old Testament passages dealing with Messianic prophecy are inadequate and unacceptable.”³

So when Grudem and the evangelical ESV revisers took up their work, they knew what they had to do. They had to clean up the theological trouble spots that had been identified for decades.

Did the ESV correct the doctrinal weaknesses of the RSV?

Herman Otten in *Christian News* has encouraged Lutheran Christians to avoid the ESV because in his opinion the ESV has not corrected the doctrinal problems of the RSV. He writes, “Many of the errors in the RSV remained in the ESV.”⁴ If this is true, the ESV should be avoided. The first criteria for Bible translations in our circles has always been: “Is the translation doctrinally acceptable?”⁵

However, Otten does not give many examples. The conclusion of most conservative Christians, including the Commission on Worship of the LCMS, is that the ESV revisers did improve the most significant doctrinal problems in the RSV.⁶ Here are a few of the passages that were most strongly criticized by conservatives in the 1950s. You can see that they are all improved.

Passages improved in the ESV over against the RSV.

Ps 2:12 – נִשְׁקוּ־בָר פְּוֹי־אֲנִי

²Cameron MacKenzie, an LCMS professor of history at Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, promotes the ESV for this reason in a video clip available at the Concordia website (<http://media.ctsfw.edu/>).

³Joel C. Gerlach, “Bible Translations—Progress Report,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 68:3 (July 1971), 194. When referring to previous *Quarterly* articles, he would be including Frederic E. Blume, “The New Testament in The Revised Standard Version: An Evaluation,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 50:1 (January 1953), 1-15.

⁴Herman Otten, *Christian News*, November 22, 2010, 6.

⁵Gerlach, “Bible Translations—Progress Report,” 191. See also Armin Panning, “The New American Standard Bible, Is This the Answer?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 70:1 (January 1973), 13.

⁶*Comparative Study of Bible Translations*, prepared by The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 4. One exception is John Ronning, “The Disappointing ESV and HCSB.”

RSV: kiss his feet, lest he be angry.⁷
 ESV: Kiss *the Son*, lest he be angry,

Ps 45:6 (H7) – כִּסֵּאֲךָ אֱלֹהִים עוֹלָם וָעֶד

RSV: Your *divine throne* endures for ever and ever.
 ESV: Your throne, *O God*, is forever and ever.

Isa 7:14 – הִנֵּה הָעַלְמָה הָרְהָ וְיִלְדֶת בֵּן

RSV: Behold, *a young woman* shall conceive and bear a son,
 ESV: Behold, *the virgin* shall conceive and bear a son,

Ro 9:5 – καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα, ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς

RSV: and of their race, according to the flesh, is the *Christ. God* who is over all be blessed for ever.
 ESV: and from their race, according to the flesh, is the *Christ who is God* over all, blessed forever.

That is not to say that the ESV is a four-lane superhighway without any doctrinal bumps or cracks. A very significant gender difficulty is apparent in 1 Corinthians 11:3. This is the passage that states the general principle of headship, and the ESV unfortunately limits it to husbands and wives. The context, however, has no markers like “*his wife*” or “*her husband*” to favor the more narrow meaning. And, the parallel Pauline texts in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8ff have no such limitation.

A gender difficulty in the ESV.

1 Co 11:3 – κεφαλὴ δὲ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ,

ESV: the head of a *wife* is her *husband*,
 NIV 2011:⁸ the head of the *woman* is *man*,

The ESV is also weak in some passages that have been used by Calvinists to teach double predestination. The wording of the ESV is more Calvinistic than the NIV in these passages. Of course, the NIV has long been criticized by some Lutherans for supposedly showing Reformed influence. The fact is that the ESV, like the NIV, was done by a committee of translators who did not hold to Lutheran theology.

Some passages that sound more Calvinistic in the ESV than in the NIV.

1 Pe 2:8 – οἱ προσκόπτουσιν τῷ λόγῳ ἀπειθοῦντες εἰς ὃ καὶ ἐτέθησαν.

ESV: They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were *destined to do*.
 NIV: They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also *what they were destined for*.

Jude 4 – παρεισέδυσαν γὰρ τινες ἄνθρωποι, οἱ πάλαι προγεγραμμένοι εἰς τοῦτο τὸ κρίμα,

ESV: For certain people have crept in unnoticed *who long ago were designated for this condemnation*,

⁷I will sometimes insert italics into translations to highlight the pertinent words.

⁸All references in this paper will be to NIV 2011 unless otherwise indicated.

NIV: For certain individuals *whose condemnation was written about long ago* have secretly slipped in among you.

Closer scrutiny of the ESV over time might reveal other passages that are not translated the way Lutherans would prefer. The LCMS Commission on Worship noted that the ESV often translates the Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּטִים as “rules,” where we would prefer a word with a less negative connotation. One messianic prophecy seems to be worse in the ESV than it was in the RSV. Some Pauline passages take an interpretation different from what has been common among us.

God gives us “rules”?

Ps 119:43 – כִּי לְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ יְחַלְתִּי

ESV: my hope is in your *rules*.

NIV: I have put my hope in your laws.

Losing the messianic reference?

Ge 49:10 – לֹא יִסּוּר שִׁבְטֹ מִיְהוּדָה ... עַד כִּי־יָבֹא שִׁילָה

RSV: The scepter shall not depart from Judah,...until *he comes to whom it belongs*;

ESV: The scepter shall not depart from Judah,...until *tribute comes to him*;

NIV: The scepter will not depart from Judah,...until *he to whom it belongs shall come*

Questionable interpretation.

1 Co 2:13 – πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγχαρίνοντες.

ESV: interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

NIV: explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

Comment: The NIV takes it as a reference to verbal inspiration.

Col 2:8 (also 20) – τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου

ESV: the elemental spirits of the world,⁹

NASB:¹⁰ the elementary principles of the world,

But these weaknesses do not seem to rise to the level of “deal-breakers.” In regard to English translations, we have to have realistic expectations. There is no perfect translation. Every published translation has its weak spots. The KJV did. The NIV does.¹¹ It seems that the same judgment can be placed on the ESV today that was placed by WELS on the NIV in the 1970s: Doctrinally it is “a translation which may be used with a high degree of confidence.”¹²

⁹Curiously, in Galatians 4:3, 9 the ESV translates the same phrase as “the elementary principles of the world.”

¹⁰All references in this paper will be to NASBU, the update published in 1995.

¹¹In this paper I am not opening up the topic of Old Testament messianic prophecies and the capitalization of messianic titles. Some might criticize the ESV for Micah 5:2 (“from ancient days”), but the NIV has always had something similar and this is what the Hebrew words mean elsewhere. Some might praise the ESV for the capitalization of “his Anointed” in Psalm 2:7 (where the NIV doesn’t), but the ESV doesn’t capitalize “an anointed one” in Daniel 9:25 (where the NIV does). We have always lived with inconsistencies in this regard. The KJV did not capitalize “redeemer” in Job 19:25.

¹²*Book of Reports and Memorials for the Fifty-Fifth Biennial Convention of WELS, 1979, 197.*

If the ESV is doctrinally acceptable, then we can look at its translation philosophy and consider its strengths and weaknesses in the task of translating.

The translation philosophy of the ESV

The ESV presents its translation goals in one sentence as follows: “The English Standard Version (ESV) Bible is an essentially literal Bible translation that combines word-for-word accuracy with literary excellence, beauty, and depth of meaning.”¹³ Simply put, its two goals are: 1) word-for-word translating and 2) excellent English.

The “Preface” to the ESV elaborates on these goals. It says that the ESV “seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original... To the extent that plain English permits and the meaning in each case allows, we have sought to use the same English word for important recurring words in the original.” In regard to English style, the “Preface” says, “The words and phrases themselves grow out of the Tyndale-King James legacy... Archaic language has been brought to current usage... We have sought to be ‘as literal as possible’ while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence.”¹⁴

The summary paragraph of the ESV “Preface” states: “As an essentially literal translation, then, the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language. As such, it is ideally suited for in-depth study of the Bible. Indeed, with its emphasis on literary excellence, the ESV is equally suited for public reading and preaching, for private reading and reflection, for both academic and devotional study, and for Scripture memorization.”¹⁵

Subsequent sections of this paper will consider to what extent the ESV meets its goals. But at this point it is worth stating the obvious that the ESV has certainly set ambitious goals for itself—one could say grandiose, pretentious, or even impossible goals. The ESV’s summary paragraph takes one’s breath away! Generally speaking, if a translation intends to be word-for-word, it will not be as beautiful or idiomatic in the receptor language. Generally speaking, if a translation seeks to be precise for study purposes, it may not be the best for devotional reading. Some of these goals are mutually exclusive. The ESV, however, claims that it can do everything well.

The primary spokesman for the ESV in secondary literature has been Prof. Leland Ryken, a Wheaton College English professor and specialist in Milton who was the chief literary stylist for the ESV. Crossway Press has published three books by Ryken in which he argues the case for the translation methods of the ESV.¹⁶ In Ryken’s works, we get a fuller picture of what the ESV hopes to accomplish as a translation.

Ryken argues that the Bible as God’s inspired Word should be translated in a word-for-word fashion like the ESV, and not thought-for-thought. Then the English reader can have “a direct and unobstructed view of the original text.”¹⁷ Words should never be put into the translation that are not represented in the original, and the idioms of the original should be retained. Only on “rare occasions” will an essentially literal translation need to shift away from the actual words of the biblical author, and then the translation will normally contain a footnote that gives the literal rendering.¹⁸

Ryken contends that this “essentially literal” method of the ESV is best because it keeps interpretation out of the translation. Ryken admits that there is “linguistic interpretation” when decisions need to be made

¹³From the brief “Introduction” on the ESV website at <http://www.esv.org/esv/introduction/>.

¹⁴*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2002), vii-viii.

