

The ESV NT: A Review Article¹

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Introduction

Bible translations always seem to generate considerable debate—a debate in which it seems difficult to engage objectively and dispassionately. For many Christians a new translation of the Book can be threatening for it is often perceived as challenging that which is sacrosanct. “Keep your hands off my Bible!” is not an uncommon attitude. And no one with a heart for ministry wants to destabilize the faith of other believers. Such matters are sensitive ones in the church. Many times these sensitivities are unfounded and based on a lack of understanding of what is involved in biblical inspiration and authority on the one hand and in translation on the other hand. But they are real sensitivities nonetheless.

In recent years concern regarding specific translations has reached high levels of intensity and rhetoric. The more recent outbursts have been produced by the *TNIV*.² Some of the concerns raised have been legitimate, others have been misplaced. In the context of the *TNIV* debate, the publication of the *ESV* is significant because its sponsors and advocates have frequently portrayed the *ESV* as the “safe” alternative to the *TNIV*. Two major differences are mentioned. One, the *ESV* is said to be a literal translation,³ whereas the *TNIV* is described as a dynamic equivalent

translation.⁴ Second, the *TNIV* is often depicted as using inclusive language in contrast to the *ESV*.⁵ A few preliminary comments regarding these issues are in order before examining the *ESV* as a translation.

Translation Philosophy

Translation theory has often been described in terms of two opposing philosophies: literal versus dynamic equivalent. Both of these terms are problematic. First, “literal” is a very slippery term which has only a vague definition in most people’s minds. Too often it is assumed to refer to word-for-word translation. It is also frequently associated with “more accurate.” Neither assumption is valid. Translation is not a matter of finding word-for-word equivalents in another language. Languages seldom correspond at the word level. If a “translation” were attempted on such a basis, the result might be something like this:

Of the but Jesus Christ the birth thus it was being betrothed of the mother of him Mary to the Joseph before or to come together them she was found in belly having from Spirit Holy (Matt. 1:18).

This is “precisely” (i.e., word-for-word) what the Greek text says if turned into English. No such translation has ever been published.⁶

¹ *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *ESV* and are used by permission. At one time I had contemplated a subtitle for this article along the lines of “The *ESV*: A Case of Truth in Advertising?” but have decided that to do so would put the onus in the wrong place. It is more likely that the discrepancy such a subtitle would have implied is due to public perception rather than to deliberate misrepresentation by the publisher, though I do not want to exempt Crossway from some degree of responsibility in this regard. These matters will be discussed in the course of the article. It should also be noted that this paper has been severely and drastically abridged for purposes of the BBS Faculty Forum session. The original document is nearly 60 pages, single-spaced and includes extensive documentation and examples of the issues discussed here; it may be found on the author’s web site, <www.NTResources.com>.

² *Today’s New International Version, New Testament* (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). See some preliminary observations on this translation by the present author at <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/tniv.htm>>.

³ Technically, an “essentially literal” translation in contrast to the “consistently literal” translation of the *NASB*. On this, see below.

⁴ The terminology used by the *ESV* and its defenders is confusing in that several different terms are used including not only dynamic equivalent but also functional equivalent and “thought for thought” translation. These matters will be considered below.

⁵ This statement will be qualified below and “inclusive language” as used in this paper will be defined (see n. 94 on p. 16). Suffice it for now to point out that 1. the Preface to the *ESV* studiously avoids the designation “inclusive language” (the word “inclusive” appears only once), and 2. the popular perception (whether valid or not) is that the *ESV* is not an inclusive language translation. As will be demonstrated in the following pages, the *ESV NT* contains a large quantity of inclusive translation (as I am using that term). The *TNIV* contains more, but the difference is in part one of degree (and not as great a degree as many would suspect from the press or Crossway’s own marketing department), though there are also some philosophical issues involved here.

⁶ The closest to such unintelligibility are *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, rev. ed. (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) and the *Concordant Version of the Sacred Scriptures* (ed. A. E. Knoch), rev. ed. (Los Angeles: Concordant Pub. Concern, 1931), the latter of which produces such nonsense as “But we have had the rescript of death in ourselves in order that we may be having no confidence in ourselves, but in God, Who rouses the dead, Who rescues us from a prodigious death, and will be rescuing, on Whom we rely, that He will still be rescuing also; you also assisting together by a petition for us, that from many faces He may be thanked for us by many, for our gracious gift” (2 Cor. 1:9–11)!

Second, “dynamic equivalence” is an outdated term.⁷ Discussions of translation theory would be helped considerably if more accurate, technical terminology were adopted. The most appropriate terminology in this arena is not a dichotomy of literal versus dynamic equivalence, but rather a spectrum with formal equivalence on one end and functional equivalence on the other. Formal equivalence is a translation approach that seeks to reproduce the grammatical and syntactical *form* of the donor language as closely as possible in the receptor language.⁸ Thus for each word in the donor language, the same part of speech is used in the receptor language and, as much as possible, in the same sequence. For example, Greek nouns are translated by English nouns, participles as participles, etc. Functional equivalence, by contrast, focuses on the meaning and attempts to accurately communicate the same meaning in the receptor language, even if doing so requires the use of different grammatical and syntactical forms. Although the form may differ somewhat in functional equivalence, the translation *functions* the same as the original in that it accurately communicates the same meaning.⁹

⁷ The older term “dynamic equivalence” is correctly defined as an approach to translation that attempts to produce the same *response* by the reader of the modern translation as the original reader. (The term “dynamic” is related to the “response.”) But as Carson points out, this is a bit silly, if well-intentioned. D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 71. Do we really want to produce the same result? In many (most?) cases, of course, we have no way of knowing just what the original recipients’ response was. The Corinthians, as one example, responded quite poorly to Paul’s letter which we know as 1 Corinthians! The goal of translation should not be defined in terms of response, but of accurate communication of meaning.

Some advocates of formal equivalence confuse these two disparate definitions, attributing the older dynamic equivalence goal to the newer functional equivalent approach. For example, Raymond Van Leeuwen says that “newer FE [functional equivalent] translations [change] what was written. They do not so much translate Paul’s words into English words as try to find a *meaning* already familiar to Americans. They hope the new American meaning will affect readers the same way Paul’s meaning affected his readers. The two meanings are meant to be functionally equivalent” (“We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation,” *Christianity Today*, 22 Oct 2001, p. 31). This is a misrepresentation of functional equivalence.

⁸ The donor (or source) language is the language from which one is translating (e.g., Greek in the case of the NT); the receptor language is the (modern) language into which one translates (e.g., English, Spanish, etc.).

⁹ This is not necessarily a “thought for thought” translation, but one which alters the grammatical form when necessary to preserve accuracy of meaning. In some cases form and meaning are inter-related, and in such cases functional equivalence will

These two approaches are not to be thought of as mutually exclusive categories. *All* translations include both formal and functional equivalents. Any individual translation may be judged to use a greater or lesser degree of formal or functional equivalence and thus fall on a different part of the translation spectrum. No translation can completely ignore the form of the original. If it did, one would not have a translation at all but a new work altogether. On the other hand, no translation can be completely formal if it is to communicate with any degree of accuracy in another language.

Functional equivalents are not new. Although the translation theory which formally defines such differences is of recent origin, the technique did not originate in the late twentieth century. Functional equivalent translation is found in the Septuagint¹⁰ and the venerable KJV also used functional equivalence.¹¹ Even the NASB, reputed to be one of the most formal translations, uses functional equivalence, though not as extensively as other translations.¹² It is not possible to translate any extended literary corpus without employing both formal and functional equivalence.

It is appropriate to class translations as *more formal* or *more functional*, though this is a relative categorization and

attempt to preserve the necessary formal elements. But in most instances the form is language-specific and is not essential to expressing the meaning in another language. In many cases it cannot be maintained. Every translation, including the most formal, makes many substantial revisions to the form of the original.

¹⁰ There is considerable diversity throughout the disparate translations that comprise what is usually referenced as the Septuagint, various portions of which contain different proportions of formal/functional translation. As an example of one situation in which the LXX employed functional equivalence it is interesting that they were reticent to translate קֶלֶע (rock) as πέτρα if God was the referent. For example, in 2 Sam. 22:3, אֱלֹהֵי צוּרֵי אֶחָסֶה-בּוֹ (“my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge”) becomes in the LXX, ὁ θεός μου φύλαξ ἔσται μου (“my God will be my guard”; also v. 47). Other such translations of קֶלֶע include κτίστης (creator, 2 Sam. 22:33); στερέωμα (firmness, Ps. 18:2); βοηθός (helper, Ps. 18:2); and Ἀντιλήμπτωρ (protector, Ps. 42:9). In each such case the LXX translators have provided a functional equivalence by interpreting the metaphor.

¹¹ When Paul is made to say in Romans 6:2, “God forbid!” it is interesting to note that Paul’s statement in Greek (μὴ γένοιτο) includes the equivalent of neither the word “God” nor the word “forbid”! How then did the KJV translators get “God forbid”? That expression, a common one in the 16th and 17th centuries, is a good functional equivalent for expressing Paul’s meaning in this context. This is not an isolated example. To cite just a few others, compare the KJV with the original text in these passages: 1 Sam. 10:24 (“God save the king”), Matt. 27:44 (“the thieves cast the same in his teeth”), and Luke 19:23 (“Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank?”).

¹² A few examples from Acts include 14:12, 28; 15:7.

at national ETS conferences the advocates of the ESV have made this no secret. Some, e.g., John Piper, have publicly vilified the NIV for its use of functional equivalence.¹⁸ In every case where this discussion has taken place the issue of inclusive language has been the most hotly debated point, almost to the exclusion of other issues.

In terms of historical lineage, the ESV explicitly places itself in the historical line of traditional translations. It does not claim, as do many of the newer translations (e.g., NIV, NASB, etc.) to be a new translation. In their own words,

The English Standard Version (ESV) stands in the classic mainstream of English Bible translations of the past half-millennium. The fountainhead of that stream was William Tyndale's New Testament of 1526; marking its course were the King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the Revised Version of 1885 (RV), the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV), and the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and 1971 (RSV)... Our goal has been to carry forward this legacy for a new century.¹⁹

The ESV is essentially a revision of the 1971 edition of the RSV. The translators explain that "archaic language has been brought to current usage and significant corrections have been made in the translation of key texts."²⁰

The reference to "significant corrections" that have been made to "key texts" in the RSV, although not explained, is almost certainly intended to address concerns by many conservative Christians that there were theological problems with some aspects of the RSV. When the RSV first appeared in 1952 there were major protests by conservatives (though a few well known conservative scholars supported it²¹). Some of these protests were sim-

ply cranky folks who didn't want the KJV changed.²² But others posed some serious exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological objections. Most such issues related to the OT, and to Messianic prophecies in particular.²³

As an illustration of the problem in the OT, the RSV translated Psalm 45:6a as follows: "Your divine throne endures for ever and ever." This is in contrast to the KJV/RV/ASV, all of which had translated, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever." The ESV has restored the traditional rendering, though with updated English: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." The RSV does not evidence such systematic problems in the NT which was quite well done, even correcting some problems introduced by the RV/ASV,²⁴ though at least one doctrinal problem in the NT has been corrected. Romans 9:5 in the RSV reads (note especially the punctuation): "to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen." The ESV, by contrast, reads as follows: "To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is

²² As one example, see Carl McIntire, "The New Bible, Revised Standard Version, Why Christians Should Not Accept It" (Collingswood, NJ: Christian Beacon, n.d.). He complains about some passages being typeset as poetry and the omission of italics (both on p. 11), as well as the introduction of quotation marks (12, "the Greek and Hebrew do not have quotation marks. The King James translators did not introduce them"—of course there is no mention that there was no punctuation of any sort in the original texts! We should perhaps condemn the audacity of the KJV for adding periods and commas!).

²³ As a sample of the more careful criticisms of the RSV, consider R. Laird Harris' conclusion: "It is a curious study to check the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, a monument of higher critical scholarship, and note how every important Old Testament passage purporting to predict directly the coming of Christ has been altered so as to remove this possibility.... It is almost impossible to escape the conclusion that the admittedly higher critical bias of the translators has operated in all of these places. The translations given are by no means necessary from the Hebrew and in some cases..., are in clear violation of the Hebrew" (*Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study*. Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives (2d ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 58. Elsewhere Harris refers to the "numerous defects which many believe mar" the RSV (17). See also Allan A. MacRae, "Why I Cannot Accept the Revised Standard Version" (New York: American Council of Christian Churches, n.d.). MacRae discusses a number of the OT passages in which there are "Messianic concerns" with the translation. Since the focus of this review is the ESV NT, this subject will not be pursued here in any detail.

²⁴ For example, the RV/ASV translated 2 Tim. 3:16, "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable...." The RSV changed this to read, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable....," and the ESV reads, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...."

¹⁸ Piper's statements were made during a panel discussion between representatives of NIV, NET, and ESV at the 2002 annual ETS meeting in Colorado Springs. His rather strong language was immediately repudiated by his fellow ESV panelist, Wayne Grudem, in terms that suggested that he considered Piper's comments intemperate.

¹⁹ Preface to the ESV, p. vii. Also accessible online at <http://www.gnpccb.org/page/esv_story/>, accessed 1/8/04.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ One conservative scholar who spoke out in support of the RSV was Donald Grey Barnhouse, "I Have Read the RSV," *Eternity*, April 1970, p. 6. He acknowledges that there are a "few outstanding blunders" and that there are "many questionings of the Hebrew text," but concludes that "the RSV is superior to the translations of the Bible in more than 99% of the languages in which Scripture portions exist in the world." After listing more than a dozen major translations in several languages (most English, but also French and German) Barnhouse asserts that the RSV "is superior to many of these, the equal of any, and useful for many purposes along with the best of them."

the Christ who is God who is over all, blessed forever. Amen.”

The ESV, though based on the RSV, has taken pains to avoid its predecessor’s reputation. It has not only revised the objectionable Messianic passages, but it has distanced itself from the RSV copyright holder, the National Council of Churches, clarifying on the official ESV website that although based on the RSV with permission of the copyright holder, that there are no royalties paid to the NCC.²⁵

It should be noted that as a revision of the RSV, the ESV inherits many of its forebear’s qualities, both strengths and weaknesses. Some criticisms of the ESV are actually criticisms of the underlying RSV. Yet since the ESV committee accepted the RSV as its base, it also committed itself to either approve or revise any and all of its content. Were it a new translation, some of these issues might not arise—although others most certainly would take their place. Since history has provided adequate time for assessment of not only the RSV, but the preceding ASV, RV, and KJV, there are likely to be fewer problems of this sort than with any new translation that is only beginning its period of critical assessment.

Formal Characteristics of the ESV

Textual Basis

The ESV NT is based on the UBS⁴/NA²⁷, the standard modern Greek text.²⁶ Although one can generally assume that what one finds in the text of these editions is the Greek text being translated at any given point, there are some exceptions. As the editors explain, “in a few difficult cases in the New Testament, the ESV has followed a Greek text different from the text given preference in the UBS/Nestle-Aland 27th edition.”²⁷ When there are significant textual issues there is usually a footnote which gives some indication of the issue. The standard indication of a textual variant is a note which begins, “Some manuscripts...” followed by the translation of the variant.²⁸

²⁵ “Does Crossway pay royalties to anyone for use of the ESV text? No. Crossway owns the rights to the text” (<http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_faq/> accessed 1/8/04).

²⁶ *The Greek New Testament*, ed. B. Aland, et al., 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996), and *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. B. Aland, et al., 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993). The text of these two editions is identical, only the apparatus and supplemental materials differ.

²⁷ Preface to ESV, ix.

²⁸ The “Some manuscripts...” indicator may be modified by the addition of any of the following descriptors: “add, insert, omit, do not include.” Notice that there is no attempt to value such alternatives; all variants are marked with the same undifferentiated “some manuscripts.” This contrasts with the practice of some other translations (e.g., NASB, NIV, TNIV) of weighting some variants as “some early manuscripts” (and variations thereof)

Typography

The typography of the ESV is very traditional. All editions published thus far are double-column, usually with center column cross references, and usually red-letter editions. The print is quite small in most editions (9.5 point Berkeley font)—too small for older eyes to read comfortably—and the margins are very narrow.²⁹ There is a Deluxe Reference Edition with a slightly larger font (10.2 point) and a wider side margin. A large print edition is planned, but not yet scheduled for production.

Although typography may seem incidental to many people, even this seemingly mundane matter can have hermeneutical implications. The popular red-letter editions, for example, foster the impression that some words of Scripture are more important than others—a theological error of considerable significance.³⁰ The ESV has done better in their selection of paragraph formats. As is more common in modern translations, the text is set in standard paragraph format rather than the older (i.e., KJV) style of setting each verse as a separate paragraph.³¹ The older

rather than simple “some manuscripts.” (The implication of the qualifier is that “early” is more significant than an unmarked reference.) This is probably the wiser practice since readers who know enough to understand the significance of such a note probably also have their own ideas as to the value of such evidence or have the means to check it for themselves.

²⁹ The Pew Bible Edition has a slightly larger font at 10 point. The Compact Thinline Edition uses a 6.2 point font—but that is fairly standard for condensed editions. The Pocket New Testament uses a 7 point font. The Berkeley font, used at least in the reference and thinline editions, is said to be “designed for legibility” (what text font isn’t?!), and it is certainly serviceable, if somewhat pedestrian; it is at least a font which conveys a “classic” impression on a double-column page and does not draw attention to itself. The Berkeley font does not seem ideal for the format of the thinline edition; usually a lighter stroke font or one with a narrower design is employed for such editions. The ESV Thinline Edition has used a very tight letter-spacing with adjacent letters often touching each other. (Some that appear to touch actually do not when examined with a magnifying glass.) This occasionally happens even in the Deluxe Reference Edition, but not nearly as frequently. These details and other such matters cited here come from my own examination and from the publisher’s website, <<http://www.gnpcb.org/home/esv/>>, especially on <http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_faq/> and <<http://www.gnpcb.org/catalog/bibles/>>, all accessed 1/9/04.

³⁰ The publisher’s representatives have assured me that this is what the market requires if a new translation is to sell. Thankfully there are now a few black letter editions available.

³¹ I do not know when the practice began of setting each verse as a separate paragraph. It is certainly not ancient since all printed Greek and Vulgate editions that I have seen use a paragraph format as do the earliest versions in German and French. The Tyndale (1526), Coverdale (1535), and Matthew (1537) Bibles also use normal paragraphing. The earliest example I have been

typography caused the reader to view verses as independent units that could be read, memorized, and interpreted as autonomous sayings. The ESV is to be commended for encouraging the reading of Scripture in context by their typographical design decision to use normal paragraphs.

The cross-references included are voluminous: more than 76,000 entries are included. This might be considered boon or bane, depending on one's perspective. Those who enjoy chasing such cross-references will enjoy the abundance of possible associations (though how many of them provide significant help in understanding the text might be an interesting question—one that has not been probed in this review). Others might find them so numerous as to obscure the text itself. Certainly the proliferation of superscript letters and numbers makes the text itself harder to read, as well as detracting from the beauty of the printed page. These are not present in the compact, thinline editions or in the pew Bible.

The double-column format is perhaps a more subjective matter, some preferring this style and others preferring a single column format. Apart from the Bible which has traditionally been set in double columns until relatively recently, most readers would associate a double column format with a reference book rather than one which contains a continuous narrative to be read as such. The single column format is what readers are most accustomed to reading in ordinary publications (apart from multi-column newspapers).

At the least this reviewer would like to have the choice of a text-only, no cross-references, single-column, black letter edition. This would seem to be the sort of edition best suited to inductive Bible study and to general Bible reading. Unfortunately, this option is not available, and the publisher has indicated that it is unlikely to be considered, at least for a long time.

Language

The ESV has been advertised as a work in which literary style is given high value. This is said to be based on its classic heritage in line with the KJV and RSV. Stylistic consultants, headed by Leland Ryken, were involved in the translation process. They indicate that the “goal has been to retain the depth of meaning and enduring language that have made their indelible mark on the English-speaking world and have defined the life and doctrine of the church

able to find of the verse-paragraphed format is the Geneva Bible (1560). Samples plates of all these may be found in the appendix of vol. 3 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. S. Greenslade (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963). Only the NKJV and NASB persist in using the verse-paragraphed format, though there are a few editions of both of these translations in normal paragraphed form available from some publishers.

over the last four centuries.... Accordingly [the ESV] retains theological terminology—words such as grace, faith, justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, propitiation.”³²

One would expect from such descriptions that the reading level would be somewhat higher than average among modern translations, but the publisher claims it is only an eighth grade reading level—which is very close to the level for which most modern translations appear to aim.³³ Such estimates are only a general guide and publishers can select any of several evaluation instruments to provide slightly different numbers. Having read the ESV NT, I can only suggest that my subjective impression is that it is somewhere between the NIV on the one hand and the NASB and NKJV on the other.³⁴ An eighth grade reading level seems to be somewhat at odds with the traditional vocabulary employed (though vocabulary is only one factor in such determinations).

Translation Issues

Self-Description of the ESV

The Preface of the ESV describes the translation philosophy employed as follows.

Each word and phrase in the ESV has been carefully weighed against the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, to ensure the fullest accuracy and clarity and to avoid under-translating or overlooking any nuance of the original text.... Archaic language has been brought to current usage....

The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.

³² Preface to the ESV, vii, viii. Interestingly, “inspiration”—which one would think would qualify as a (traditional) theological term—is gone from 2 Tim. 3:16, which reads “all Scripture is breathed out by God.”

³³ ESV FAQ at <http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_faq/>, accessed 1/9/04.

³⁴ The International Bible Society web site (<<http://www.gospelcom.net/ibs/bibles/translations/index.php>>, accessed 3/12/04) suggests the following reading levels (by grade) for other contemporary translations (arranged here in increasing order): CEV, 5.6; NLT, 6.3; NIV, 7.8; TLB, 8.3; NKJV, 8.5; Message, 8.5; NASB, 11. No details are given as to how these figures were derived, nor is ESV included. (I must confess to a bit of skepticism as to the relative ranking of the NKJV in this list; I think it should be higher when compared with the other translations in the 8th grade range. TLB also seems too high to me.)

...We have sought to be “as literal as possible” while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence. Therefore, 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....

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.³⁵

This approach is deliberately contrasted with translation methods that are viewed to be on either side of the ESV in the translation spectrum. In contrast to a more formal approach, the ESV web site compares the ESV and the NASB as follows:

The ESV seeks to translate each word as literally as possible. However, when an exactly literal translation interferes with the natural flow of the English language, the word or phrase has been rendered with an eye for proper syntax and grammar. This is an “essentially literal” translation. The NASB is a “strictly literal” translation, attempting to render each word in English for the corresponding Greek or Hebrew. The NASB does not give as much weight as other “standard” translations to the flow of the English language.³⁶

On the other side of the continuum, the contrast with functional equivalent versions³⁷ is described.

In contrast to the ESV, some Bible versions have followed a “thought-for-thought” rather than “word-for-word” translation philosophy, emphasizing “dynamic equivalence” rather than the “essentially literal” meaning of the original. A “thought-for-thought” translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture.³⁸

These descriptions appear to portray clear-cut distinctions. Many people who have read the Preface, browsed the ESV web site, seen the PR materials from Crossway, or read some of the published defenses of the ESV translation philosophy — *but who have not read the ESV extensively* (or if they have read it, have not compared it carefully with the original text) — have concluded that the ESV is essentially a NASB with better literary style — a NASB on English steroids.³⁹ This has proved to be very attractive to many of

these people, especially those who have been drawn to the NASB due to its greater degree of perceived accuracy as “the most literal” translation. For such people, the following analysis may prove disconcerting. In short, the following discussion will attempt to demonstrate that the ESV—which is a *good* translation—is much more functional than many people think. There seems to be a discrepancy between the product as advertised (or at least as perceived) and what is actually delivered. The finished goods represent a good product; it just doesn’t match the popular perception.

The extent to which the ESV includes major functional translation elements ought not to be a surprise. The ESV Preface explicitly notes that “every translation is at many points a trade-off between literal precision and readability, between ‘formal equivalence’ in expression and ‘functional equivalence’ in communication, and the ESV is no exception.”⁴⁰ It turns out to be quite interesting just how many “points” turn up in the functional column of the translation ledger. The following discussion evaluates the ESV NT on the basis of a dozen issues in translation, citing and discussing examples of each. In this abridged version it may appear that conclusions are being drawn on the basis of inadequate evidence. This is one of the major reasons that the original document (see n. 1 above) was so lengthy — to provide adequate evidence that the conclusions suggested here are not based on a few scattered examples, but are characteristic of the ESV as a whole. The reader is encouraged to browse the additional supporting data in the unabridged version.

Translation Style

Words Added

An approach to translation which attempts formal equivalence, especially when “‘word-for-word’ correspondence” is cited as an “emphasis,” should be expected to have relatively few words added to the text. That is, this approach implies that there is normally an equivalent word in the donor language for each word in the receptor language. Of course this isn’t a one-to-one equivalent since grammar and syntax often requires multiple word equivalents due to the nature of the two languages. But one would not expect to find as many words added in a formal equivalent translation as in a functional one. How does the ESV fare when evaluated on this basis?

2 Cor. 4:3, “it is veiled only to those who are perishing” (ἐν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις ἐστὶν κεκαλυμμένον), the word “only” has been added. This is *perhaps* to be implied from the context, but the text itself does not say this explicitly.

roughly analogous to that described above. My unscientific survey has included colleagues, pastors, students, and laymen.

⁴⁰ ESV Preface, viii. See also the second sentence of the quote at note 36 in the text above.

³⁵ ESV Preface, vii–viii.

³⁶ ESV FAQ, <http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_faq/>, accessed 2/22/04.

³⁷ The ESV Preface is confusing in that it uses multiple designations for this translation model. In addition to the two terms cited above, the following paragraph adds the designation “functional equivalent.”

³⁸ ESV Preface, vii–viii.

³⁹ I cannot cite documentation for this, but over the past six months that I have been reading the ESV, comparing it with my Greek testament, and thinking about this review, I have frequently asked others what their perceptions of the ESV have been. Almost invariably they would respond with a description

Eph. 3:6, “this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs” (εἶναι τὰ ἕθνη συγκληρονόμα). The words “this mystery is” have been added, and here the ESV includes a note that these words “are inferred from verse 4.” (This sort of note seems quite rare.) Even with a note, however, this eliminates the exegetical option that this might be a purpose clause; only the content clause option is feasible with the addition.

1 Tim. 3:10, “then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (εἶτα διακονεῖτωσαν ἀνεγκλητοὶ ὄντες). Formally this reads, “then let them serve being blameless.” The use of “if” is justifiable if the adverbial participle ὄντες is understood as a conditional participle, but the addition of “prove themselves” is an interpretive/exegetical addition which, even though an accurate understanding of Paul’s point here, is not what the text actually says. It does not reflect “the precise wording of the original text” nor does it let “the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.”⁴¹

1 Tim. 5:21, “I charge you to keep these rules” (διαμαρτύρομαι ... ἵνα ταῦτα φυλάξης), whereas the text says simply “... keep these [things].” There is no word for “rules” in the text. By adding it the ESV invites abuse by those who base their “study” on the occurrence of the same English word in various texts—made the more critical due to the ESV being advertised as a “‘word-for-word’ correspondence” translation.