¹⁵*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, viii.

¹⁶See Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Bible Translation Differences* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), and *Understanding English Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009).

¹⁷Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 137.

¹⁸Ryken, *Choosing a Bible*, 24.

“regarding what English words best express Hebrew or Greek words.”¹⁹ But he doesn’t really consider that to be “interpretation.” Actual interpretation can be avoided. He maintains, “It is time to call a moratorium on the misleading and ultimately false claim that all translation is interpretation.”²⁰ Especially when a Scripture text has multiple interpretive possibilities, Ryken says that the ESV method is best because it will preserve “the full interpretative potential of the original text.”²¹ The ESV, according to Ryken, allows the reader to interpret the text for himself.

Ryken also praises the ESV for its English style. He looks upon the KJV as the gold standard of literary excellence. Insofar as the ESV continues in the tradition of the KJV, it has an artistry and literary beauty above other English translations. The reason why ESV instigators did not settle onto the New American Standard Bible (NASB), according to Ryken, is because they wanted a translation with “greater stylistic flair than the essentially literal NASB.”²² Ryken is not concerned that the reading level of the ESV is more difficult than many other English translations. He thinks that if the Bible “is made to sound like the newspaper” or if the Bible is “pitched at a junior high level,” it will not be respected in the way that it should.²³

In summary, this is what the ESV claims to be:

- a word-for-word translation that gives transparency to the original text;
- a translation that does not insert interpretation;
- a translation that strives to translate Hebrew and Greek words consistently with the same English word (“verbal consistency”);
- a translation based on the KJV but without archaic words and constructions;
- a translation with clarity of expression; and
- a translation with literary excellence.

It is commonly understood in translation circles today that there are many possible goals when it comes to translation, and there is not just one right way to translate anything. It is impossible for any translation to bring over all of the content of the original. So, each translation has to set up its goals in view of its intended audience. The best way to evaluate a translation, therefore, is to see if the translation actually does what it intends to do. D. A. Carson writes: “The ultimate (but not the only) test of a translation is whether or not it achieves with the target audience what the translator sets out to achieve.”²⁴

With that in mind, let us consider to what extent the ESV meets the goals it sets for itself.

The ESV’s “direct transparency” into the original text

Does the ESV give “a direct and unobstructed view of the original text?” Does the ESV “let the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original?”

It is certainly true that the ESV is more literal than the NIV and numerous other English translations. However, it is an overstatement to say that the ESV gives direct transparency into the original text. Often the ESV reworks the form of the original and often the ESV adds words that are not in the original. Rodney Decker in his review of the ESV correctly states, “There are far more idiomatic, functional equivalents in the ESV than most people would ever suspect based on the popular perception of this ‘essentially literal’ translation.”²⁵

¹⁹Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 85.

²⁰Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 89.

²¹Ryken, *Choosing a Bible*, 25.

²²Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 55.

²³Ryken, *Understanding Bible Translation*, 170.

²⁴D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 71.

²⁵Rodney J. Decker, “The ESV NT: A Review Article,” Faculty Forum, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, 11.

First let's look at a few passages where the ESV adds words that are not in the original. This is just a tiny sampling, and in every case where I give some ESV examples, there are many more that could be found.

Passages where the ESV adds words that are not in the original.

Ps 57:6 (H7) – נִפְּלוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ

Literal: they fell in the midst of it.

ESV: *but* they have fallen into it *themselves*.

2 Co 4:3 – ἐν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις ἐστὶν κεκαλυμμένον,

Literal: among those perishing it is veiled

ESV: it is veiled *only* to those who are perishing.

1 Ti 5:21 – Διαμαρτύρομαι ... ἵνα ταῦτα φυλάξης χωρὶς προκρίματος,

Literal: I charge ... that you keep these without partiality.

ESV: I charge you to keep these *rules* without prejudging,

Good translation does not have anything to do with counting up the total number of words. But it is interesting to see what the total word count is in the ESV and other translations, especially since promoters of the ESV are quick to say that the ESV does not add words where they are not in the original.

<i>Version:</i>	<i>Total number of words:</i>
Hebrew and Greek	545,202
HCSB ²⁶	718,943
NIV (1984)	726,109
ESV	757,439. ²⁷

Next, if one works at all with the ESV and the original languages, one can easily find many examples where the ESV does not translate literally, and no footnote is added. I am not critical of the way the ESV translates in these cases, because they are properly trying to bring over the meaning for contemporary readers. It's just that they are not really doing what they promised to do. In some of these cases, the original expression would probably have been understandable in English if translated literally. Here is a small sampling.

Passages where an idiom was not translated literally, and no note was added.

Ex 4:10 – לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי

Literal: I am not a *man of words*

ESV: I am not *eloquent*,

²⁶The Holman Christian Standard Bible is a fresh translation published in 2003. It was prepared by a group of 90 evangelical scholars from various denominations, with a conservative Presbyterian as the editor-in-chief. So far it has been marketed mostly in the Southern Baptist Convention. The HCSB tries to have readability similar to the NIV, but it does nothing objectionable with gender language and it retains traditional theological terminology.

²⁷From a promotional brochure for the Holman Christian Standard Bible, distributed at the annual ETS conference in Atlanta, November 2010.

Ex 6:8 – הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂאתִי אֶת־יָדִי לָתֵת אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלַיַעֲקֹב

Literal: the land that *I lifted my hand* to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob

ESV: the land that *I swore* to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

2 Ki 9:1 – חָגַר מִתְנַיֵּךְ

NASB: Gird up your loins,

ESV: Tie up your garments,

2 Ki 9:8 – וְהִכַּרְתִּי לְאַחָאָב מִשְׁתֵּינ בְּקִיר

Literal: I will cut off for Ahab *one urinating on a wall*

ESV: I will cut off from Ahab *every male*,

Job 19:27 – כָּלוּ כְלֵי־תִי בְחֻקֵי

Literal: my kidneys in my bosom are exhausted

ESV: My heart faints within me!

Ps 56:12 (H13) – עָלַי אֱלֹהִים נִדְרֵיךָ

Literal: on me, God, are your vows

ESV: I must perform my vows to you, O God;

Ps 62:9 (H10) – אֵדָה | הֶבֶל בְּנֵי־אָדָם כְּזָב בְּנֵי אִישׁ

Literal: Surely breath, sons of mankind; deception, sons of man.

JPS:²⁸ Men are mere breath; mortals, illusion;

ESV: Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion;

Lk 5:9 – θάμβος γὰρ περιέσχεν αὐτὸν καὶ πάντας τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ

NASB: For amazement had seized him and all his companions

ESV: For he and all who were with him were astonished

1 Co 7:1 – καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἅπτεσθαι.

NASB: it is good for a man not *to touch* a woman.

ESV: It is good for a man not *to have sexual relations with* a woman.

Php 1:8 – ἐπιποθῶ πάντας ὑμᾶς ἐν σπλάγχχοις Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

KJV: I long after you all *in the bowels* of Jesus Christ.

ESV: I yearn for you all *with the affection* of Christ Jesus.

Seeing the number of shifts like this in the ESV leaves me stunned when I read Leland Ryken's comment that the ESV only rarely shifts away from the literal wording of the original, and generally supplies a footnote when it does. The only person who could honestly say this, it seems to me, would be a person who has

not actually worked with the original texts and the ESV open on his desk.²⁹ I wonder: was there no Crossway editor knowledgeable with the original languages who could correct this overstatement in Ryken's book?

In actuality, the handling of idioms in the ESV seems inconsistent. Sometimes idioms are brought over literally, and sometimes the same idioms or similar idioms are reworked without any footnote.

Inconsistency in handling idioms.

Ge 6:8 – וַיִּבֶן מִצָּדָה חֵן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה

ESV: But Noah found favor *in the eyes of* the LORD

Ge 38:7 – וַיְהִי עֵר בְּכוֹר יְהוּדָה רָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה

ESV: But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked *in the sight of* the LORD,

1 Kg 3:10 – וַיִּיטֵב הַדְּבָר בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנָי

ESV: It pleased the Lord³⁰

Ge 27:39 – מִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ יִהְיֶה מוֹשְׁבֶדְךָ

ESV: away from *the fatness of* the earth shall your dwelling be,

Da 11:24 – וּבְמִשְׁמַנֵּי מְדִינָה יָבוֹא

ESV: he shall come into *the richest parts of* the province,

Ex 11:7 – וְלֹכֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יַחַרְץ־כְּלָב לְשׁוֹנוֹ

Literal: a dog will not sharpen his tongue

ESV: But not a dog *shall growl* against any of the people of Israel,

Jos 10:21 – לֹא־חָרַץ לְבִגְיֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאִישׁ אֶת־לְשׁוֹנוֹ

ESV: Not a man *moved his tongue* against any of the people of Israel.

2 Sa 7:10 – וְלֹא־יִסְיִפוּ בְּנֵי־עוֹלָה לְעַנּוֹתָיו

Literal: sons of injustice

ESV: And *violent men* shall afflict them no more

Pr 31:5 – אִישׁוֹנָה דִין כָּל־בְּנֵי־עָנִי

²⁹

I read with interest the following evaluation of Ryken in “The ESV NT: A Review Article” by Rodney J. Decker, 9: “My conclusion is that Ryken's work is seriously flawed to the point of being unusable. This book may have some helpful points from time to time, but most of it is filled with linguistic nonsense. It is written by an English professor—and as such he is well respected in his field. But he appears to understand little about translating the biblical languages into English. The book is characterized by overstatement, straw men, invalid assumptions, and faulty conclusions. It could be one of the more harmful and polarizing factors in the reception of the ESV. The translators understand the issues that Ryken does not, but by allowing someone who does not understand such issues to serve as the major (at this point the only) published defense of the ESV's translation theory, it is possible that the ESV will not get the hearing it deserves. The ESV overall is quite good; Ryken's defense of it is quite bad.”