Heb. 6:10, “God is not so unjust as to...” (οὐ γὰρ ἄδικος ὁ θεός). Here the absolute statement “God is not unjust” becomes a relative statement by adding a qualifier, “so,” that is not in the text, leaving open the possibility that God is unjust, just not to the extent that he would do certain things. An orthodox reader would not likely reach that conclusion, but that would be due to his presuppositions, not the translation he was reading.

Of course a half dozen examples are not adequate to characterize an entire translation, but these are only representative of a fairly frequent pattern in the translation.⁴² The point is not that one will find such things in every verse, but it is interesting just how pervasive such additions really are in the ESV. They occur far more frequently than one would expect—so frequently, in fact, that one might wonder just what “essentially literal” means if the goal is to show “the precise wording of the original text.” In fact, many of these additions are good, often essential to

translate clearly. The point here is not to criticize every example cited. Some are questionable, but others are very helpful. But every such addition is a functional, not a formal equivalent.

Change in Word Order

Another feature that is unexpected in a formal translation model is a change in word order. Since one of the stated goals of the ESV is to let “the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original,”⁴³ one would expect to see word order maintained at a high level of correspondence (realizing that some adjustment is essential whenever two languages are as different from each other as are Greek and English).⁴⁴ In reality, the stated goal often results in tension since transferring the structure from Greek to English sometimes detracts from the meaning. The reverse is also true in that to enable the reader to see the meaning most directly often requires transforming the structure.

We might begin with a very simple example of a two word reversal. In Matt. 1:18, the text reads πνεύματος ἁγίου (spirit holy), but the ESV gives “Holy Spirit”—as it does in all 44 instances in which this word order pattern occurs in the NT. One would expect this to be the case since in English we never refer to “Spirit Holy.” An English translation which did refer to the Spirit Holy would be viewed as odd indeed. The point is not that this is wrong, just that it is not a strict formal equivalent; the functional equivalent is necessary to produce standard English.

Or what about 2 Cor. 1:19, “Silvanus and Timothy and I” (δι’ ἐμοῦ καὶ Σιλβανοῦ καὶ Τιμοθέου)? Formally this says, “through me and Silvanus and Timothy”—with the preposition omitted as well as the word order changed, and that only for English style.

Eph. 6:12 reads, “flesh and blood,” but the text says αἷμα καὶ σάρκα (see also Heb. 2:14). The only reason these are reversed is due to English idiom, which is not a problem, but the reader ought not to be misled into thinking that the ESV is going to tell them, “word-for-word,” what the original text says. Both patterns occur in the NT (though I doubt that the difference is semantic). A formal equivalent of either combination is perfectly intelligible English, so this is not “as formal as possible.”

⁴¹ ESV Preface, vii.

⁴² The unabridged copy discusses the following passages as additional examples of this: Luke 8:23; 22:37; John 7:39; Rom. 3:9; 5:9; 7:8; 1 Cor. 2:15; 4:13; 11:27, 31; 14:13; 2 Cor. 1:15; 11:11, 12; Gal. 4:15, 17, 24; 5:10; Eph. 2:3; 3:7; 4:9; 5:19; Phil. 1:28; 2:5; 2 Thess. 2:7; 3:17; 1 Tim. 5:7; Phile. 9; Heb. 1:5; 7:2, 16; 8:1; 9:1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 22; 1 John 2:28; and Rev. 8:1.

⁴³ ESV Preface, vii.

⁴⁴ The *translators* understand that restructuring the original form is often necessary. Grudem and Poythress, both members of the ESV NT Committee, argue that “the translator should do as much restructuring as he needs in order to represent the meaning fully in English” (*The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 74). I do not criticize most of the changes cataloged here. I point it out only to show how the popular perception of the ESV differs from its actual nature.

Heb. 9:15 illustrates the sometimes extensive reordering of the text to accommodate English style. Here entire clauses are reordered:

ESV	Greek	“Formal”
“Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant”	καὶ διὰ τοῦτο διαθήκης καινῆς μεσίτης ἐστίν, ὅπως θανάτου γενομένου εἰς ἀπολύτρωσιν τῶν ἐπὶ τῇ πρώτῃ διαθήκῃ παραβάσεων τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν λάβωσιν οἱ κεκλημένοι τῆς αἰωνίου κληρονομίας	and therefore of a new covenant a mediator he is so that since a death has occurred unto redemption of the under the first covenant transgressions the promise should receive those who are called the eternal inheritance

Although not particularly straightforward (by standards of English syntax), the Greek text communicates quite well—in Greek. But a translation into reasonably good English can be offered without moving whole phrases around as the ESV has done.⁴⁵ If the stated goal is to expose the reader “as directly as possible [to] the structure and meaning of the original,” this would seem preferable to transposing entire clauses when it is not necessary. These changes are sometimes necessary in order to communicate clearly in English, but the result should not be confused with “‘word-for-word’ correspondence,” especially when the changes are merely stylistic in English and not required for either clear communication nor correct grammar. It is quite obvious that the *translators* understand this (else they would not have done such things). Whether the typical user who reads the ESV Preface (or Crossway’s PR department or other erstwhile defenders of the ESV) understand the difference or not is open to question.⁴⁶

Interpretive Decisions/Grammar

Some defenders of the ESV have majored on the point that translation should never be interpretive. Supposedly the “lack of controls” in functional equivalence translation results in wild variations between translations since the translator is reading his interpretation into the text. This “linguistic antinomianism” is condemned in the strongest

⁴⁵ Such an attempt might result in something like this: “And therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant so that, since a death has occurred that releases them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”

⁴⁶ See also John 18:18; 21:8, in which entire clauses or phrases are rearranged. Other examples noted in the larger paper: Luke 1:53; 22:57; 23:50–51; Eph. 4:1; and 2 Tim. 4:8.

terms since it introduces “major deviations” into the text.⁴⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to respond to such arguments in any detail. But consider first an example adduced as the model of what’s wrong with functional equivalence—and then examine the ESV in the same light.

Ryken selects 1 Thess. 1:3 as one of his case studies to show the errors of modern translation theory. He cites in parallel the KJV, RSV, NASB, and ESV and points out that they are nearly identical. The reason for this is said to be due to the primacy given to the words of the original. Then the translations of the TNIV, GNB, and CEV are compared. The conclusion derived is that there are “major deviations from the literal rendering of the original” because “there are no firm controls on interpretation.”⁴⁸ To cite but two of the examples given, the ESV reads, “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The NIV has, “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” At first glance Ryken seems to have a point. Why does the NIV add these explanatory words? Doesn’t this add an unjustifiable, subjective interpretation? Ryken assumes that this is invalid, uncontrolled, and baseless. But this only reflects his lack of understanding of Greek. Not only are these “additions” justifiable, it might be argued that they represent the best way to translate this verse. What is ignored in the contrary

⁴⁷ One of the most vocal proponents of this sort of argument is Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), see esp. pp. 79–91. I had originally hoped to include a review of Ryken’s book (which was written in defense of the translation approach used by the ESV). That has turned out to be infeasible for two reasons. First, the review of the ESV itself has become much too long already, and second, the problems with Ryken’s work are so extensive and fundamental that they would take this article in an entirely different direction to evaluate adequately. In summary, 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. (For a similar assessment of Ryken’s book, see Mark Strauss, “Form, Function, and the ‘Literal Meaning’ Fallacy in Bible Translation,” paper presented at the annual ETS conference, Atlanta, Nov. 2003, p. 3 n. 9.)

⁴⁸ Ryken, *Word of God in English*, 82.

argument is the fact that these words represent a string of genitives which meet the qualifications for the objective/subjective genitive category. Although there is more to it than this, the NIV has concluded that these three phrases are subjective genitives and has translated them accordingly. This is a well-known use of the genitive case.⁴⁹ If all three phrases are parallel (which certainly appears to be the case), then this category is the only one that explains all three phrases adequately. There is thus contextual justification and grammatical controls on such an exegetical decision and it is appropriate to reflect it in the translation. This is especially true since the translator is almost always in a much better position to evaluate such options than the average reader—who does not usually know what legitimate options there are for “of” in English.⁵⁰

Prepositions & Cases

There are numerous examples in the ESV in which oblique cases and prepositions have been interpreted (usually correctly) based on contextual considerations.⁵¹ For example, consider Rom. 1:5, which the ESV translates as, “to bring about the obedience of faith” (εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως). Though probably correct and certainly helpful, this must be judged as a subjective translation of εἰς (which might more formally be left as simply “unto”).⁵² Amazingly, Ryken selects this example to show the superiority of the ESV over several translations which are (in his view) more functional at this point. He excoriates the NIV

for translating “to the obedience that comes from faith.”⁵³ The only way that he can trumpet the superiority of the ESV at this point is to focus only on the words “the obedience of faith.” He assumes that this is the correct, formal equivalent of ὑπακοὴν πίστεως, as if the English word “of” is the “word-for-word” equivalent of the genitive case. But translation cannot be done on a word-for-word basis. How is translating πίστεως as a subjective genitive (as the NIV does here) any different from translating the preposition εἰς at the beginning of the phrase as “to bring about”? One might argue on the same basis as Ryken that the only correct, formal equivalent of εἰς is “unto,” but this would be invalid. The ESV has been sensitive to the entire phrase εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως (including both the force of εἰς and the genitive) in translating (correctly), “to bring about the obedience of faith”—even though the phrase has had a verbal idea “added” in English (i.e., the phrasal verb “bring about”). The NIV translation expresses the same meaning even though it introduces the verbal idea at the end of the phrase rather than at the beginning.

Decisions such as this are very common in translations. Ryken’s criticism of 1 Thess. 1:3 in the NIV was that such “interpretation” is invalid. He also criticizes the NIV for translating Rom. 1:17 (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) as “righteousness from God,” arguing that the addition of “from” is “theological interpretation” that goes “beyond the literal rendering and make[s] a theological decision for the reader.” The ESV is surely to be preferred here, says Ryken, since it says only “righteousness of God.”⁵⁴ But how is that any different from what the ESV itself has done just a dozen verses earlier in Rom. 1:5 in translating εἰς as “to bring about”?

As a few additional examples, consider these. 2 Cor. 9:13, “because of your submission flowing from your confession” (ἐπὶ τῇ ὑποταγῇ τῆς ὁμολογίας ὑμῶν). “Flowing from” interprets the genitive (correctly) as a subjective genitive. Heb. 13:13, “and bear the reproach he endured” (τὸν ὀνειδισμὸν αὐτοῦ φέροντες). In its most formal sense, ὀνειδισμὸν αὐτοῦ is simply “his reproach,” but this is quite ambiguous. Does he do the reproaching, or is he reproached? Both the Greek and the simple English equivalent can mean either of these things. ESV has wisely clarified the choice between objective and subjective genitive here, opting (correctly) for an objective genitive.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ The subjective genitive classification is given in the grammars: MHT, 3:211; BDF, §163; Porter, *Idioms*, 95; Young, *Intermediate NT Greek*, 33; Chamberlain, *Exegetical Grammar*, 31; it also shows in the exegetical handbooks: Fee, *NT Exegesis*¹, 81; Rogers & Rogers, *New Linguistic Key*, 471; and in the commentaries: Marshall, NCBC, 51; Milligan, 6; Morris, NICNT, 51; Wanamaker, NIGTC, 75. Wallace, as often, divides these into much finer categories and classes this example as a “genitive of production” (*Grammar*, 104–06). Robertson calls it a genitive of apposition (*Grammar*, 498) which would be translated, e.g., as “work which consists of faith.”

⁵⁰ “Of” is one of the most flexible of all English prepositions and expresses a very broad range of semantic values. Not every possible meaning of “of” in English is a valid possibility for every Greek statement in which “of” might be used. To leave a translation as ambiguous as “of” when the grammar of a passage justifies a more explicit, clear, and helpful translation is a curious choice to enshrine lack of meaning! As Bob Milliman asks, “will average readers take the necessary steps to make an intelligent decision in these matters when reading a literal, word-for-word translation?” (“Translation Theory and Twentieth-Century Versions,” 142).

⁵¹ For a helpful discussion of such translation issues, especially with the genitive case, see Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 48–50.

⁵² The same expression has been handled the same way in Rom. 16:26.

⁵³ Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 194.

⁵⁴ Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 87.

⁵⁵ For other examples, consider Jas. 1:20, “the righteousness that God requires” (δικαιοσύνην θεοῦ) reflects only one of at least four possible interpretations. (See the discussion of the exegetical options in the commentaries by Moo [Pillar] and Davids [NIGTC].) Or Eph. 4:1, “a prisoner for the Lord” (ὁ δέσμιος ἐν κυρίῳ), or Eph. 4:4, “to the one hope that belongs to your call” (ἐν μιᾷ ἐλπίδι τῆς κλήσεως ὑμῶν).

Participles

Participles represent another situation in which translators must make “interpretive” decisions in representing them in English. This is especially true since participles are used more frequently in Greek than in English and with a much wider range of meaning. This is most obvious in the case of adverbial participles, which, in the ESV, are freely translated to reflect the appropriate contextual relationship with the main verb. They are not usually left as “bare” participles in English. For example, in Rom. 5:1 δικαιωθέντες is not left simply as “being justified,” but (correctly) becomes “since we have been justified” even though this adds the word “since” and converts the participle into a finite verb (supplying “we” as the subject). This is certainly accurate and justified in the context, but it does demonstrate why no translation can consist of only formal equivalents.