³⁰With all the ESV passages in this paper, it would be fascinating to compare them with the RSV. These three passages have been brought over into the ESV identically from the RSV. I suspect that is the case with most of the passages about which I have concerns. One wonders how carefully the revision was carried out.

Literal: sons of affliction

ESV: and pervert the rights of all *the afflicted*

Eph 5:6 – γὰρ ἔρχεται ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ἀπειθείας.

ESV: for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon *the sons of disobedience*.

Quite commonly people talk about two approaches to translation: “formal correspondence or equivalence” and “functional equivalence,” based on categories established by Eugene Nida in the 1950s and 1960s.³¹ Formal equivalence is literal, word-for-word translating that seeks “to retain the *form* of the Hebrew or Greek while producing basically understandable English.”³² Functional equivalence is “idiomatic or meaning-based translation” that seeks to “reproduce its *meaning* in good idiomatic (natural) English.”³³ In the past, functional equivalence has sometimes been called “dynamic equivalence,” with the thought that the English translation should have the same effect on the readers today as the original would have had on its readers—but this term is not preferred today. Commonly, translation discussions will say that there is a continuum from formal equivalence on one end to functional equivalence on the other. They will often lay out the common translations in a manner similar to this:³⁴

Translation Spectrum

Formal
Equivalence
NASB NKJV³⁵ ESV

Mediating
HCSB NIV

Functional
Equivalence
NLT³⁶ CEV³⁷

The longer I teach Biblical Hebrew and work with the Bible in the original languages, however, the more it strikes me that no translation should be put way over on the left on this continuum. LCMS Professor Jeffrey Gibbs is correct: “Strictly (or ‘literally’) speaking, *no* English translation is ‘literal,’ for the Bible’s original languages use different word order and grammar to structure their sentences.... All modern English translations use, to a greater or lesser extent, the general concept of ‘dynamic equivalence.’ But some use it more than others.”³⁸ Even the KJV translated *μὴ γένοιτο* (Gal 2:17) as “God forbid.” If the spectrum is used, the more honest presentation is something like this:

Translation Spectrum

Formal
Equivalence

Mediating

Functional
Equivalence

³¹Eugene Nida co-authored *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969) and other very influential works on Bible translation.

³²Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 26.

³³Fee and Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation*, 26.

³⁴Fee and Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation*, 28.

³⁵The New King James Version from 1982.

³⁶The New Living Translation was first published in 1996. It underwent a major revision in 2004 and a minor updating in 2007. The NLT is an evangelical Christian attempt to render the Bible into “clear, contemporary English.” It considers the NIV to be too wooden in places.

³⁷The Contemporary English Version was published in 1995 by the American Bible Society as a translation that tries to follow the principles of dynamic equivalence consistently.

³⁸Jeffrey Gibbs, “All Those Translations!”, *Lutheran Witness*, 117:11 (November 1988), 11.

NASB
NKJV⁴¹
ESV

HCSB NIV

NLT³⁹ CEV⁴⁰

Some translation specialists prefer not to use these categories at all.⁴² When translating, the source text always has more features than can be brought over into the target text. In addition to form and meaning, there may be features of sound (e.g. word plays), there may be features of organization (e.g. acrostic poems), and there may be allusions to other portions of Scripture. There may be necessary background information that is implicit in the original but unknown to receptor language readers. There may be innuendos and connotations that escape us or are impossible to reproduce. The translator must always pick and choose what he feels is most important to bring over for his audience. Translating is a difficult, complex art that takes insight and good judgment. So, it may be simplistic to speak merely of “formal equivalence” versus “functional equivalence.”

But at any rate, if you are eager to use and promote the ESV because you understand that it gives “a direct and unobstructed view of the original text,” then I say, think again. This is an overstatement. The ESV properly shifts many constructions and idioms, because every translation must.

The ESV’s promise of “no interpretation”

In regard to interpretation in Bible translation, it is certainly true that the more literal a translation is, the less interpretation there will be. The more free a translation is, the more interpretation there inevitably will be. It is also true that if the original text has a construction that allows for multiple interpretations, it is a good thing to preserve that ambiguity in English if possible.

However, it is linguistically naive to say that one can translate without inserting interpretation, or that interpretation needs to be inserted only rarely. Regularly on every page, just to put something on paper, a translator has to make interpretive decisions. This includes translators who are producing an essentially literal translation. Very often a construction that allows ambiguity in the original will not be able to be conveyed in English with that same ambiguity. The translator will have to make a judgment call.⁴³ ESV promoters, therefore, are overstating the case when they advertise their translation as a translation without interpretation.

The situation can be illustrated with the book of Jonah, familiar to all of us. In the ESV translation of the book of Jonah, there are at least 13 places where the ESV translators have made an interpretive decision—in most cases because they had to. Let me give the ESV translation and indicate how it shows an interpretive decision:

Passages in Jonah where the ESV has made an interpretive decision.

Jnh 1:2 – וְקָרָא עָלַיָּהּ בִּי-עֲלֹתָהּ רָעָתָם לְפָנַי

ESV: call out against it, *for* their evil has come up before me.

Comment: Rather than introducing a causal clause, **וְ** could introduce an object clause and could

³⁹The New Living Translation was first published in 1996. It underwent a major revision in 2004 and a minor updating in 2007. The NLT is an evangelical Christian attempt to render the Bible into “clear, contemporary English.” It considers the NIV to be too wooden in places.

⁴⁰The Contemporary English Version was published in 1995 by the American Bible Society as a translation that tries to follow the principles of dynamic equivalence consistently.

⁴¹The New King James Version from 1982.

⁴²See Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., “On Bible Translation and Choosing a Bible,” in the forthcoming issue of *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Also Stephen Pattemore, “Framing Nida: The Relevance of Translation Theory in the United Bible Societies,” in *A History of Bible Translation*, edited by Philip A. Noss (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 2007), 217-263.

⁴³Two well-known New Testament examples are Luke 2:37 and 1 Thessalonians 4:4.

give the content of the preaching.

Beck: announce to her *that* I see how wicked they are.

Jnh 1:5 – וַיִּזְנֶה יָרֵד אֶל־יַרְכְּתֵי הַסְּפִינָה

ESV: But Jonah *had gone down* into the inner part of the ship

Comment: When did Jonah go down into the ship and fall asleep? The *Concordia Commentary* prefers the idea that Jonah went down while the storm was raging, not before.

CC: But Jonah went down to the innermost recesses of the ship,⁴⁴

Jnh 1:11 – כִּי הַיָּם הוֹלֵךְ וְסֹעֵר

ESV: For the sea grew *more and more tempestuous*.

Comment: Does the construction with the two participles show continuance or intensification? GKC 113v says that the construction shows “long continuance.”

Limburg: For the sea kept on storming.⁴⁵

Jnh 1:14 – כִּי־אָתָּה יְהוָה בְּאֲשֶׁר חָפַצְתָּ עָשִׂיתָ

ESV: for you, O LORD, *have done as it pleased you*.

Comment: The perfect verbs could describe something done in the past. They also could describe a general truth (JM 112d).

Beck: since You, LORD, do as You like.

Jnh 2:4 (H5) – אֵךְ אוֹסִיף לְהִבִּיט אֶל־הַיְכָל קִדְשֶׁךָ

ESV: yet I *shall again look upon* your holy temple.

Comment: Some interpreters take this as a doubt-filled question, rather than as a statement of confidence. Also some interpreters assume that Jonah is talking about praying to God in heaven, rather than looking upon the temple in Jerusalem again.

GOD’S WORD: Will I ever see your holy temple again?

NIV: yet I will look again toward your holy temple.

Jnh 2:6 (H7) – יָרַדְתִּי הָאָרֶץ בָּרַחְיָהּ בַּעֲדֵי לְעוֹלָם

ESV: I went *down to the land whose bars closed upon me* forever;

Comment: It is possible to divide the verse differently and to take הָאָרֶץ as the dry ground which will bar Jonah out so that he can never return.

Literal: as for the earth, its bars were against me forever.

Jnh 2:8 (H9) – מִשְׁמָרִים הַבְּלִי־שׁוֹא חֲסָדָם יַעֲזָבוּ

ESV: Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake *their hope of steadfast love*.

Comment: The חֲסָדָם is a famous crux. Is it God’s love or the idolaters’ own faithfulness?

NASB: Those who regard vain idols Forsake their faithfulness,

Jnh 3:3 – וַיִּנְיָהּ הִיְתָה עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֱלֹהִים

ESV: Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city,

⁴⁴R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 98.

⁴⁵James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 54.

Comment: The word לְאֱלֹהִים could be understood literally and does not need to be taken as a way to express the superlative degree.

Beck: Nineveh was a great city before God,

Jnh 3:3 – מִהֶלֶךְ שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים

ESV: three days' journey in breadth.

Comment: What is meant by Nineveh being a “journey of three days” is interpreted differently by different people. Here is a case where the ESV could have left all the interpretive options open by translating literally. Instead, they have favored one interpretation.

NLT: a city so large that it took three days to see it all.

Jnh 3:7 – וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינְוָה מִטֶּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ

ESV: And he issued a proclamation and published *through Nineveh*, “By the decree of the king...

Comment: It is grammatically possible that בְּנִינְוָה could be the first word of the decree.

NASB: He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king...

Jnh 4:2 – עַל־כֵּן קָדַמְתִּי לְבָרוּחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה

ESV: That is why I *made haste* to flee to Tarshish;

Comment: The verb קָדַמְתִּי could refer to something done earlier in time or something done quickly.

NRSV: That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning;

Jnh 4:5 – וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן־הָעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקְדָּם לָעִיר

ESV: Jonah *went out* of the city and sat to the east of the city

Comment: When did Jonah leave the city? Some people think that he left prior to the dialogue in Jonah 4:1-4.