For one additional example, in Eph. 4:15 we read in the ESV of “speaking the truth in love” (ἀληθεύοντες δὲ ἐν ἀγάπῃ). Here the participle does not specify “speaking,” only “truthing”—but “truthing” is not standard English since we do not have a verb “to truth.” Every translation must do something, but every choice excludes other equally viable choices.⁵⁶ Although “speaking the truth” is a common offering (thus KJV, ASV, NIV, NASB), it could equally well be doing/holding/telling/living or practicing the truth—or simply “being truthful.”⁵⁷

Verb Forms (Tense, etc.)

Similar decisions are often involved with how one might express the aspect or *Aktionsart* values of finite verbs. For example, in Luke 22:64 the ESV translates, “they ... kept

⁵⁶ Cp. CEV (telling), NET (practicing), NLT & Weymouth (hold to), Rotherham (pursuing), Knox (follow), Confraternity (live in). BDAG’s first gloss is “be truthful.”

⁵⁷ 1 Tim. 4:1, “some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits” (ἀποστήσονται τινες τῆς πίστεως, προσέχοντες πνεύμασιν πλάνοις). The “by” is supplied based on the exegetical decision that this is an adverbial participle of means. Formally, all that the participle says is “devoting”—the addition of “by” is only one possibility. The list of examples could easily become very long here. A quick survey of how the ESV has translated adverbial participles in John shows instances of the following categories: purpose (4:23, “to worship him”; see also 6:6; 8:6; 12:23; and 18:22), causal (6:18, “because a strong wind was blowing”), concessive (12:37, “though he had done so many signs”), and temporal (2:3, “when the wine ran out”; my quick check listed about 50 temporal translations—one would expect more temporal uses in narrative genre). In other instances the sentence structure is changed so that the participle becomes a main verb (e.g., 1:36, 38; 6:17; 8:2, 8, 10; 9:11; 12:12, 14, 36; 17:1; 20:16; 21:20); these are other than adverbial participles of attendant circumstances. Redundant participles in quotation formulas are usually omitted (e.g., 1:26, ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰωάννης λέγων becomes simply “John answered them”).

asking him....” But there is no word in the text for “kept.” This clearly adds a semantic nuance to the text, which simply says ἐπηρώτων λέγοντες (“they were asking saying”). It is quite normal Greek style to add a participle of λέγω when introducing a quote. This is redundant in English style and does not suggest a repetitive statement (else we should add “kept on” to a great many other NT texts!). The ESV is probably attempting to reflect the imperfective aspect and the *lexis/Aktionsart* of the imperfect verb ἐπηρώτων in this context. The sense of the context along with two imperfective verb forms may well justify the translation given in Luke 22:64, but it should not be claimed as a formal equivalent. The ESV is not consistent in this policy, however, since in most passages where the same construction occurs it is not represented as “kept on....”⁵⁸

In Acts 3:8, “began to walk” is the translation of the imperfect form (which *may* refer to inceptive action in some contexts), but this is an exegetical judgment—there is no word for “began” in the text. I think that ESV has been a bit more careful than NASB in these situations, but it is a debatable decision many times as to whether or not this reflects the point of the writer.

Interpretive decisions based on Greek grammar *are* included frequently in the ESV rather than allowing a strict formal equivalent to stand. This is *not* wrong and is often both a wise and a necessary choice, but if it is considered legitimate, then one should not criticize the NIV (or other translations) for doing the same thing!⁵⁹

Idiomatic Equivalents

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. This is not at all a bad thing; indeed, it is one of the better features of the ESV (despite too much rhetoric to the contrary by some!). This list could quickly become very long, but consider the following examples.

⁵⁸ Other examples of the imperfect form of ἐρωτάω or ἐπερωτάω followed by a present participle of λέγω include Matt. 15:23, ἠρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες (“begged him saying”); 16:13, ἠρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων (“he asked his disciples”—with the ptcp. omitted); Mark 8:27, ἐπηρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων αὐτοῖς (“he asked his disciples”—with the ptcp. omitted); Mark 9:11, ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες (“they asked him”—with the participle omitted); Mark 12:18, ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες (“they asked him a question, saying”); Mark 15:4, ἐπηρώτα αὐτὸν λέγων (“asked him”—with the ptcp. omitted). There are another half dozen examples of this construction in Luke (3:10, 14; 22:64), John (4:31; 12:21), and Acts (1:6), but only in one other passage (Luke 22:64) does the ESV add the “kept on” idea, and in five of them the participle is omitted in translation (it is retained only in John 4:31).

⁵⁹ Other examples omitted in this edition that comprised an entire section include 1 Cor. 7:18; 11:3–15; 1 Tim. 5:9; Jas. 4:5–6; Phil. 2:17; Heb. 6:4–6; and 1 Pet. 1:11.

Matt. 19:28, “in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit ...” (ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, ὅταν καθίσῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου). Translating παλιγγενεσίᾳ as “new world” is not unique (it was already in the RSV), but it certainly raises eyebrows in terms of being a “literal” translation. The word παλιγγενεσίᾳ means renewal, rebirth, or regeneration. It is a very interpretive choice to translate this as to imply a particular interpretation.⁶⁰

John 9:30 provides a functional, idiomatic translation—and a good one: “Why, this is an amazing thing!” (ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ τὸ θαυμαστόν ἐστίν—formally, “for in this is the amazing thing). There is not an equivalent in Greek of the English “why...!” (and note that the article has disappeared also), but the ESV has made a superb choice to catch the tone implied in this context.⁶¹

Acts 28:11, “a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead” (Ἀλεξανδρίνῳ, παρασήμῳ Διοσκουρίοις). The ESV not only adds the words “a ship,”⁶² but nicely smooths out the terse Greek which reads (formally), “in Alexandria, in a figurehead, Dioscuris.” The text is probably to be read as a proper name, “with the Dioscuris on the figurehead,” but that is opaque to English readers who would not recognize that Dioscuris is the title of the gods Castor and Pollux (the “heavenly twins”).⁶³ So the ESV has handled this verse well, but it is not a formal equivalent translation.

Rom. 7:15, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (ὁ γὰρ κατεργάζομαι οὐ γινώσκω· οὐ γὰρ ὁ θέλω τοῦτο πράσσω, ἀλλ’ ὁ μισῶ τοῦτο ποιῶ). The ESV makes a number of changes in this verse: 1) the introductory conjunction, γάρ, is omitted (though the second γάρ is retained); 2) the word order is reversed in each of the three clauses; 3) a verb is changed to a noun (κατεργάζομαι becomes “actions”); 4) the relative pronoun is omitted; 5) two different Greek words are translated as the same English word; and 6) one sentence is broken up into two. All of these changes are justifiable and the result communicates quite well. But it is hardly “word-for-word” translation.

1 Tim. 6:6, “now there is great gain in godliness with contentment” (ἔστιν δὲ πορισμὸς μέγας ἢ εὐσέβεια μετὰ

⁶⁰ This is so despite the fact that BDAG (752, s.v. παλιγγενεσία, 1.b.) includes this as one appropriate rendering of this verse: “in the new (Messianic) age or world.” A lexicon is a secondary tool and often includes substantive interpretive decisions as well.

⁶¹ BDAG does list “why!” as a possible idiomatic translation of γάρ in questions (BDAG, 189, 1.f.), but lists no examples like this one. But in any event, it is an idiomatic translation, not a “strict” formal equivalent.

⁶² The word “ship” (πλοῖον) occurs only once in the text, though ESV has supplied it a second time for clarity.

⁶³ Διόσκουροι, ὦν, οἱ is from Δίος κοῦροι, Sons of Zeus (BDAG, 251).

αὐταρκείας). This translation follows the word order of the Greek text, but changes the grammar, making the grammatical subject of the sentence (ἡ εὐσέβεια) into the object of a preposition which is not in the original text. Which formal element does a translator choose, the word order (which is one of the most obvious formal elements) or the grammatical structure? One or the other must be sacrificed to communicate clearly in English.⁶⁴

Awkward English

Since the ESV makes much of its goal of “maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence” (ESV Preface, viii), one would expect that any section of a review concerned with stylistic matters would be relatively brief. Unfortunately, this section is longer than expected. Overall the English style is good, but there are a surprising number of stylistic “bumps” on the ESV road. In part this comes from emphasizing formal equivalence and English literary style—two concerns that are often found to be in tension with each other in such endeavors.⁶⁵

A number of examples of formal translations may be cited that are not natural English: Luke 5:12, “full of leprosy” (we would say, “covered with leprosy”); Luke 8:27, “a man who had demons”⁶⁶; Matt. 1:18, “she was found to be with child”; Matt. 1:25, “knew her not”; Matt. 5:2, “he opened his mouth and taught”; Luke 8:23, “they were filling with water and were in danger”(!); Luke 4:15, “being

⁶⁴ There is a similar instance in Heb. 13:16, “for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (τοιαύταις γὰρ θυσίαις εὐαρεστεῖται ὁ θεός). Here the translation maintains the word order, but must reformulate the grammar to do so. The subject of the sentence is ὁ θεός and the verb is εὐαρεστεῖται, thus, “God is pleased.” The reference to sacrifice is a dative noun which would normally be translated adverbially: “God is pleased with such sacrifices.” But in the ESV, the dative becomes the subject and the nominative becomes the object of a (supplied) preposition. Other examples (see the larger paper) include: John 21:4, 7; Acts 9:40; 2 Cor. 8:18; Phil. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:16; John 8:44; Luke 12:35; 22:51; Acts 10:4; Rom. 6:19; 1 Cor. 4:3, 13; 9:7; Gal. 3:15; Eph. 4:16; 4:28; 6:15; Phil. 4:2; Col. 3:5; 4:5; Heb. 1:3; 7:16; 11:11; 12:3; Jas. 4:1; Rev. 8:9; Mark 9:41; 14:57; 2 Tim. 2:8; John 7:38; Luke 20:16; Rom. 7:2, 22; 2 Cor. 6:11; 9:6; Jas. 1:4; and 3 John 5, 10.

⁶⁵ The tension can be felt in their statement that “as [an ‘essentially literal’ translation], its emphasis is on ‘word-for-word’ correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages” (ESV Preface, vii).

⁶⁶ Is this really parallel with our English expressions, “had children/sheep, etc.?! ”

glorified by all”; Luke 24:1, “at early dawn”⁶⁷; Acts 2:19, vapor of smoke (!); Luke 24:27, “he interpreted to them.”⁶⁸

Acts 2:43, “and awe came upon every soul.” In English we do not speak of awe “coming upon” someone, and we would certainly not use “soul” here, the reference is to people (“soul” does not mean “people” in contemporary English⁶⁹). Perhaps better, “everyone was awed” (even though this changes the *form*: a noun phrase being translated as a verbal phrase). NIV has “everyone was filled with awe.” And even NASB95 departs from a formal equivalent (though over-translating the verb): “everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.”

In Acts 3:11 we read about, “the portico called Solomon’s” (ἐπὶ τῆς στοᾶς τῆς καλουμένης Σολομῶντος). Why not just use natural English, “Solomon’s Porch”? There is absolutely no exegetical significance or benefit to retaining the participle “called” since that is only normal Greek idiom (but foreign to English), and most people do not recognize the word “portico.”⁷⁰

There are some sections of the ESV in which the overall syntax follows the original so closely that they read in quite awkwardly in English. For example, Acts 10:36–37: “As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all),³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed.” Yet even in this rather clumsy section there are functional equivalents that transpose Hebraic idiom into English: τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ (sons of Israel) becomes simply “Israel,” and τὸ γενόμενον ῥῆμα (the thing which came to be) becomes “what happened.”⁷¹ If these two changes are legitimate (and they are; the meaning is communicated accurately and much more intelligibly), then why shouldn’t “the portico called Solomon’s” become simply “Solomon’s porch”?⁷²

⁶⁷ ὄρθου βαθῶς, which is what Newman’s dictionary gives, but BDAG (162 s.v. βαθος, 3.b.) suggests, “early in the morning”—which is far better English.

⁶⁸ Luke 24:27, “he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures.” This is not normal English idiom. We do not interpret to someone, instead we interpret the text, but we *explain* this interpretation to others. BDAG (244, s.v. διερμηνεύω) gives *translate*, *explain*, and *interpret* as viable glosses in this context and English usage surely prefers *explain*.

⁶⁹ The only exception might be phrases such as “I didn’t see a soul” (= “I didn’t see anyone”), but it is otherwise an archaic usage.

⁷⁰ Even Greek could omit the participle “called” with no change of meaning; compare Acts 5:12, ἐν τῇ Στοᾷ Σολομῶντος, which the ESV translates as “Solomon’s Portico.”

⁷¹ Here the Hebraic use of τὸ ῥῆμα as “thing” dissolves into the participle, leaving no trace in English.

⁷² Other examples include: Luke 9:16 (cf. Matt. 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; Heb. 11:20; but ctr. Luke 2:28, 34; 24:30, 50); Luke 10:6;

Sentence Structure

We are told that “in punctuating, paragraphing, dividing long sentences, and rendering connectives, the ESV follows the path that seems to make the ongoing flow of thought clearest in English” (ESV Preface, viii). This does not spell out any particular principles by which such decisions were made. There is considerable diversity in the ESV in this regard—but that is true of many translations. In 2 Pet. 2:4–10a, a very long sentence with multiple subordinate clauses and a parenthetical statement is preserved. But in John 7:1, one sentence in Greek becomes two in English in a situation where it isn’t at all necessary for either English style or intelligibility (and the introductory γάρ is omitted from the second sentence). Many similar examples could be cited. The point is not that the ESV should not do such things. These are legitimate choices. Rather the point is that every translation does such things—the difference is one of degree.