JPS: Now Jonah had left the city and found a place east of the city.

Jnh 4:6 – וַיִּמַן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים קִיקְיֹון וַיַּעַל מֵעַל לְיוֹנָה

ESV: Now the LORD God appointed a plant and *made it come up* over Jonah,

Comment: The verb form וַיַּעַל is ambiguous. It could either be Hifil or Qal.

NASB: So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah

Leland Ryken says that essentially literal translations like the ESV do not insert interpretation, whereas functional equivalent translations like the NIV do.⁴⁶ Rather, it is correct to say that all translations include interpretation in varying degrees. It is a matter of degree, not of a different method.

Because there is interpretation in translation, some people think that WELS should produce its own translation, so that we could have in our own hands the interpretive decisions of our translation. This is a pious thought, but ill-conceived. No one on the WELS English Version Evaluation Steering Committee thinks that this is the best way to go forward, for a number of reasons. We simply don't have the strength and time in our circles to do it. The Hebrew Old Testament has 1600 pages. Do we have Hebrew scholars to cover all of these books and pages? Not with the high expectations of modern translations, where there is mountain of exegetical

⁴⁶Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 89.

and lexical information to be brought to bear on the translating. Also, there has always been the fear that we do not want to become like a sect that needs its own translation to prop up its doctrine.

It is comforting to know that six of the most widely marketed English translations today have been produced entirely by evangelical Christians who consider the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. They are the ESV, HCSB, NKJV, NASB, NIV, and the NLT.⁴⁷ We should thank God for this great blessing! With any of these translations we can be confident that the interpretive decisions of the translators flow out of a high regard for the Scriptures as God’s Word.

Also it is a good thing that all six of these translations have all been produced and overseen by committees that have included scholars from a variety of denominations. Sometimes the idea of translation by committee may be scorned. But the truth is that Bible translation by committee can be a good thing. This is the best way to produce a Bible translation that will not be skewed toward the idiosyncratic doctrine of any one denomination. The various translators serve as a check on each other, so that what is published is a fair and honest translation of the original.

So in short, if you want to use the ESV, I say “fine.” But don’t do it because you think that the ESV will give you direct transparency into the original text without any interpretation. It has much interpretation, just like every other translation.

The ESV’s “verbal consistency”

If you read the ESV “Preface,” you might presume that the ESV regularly uses one English word for the most important Hebrew and Greek words. If you read Leland Ryken, you would assume the same. He writes, “Literal translations beginning with the Revised Version of 1885 have generally chosen to translate the same Hebrew or Greek word the same way throughout a text, thereby preserving the concordance of the original....Fidelity to the words of the biblical original *prescribes* that an English translation strive for concordance.”⁴⁸

Once again, these claims of the ESV are exaggerated. There may be more verbal consistency in the ESV than in some other translations. But a quick concordance check on the ESV reveals that most Hebrew and Greek words, even the key theological terms, are translated in a variety of ways. If a person asked ESV promoters for a list of the words translated in a concordance fashion, I wonder what would be on the list. I haven’t seen such a list, nor words that belong on such a list. Here are some words I checked:

<i>lemma</i>	<i># of occurrences</i>	<i>usual ESV and # of times</i>	<i># of times something else in ESV</i>
הִנֵּה	789	724 behold	65
ἰδοὺ	187	138 behold	49
ἄδης	11	10 Hades	1 hell (Mt 16:15)
δικαιοσύνη	92	85 righteousness	7
χάρις	155	124 grace	31
χάρισμα	17	16 gift	1 blessing
σὰρξ	147	117 flesh	30

⁴⁷According to the February 2011 statistics of the Christian Booksellers Association (see www.cbaonline.org), these translations are ranked in total dollar sales in the United States as follows: #1 NIV, #2 KJV, #3 NKJV, #4 NLT, #5 ESV, #6 HCSB, #8 NASB.

⁴⁸Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 221.

For the fun of it, I also checked to see how the ESV translates the Hebrew verb **יָשַׁב**. The ESV uses eight different English equivalents in the book of Genesis alone: dwell, live, remain, settle, sit, sit down, sit up, and stay.

But more importantly, it is not wholesome in translation to try to translate in a totally concordance fashion. Words in the receptor language never have exactly the same semantic range as words in the source language. Words take on nuances as they associate with other words in phrases and sentences. As a simple example, the Hebrew word **רוּחַ** means both “wind” and “spirit.” English does not have one word to cover both concepts. In each context, a translator has to pick what fits best, mindful of the semantic range of the source word.

So, please don’t pick up the ESV because you think it will give you verbal consistency. It doesn’t provide what it promises in this regard. And, verbal consistency itself is an impossible goal in translation, if one wants to translate intelligently.

What about gender inclusive language?

Of course, the hot button issue in Bible translation currently is gender inclusive language. The ESV originated in large part as a reaction against the inclusive language of the NIVI of 1997. The ESV has been promoted as a safe Bible for those who want to avoid the gender neutral language of the new NIV.⁴⁹ The publishing house associated with the ESV (Crossway) is known in evangelical circles for its “complementarian” position. It publishes books that promote different roles for men and women, in contrast to the “egalitarian” position.

With this background, it may be a surprise for ESV readers to realize that the ESV itself has a large amount of gender inclusive language. For example, the ESV has removed the words “man” and “men” from the RSV 671 times.⁵⁰ The Greek word *ἄνθρωπος/οι* is translated 51 times as “people” and frequently in other ways besides “man” or “men.” The ESV, without any doubt, has more inclusive language than NIV 1984, and NASB lovers may criticize the ESV for this. The ESV should be commended, however, for translating most salvation passages in a gender inclusive way, unlike the NASB.

Salvation passages that are gender neutral in the ESV.

Jn 12:32 – *καὶ γὰρ ἐὰν ὑψωθῶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς, πάντας ἔλκυσω πρὸς ἑμαυτόν.*

ESV: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself.

NIV: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself.

NASB: And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to Myself.

Ro 3:28 – *λογιζόμεθα γὰρ δικαιουῖσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου.*

ESV: For we hold that *one* is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

NIV: For we maintain that *a person* is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

NASB: For we maintain that *a man* is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

1 Ti 2 4 – *ὅς πάντας ἀνθρώπους θέλει σωθῆναι καὶ εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας ἐλθεῖν.*

⁴⁹Paul McCain argues this way in a blog posted on December 14, 2010, at <http://cyberbrethren.com/2010/12/14/avoid-gender-neutrality-like-the-plague-heres-why/>.

⁵⁰Fee and Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation*, 97.

ESV: [God] desires *all people* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

NIV: [God] wants *all people* to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

NASB: [God] desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Tit 2:11 – Ἐπεφάνη γὰρ ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ σωτήριος πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις

ESV: For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for *all people*,

NIV: For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to *all people*.

NASB: For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to *all men*,

Other examples of gender neutral language in the ESV.

Ro 2:9 – θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου τοῦ κατεργαζομένου τὸ κακόν,

ESV: There will be tribulation and distress for *every human being* who does evil,

NIV: There will be trouble and distress for *every human being* who does evil:

NASB: There will be tribulation and distress for *every soul of man* who does evil,

1 Co 2:14 – ψυχικὸς δὲ ἄνθρωπος οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ.

ESV: The *natural person* does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,

NIV: The *person without the Spirit* does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God

NASB: But a *natural man* does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,

Still it is honest to say that the ESV does not have as much gender inclusive language as NIV 2011. The ESV routinely retains the generic “he” in passages like John 6:57, “Whoever feed on me, *he* also will live because of me.” The ESV never translates the vocative ἀδελφοί as “brothers and sisters.” It retains “brothers,” but often has a footnote indicating that it can refer to people of both genders.⁵¹ The ESV makes regular use of the generic words “man” and “men.” So if you think the NIV has gone too far, you may feel at home with the ESV.

What is puzzling to me, however, is that the ESV sometimes is inconsistent in its use of gender inclusive language. Constructions with אָדָם, אִישׁ, בֶּן, ἄνθρωπος, or υἱοί are not always translated the same way, even in similar contexts. I found several passages where the ESV is gender neutral and the NIV is not. And, there are still a few salvation passages that are not gender inclusive.

Passages where the ESV is inconsistent with gender inclusive language.

Ps 32:2 – אֲשֶׁר־יִאָדָם לֹא יִחַשְׁבֶּה יְהוָה לִן עָוֹן

ESV: *Blessed is the man* against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,

Ps 84:5 (H6) – אֲשֶׁר־יִאָדָם עוֹז־לֵךְ בְּךָ

ESV: *Blessed are those* whose strength is in you,

⁵¹As a general operating procedure, it can be debated whether it is better to put a literal translation into the text with a footnote explanation, or to put a readily understandable translation into the text with the literal translation in a footnote. An argument for the latter is the fact that the way the Bible is most commonly received is orally—by hearing it read. Also, footnotes tend to be easily overlooked and ignored when reading.

Ps 84:12 (H13) – בָּרוּךְ הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁתָּחֵב

ESV: *blessed is the one who trusts in you!*

Ac 5:21 – πᾶσαν τὴν γερουσίαν τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ

ESV: all the senate of *the people of Israel*

Ac 7:23 – τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτοῦ τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ.

ESV: his brothers, *the children of Israel*.

Ac 7:37 – ὁ Μωϋσῆς ὁ εἶπας τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ.