Inconsistencies

Although every translation will contain some degree of diversity, one tends to expect this to be minimized in those which emphasize formal equivalence. The ESV Preface indicates that “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.”⁷³ Yet the ESV demonstrates some surprising inconsistencies in such things as translating the same or similar words and phrases, in handling figures of speech, in capitalization and punctuation, and in measurements.

Translating Similar Words/Phrases. The ESV has generally been fairly consistent in some translation choices. ψυχή is sometimes translated “life/lives” and other times “soul.” Both these English glosses are correct and ESV seems to follow a consistent pattern of word choice.⁷⁴ There are instances, however, when the choice seems to have gone awry, e.g., Luke 21:19, “you will gain your lives,” but in Luke 12:20, “this night your soul is required of you.” In both instances the text seems to be clearly using ψυχή in the sense of (physical) “life” that is gained or lost.⁷⁵ In Acts 2:27, 41 “souls” would make much better sense in English as “people.” “Everyone” would be preferable in Acts 2:43; 3:23. Other translations used for ψυχή include “human

Acts 19:31; Rom. 6:12, 21–22; 14:9; 2 Cor. 9:2, 5; 10:14; Gal. 4:17b–19; Eph. 3:1–3; 6:6; 1 Thess. 2:2; Jas. 5:5; and 1 Pet. 1:7; and Rev. 11:19.

⁷³ Perhaps the ambiguity in this guideline is in figuring out what the ESV considers to be “important recurring words in the original.”

⁷⁴ All occurrences of ψυχή in the Gospels have been checked for this assessment.

⁷⁵ Perhaps 12:20 is left as “soul” to make a verbal association with ψυχή in v. 19 (*bis*), but that has not prevented similar switches in close proximity elsewhere, e.g., John 12:25, 27.

being” (Rom. 2:9); “people/person/s” (Acts 7:14; 24:37; Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 3:20); “me” (2 Cor. 1:23); “selves” (1 Thess. 2:8); and “all” (Jude 15).

The word σάρξ is notoriously difficult to translate. Some people learn it as “flesh” in first year Greek and can never get beyond that elementary gloss. Yet σάρξ has a very complex semantic range. The ESV normally translates σάρξ as “flesh” (115 of 147 times, 78%), but there are some surprising alternatives in some passages. The range includes the following glosses a total of thirty-two times: *human being, physical, natural limitations, fellow Jews, earthly, worldly, worldly standards, body, bodily, anyone, no one, condition, face to face, sensuous, and desire*. In five instances there is no word in the ESV at all to represent σάρξ—it is omitted altogether. In some passages there is a note which reads: “Greek *flesh*” (or the appropriate variation thereof), but this appears only nine times. Sometimes there appears to be a rationale for inclusion of such a note, but other passages which are very similar sometimes have and sometimes don’t have a note.⁷⁶ Some alternatives which are quite “free” (even though appropriate in the context) have no note, including Rom. 11:14 (“fellow Jews”). These examples would lead the reader to assume that particular words (e.g., master, father, Jew) appear in the original text when they do not.

Or consider the phrase οὐ θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν. This phrase (and minor variations of it) appear in the ESV in the following forms. Why so many variations of the same phrase?

- Rom. 1:13, I want you to know (*bis*);
- 11:25, I want you to understand;
- 1 Cor. 1:8, I want you to know;
- 12:1, I do not want you to be uninformed;
- 2 Cor. 1:8, we do not want you to be ignorant;
- 1 Thess. 4:13, we do not want you to be uninformed.

There are a variety of translations for οἰκονομία. In the parable in Luke 16 it is translated “management” all three times. In 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25; and 1 Tim. 1:4 it is translated “stewardship.” But in Eph. 1:10 and 3:9, it is “plan.” A marginal translation of “good order” is given for 1 Tim. 1:4. There is some consistency in these choices. When the reference is personal, “stewardship” appears to be the ESV’s choice, whereas when the focus is on a larger scale, “plan” is employed. Note that both Eph. 1:10 and 3:9 occur in the context of God’s over-arching intentions across vast reaches of human history, whereas 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; and Col. 1:25 refer to Paul’s specific role in that larger context. So perhaps some such interchange is justified. A more significant question might be why the modern

concept of “management” is selected for the parable in Luke 16 whereas the older English term “stewardship” is retained in the epistles? Second, is “plan” the best English choice for expressing God’s over-arching intentions? The word οἰκονομία seems to carry an emphasis that goes well beyond “plan.” Although an active management includes a plan by which it is implemented, “plan” by itself does not necessarily connote any active work in carrying out and administering/implementing that plan.⁷⁷

Measurements. It is interesting that many weights and measurements have been converted to equivalent American units, e.g., John 2:6, “twenty or thirty gallons” (μετρητὰς δύο ἢ τρεῖς); 11:18, “about two miles off” (σταδίων δεκαπέντε); 21:8, “about a hundred yards off” (πηχῶν διακοσίων); or Rev. 6:6, “quart” (χοῖνιξ). But other similar expressions have been left in first century terminology, e.g., Acts 27:28, “twenty fathoms” (ὄργυιὰς δεκαπέντε—with no explanatory note), or John 12:5, “three hundred denarii” (δηνάριον is always transliterated), or given a non-specific designation, e.g., Luke 15:8–9, “ten silver coins” (δραχμή, *drachma*).

We read about “talents” (τάλαντον) in the parable in Matt. 25:14–30,⁷⁸ but “about one hundred pounds” (ταλαντιαῖος) in Rev. 16:21. We read of “miles” for στάδιον in Matt. 14:24; Luke 24:13; John 6:19; 11:18, but of “stadia” in Rev. 14:20; 21:16. In John 21:8, παχῦς is expressed in yards, but in Rev. 21:17 it is cubits. The λεπτόν in Mark 12:42 and Luke 21:2 is a “small copper coin,” but in Luke 12:59 it is a “penny,” whereas the “penny” in Matt. 5:26 and Mark 12:42 is a κοδράντης. The “mile” (μίλιον) in Matt. 5:41 is only approximately equivalent to our American term (5,000 feet versus 5,280 feet).⁷⁹

In Acts 19:19 ἀργυρίου μυριάδας πέντε is given as “fifty thousand pieces of silver,” but with no indication of the value of this sum. Nor are Judas’ thirty pieces of silver (e.g., Matt. 26:15) assigned a value.⁸⁰ The δίδραχμον (i.e., the

⁷⁷ 1 Tim. 4:14 offers “do not neglect the gift you have” (μὴ ἀμέλει τοῦ ἐν σοὶ χαρίσματος). In this case “you have” is a functional equivalent for ἐν σοὶ. But in 2 Tim. 1:6 the identical phrase with similar reference in a similar context is represented with the formal equivalent: “...the gift of God, which is in you...” (τὸ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν σοὶ). (These are all the occurrences of ἐν σοὶ in the Pauline corpus. See also 2 Tim. 1:5b and Rom. 9:17; Gal. 3:8, all of which use “in you”; ctr. 2 Tim. 1:5a which uses “your” due to English idiom.)

⁷⁸ Especially given the extraordinary abuse heaped on this word (assuming its *English* definition, i.e., “ability”), it would have seemed a wise place to use an American equivalent.

⁷⁹ This is actually a Latin/Roman unit, *mille passus*, i.e., 1,000 paces (@5 Roman feet per pace; see ABD, 6:901, s.v. Weights and Measures).

⁸⁰ A piece of silver equaled 120 denarii, which was about four months wages for a laborer (see ABD 1:1086, s.v. Coinage; Coins of the NT).

⁷⁶ Gal. 1:16 (“anyone”) is noted, but Gal. 2:16 (“no one”) is not. Col. 3:22 (“earthly masters”) has a note, but Heb. 12:9 (“earthly fathers”) has none.

double-drachma) is “the half-shekel tax” or simply “the tax” (Matt. 17:24a, b), with no indication of value.

In most of these instances the alternate form appears in a footnote. But why the inconsistency? Why not always put the American equivalent in the text and the first century terminology in the notes—or vice versa. Why some one way and some the other? This is admittedly a difficult decision for translators and something regarding which it is difficult to be consistent, but one would think that greater consistency could be achieved.⁸¹ If there is a set of standardized guidelines, it would be helpful to the reader to know what they are, but the brief listing of weights and measures that follows the last chapter of Revelation offers no such explanation, nor is there any in the introductory material. I initially thought that it *may* have been that weights and measurements were given equivalents and monetary values transliterated, but this is not consistent. If this is what was intended, it ought to be explained and made consistent.

Figures of Speech. Although sometimes the ESV maintains figures of speech (e.g., “walk”⁸²), other times they interpret metaphors that would seem to be adequately transparent in English, e.g., 1 Cor. 11:30, “sleep” becomes “have died.”⁸³ In 2 Cor. 6:11 the ESV has, “we have spoken freely to you” (τὸ στόμα ἡμῶν ἀνέωγεν πρὸς ὑμᾶς—formally, “our mouth is open to you”). The figure is totally gone—and probably rightly so since this figure would be opaque to a modern reader. Some of these decisions are based on the judgment as to whether or not the metaphor is live or dead—but it is not clear if a live versus a dead metaphor is judged from first or twenty-first century standards. This is an area that deserves more attention.

Capitalization & Punctuation. The ESV tends to capitalize more descriptive phrases relating to God than is cus-

tomary, treating them as proper nouns. For example, “the Majestic Glory” (2 Pet. 1:17), and “the Master” (2:1). If “The Stone Pavement” (Λιθόστρωτον) is capitalized in John 19:13, why isn’t “the place of the skull” (Κρανίου Τόπον) likewise capitalized in John 19:17?⁸⁴

That even something as simple as capitalization can be interpretive is illustrated in 2 Tim. 1:12, “he is able to guard until that Day...” (δυνατός ἐστιν ... φυλάξει εἰς ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν).⁸⁵ But other passages referencing an eschatological day are not; e.g., 2 Cor. 1:14, “the day of our Lord Jesus,” or Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16, “the day of Christ,” or 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2, “the day of the Lord.” What is there about the unadorned “that Day” that warrants the special capitalization?

The “Faithful Sayings” of the Pastorals are not punctuated consistently. Although the descriptor is consistent (“the saying is trustworthy”), the adjoining punctuation varies from a colon (1 Tim. 3:1 and 2 Tim. 2:11–13), to a comma (1 Tim. 1:15), to a period (1 Tim. 4:9–10). Some of these inconsistencies are due to the difficult nature of these questions, but one might have hoped for at least consistent treatment, even if marginal options might suggest alternative views.⁸⁶

In John 1:24 we find a paragraph beginning with a parenthetical statement! One might expect parenthetical statements to appear within a paragraph, but to find a new paragraph beginning with an opening parenthesis causes one to wonder if something is not asked.

Misc. Notes and Specific Translation Problems

On a commendable note, 1 Cor. 7:1 is punctuated differently from many other translations: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’” By placing the second part of the verse in quotation marks, these words become a quotation from the Corinthians rather than Paul’s own teaching. This has not been the traditional punctua-

⁸¹ For a brief, but helpful discussion of these issues, see Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3d ed., 44–45.

⁸² But there are exceptions to this also; 1 Cor. 3:3 translates περιπατέω as “behave”; in 7:17 it is “lead the life”; in 2 Cor. 4:2, “practice”; 12:18, “act”; Col. 4:5, “conduct yourself”; 1 Th. 4:1, 12 “live” (though in these two passages there is a note that says, “Greek walk”—but none of the other examples cited here have such a note! And the 2d occurrence of περιπατέω is not reflected directly in the translation at all); Heb. 13:9, “devoted to”; 1 Pet. 5:8, “prowls” (though not a figure here since it describes a lion—though the larger lion saying is figurative); Rev. 16:15, “go about.”

⁸³ One must wonder what Ryken would think of a translation (such as the ESV!) which dares to translate the metaphor of sleep as death since he is quite severe on translations which drop or interpret metaphors (Ryken, *Word of God in English*, 128, 141, 247–48). Likewise Van Leeuwen, who argues that “removing” a metaphor “may defeat the purpose of the Holy Spirit” (Raymond Van Leeuwen, “We Really Do Need Another Translation,” *Christianity Today*, 22 Oct. 2001, p. 31).

⁸⁴ This is especially so since both are immediately followed by the Aramaic equivalent given in the same form (Ἑβραϊστί).

⁸⁵ See also v. 18 and 4:8; 1 Cor. 3:13 for similar capitalizations.

⁸⁶ When the saying follows the introductory formula (as it usually does), the saying is sometimes capitalized (1 Tim. 3:1), sometimes set off in poetic lines (2 Tim. 2:11–13), and sometimes run into the English syntax with a “for....” In two cases the identity of the saying is left to the reader to figure out. In 1 Tim. 4:9–10 the introductory formula is punctuated with a period as its own sentence, leaving it unclear if the saying precedes or follows. In Titus 3:5–8a the statement following the formula (connected with a comma) reads more like an explanation (it probably is) than a saying, but if the saying precedes the formula (as appears most likely), the reader would not suspect that from the punctuation, which separates it with a period.

tion; neither RSV, NASB, NIV, NEB^{txt}, nor NLT do so.⁸⁷ The ESV is not the first to suggest this; it appears also in NEB^{mg}, NAB, NRSV, CEV, and NET, and is now also to be found in the TNIV. It is, however, relatively recent in terms of popularity.⁸⁸ It makes much better sense of this passage and is worthy of greater consideration in exegesis. The ESV is to be commended for adopting this punctuation.