ESV: Moses who said to *the Israelites*,

Ac 10:36 – τὸν λόγον [δὲν] ἀπέστειλεν τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ

ESV: As for the word that he sent to *Israel*,

Ro 9:27 – ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ

ESV: the number of *the sons of Israel*

1 Co 14:2 – ὁ γὰρ λαλῶν γλῶσση οὐκ ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ ἀλλὰ θεῷ.

ESV: one who speaks in a tongue speaks not *to men* but to God;

1 Co 14:3 – ὁ δὲ προφητεύων ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ οἰκοδομῆν

ESV: the one who prophesies speaks *to people* for their upbuilding

The ESV is inclusive where the NIV is not.

Nu 19:18 – הַיּוֹטֵב שֵׁשׁ בְּמִים לְבַטֵּן בּוֹיֵס קִקְלִי

ESV: Then a clean *person* shall take hyssop and dip it in the water

NIV: Then a *man* who is ceremonially clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water

1 Sa 22:18 – בָּרֶךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁחַטוּ שְׁמֹנֵים עָשָׂר וְחָמֵשׁ אֲנָשִׁים בְּיָמֵי יְהוֹשָׁפָט

ESV: and he killed on that day eighty-five *persons* who wore the linen ephod.

NIV: That day he killed eighty-five *men* who wore the linen ephod.

Comment: I'm baffled why the ESV would go gender neutral here.

1 Co 7:26 – διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην, ὅτι καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ τὸ οὕτως εἶναι.

ESV: in view of the present distress it is good for a *person* to remain as he is.

NIV: Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a *man* to remain as he is.

Php 2:8 – καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν

ESV: And being found *in human form*, he humbled himself

NIV: And being found *in appearance as a man*, he humbled himself

NASB: Being found *in appearance as a man*, He humbled Himself

Salvation passages where the ESV does not have inclusive language.

Jn 1:4 – ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων·

ESV: In him was life, and the life was the light of *men*.

NIV: In him was life, and that life was the light of *all mankind*.

Ac 4:12 – οὐδὲ γὰρ ὄνομα ἐστὶν ἕτερον ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν τὸ δεδομένον ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἐν ᾧ δεῖ σωθῆναι ἡμᾶς.

ESV: there is no other name under heaven given among *men* by which we must be saved.

NIV: there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

Ro 5:18 – ὡς δι' ἑνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντα ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἑνὸς δικαιοῦματος εἰς πάντα ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς·

ESV: as one trespass led to condemnation for all *men*, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all *men*.

NIV: just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for *all people*, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for *all people*.

Once again, it is not a matter of the NIV consistently following one translation philosophy (functional equivalence) and the ESV following another (formal equivalence), as Leland Ryken says.⁵² Rather, both translations use both methods, but the NIV goes further than the ESV in striving to communicate in idiomatic English. It is a matter of degree, not of different philosophies.

The degree to which freedom should be employed in translating is a matter of subjective opinion, where we should let each translation determine its own objectives and then let it try to fulfill them. Unfortunately, ESV promoters sometimes demonize the NIV. They accuse the NIV of following a faulty translation method and of distorting the Word of God when it is freer than the ESV.⁵³ In reality, however, the ESV and NIV follow similar methods, only the NIV pursues functional equivalence and inclusive language more consistently and to a greater degree.

The ESV and archaic language

In regard to English style, the ESV claims that it has brought the archaic language of the KJV and RSV into current usage. Here the situation is similar to the previous topics. Certainly, much archaic language has been updated, but a good amount remains. The updating was inconsistent. The ESV's claim is exaggerated. Consider a few examples, where many more could be offered.

Passages that use archaic words or expressions.

Ge 2:24 – עַל־כֵּן יַעֲזֹב־אִישׁ אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ

ESV: Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife,

NIV: That is why a man leaves his father and mother and *is united* to his wife,

⁵²Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 14, also *Choosing a Bible*, 9.

⁵³Leland Ryken says that readers of Bibles like the NIV do not really have the Word of God, but a mixture of God's Word with human commentary and interpretation. See *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 194.

Ps 37:1 – אֲלִיתְחַר בַּמַּרְעִים

ESV: *Fret not yourself* because of evildoers;⁵⁴

NIV: *Do not fret* because of those who are evil

Isa 40:11 – וּבְחִיקוֹ יִשָּׂא

ESV: he will carry them *in his bosom*,

NIV: and carries them *close to his heart*;

Isa 53:5 – וּבַחֲבֵרֹתָיו נִרְפָּא לָנוּ

ESV: and with his *stripes* we are healed.

NIV: and by his *wounds* we are healed.

Hos 1:2 – לֵךְ קַח-לְךָ אִשָּׁת זְנוּנִים וְיִלְדֵי זְנוּנִים

ESV: Go, take to yourself a wife of *whoredom* and have children of *whoredom*,

NIV: Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her,

Joel 2:28 (H3:1) – וְהָיָה אַחֲרֵי-כֵן

ESV: *And it shall come to pass* afterward,

NIV: And afterward,

Mal 3:2 – כִּי-הוּא כַּאֲשֶׁר מְצַרְף־הוּא וְכַבְרִית מְכַבְּסִים

ESV: For he is like a refiner's fire and like *fullers' soap*.

NIV: For he will be like a refiner's fire or a *launderer's soap*.

Lk 1:27 – πρὸς παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὄνομα Ἰωσήφ

ESV: to a virgin *betrothed* to a man whose name was Joseph,

NIV: to a virgin *pledged to be married* to a man named Joseph,

Ac 8:2 – καὶ ἐποίησαν κοπετὸν μέγαν ἐπ' αὐτῷ.

ESV: Devout men buried Stephen and *made great lamentation* over him.

NIV: Godly men buried Stephen and *mourned deeply* for him.

Ro 12:11 – τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί,

ESV: Do not be *slothful* in zeal,

NIV: Never be *lacking* in zeal,

1 Co 7:3 – τῇ γυναικὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω,

ESV: The husband should give to his wife her *conjugal rights*,

NIV: The husband should fulfill his *marital duty* to his wife,

People sometimes look at two particular words that were common in older English and in the KJV, but are not part of contemporary usage in the same way. They are the interjection “behold” (translating הִנֵּה or

⁵⁴The ESV frequently has this archaic word order with the negative “not.”

ἰδοὺ) and the auxiliary verb “shall.” The ESV continues to use both of these words extensively. Here are the statistics:

	<i>KJV</i>	<i>ESV</i>	<i>NIV</i>	<i>HCSB</i>
“behold”	1326	1106	6	0
“shall”	9838	6389	467	0 ⁵⁵

People also look at length of sentences. Older English allowed for longer sentences. Modern English has a preference for shorter sentences. One can find many examples of sentences in the ESV that are longer than current English style and longer than idiomatic English translations. Here are some examples:

Romans 1:1-7	ESV -- 1 sentence of 130 words NIV -- 4 sentences with the longest 70 words
Ephesians 1:15-21	ESV -- 1 sentence of 166 words NIV -- 4 sentences with the longest 58 words.

In addition, there are places where the ESV makes a word choice that was once OK and is still understandable, but if a person has his ears tuned to the nuances of current usage, the choice could certainly be improved. Here are some examples.

Not the best current usage.

Ex 2:7 – האלף וקראתי לך אשה מינקת מן העברית ותינק לך את-הילד –

ESV: Shall I go and call you a *nurse* from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?

NIV: Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?

Comment: For us, a “nurse” is not a woman who is breast-feeding, but a person in scrubs in the hospital.

1 Ki 2:10 – וישכב דוד עם-אבתיו –

ESV: Then David *slept with* his fathers

NIV: Then David rested with his ancestors

Pr 12:10 – יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו –

ESV: Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his *beast*,

NIV: The righteous care for the needs of their animals,

Isa 43:28 – ואחלל שרי קדש –

ESV: Therefore I will profane the *princes* of the sanctuary,

NIV: So I disgraced the dignitaries of your temple;

Comment: Usually a “prince” is a king’s son and part of a royal family.

Eze 9:1 – ויקרא באזני קול גדול –

ESV: Then he *cried* in my ears with a loud voice,

⁵⁵From a promotional brochure for the Holman Christian Standard Bible, distributed at the annual ETS conference in Atlanta, November 2010.

NIV: Then I heard him call out in a loud voice,

Jn 9:34 – ἐν ἀμαρτίαις σὺ ἐγεννήθης ὄλος

ESV: You were born in *utter* sin,

NIV: You were steeped in sin at birth;

2 Co 11:25 – ἅπαξ ἐλιθάσθην,

ESV: Once I *was stoned*.

NIV: once I was pelted with stones,

Eph 2:19 – Ἄρα οὖν οὐκέτι ἐστὲ ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι

ESV: So then you are no longer strangers and *aliens*,

NIV: Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers,

Comment: Since the movie *E.T.*, the word “alien” has the nuance of “extraterrestrial.”

Quite telling is the fact that some ESV promoters actually present the archaisms of the ESV as a positive virtue. When I was visiting with a Crossways executive about the ESV, he commented that it is good to have an English Bible that sounds a bit archaic, because, after all, the Bible is a book from long ago.

The ESV and “clarity of expression”

“Clarity of expression” is another goal of the ESV according to the ESV “Preface.” To what extent is this goal met? As I have read the ESV over the past years and especially in the past months, for the most part I have read along fairly smoothly with adequate comprehension. Often I could anticipate what the translation would say next. Of course, I have been reading and hearing the Scriptures in a variety of languages and translations for over 30 years.

However, there definitely are some “clunkers” in the ESV when it comes to clarity of expression. The ESV’s adherence to an essentially literal translation philosophy and their reliance on the KJV tradition makes many passages less than clear to the modern reader. Here are some examples I found. Many more could be listed. With each of these passages, read the ESV and then ask yourself what it means. I don’t think these ESV renderings communicate anything clear in English.

Some passages that are unclear in English.

Ps 69:23 – וּמְתוּנֵיהֶם תִּמְיֵד הַמָּעַד

ESV: make their loins tremble continually. [of the psalmist’s enemies]

NIV: May...their backs be bent forever.

Ps 144:5 – יְהוָה הִטְשָׁמִיד וְתַרְדּ

ESV: Bow your heavens, O LORD, and come down!

NIV: Part your heavens, LORD, and come down;

Pr 15:30 – מְאוֹרֵי עֵינַיִם יִשְׂמַח לֵב

ESV: The light of the eyes rejoices the heart,

NIV: Light in a messenger’s eyes brings joy to the heart,

Lk 19:44 – ἀνθ' ὧν οὐκ ἔγνωσ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς σου.

ESV: because you did not know the time of your visitation.

NIV: because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.

Lk 22:45 – εὗρεν κοιμωμένους αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς λύπης,

ESV: he ... found them sleeping for sorrow,

NIV: he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.

Ac 8:23 – εἰς γὰρ χολὴν πικρίας καὶ σύνδεσμον ἀδικίας ὁρῶ σε ὄντα.

ESV: For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

NIV: For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.

2 Co 6:12 – οὐ στενοχωρεῖσθε ἐν ἡμῖν, στενοχωρεῖσθε δὲ ἐν τοῖς σπλάγχνοις ὑμῶν.

ESV: You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.

NIV: We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.

Gal 4:18 – καλὸν δὲ ζηλοῦσθαι ἐν καλῷ πάντοτε

ESV: It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose,

NIV: It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always,

Jas 1:17 – τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν φώτων, παρ' ᾧ οὐκ ἔστι παραλλαγή ἢ τροπῆς ἀποσκίασμα.

ESV: the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

NIV: the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

It is one thing to present a translation that is unclear. It is another to present something that could give a wrong impression. Unfortunately, the literal translation method of the ESV has provided numerous passages where the uninformed English reader could easily understand something different from the intended meaning of the original text.

Sometimes beginning language students think that a literal translation is always more accurate. This is not true. William Beck wrote, "Literal translating has two faults. While it may look accurate, it often fails to give the meaning and it may even give the wrong meaning."⁵⁶ This is the case with many idioms. An idiom is a construction that means something different from the literal meaning of the words. So if a translation brings the literal words of an idiom over and the receptor language does not have the same idiom, then miscommunication will result. The wrong message will be conveyed. Consequently, in order to communicate the meaning accurately, a translation often needs to depart from the literal words.

Here are some examples of passages in the ESV that could communicate the wrong meaning.

Some passages that may give the wrong impression in English.

Ge 19:5 – הַצִּיּוֹן אֵלֶינוּ וְנִדְבָר אֵת

⁵⁶William F. Beck, "A Literal Translation," in *Christian News*, November 22, 1999, 5. An irony in the current LCMS situation is the fact that the LCMS translation giant of the 1900s, William Beck, held doggedly to the "functional equivalent" method of translating. I'm sure he would be distressed to see the acceptance of the ESV as the CPH translation of choice today.

ESV: Bring them out to us, that we may *know* them.
 NIV: Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.

Nu 12:8 – פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֶדְבַר־בוֹ

ESV: With him I speak *mouth to mouth*,
 NIV: With him I speak face to face,

Jos 10:6 – אַל־תִּתְּרֵף יָדְךָ מֵעַבְדֶיךָ

ESV: *Do not relax your hand* from your servants.
 NIV: Do not abandon your servants.

1 Sa 10:23 – וַיִּגְבֶּה מִכָּל־הָעָם מִשְׁכְּמוֹ וְמֵעֵלָה

ESV: he [Saul] was *taller* than any of the people *from his shoulders upward*.
 NIV: he was a head taller than any of the others.

2 Sa 18:25 – אִם־לִבְדּוֹ בְשׂוֹרָה בְּפִיו

ESV: If he is alone, *there is news* in his mouth.
 NIV: If he is alone, he must have good news.

1 Ki 3:7 – לֹא אֵדַע צֵאת וּבֵא

ESV: I do not know how *to go out or come in*.
 NIV: I ... do not know how to carry out my duties.

Ps 1:1 – אֲשֶׁר־יֵהְיֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר | לֹא הֵלֵךְ ... וּבִדְרֹךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד

ESV: Blessed is the man who walks not ... nor *stands in the way of sinners*,
 NIV: Blessed is the one who does not walk ... or stand in the way that sinners take

Ps 51:5 (H7) – וּבַחַטָּא יִחַמְתֵּנִי אִמִּי

ESV: and *in sin* did my mother *conceive* me.
 NIV: I was..., sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Jer 7:22 – לֹא־דַבַּרְתִּי אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא צִוִּיתִים־עַל־דְּבַרְךָ עוֹלָה וְזֶבַח

ESV: I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.
 NIV: I did not *just* give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices,

Am 4:6 – וְגַם־אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לְכֶם נְקִיוֹן שֵׁנִים בְּכָל־עָרֵיכֶם

ESV: I gave you *cleanness of teeth* in all your cities,
 NIV: I gave you empty stomachs in every city

Mal 1:6 – וְאִם־אָב אֲנִי אֵיךָ כְבוֹדִי

ESV: And if I am a master, *where is my fear*?
 NIV: If I am a master, where is the respect due me?

Mt 23:3 – λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν.

ESV: For they preach, *but do not practice*.

NIV: for they do not practice what they preach.

Jn 12:11 – ὅτι πολλοὶ δι’ αὐτὸν ὑπήγον τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ ἐπίστευον εἰς τὸν Ἰησοῦν.

ESV: on account of him many of the Jews *were going away* and believing in Jesus.

NIV: for on account of him many of the Jews *were going over to Jesus* and believing in him.

Ac 7:19 – ἐκάκωσεν τοὺς πατέρας [ἡμῶν] τοῦ ποιεῖν τὰ βρέφη ἔκθετα αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ μὴ ζωογονεῖσθαι.

ESV: He ... forced our fathers *to expose* their infants, so that they would not be kept alive.

NIV: He ... oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

Ac 20:12 – ἤγαγον δὲ τὸν παῖδα ζῶντα καὶ παρεκλήθησαν οὐ μετρίως.

ESV: And they took the youth away alive, and *were not a little comforted*.

NIV: The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

Attempts are commonly made to assign reading levels to the English of the various English translations. One chart I recently saw placed the reading level of the NIV at grade 8 and the ESV at grade 11.⁵⁷ Rankings on a matter like this are always imperfect and subject to debate. But my own impressions of the NIV and ESV would concur with a comparative ranking in that neighborhood. The ESV is not as easily understood as the NIV. It demands more of the reader.

In contrast, CPH publisher and chief editor Paul McCain on a blog posted on January 14, 2010, argued that the reading level of the ESV is equal to the NIV or lower.⁵⁸ He referred to a study posted on the Crossway website that put the reading level of the ESV at grade 7.4. However, if you look at that study closely—the Flesch-Kincaid study—you will see that it was methodologically flawed. The study itself admits up front that it “doesn’t handle poetry well.”⁵⁹ It rates the ESV reading level for the book of Job at grade 4.2, Psalms at 3.9, Lamentations at 4.0, Nahum at 3.8, and so on. Since a high percentage of the Old Testament is poetry, the totals for the entire Bible have been skewed to a much lower level than reality. I can’t imagine that any objective reader who reads the NIV and ESV side by side would conclude that they are equal in reading level.

In short, I can’t say that the ESV is entirely successful with its goal of communicating clearly. Since WELS has been accustomed to the NIV for 30 years, I fear that it would be a step backwards in readability and comprehensibility for our people if we moved to the ESV at this point.

The ESV and “literary excellence”

Finally, what about “literary excellence?” Without a doubt, literary excellence is a subjective entity, and there are many different kinds of it. But from everything already presented in this paper, you can guess that I find it hard to call the ESV a model of literary excellence.

⁵⁷On the website of the Common English Bible (CEB) at

<http://www.commonenglishbible.com/Explore/CompareTranslations/ComparisonChart/tabid/301/Default.aspx>.

⁵⁸<http://cyberbrethren.com/2010/01/14/is-the-niv-easier-to-read-than-the-esv/>. Perhaps it is not surprising that McCain has a commendatory comment on the cover of Leland Ryken’s book, *The Bible in English*.

⁵⁹<http://www.crossway.org/blog/2005/08/readability-grade-levels/>.

In addition to the archaisms and literal renderings already seen, I can add some passages where the ESV word order seems awkward. Also, by translating the genitive case literally, the ESV regularly winds up with expressions that are not elegant English.

Passages where the English word order seems awkward.

Lk 22:29 – *κάγω διατίθεμαι ὑμῖν καθὼς διέθετό μοι ὁ πατήρ μου βασιλείαν,*

ESV: I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom.

NIV: And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me,

Eph 6:7 – *μετ' εὐνοίας δουλεύοντες ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις,*

ESV: rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man [sg!],

NIV: Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,

Php 1:4 – *πάντοτε ἐν πάσῃ δεήσει μου ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν, μετὰ χαρᾶς τὴν δέησιν ποιούμενος,*

ESV: always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,

NIV: In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy

Genitives translated literally, resulting in poor English style.

Ecc 7:3 – *כִּי־בִרְצֹנָה מִבְּרִיבֵי־פָנִים לֵב יֵשׁׁב*

ESV: for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

NIV: because a sad face is good for the heart.

Ro 8:21 – *εἰς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ.*

ESV: the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

NIV: the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Php 1:3 – *Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ μνηα ὑμῶν*

ESV: I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,

NIV: I thank my God every time I remember you.

Heb 1:3 – *φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ,*

ESV: he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

NIV: sustaining all things by his powerful word.

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel in the ESV, there are 28 sentences that begin with "And." This continues throughout the book. ESV promoters say that it is good to reproduce this feature of Mark's style for the English reader.⁶⁰ But the ESV is once again not consistent in this matter. The countless ἰ's in the Old Testament are certainly not all translated with "and" in the ESV. As for English style, the ESV translation of Mark with its multitude of sentences beginning with "And" can make the book sound somewhat childish. It is hardly "literary excellence" in English.