I do wish that Χριστός had at times been translated as *Messiah*. Though the wholesale changes of the TNIV in this regard still seem strange to my ears in many places, there are some texts which clearly cry out for this translation, e.g., John 9:22, “if anyone should confess Jesus to be *the Messiah*” (also 11:27). Or consider Rom. 9:5, “to them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God who is over all, blessed forever. Amen.”⁸⁹

Rom. 16:7 will likely generate considerable comment. The translation is not of the “let the reader decide” variety. In this controversial text,⁹⁰ Andronicus and Junia are described as ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, which ESV gives as “well known to the apostles.”⁹¹ “Well-known,” though it might be a true statement, doesn’t seem to reflect ἐπίσημος, which seems to describe the character of the person, not the knowledge of another party. Perhaps “well thought of by the apostles” would be better. The larger issue, of course, is whether or not this verse intends to describe Andronicus and Junia as apostles—the text can be understood in this way if it is translated, “outstanding among the apostles.”⁹² The ESV, since it accepts the feminine form

Junia, does not want to allow this option, so precludes it by the English translation.

1 Cor. 9:10, “Does he not speak entirely for our sake?” (ἢ δι’ ἡμᾶς πάντως λέγει;). To translate πάντως as “entirely” would seem to imply that the entire purpose of God’s instructions in Deut. 25:4 (quoted here) is for the Christian. But that would suggest that God did not have the welfare of the ox in view—which seems to be at least part of the point (if not the major point) in Deuteronomy. Better that we translate πάντως as “certainly” or “surely,” which would say that there is certainly more in Deut. 25 than just a statement of animal husbandry.

Rev. 1:3, “blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear” (μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας). To translate ἀναγινώσκω as “read aloud” may be to over-specify the meaning in this context. Although ἀναγινώσκω can, and often does, refer to reading aloud, that meaning should not be assumed in every use. Are we to assume that this blessing is promised only on those who read orally and not silently?! Private reading in the ancient world was often done aloud rather than silently as we are accustomed to do, but to make a cultural custom an obligatory practice in this way is unwise.⁹³

Inclusive Language in the ESV

In light of the debate over inclusive language, some brief comment needs to be included here as to how this is handled in the ESV. This is not intended to be a complete discussion of that issue, nor even of all aspects of the ESV’s treatment. But a few representative comments may be helpful to give the reader some sense of how the ESV has handled these issues. The extent to which inclusive language⁹⁴ has been incorporated in the ESV will surprise

nontechnical sense (but then there is not so much a problem with a woman in this position).

⁹³ Or are we to think that this refers to the public lector who reads to a congregation? That seems to restrict the intended blessing unduly.

⁹⁴ I am using “inclusive language” in the broad sense which includes any form of generic reference to people, not the narrower sense in which it describes only attempts to transmute, say, masculine references in the original into generic references in the translation. Terminology in this area is not precise and various writers use a range of terms, not always with the same meanings as others who use the same terms. I intend this to be descriptive, not polarizing and neither commend nor condemn other terminology (e.g., “gender-neutral,” “gender inclusive,” “gender accurate,” etc.) or uses. My usage of “inclusive language” here would then include such things as the translation (or notation) of ἀδελφοί as “brothers and sisters,” or the use of “people” for ἄνθρωπος—neither of which are disputed—as well as issues related to generic “he,” or the use of ἀνὴρ as an inclusive term.

⁸⁷ This punctuation does show up as a marginal note in later printings of the NIV (I think as of the 3d edition, late 1980s?).

⁸⁸ See the discussion in Gordon Fee, *I Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 271–76, esp. 273 n. 25 in which he traces the view as early as Origen with scattered instances until relatively modern times.

⁸⁹ “Messiah” appears in ESV only in Jn. 1:41 and 4:25 as a translation of Μεσσίας (the only two occurrences of this transliterated Hebrew word in the NT). Since “Messiah” and “Christ” are simply the Hebrew and Greek equivalents for the same title, there is nothing gained by distinguishing them in English. The choice of one over the other in the text is certainly not semantic.

⁹⁰ The issues raised in this text are many and they will not be resolved here. The discussion above only suggests some of the issues in how the ESV has chosen to handle this verse.

⁹¹ ESV has “Junia” which is feminine (Ἰουνία, ας, α, αν, ή) and this is the “traditional” reading (Byz, KJV, etc.), however, there is a *v.l.* Junias which would be masculine (Ἰουνιάς, ᾶ, ᾱ, ᾶν, ό), and this is given in a marginal note in ESV. The only difference is the accent—and the earliest MSS were unaccented (⊗ A B* C D* F G P pc).

⁹² This is what is found in NIV and TNIV—but with a major difference: NIV has the masculine form, Junias, whereas the TNIV has changed the spelling to the feminine Junia. Of course both of these raise the perplexity of some form of apostolic succession (which seems quite unlikely to me) unless apostle is taken in a

many people. Although done on a different basis than the TNIV, the changes are similar in scope. The goal has been to achieve parity of reference between the two languages. That is, if the reference in Greek refers indiscriminately to men and women, the English should have an equally inclusive reference. If the original intends a male reference, then so should the English. Few would disagree with this in principle, though the application of this principle in a number of situations is disputed.

The guidelines employed are, in part, as follows. “In the area of gender language, the goal of the ESV is to render literally what is in the original.... the objective has been transparency to the original text, allowing the reader to understand the original on its own terms rather than on the terms of our present-day culture.”⁹⁵ In this context certain conventions have been established including the retention of “man” and “men” when a “male meaning component is part of the original Greek” and where man is contrasted with God, the use of “brothers” for ἀδελφοί as a reference to fellow believers, “sons” for υἱοί, and the use of generic “he.”⁹⁶ These conventions are hotly debated, but it is not the purpose of this article to resolve them. The changes that have been made in this area are good ones and in almost all cases acceptable.

The following listings serve as representative samples of how the ESV has handled some of the gender issues in areas that are either debatable or which involve significant changes from the RSV text.

ἄνθρωπος

The word ἄνθρωπος receives quite varied treatment in the ESV. The following catalog illustrates the range to be found. (The catalog does not intend to be complete.)

“people”/“person”: Luke 1:25; John 5:41; 6:10⁹⁷; Titus 2:11; 3:8⁹⁸; Rom. 7:1; 1 Cor. 2:14; Titus 3:10

“one”: Matt. 18:7; Gal. 6:7

“human being,” “human”: John 16:21; Gal. 3:15; Jas. 3:8⁹⁹; 1 Cor. 3:3¹⁰⁰; cp. 1 Cor. 9:8, “on human authority” (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον)

The ESV Preface refers only to “gender language,” though it also uses the term “inclusive” to describe generic “he.”

⁹⁵ ESV Preface, viii–ix.

⁹⁶ ESV Preface, viii–ix.

⁹⁷ In John 6:10 (also 14), ἄνθρωπος is translated “people,” but in 10b “people” represents ἀνὴρ. I wonder if in 10b ἀνὴρ isn’t generic also? That seems to make better sense than distinguishing ἄνθρωπος from ἀνὴρ in the same context.

⁹⁸ This one sounds particularly awkward in English; “for everyone” sounds much better in English and communicates the author’s intent accurately; this is NIV’s choice.

⁹⁹ Jas. 3:8 reads “no human being” (οὐδεὶς ἀνθρώπων), but this reads very awkwardly here and should perhaps have been left as “no one.”

“mankind”: Acts 15:17; 17:26; 1 Thess. 2:15; Jas. 3:7¹⁰¹;

Rev. 9:15, 18, 20; 14:4

“nature,” 2 Cor. 4:16

“others,” 2 Cor. 5:11

In Phil. 2:7–8, “being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human likeness...” (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὗρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος). Here ἄνθρωπος is translated both “men” and “human” in two adjacent phrases, but there is no discernible difference between them; both are inclusive references. The reader would certainly not know that these are the same Greek word with the same referent.

1 Thess. 2:4, “not to please man” (οὐχ ὡς ἀνθρώποις ἀρέσκοντες), formally: “not as pleasing men.” Note that the grammatical number has not been maintained here; the Greek is plural, but the ESV uses a singular (something for which some ESV advocates have criticized the TNIV!). The change is legitimate since “man” is treated as a collective term in English. One wonders, however, why they did not use “people” in this instance since it is surely intended as an inclusive reference—especially since a very similar statement is handled this way just two verses later: 2:6, “nor did we seek glory from people” (οὐτε ζητοῦντες ἐξ ἀνθρώπων δόξαν). The response might be that in v. 4 ἄνθρωπος is contrasted with θεός (which is standard procedure according to the Preface¹⁰²). But why then switch to “people” in v. 6? Consistency would seem to prefer the continued use of “man/men” since the contrast continues. It appears that here some of the stated goals of the ESV are in conflict with one another: word-for-word correspondence, inclusive language, and maintaining “man” for ἄνθρωπος in contrast to θεός.

ἀνὴρ

The instances of ἀνὴρ in the ESV are almost invariably translated as “man/men” or “husband/s,” but there are some interesting exceptions. The most common variance is

¹⁰⁰ 1 Cor. 3:3, “are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way” (οὐχὶ σαρκικοί ἐστε καὶ κατὰ ἄνθρωπον περιπατεῖτε;). This is acceptable, though one might wonder why ἄνθρωπον became “human,” but σαρκικοί remained “flesh.” See also v. 4, “are you not being merely human?” (οὐκ ἀνθρωποὶ ἐστε;).

¹⁰¹ Jas. 3:7, “by mankind” (τῇ φύσει τῆ ἀνθρωπίνῃ).

¹⁰² “Where God and man are compared or contrasted in the original, the ESV retains the generic use of ‘man’ as the clearest way to express the contrast within the framework of essentially literal translation” (ESV Preface, ix). This is not argued, however, and it would seem that the contrast between “God” and “people/human” is just as clear as between God and man. (Even though God is a person, that is not what English implies when “God” and “people” are contrasted.) The Preface is probably not the place to defend such choices, but I have been unable to find any discussion of this issue by the translators or publishers.

the complete omission of ἀνὴρ in what are probably viewed as set, idiomatic expressions such as ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί. Although this is formally, “men brothers,” the ESV always translates this appositional phrase (which occurs only in Acts) simply as “brothers” (13×).¹⁰³ Other similar expressions (all in Acts) include the combination of ἀνὴρ with murderer (3:14), Ethiopian (8:27), Jew (10:28; 22:3), and magician (13:6). Each of these omit ἀνὴρ and use only the second substantive in the pair. This pattern is not totally consistent, however, since we also find “men of Athens” (Ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι) instead of Athenians (17:22), “men of Ephesus” (Ἄνδρες Ἐφεσίοι) rather than Ephesians (19:35), and “men of Israel” (Ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται) rather than Israelites (21:28)—the last of which is particularly interesting since ἀνδρὶ Ἰουδαίῳ and ἀνὴρ Ἰουδαῖος are translated simply “Jew” in 10:28 and 22:3.

Another instance omits ἀνὴρ due to a euphemism: Luke 1:34, ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω (formally, “since I do not know a man”) becomes “since I am a virgin” in the ESV. The word ἀνὴρ is omitted with nothing in its place and no idiom involved in Acts 25:24; πάντες οἱ συμπρόντες ἡμῖν ἄνδρες becomes simply “all who are present with us.” There are several other isolated translations as well.¹⁰⁴ One might facetiously suggest that these examples “eliminate the male marking that is present in Greek” or that they “mute the masculinity ... of God’s words”¹⁰⁵ since ἀνὴρ is not translated as “man,” but that would be an invalid charge. The meaning is unchanged.

ἀδελφός

Although the ESV translators have chosen to handle the plural use of ἀδελφοί differently from the TNIV, they agree that the reference when used to refer to fellow believers is generic. Whereas the TNIV translates ἀδελφοί as “brothers and sisters” (without note or explanation), the ESV has retained “brothers” in the text, but includes a note that reads as follows:

Or brothers and sisters. The plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God’s family, the church.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Acts 1:16; 2:29, 37; 7:2; 13:15, 26, 38; 15:7, 13; 22:1; 23:1, 6; 28:17.

¹⁰⁴ Acts 25:24, “sirs”; Rom. 7:2, “marriage”; 1 Cor. 7:13, “him”; and Eph. 4:13, “manhood.”

¹⁰⁵ Grudem and Poythress, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 101, cf. 102–04, 107.

¹⁰⁶ This note* occurs at Matt. 5:47; Luke 14:12; John 2:12; Acts 1:14; Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 1:8; Gal. 1:2; Phil. 1:12; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 4:21; Heb. 2:11; James 1:2; 2 Peter 1:10; 1 John 3:13; 3 John 3; and Rev. 6:10. Ephesians has only one occurrence (6:23), but the abridged note is given rather than the full version. This is probably an oversight since the

This full note occurs only the first time that ἀδελφοί occurs in a NT book. Thereafter an abridged reference is given: “Or *brothers and sisters*.”

There is an interesting discrepancy between the TNIV and the ESV on this score, and one in which the TNIV comes out as the more conservative or traditional. In Luke 16:28 the ESV appends the “Or *brothers and sisters*” note to the statement, “I have five brothers.” The TNIV leaves this instance as “brothers” with no note. This results in the ESV suggesting that the rich man in torment had both brothers and sisters to whom he refers,¹⁰⁷ whereas the TNIV restricts it to brothers. (The reference cannot be to a spiritual relationship in this context.)¹⁰⁸ Conversely, TNIV does use “brothers and sisters” in Acts 1:16 whereas ESV does not include the note—though v. 15 (with the same referent) is noted.¹⁰⁹ In Acts 3:22 the TNIV opts for “people,” but ESV stays with “brothers” (with no note).¹¹⁰ In Acts 9:30; 10:23; 15:1, 40; 17:6 the TNIV uses “believers,” and again ESV has “brothers” (with no note). It is “associates” in 22:5 in TNIV, but (unnoted) “brothers” in ESV. These variations demonstrate that such decisions are not always easy and both of these translations come out differently than one might expect at times even though they agree in principle on this issue.