⁶⁰Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation*, 136.

ESV promoters sometimes praise the ESV for having a literary beauty superior to the NIV. Popular LCMS author Gene Edward Veith posted this blog on November 16, 2010: “It also looks like the new NIV will continue and maybe even intensify what most annoyed me about the old NIV: the utter tone-deaf resistance to metaphor, poetry, and beauty of language.”⁶¹ The only example Veith gives, however, is Psalm 23:4 where the NIV 2011 translates “through the darkest valley” instead of “through the valley of the shadow of death.” People who know Hebrew understand that this is not at all a matter of English style, but of what the Hebrew word צְלֵמוֹת means—whether it is צְלֵמוֹת meaning “shadow of death” or צְלֵמוֹת meaning “deep darkness.” Luther, by the way, translated “*im finstern Tal*,” meaning “in the dark valley.”

What I find generally in reviews of the ESV is the same opinion presented in this paper. The ESV is not looked upon as a model of “literary excellence.” Here is a sampling of comments made by others about the literary character of the ESV.

- John Brug in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*: “It does not have the natural flow of contemporary English. In many places it sounds quite stilted.”⁶²
- Andrew Steinmann in the *Lutheran Education Journal*: “The ESV often sacrifices English idiom for the sake of preserving word-for-word correspondence to the original languages, even when it makes little sense to do this.”⁶³
- Timothy Maschke in *Concordia Journal*: “The text ‘feels’ antiquated.... The advanced reading level alone will make this translation difficult for many to read, particularly our children and young adults who have been memorizing the NIV for over twenty years.”⁶⁴
- Allan Chapple in the *Reformed Theological Review*: “There are problems with much of the ESV’s ‘diction.’ Too often, it ranges from the quaint or slightly odd (the way a rather pedantic and elderly English teacher might speak) to the awkward and unnatural (and often archaic as well).”⁶⁵
- Peter Davids in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*: “The ESV, while an accurate translation with a beautiful stately tone, is somewhat archaic. Its language is not the language of contemporary communication, which will make it too difficult to read for many in the Church and which will lead to misunderstanding on the part of others.”⁶⁶

⁶¹<http://www.geneveith.com/2010/11/16/the-two-different-nivs/>.

⁶²John F. Brug, “Review Article: The ESV—Some Preliminary Observations,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 103:4 (Fall 2006), 308.

⁶³Andrew Steinmann, “Using the English Standard Version: A Few Notes of Caution,” *Lutheran Education Journal*, 141:2 (2007), 115.

⁶⁴Timothy Maschke, “Book Review of *The Holy Bible—English Standard Version and CD-ROM*,” *Concordia Journal*, 31:2 (April 2005), 199.

⁶⁵Allan Chapple, “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” 23. He goes on: “It may well be ‘user-friendly’ for the highly literate. It may also be preferred by older Christians, for whom it will satisfy any lingering nostalgia for the RSV. But I doubt that it will be easily understood by believers under thirty-five or so, especially if they come from an unchurched background and have not already been enculturated into ‘church-speak.’ ... Committing a congregation to use the ESV may mean putting unnecessary obstacles in the way of new Christians, of people from unchurched backgrounds, and of people without an unusually high degree of literacy.”

⁶⁶Peter H. Davids, “Three Recent Bible Translations: A New Testament Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 46:3 (September 2003), 531. He goes on: “For those who have cut their teeth on the KJV, the ESV may be a good choice, so long as they realize that they have a special linguistic background and do not expect that others without their background will necessarily find it as clear and understandable as they do. Furthermore, for many contemporary readers the effect of the language will be to distance the Bible, God, and the faith from contemporary life, for this translation and the churches that may use it speak a different language than the one that the readers/members use in the world. This unintentional effect may be more negative than the problem of misunderstanding.”

It remains to be seen whether the ESV Translation Committee will aggressively seek to improve the translation in the coming years. There is much that could be done to make it better, if the committee were to collect the criticisms of users and act upon them. Already in 2007 an updated ESV was published with several hundred changes. My impression, however, is that the changes were quite modest in scope and significance.

Disturbing claims by some ESV promoters

What troubles me most in regard to the ESV, however, is not the ESV itself with its examples of unidiomatic English. I assume that the ESV has its niche as a translation. If someone wants a translation that is quite literal, that resembles the KJV, and that is doctrinally acceptable, they should use the ESV to God's glory and the building up of the church. I was blessed as I quickly read the ESV New Testament in devotional reading during the past weeks. It reminded me of my KJV childhood. The gospel in it fed my faith in Christ.

What troubles me most is what is said by some ESV promoters about translation philosophy. The main promoters of the ESV imply that belief in verbal inspiration necessarily leads a person to prefer a literal, word-for-word translation. In other words, if you favor a functional equivalent method of Bible translation, suddenly your convictions about Biblical inerrancy and verbal inspiration must be suspect.

Both Wayne Grudem, the ESV instigator, and Leland Ryken, the ESV apologist, make such claims. Grudem writes, "The idea that all the words of Scripture are the words of God—strongly favors essentially literal translation of the Bible, and seriously calls into question the theory of dynamic equivalence translation."⁶⁷ Leland Ryken writes, "It is my belief that an essentially literal translation is congruent with the doctrine of verbal or plenary inspiration."⁶⁸ Ryken goes on to say that translating in a thought-for-thought fashion is similar to twentieth-century neoorthodoxy—not taking the inspired words of God seriously enough.⁶⁹

These statements may sound pious, and certainly they come from a high respect for God's Word. However, they are seriously misguided and they need to be vigorously opposed.

The previous sections of this paper give reasons why these statements are misguided. Literal, word-for-word translating goes well as long as the source and receptor languages have similar vocabulary and structures. However, no two languages are the same in their structure and vocabulary, so changes inevitably need to take place in translation if one wants to communicate accurately and clearly. Literal translations can be sometimes be inaccurate or unclear.

In terms of Lutheran doctrinal theology, we believe that God has verbally inspired each and every word of the original texts (the *materia*). Each word is important and treasured, because it comes from God. However the true essence (the *forma*) of God's inspired revelation is the thought or truth or message that is conveyed through the vehicle of the words as they are combined in a context, not the outward words themselves. Hoenecke writes, "The essence of God's Word is not the sounds, tones, letters, syllables, words, and sentences. It is the divine truth contained in the words."⁷⁰ Words serve the meaning; the meaning does not serve the words.⁷¹

That is why it is possible to translate the Bible into other languages. The idea that God presents through Hebrew and Greek words is able to be communicated in other languages. When the idea is communicated accurately, we can say legitimately say that the translation is God's Word. The divine truth is the essence of

⁶⁷Wayne Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration Favors 'Essentially Literal' Bible Translations," in *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 56.

⁶⁸Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 134.

⁶⁹Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 135.

⁷⁰Adolf Hoenecke, translated by Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics: Volume IV* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 5.

⁷¹Luther makes this point in LW 35:213.

God's Word, and not the outward form of the Hebrew and the Greek. This, of course, means that there is nothing inherently holier or purer in having a form in the translation that is identical to or close to the form in the Hebrew and Greek. We shouldn't overstate the case in regard to the outward words. It is possible to have an overemphasis on the original's wording rather than on the original's meaning.⁷²

Strict Moslems, you may know, insist that the Koran cannot be translated into other languages. It must be read in Arabic because that is the inspired text. Protestant Christians on the other hand, have generally welcomed vernacular translations. They know the heart of the matter is the message, and the message can be transferred into other languages.

In short, one can have a high view of Scripture as the verbally inspired Word of God, and still prefer a translation method that is functional equivalent. Many Bible-believing Christians have done so. People who have a high view of Scripture may well find themselves more concerned about the transparency or comprehensibility of the divine message for the reader, than about the transparency of the translation to the form of the original Greek and Hebrew. Above all, they may want God's message to be understandable and clear. One such person, close to home for us, was our Reformation father Martin Luther.

Martin Luther's translation principles

Translating the Bible into German was a life-long project for Martin Luther. His *Septembertestament* came out in 1522. He was working on some proofs of his latest New Testament revision when he died in 1546. Whereas most of his written works were hastily composed, without time for editing and revising, with his Bible translation, he "spared no time or effort in writing carefully, revising thoroughly and personally seeing the manuscript through the press."⁷³

There are two main works in which Luther describes his translation philosophy. In 1530 he wrote "On Translating: An Open Letter" (German: *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*).⁷⁴ In 1531 he wrote "Defense of the Translation of the Psalms" (German: *Ursachen des Dolmetschens*).⁷⁵ In these writings Luther defends his desire to produce a translation that is idiomatic German. He says that there are times when a translator must translate literally if a significant doctrinal point is at stake.⁷⁶ But in general, he sought to make his Bible translation read naturally in German as if it had been originally composed in German. As a translator he tried to remove "boulders and clods" so that the reader could move along "as over a smoothly-planed board."⁷⁷

Here are some quotations:

I have constantly tried, in translating, to produce a pure and clear German, and it has often happened that for two or three or four weeks we have searched and inquired for a single word and sometimes not found it even then.⁷⁸

Again in Psalm 68 we ran quite a risk, relinquishing the words and rendering the sense. For this many know-it-alls will criticize us, to be sure, and even some pious souls may take offense. But what is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the

⁷²William F. Beck makes these points in a useful article entitled "The Translation of Meaning," in *Christian News*, December 28, 1998, 5-6.

⁷³Armin J. Panning, "Luther as Bible Translator," in *Luther Lives*, edited by Edward C. Fredrich, Siegbert W. Becker, and David P. Kuske (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1983), 70.

⁷⁴LW 35:175-202.

⁷⁵LW 35:203-223.

⁷⁶LW 35:194, 216.

⁷⁷LW 35:188.

⁷⁸LW 35:188.

text, asking himself, “Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?” Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows.⁷⁹

We must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly.⁸⁰

I must let the literal words go and try to learn how the German says that which the Hebrew expresses.⁸¹

More quotations can be found in an essay by our WELS African language specialist, Ernest R. Wendland, entitled: “Martin Luther—The Father of Confessional, Functional-Equivalence Bible Translation.”⁸² Eugene Nida is sometimes regarded as the father of the dynamic/functional equivalent method of Bible translation in English.⁸³ But notice that Wendland gives the ultimate credit for this method to Martin Luther!

One flash point in the debate at Luther’s time was the translation of Romans 3:28. Recall that Luther inserted the word *allein* even though it was not present in the Greek.

Ro 3:28 – λογίζομεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου.

Luther: So halten wir es nun, dass der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, *allein* durch den Glauben.

In his “Open Letter,” Luther says that it was legitimate to add the word, because it was needed in German to make the thought perfectly clear. “It belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous.... This is the German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage.”⁸⁴

The Biblical book that Luther expended the most time and energy on was the book of Psalms, and it is interesting to compare his earlier translations of the Psalms with his latest translation. The first edition of the Psalms came out in 1524. There was a revision in 1528. Then in 1531 Luther came out with a revision that has been called “the most thoroughgoing revision he ever undertook of an important book of the Bible.”⁸⁵ In this last revision, Luther went further than before in rendering passages freely, showing a “breath-taking degree of freedom” at places.⁸⁶ It is interesting to see that the older Luther grew, the more he cut himself loose to translate in a “functional equivalent” manner.

For Martin Luther, the purpose of a vernacular translation was not to provide a crib or “jimmy” or interlinear for beginning Hebrew and Greek students. This seems to be what some people are looking for in a translation today, especially those who are unaware of the linguistic complexities of translation and who have a “mechanical view of language.”⁸⁷ Rather, Luther wanted his translation to communicate the message of God’s Word clearly to people who didn’t know any Hebrew and Greek. The purpose was communication not copying.

⁷⁹LW 35:213-214.

⁸⁰LW 35:189.

⁸¹LW 35:193.

⁸²Ernst R. Wendland, “Martin Luther—The Father of Confessional, Functional-Equivalence Bible Translation,” *Notes on Translation*, 9:1/2 (1995), 16-36, 47-60.

⁸³Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 13.

⁸⁴LW 35:188, 189.

⁸⁵Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 117.

⁸⁶Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator*, 117.

⁸⁷D. A. Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—And Other Limits, Too,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 103.

In opposition to Leland Ryken, Martin Luther obviously was a theologian who embraced the verbal inspiration of the Bible, but did not hold to an “essentially literal,” “word-for-word” translation philosophy. Actually, when people like Wayne Grudem and Leland Ryken criticize what they call the “thought-for-thought” method of the NIV and other translations, they are similar to Jerome Emser (1478-1527) and others who roundly criticized Luther in his day, referred to as the “know-it-all” by Luther. Heinz Bluhm (NWC class of 1928) wrote a book published by Concordia about Luther as a Bible translator. His title was carefully chosen: *Martin Luther: Creative Translator*.

In this regard, it is ironic to me that Concordia Publishing House and the LCMS have chosen the ESV. In recent years under the supervision of Rev. Paul McCain, CPH has been publishing wonderful confessional Lutheran resources, such as *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, Gerhard’s *Loci*, and a new edition of Walther’s *Law and Gospel*. Yet they have adopted a Bible translation that goes contrary to the translation principles of Martin Luther. CPH is publishing more volumes of *Luther’s Works*—the man who is credited with being the father of the functional equivalent method of Bible translation, yet they are promoting an “essentially literal” Bible translation for their church body. I would appreciate it if someone could give me help with this mystery!

As for WELS, as far as I can tell, Luther’s approach to Bible translation has been appreciated and followed in our previous history. Let’s turn our attention now to WELS.

Previous WELS writing on the translation of the Bible

The last time that WELS wrestled seriously with the topic of English Bible translations was in the 1970s, when the synod was determined to find an English translation to replace the KJV. In the extensive publications about English translations in that decade, one regularly finds this concern: “Is the receptor language acceptable?”⁸⁸

In a 1973 *Quarterly* article, Joel Gerlach wrote: “Two things we look for in a contemporary translation are fidelity to the original text and beauty of style.”⁸⁹ In a 1974 *Quarterly* article, John Jeske wrote that a good translation is idiomatic: “After the translator has determined the intended meaning of the original text with precision, he must express this intended meaning in a manner that agrees with the speech habits of the receptor language.”⁹⁰

This concern was expressed in WELS circles already by August Pieper in the early 1900s. As Pieper saw church life in America gravitating toward the English language, he was concerned about the use of the KJV. About the KJV, he wrote, “For the most part, it translates the idioms and expressions of the original languages too literally, often literalistically, and this makes it difficult, if not incomprehensible, for the reader.”⁹¹ Pieper continued, “If the language of our Bible, of our worship services, of the sermon, of the catechism, of our hymns and prayers is to take hold of our heart and dominate our thinking, feeling, and will, then it dare not seem strange to us, or obscure, old-fashioned, and awkward.”⁹² He, of course, looked upon Luther’s method with the German Bible as the ideal.

In the 1970s, the decision came down to a choice between two main contenders: the NASB and the NIV. From my conversations with people who participated in those discussions, there initially was some fear

⁸⁸Panning, “The New American Standard Bible, Is This the Answer?”, 13.

⁸⁹Joel C. Gerlach, “Bible Translations—Report III, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 70:3 (July 1973), 155.

⁹⁰John C. Jeske, “New International Version Completed,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 75:4 (October 1978), 300.

⁹¹August Pieper, translated by John Jeske, “Our Translation into English,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 100:2 (Spring 2003), 92. Originally found in “Unser Uebergang ins English,” *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 16:2 (April 1919), 121. The original article has much more on this topic than what appears in Jeske’s abridged translation, together with many examples. The discussion begins in the previous installment, *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 16:1 (January 1919), 64.

⁹²Pieper, “Our Translation into English,” 93. Originally in “Unser Uebergang,” 16:2 (April 1919), 124.

that the NASB would have expensive royalty fees. But in the end, both were considered doctrinally and economically acceptable. The NIV was favored because it was more idiomatic English.

In recent weeks I have heard that there are WELS pastors who are recommending that we switch to the NASB, the NKJV, or the ESV. I wonder: do we collectively have the same mindset today that was present 30 years ago about Bible translations? Some observers have commented that “linguistic conservatism” has swept through portions of the evangelical community in the last decades.⁹³ This linguistic conservatism, which prefers a literal, word-for-word Bible translation, has resulted in the ESV. It seemingly has swept the LCMS into its camp. Will the wave now overtake WELS? I will simply say that I see no good reason why it should, and I hope it doesn’t.

Closing

We should consider it a special blessing from God that the Bible has been so richly represented in English. Think of the many cultures in our world which have only one vernacular Bible, and it may not be very good. David Daniell in his book, *The Bible in English*, comments that “the English Bible is unique in that in its multiplicity of English versions it has been unlike any other book in any other country.”⁹⁴ He estimates that from the first printing of Tyndale’s complete New Testament in 1526 until the year 2000, there have been about 3000 new translations of all or part of the Bible into English.⁹⁵

In addition, LCMS professor Jeffrey Gibbs makes a good point when he says that it is a mistake “to be overly critical of any of the major, established English Bible translations, thereby causing unnecessary concern or doubt in the minds of Christians.”⁹⁶ I hope that nothing I said will lead someone to conclude that the ESV is a bad translation that should be avoided. The ESV was produced by God-fearing Christians, all of whom consider the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God. The ESV can be read as God’s Word, and I am certain that God will use the ESV for good in the lives of countless people as the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ is presented in it. It may have a good purpose among us as a literal study Bible.

But we should not make the ESV into something more than what it is. It is not the silver bullet that does everything perfectly in regard to English Bible translation. It is not some sort of “high road” for all conservative, Bible-believing, complementarian Lutherans. Simply put, ***it is a doctrinally acceptable, somewhat unidiomatic and inconsistent evangelical revision of the RSV.*** Nothing more and nothing less. It is a translation that promises more than it actually produces.

For our synod, which has been accustomed to the NIV for 30 years, I have serious reservations about making the ESV the choice for our publications at this point. There are better choices.⁹⁷ I agree with the conclusions of Mark Strauss, professor at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, in an article entitled “Why the English Standard Version (ESV) Should not become the Standard English Version” presented at the 2008 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society:

I like the ESV. I am writing this article, however, because I have heard a number of Christian leaders claim that the ESV is the “Bible of the future”—ideal for public worship and private reading, appropriate for adults, youth and children. This puzzles me, since the ESV seems to me to be overly literal—full of archaisms, awkward language, obscure idioms, irregular word order, and a great deal of “Biblish.” Biblish is produced when the translator tries to reproduce the *form* of the Greek or Hebrew without due consideration for how people actually write or speak. The

⁹³Carson, “The Limits of Functional Equivalence,” 66.

⁹⁴David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 15.

⁹⁵Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 769.

⁹⁶Gibbs, “All Those Translations!”, 10.

⁹⁷If we decide that we do not want to use the new NIV, we should take a good look at the HCSB.

ESV, like other formal equivalent versions (RSV; NASB; NKJV; NRSV), is a good supplement to versions that use normal English, but is not suitable as a standard Bible for the church. This is because the ESV too often fails the test of “standard English.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸Mark L. Strauss, “Why the English Standard Version (ESV) Should not become the Standard English Version,” presented at the 2008 convention of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1.

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