As to the debated use of the singular ἀδελφός in an inclusive sense, the ESV always maintains the translation “brothers,” even when the reference is obviously inclusive, such as Rom. 14:10, “why do you pass judgment on your brother?” (σὺ δὲ τί κρίνεις τὸν ἀδελφόν σου;).¹¹¹ The only exception to this uniform translation is the ESV translation of the singular ἀδελφός as “husband” in 1 Cor. 7:14.

πατήρ

The singular πατήρ is always translated “father” in the ESV, and the plural is usually “fathers,” though it does appear (correctly) as “parent” in Heb. 11:23 since the reference is to both Moses’ father and his mother. It is also

plural form also occurs only once in 2 Timothy and 2 Peter, but there the full note is found. *There is a minor variation of the note that occurs in Matt. 5:47; Luke 14:12 and John 2:12 which omits the last five words—for which this dispensationalist is grateful!

¹⁰⁷ As Grudem and Poythress (*The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 264) point out, translating ἀδελφοί as “brothers and sisters” “makes the inclusion of ‘sisters’ explicit, whereas the Greek word leaves it to context to decide.”

¹⁰⁸ See also John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10 (but not 20:17, which seems inconsistent).

¹⁰⁹ See also 2:29; 3:17; 13:26, 38.

¹¹⁰ See also 7:23, 25, 37.

¹¹¹ See also Matt. 5:22, 23, 24; 7:3, 4, 5; 18:15, 21, 35; Mark 13:12; Luke 6:41, 42; 17:3; Rom. 14:13, 15, 21; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:5, 6; 8:11, 13; 1 Thess. 4:6; 2 Thess. 3:6, 15; Heb. 8:11; Jas. 1:9; 4:11; 1 John 2:9, 10, 11; 3:10, 15, 17; 4:20, 21; 5:16.

translated “patriarchs” (Rom. 9:5; 15:8) or “forefathers” (Rom. 11:28) even though similar references elsewhere are “fathers” (e.g., Luke 1:55, 72; Acts 3:13, 25; Heb. 8:9). There does not seem to be any good reason why the only three references in Romans should be treated differently from the same word elsewhere. It might be that the translators should consider using “forefather” or even “ancestors” in other passages where the reference is to the early generations of Israel.

Participles

It is interesting to compare the translation models of several popular translations as it relates to substantival participles. Taking John 3–7 as a sample, there are about fifty masculine singular substantival participles.¹¹² The most common translation in the ESV is “whoever ...” with “who ...” a close second. Also common are “(the) one who ...” and “everyone (who)” The only times that “he/his/him who ...” occur is when the context explicitly identifies the referent as male (usually, but not always, Jesus or God the Father). “The man who ...” also occurs in some such situations. There are no instances in the sample section of the ESV in which a substantival participle is translated “he who ...” unless the referent is male.

By contrast, the older evangelical translations (prepared prior to the recent discussions of inclusive language) frequently use “he who” or “the man who” in a generic sense. In the same sample passages the NIV uses “he who” or “the man who” five times and NASB95 uses the same phrases fifteen times. The ESV has thus been sensitive to the changes in the usage of the English language over the past few decades. The exact phrase “a/the man who” only occurs in the ESV NT thirty-nine times, almost always when the context makes it clear that the reference is to a male. Matt. 12:48 might be disputed since there is no evidence in the context that it was a man who spoke to Jesus (“but he replied to the man who told him...”). Of greater interest in the larger discussion (but not to be pursued here) is “a/the man who” in James 1:12, 23. Here the text includes ἀνήρ, but the context makes it clear that the reference is generic and not intended to be a statement limited to males.

Grammatical Changes

Acts 20:26, “I am innocent of the blood of all of you” (καθαρός εἰμι ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος πάντων), although this is possibly an improvement on KJV (“I am pure from the blood of all men”), it has shifted the statement from third person (implicit in the adjective πάντων) to second person (“all of you”). The statement is not restricted to the

¹¹² These are the four contiguous chapters in John with the highest concentration of such participles. Masculine singular participles have been selected since that is where the gender issues arise.

addressees (the elders from Ephesus), but is a broad, general statement. This is the same kind of change which some ESV advocates are keen to press against the TNIV as a violation of legitimate inclusive language.¹¹³ Since the ESV maintains the same translation as the RSV at this point, it probably simply “slipped through the cracks” in the revision process. It would perhaps be best if a subsequent revision of the ESV changed this to, “I am innocent of the blood of everyone.”

Other examples of similar grammatical changes in number, though not involving inclusive language, include John 7:9, ταῦτα, “this” (plural changed to singular); and conversely, 2 Cor. 7:5, ἡ σὰρξ ἡμῶν, “our bodies” (singular changed to plural). In Rom. 6:12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions” (μὴ οὖν βασιλευέτω ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θνητῷ ὑμῶν σώματι εἰς τὸ ὑπακούειν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις αὐτοῦ); but here “bodies” is plural, as is “their,” though both are singular in the text (σώματι, αὐτοῦ).¹¹⁴

Summary of Translation Issues

When one evaluates the factors discussed above, I think that it is fair to conclude that the nature of the ESV is closer to the NIV than to the NASB. This is contrary to the popular perception of the ESV (and might even be to the publisher an unwelcome comparison!). Definitions of such things are subjective and must be made in the context of the spectrum of approaches discussed early in this article. By the conclusion that I suggest, I intend to view all three translations listed as being more formal than functional. Contrary to some, I do not view the NIV as a functional equivalent translation as to its basic nature. It is far closer to the KJV/RSV than it is to the “classic” functional translations such as the CEV, TEV, or Phillips. The NIV has used functional equivalents more often than the NASB and even more often than the KJV/RSV.

If one were to compare the stated practices of the NIV and the ESV, one might conclude that these two good translations were quite different. The ESV statements may be found above in the introduction to this section (see pp. 6f). For comparison, here are the equivalent statements in the Preface to the NIV.

¹¹³ If one were inclined to be somewhat “cranky,” one might quote from published articles on the TNIV and apply the same words to the ESV at this point! E.g., Wayne Grudem, “A Brief Summary of Concerns About the TNIV,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (JBMW)* 7.2 (2002): 7 (charging that replacing third person pronouns with second person pronouns is not legitimate); or Vern Poythress, “Avoiding Generic ‘He’ in the TNIV,” *JBMW* 7.2 (2002): 23 (same charge as Grudem’s). To make such a charge against the ESV would be invalid. It is, however, rather ironic.

¹¹⁴ Even the several *v.l.* are all singular.

The first concern of the translators has been the accuracy of the translation ... they have striven for more than a word-for-word translation. Because thought patterns and syntax differ from language to language, faithful communication of the meaning of the writers of the Bible demands frequent modifications in sentence structure and constant regard for the contextual meanings of words. ...

Concern for clear and natural English ... idiomatic but not idiosyncratic, contemporary but not dated—motivated the translators. ...

To achieve clarity the translators sometimes supplied words not in the original texts but required by the context.... Also for the sake of clarity or style, nouns, including some proper nouns, are sometimes substituted for pronouns, and vice versa.¹¹⁵

This is a fairly good description, not only of the NIV, but also of the ESV. Although the NIV explicitly acknowledges that it is not always word-for word, and the ESV claims to strive for “word-for-word consistency,” the result is not that much different in many instances as the evidence above demonstrates. The differences between the two translations are often to be accounted for in that the ESV is a revision rather than a new translation, so the resulting “tone” is more traditional. The differences are only of degree, but that degree is relatively small. Both contain much more functional equivalence than does the NASB though much, much less than the CEV.

The Future of the ESV

The Popularity of the ESV

So what are we to make of the ESV? How has it fared? Thus far, after somewhat over two years in the marketplace, the ESV does not seem to have fared very well. As of the most recent gift-buying season, December 2003, it was not among the top 10 selling versions in the US, and was even being outsold by a NT¹¹⁶ and a Spanish Bible.¹¹⁷

Rank	Title
1	New International Version
2	King James Version
3	New King James Version
4	New Living Translation

¹¹⁵ Preface to the NIV (1978), viii, x.

¹¹⁶ The Holman NT has been available for just a short time longer than the ESV. The earliest copyright given for the Holman Christian Standard Bible is 1999.

¹¹⁷ This is the Christian Booksellers Association list based on actual sales in Christian retail stores in the United States and Canada during December 2003, using STATS as the source for data collection. Figures posted online at <<http://www.cbaonline.org/TrackingLists/trx.jsp?w=t>>, accessed 1/14/04. The ESV was ranked number eight the month after its release by the Christian Booksellers Association (per an ESV news release posted at <<http://www.gnpcb.org/page/news011207/>>). It may be that the initial enthusiasm over a new translation has since subsided.

5	New Century Version
6	The Message
7	New American Standard Bible 95 update
8	New International Readers Version
9	Holman Christian Standard Bible (NT only)
10	Reina Valera 1960 (Spanish)

When Crossway is asked, they respond that they have not yet made it into the top eight, but hope to soon.¹¹⁸ Actual sales figures give a somewhat bleaker picture. The Evangelical Christian Publishers Association tracks such sales figures in their STATS report.¹¹⁹ It is on the basis of this data that the Christian Booksellers Association publishes their list of best sellers. STATS figures for 2002 and 2003 are as follows. “In 2002, the ESV ranked 16th among Bible translations based on Unit sales capturing 0.45% of total units sold ... [and] brought in \$638,011 in total sales, capturing 0.50% of total Bible sales for the year.... In 2003, the ESV ranked 14th among Bible translations based on Unit sales capturing 0.52% of total units sold... [and] brought in \$760,146 in total sales, capturing 0.54% of total Bibles sales for the year.”¹²⁰

At only one half percent of Bible sales, this does not appear to be a particularly stellar performance. It does take time to ramp up a full line of editions and support resources, so perhaps it is premature to suggest a lack-luster reception of the ESV. The NRSV, although appealing to a different constituency (mainline protestant rather than evangelical), has been generally regarded as successful even though it does not appear in the top 10 list.

On a more positive note, the ESV received the ECPA Gold Medallion award for excellence in Christian publishing in the Bible category for 2002 and sold over 200,000 copies in its first year on the market (Oct. 2001–Oct. 2002).¹²¹ As of 2003 Crossway reports over 300,000 copies sold,¹²² but that means that only half as many copies were sold the second year as the first.¹²³ Only time will tell what the market concludes about this new translation.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Email from Randy Jahns, Crossway VP for Sales and Marketing, 1/16/04.

¹¹⁹ The Evangelical Christian Publishers Association website is at <<http://www.ecpa.org>>; for STATS see <<http://www.ecpa.org/StatsReportthd.html>>.

¹²⁰ Email from David J. Bird, Technology and Marketing Coordinator, Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, 1/20/04. It is important to understand that this data is based on Christian retail outlet sales and represents a sampling of about 30% of the total sales for the industry.

¹²¹ ESV News Release posted at <<http://www.gnpcb.org/page/news20021119/>>, accessed 1/16/04.

¹²² Email from Randy Jahns, Crossway V.P. of Sales and Marketing, 1/16/04.

¹²³ Perhaps that is not unusual in that a new translation may initially attract more interest and sales out of curiosity compared with ongoing sales in subsequent years. But this is only specu-

The Place of the ESV

What role might the ESV play in ministry, particularly in the local church? Is it a viable candidate for general church usage? Is it of sufficiently superior merit to justify switching versions? How does it compare with other popular versions?

I would commend the ESV as a viable translation for both local church or personal use. It is accurate and readable. None of the issues that I have pointed out in the preceding review would argue against its use. That does not mean that it is perfect or is the best choice in any or every context (such a Bible does not exist!).¹²⁵ I would, however, include it in my “short list” of the most generally useable Bibles in local church ministry along with the NIV and NASB95. This recommendation reflects a generalized, ideal setting which does not always exist.¹²⁶ It may be that a transition from the KJV to a modern translation might be easier if the target were the ESV rather than the NIV or the NASB due to the more traditional nature of the ESV and

lation on my part; I have no idea how this compares with other new translations or if there are market statistics available to evaluate such a suggestion.

¹²⁴ Unfortunately, the market’s conclusion may not be an accurate judgment of the real value of the ESV (or any other translation) since the publisher’s marketing machine and PR budgets have as much to do with generating sales as does the quality of the translation itself.

¹²⁵ If I could combine the NIV with the inclusive language revisions of the ESV, I’d be very happy with the result and might even be willing to suggest that such a revision would be closer to my ideal translation than any presently available. The TNIV has gone rather too far with their inclusive revisions, but the NIV could be improved with a number of such revisions if done on a more conservative scale.

¹²⁶ In some situations something like the NKJV may be necessary for those settings in which more continuity with tradition is necessary. In other situations a pastor might be wise to continue use of the KJV for some time, though if the Word of God is to be central in the ministry of a local church in other than a titular sense, then some version that is more intelligible to contemporary readers should be the goal. Our language *has* changed to the point where we do our people a disservice by continuing the use of a text that most do not readily understand. There are far better choices for ministry in the 21st century. By stating it that bluntly I in no means intend to disparage the KJV. It is a good translation and has been greatly used by God for many centuries. But what served such a valuable role in past centuries cannot continue forever. It has only been during the last quarter of the 20th century that consideration of another translation for general ministry has become a broadly realistic option—and it is an option that pastors concerned that their people understand God’s Word must pursue, though cautiously and wisely. Such matters cannot be dictated.

the greater continuity with the KJV tradition and vocabulary that it represents.¹²⁷

There is considerable profit and wisdom in using several versions.¹²⁸ The multiple versions that one selects ought to reflect varying translation philosophies, including both more formal and more functional ones. The beginning language student (whether of Greek or Hebrew) finds great comfort in a translation such as the NASB since it reads more closely with what he is struggling to understand. But for those who work with the original texts (i.e., the more advanced students—which should certainly include seminary grads!), there is wisdom in selecting a translation with more functional elements.¹²⁹ Such a student has less need for a very formal version since he can read the original text directly. It is the task of communicating the original text clearly in contemporary English with which we may need the more help. For this task, the more functional translations *such as the ESV*, and even more so the NIV, reflect a more mature grasp of how Greek and Hebrew grammatical and syntactical forms affect one’s understanding of the text and how that might best be expressed in English.

After working carefully with the ESV for several years now, and seriously contemplating a switch to this new translation, I have decided to retain the NIV as my personal Bible of “first choice.” Part of that personal decision

¹²⁷ I have recommended to at least one church that they seriously consider the ESV in their situation for just this reason.

¹²⁸ Along with, of course, the original text! But my comments have the lay reader in mind as much as the pastor.

¹²⁹ Grudem and Poythress say that “beginning students of Hebrew and Greek are often impressed with preservation of form because it seems to create an ‘exact match’ with the original. But the exactness of the match is sometimes illusory. The match in form may not match well in meaning in some specific cases. Hence, translation theory rightly pushes these students to recognize the limitations of preserving the form” (*The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 80). Likewise Mark Strauss contends that “there is a common cliché that functional equivalent versions are for beginning Bible students while more advanced students will move up to the formal equivalent versions. I would like to turn this on its head and say that more advanced students—those in their second year and beyond—will find functional equivalent versions far more useful. Formal equivalent versions are indeed helpful for those with a rudimentary knowledge of Greek, since they reveal the structure of the text in a transparent manner. More advanced students do not need these, since they can see the structure for themselves by looking down at the Greek text! Advanced language students benefit from functional equivalent versions because these operate at the level of intermediate Greek, showing the syntactical conclusions reached by translator-scholars. ... What they *need* are translations which wrestle with *the meaning*—the syntactical relationships between words” (Strauss, “Form, Function, and the ‘Literal Meaning’ Fallacy in Bible Translation,” 17–18).

is, indeed, familiarity since I have used the NIV for nearly thirty years (longer than I had previously used the KJV). Were I just beginning my ministry, that would be a more difficult choice. But no one should use one English translation exclusively. I have been using the ESV as my “number two” translation of late, having moved my NASB to a slot one step further removed from the center of my desk.

But what about a church setting? The decisions here are different from one’s personal choices. In this context one must select a translation that works to facilitate personal understanding and also on the corporate level to support functions such as preaching, Scripture reading, and Scripture memory. There are also programmatic considerations such as educational materials for various programs. It is best to have a consistency throughout the church’s program with the same translation being used from the pulpit as in the various educational ministries across all ages. This has been a constant struggle for churches since those who publish curricular materials cannot provide infinite choices in this regard. Often there is one standard choice (which, unfortunately, is often the lowest common denominator among the constituency), or at most two—which is usually the KJV and one modern version. Larger churches may be able to offset these choices by providing supplemental materials in the translation of their choice, but smaller churches face greater limitations in this regard.¹³⁰ At this point any new translation faces a major hurdle. Publishers are reluctant to spend the money to edit all their materials to provide options for a new translation which is not yet widely used as a standard in churches. And churches are reluctant to adopt a new translation for which materials are not available.

Although my overall assessment of the ESV is a positive one, this does not mean that the ESV is of sufficiently superior merit to suggest that churches which presently use the NIV or NASB should consider switching. If a church is using the NIV, I would encourage “staying the course,” since a second transition in a relatively short time is not usually productive.¹³¹ For those still using the KJV or who have other translations in place,¹³² then the decision

should certainly include the ESV along with the NIV and NASB. Churches which might be using the RSV (probably a small number at this point) would find the ESV a much more natural “upgrade” that would be easier to implement than a move to the NIV. For a church to change their standard version is a major undertaking and not to be done lightly. The benefits must clearly outweigh the negatives to justify a careful and cautious transition. Such a change, if done right, takes years to accomplish and must certainly never be a “legislated” decision imposed “top down.”

Conclusion. I will be glad to see a second edition published in a few years that should improve some of the rough spots. Now that the ESV has been out long enough to receive a wide range of evaluation and comment, the translation committee needs to release an update that reflects this broader perspective.¹³³ New translations usually get to do this for the NT when the OT is released a few years later, but since Crossway released both testaments together (which was more realistic since it is a revision rather than a new translation), this option may require a bit more effort—but it would be a wise course of action. I do not expect that all my suggestions will meet with sufficiently wide agreement to motivate changes (though I’d be very happy if they did!¹³⁴), but surely many of these are of sufficient merit and importance to warrant some minor updating of a good translation.

A second edition of the ESV might smooth out some of the rough spots and inconsistencies. The inclusive language policy adopted by the ESV is generally serviceable

clearly in order, though even then it took several years of careful and deliberate preparation for a successful transition.

¹³³ Future plans do call for such a revision. Crossway indicates that only “corrections” have been made thus far and that revisions will not be introduced until the 2009 printings. They hope that changes in the meanwhile can be kept to a minimum. There will be meetings held in the fall of 2004 to begin the process of evaluating changes that have been suggested (Email from Marvin Padgett, VP Editorial for Crossway Books, 1/16/04). Actually some revisions have already been made silently. As one example that I have observed, in Rom. 3:9, ὑφ’ ἀμαρτίαν was originally translated, “under the power of sin.” As of the 2002 editions this has been changed to simply “under sin.” (The change is present in the 2002 Thinline Edition as well as the 2003 Deluxe Reference Edition.) Upon further specific questions, including the change in Rom. 3:9 just noted, the publishers have acknowledged that there have been “a few” changes “where it was thought ... that a mistake had been made in translation.” (Email from Marvin Padgett, VP Editorial for Crossway Books, 1/16/04 (subsequent to the email referenced at the beginning of this note).

¹³⁴ I certainly hope that my assessment, which differs from the popular perception, does not stimulate any move by the translators to make the ESV more formal. That, I think, would be a mistake. I would much rather see them clarify some of the ambiguities that remain from being too formal in some places.

¹³⁰ It is the smaller churches where the majority of Christians are and where most ministry happens, not only in the US but across the English-speaking world. And the non-English-speaking world typically has far fewer choices (if any) in terms of a translation in their own language.

¹³¹ I would especially counsel against churches that presently use the NIV not switch to some other translation simply due to their reaction against the TNIV. That is neither fair to the NIV nor is it a productive way to express one’s displeasure with the copyright owner.

¹³² When I first began pastoring in Michigan in the early 1980s the closest to a “standard” (other than the KJV used by the older folks) was the Living Bible! In such a situation an “upgrade” was

and is more cautious than some other translations in this area.¹³⁵ But as with many new endeavors of this sort it bears a bit of tweaking to get it just right. If the translation team does so, the ESV stands to be a very serviceable translation for many years.

Appendix

The following paragraphs comprise a brief collection of other specific issues that I hesitated to delete from this abridged edition.

1 Cor. 2:4 translates *πειθός* as “plausible” rather than the more usual “persuasive.” This is an hapax, so dogmatism is perhaps unwise, but neither BDAG nor LSD offer this gloss—and there is a difference: something might be plausible that is not persuasive.¹³⁶ This was also the reading of RSV; perhaps it deserves reconsideration.

1 Cor. 5:1 apparently accepts the *v.l.* *ὀνομάζεται*, but translates it as “tolerated,” which is an unusual translation for that word and not an option given in BDAG.¹³⁷ (Or is this just a word supplied from the context to smooth out a rough passage?)

1 Cor. 7:29 may be over-translated: “the appointed time has grown very short” (*ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν*); better simply, “the time is short.”

1 Cor. 11:6b, “But since it is disgraceful...” (*εἰ δὲ αἰσχρόν*) represents the first class condition, but perhaps unwisely. To translate such a condition as “since” changes a culturally conditioned “if” (in this instance) to a mandated “since.” (Shame is distinctly culture-based and what may have been true in Corinth may not be true today.) Additionally, first class conditions should almost always be left as “if” rather than phrased with “since” to preserve the rhetorical force of the condition.¹³⁸

1 Cor. 15:34, “wake up from your drunken stupor” (*ἐκνήψατε*), seems a bit too expansive and overplays the possible figure of speech that may be present. The word *ἐκνήψω* can refer to one recovering from drunkenness (i.e., the nonmetaphorical use = “sober up”—though it is never used this way in the NT or in early Christian literature), but it was commonly used in a metaphorical sense, “come to your senses,” in which it is not certain that the metaphor was still “live.”¹³⁹ Many English readers might read more into the ESV’s translation here than Paul intended. Since Paul has just quoted “let us eat and drink” (from Isa. 22), many modern readers may conclude that Paul is referring to actual drunkenness.

3 John 15, “Greet the friends, every one of them” (*ἀπάζου τοὺς φίλους κατ’ ὄνομα*). This is another carry-over from the RSV, but it ought to be corrected. The phrase *κατ’ ὄνομα* does not mean “every one of them,” but “by name” (BDAG, 712, s.v. *ὄνομα*, 1.c; cf. John 10:3). The focus is not on greeting everyone in the group designated as friends, but is intended as an individual, personal greeting.

Jude 14, “the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones” (*ἦλθεν κύριος ἐν ἁγίαις μυριάσιν αὐτοῦ*). The question here relates to the temporal reference of the verb *ἦλθεν*. The question is, does the

statement refer to a past or future event? The ESV, as the RSV before it, along with NASB, translate this as a past event (“came”) as does NAB, “has come.” On the other hand a future reference is given by NIV, NRSV, CEV, and NLT, all of which translate “is coming,” equivalent to the KJV’s “cometh.” The TEV translates, “will come.” Although part of the question here relates to the current debate in Greek grammar as to whether or not the Greek verb grammaticalizes time,¹⁴⁰ one’s conclusion on that matter does not settle this question.¹⁴¹ If this is a quotation from Enoch,¹⁴² the time reference must be considered from the perspective of his day. Was this intended as a past or future statement by Enoch? If it was a past event, to what could it possibly refer in the first few generations of world history? Jude explicitly refers to Enoch’s statement as a prophecy (*προφητεύσεν*), and the context of Jude 14 makes it clear that this was intended to be understood as a predictive statement.¹⁴³ These factors combine to recommend the translation of “will come” rather than “came”—and that regardless of one’s conclusion on the grammatical issue.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ For a summary, see R. J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb*, SBG 10 (Lang, 2001), 1–28. The seminal works are S. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the NT*, SBG 1 (2d ed., Lang, 1993) and B. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in NT Greek* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁴¹ Evidence for this is that many of the translations cited here pre-date the present grammatical discussion.

¹⁴² Since the statement in Jude 14 is attributed to “Enoch” one must first decide if this is intended to be the record of a traditional prophecy handed down since the seventh generation of humanity, or if it refers to the pseudepigraphal book of 1 Enoch, or if that pseudepigraphal book has incorporated a genuine prophecy from the historical Enoch. Since the quotation is introduced as being from “Enoch, the seventh from Adam” who prophesied, some have concluded that this is an oral tradition that is to be traced back to the historical Enoch and is not related to the pseudepigraphal book (thus George Lawlor, *The Epistle of Jude* [P&R, 1972], 101–02). On the other hand, 1 Enoch 1:9 clearly reads: “Behold, he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all.”* Since this book was known and used in Qumran,† it appears most likely that the quotation in Jude comes from this source. Perhaps we should view Jude’s introductory statement as verification that this is an accurate record of a genuine prophecy by the historical Enoch. *Translation (from Ethiopic) from E. Isaac in James Charlesworth, *The OT Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Doubleday, 1983–85), 1:13–14. Enoch may have originally been written in Hebrew or Aramaic (or parts in both), but the only complete surviving copies are Ethiopic manuscripts dating around the 15th C. (some fragments also exist in Greek, Aramaic, and Latin). The date of composition is usually given as the first two centuries BC. †The Aramaic fragments of 1 Enoch discovered at Qumran have been published by J. Milik and M. Black, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford, 1976).

¹⁴³ As it is used in the context of the pseudepigraphal book of 1 Enoch, it is clearly intended as an eschatological statement. The Ethiopic verb equivalent to *ἦλθεν* (the perfect form *mas’a*), although often translated as “he came,” in this context is almost uniformly translated “will come/arrive.”

¹⁴⁴ Even the more traditional views of the verb would describe this as a prophetic/proleptic aorist stressing the certainty of the event (e.g., Lawlor, *Epistle of Jude*, 103).

¹³⁵ E.g., TNIV, which has probably moved too far too fast.

¹³⁶ The choice of “plausible” likely comes from LS, but then only if their suggestion is accepted that *πειθός* is to be equated with *πιθανός*, which is glossed as “persuasive, plausible” (1353, 1403; the only evidence cited, however, is classical usage). BDAG makes no mention of this suggestion.

¹³⁷ BDAG suggests “to call/name; to use a name; be known.”

¹³⁸ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 690–94. See also his, “The Myth about the Meaning of First Class Conditions in Greek,” posted at <<http://www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/1class.htm>>.

¹³⁹ A “dead metaphor” is one that no longer raises the nonmetaphorical associations of older usage.