

Review Article: The ESV—Some Preliminary Observations

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For about two decades WELS has been using the NIV, not as an official or mandated translation, but as the standard translation used in our publications. In the last issue of the *Quarterly* we evaluated a revision of the NIV known as the TNIV (Today's New International Version). In this issue we consider another new translation which is emerging as a possible rival of the NIV and the TNIV in the Evangelical church and in the Missouri Synod—the English Standard Version. This preliminary review is not based on a detailed study and comparison of this version in its entirety, but on a survey of the publisher's claims and objectives for the new version and on an evaluation based on a single reading of the text.

The version of the ESV used for this review was *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, FL, 2005, \$39.99. R. C. Spoul, editor). This review will conclude with some comments on the notes of this study Bible.

Vocabulary and Style

The TNIV and the ESV are quite different in their basic approach to translation—to such a degree that one might even call them opposition or rival translations. The TNIV aims for contemporary language and follows what is generally called the dynamic equivalent (thought for thought) approach to translation. Gender neutral language was one of its main aims. The ESV on the other hand seeks to follow in the tradition of Tyndale, the King James, and the RSV. It follows a more “word-for-word, essentially literal” approach and opposes accommodation to gender-neutral language.

The ESV is an Evangelical revision of the Revised Standard Version that aims to correct the non-Christian interpretations of the RSV in the Old Testament and to improve the accuracy throughout by providing more literal renderings. It also updates the language somewhat. The makers of this version undertook the work with the idea that there was a need for an Evangelical version that was more literal than the New International Version but more idiomatic than the New American Standard Bible. The Revised Standard Version seemed close enough to this middle ground that it might be suitably revised in a shorter period of time than would have been needed for a completely new translation. Whether or not this was the original intention, the ESV is now perceived by many, at least in part, as a counter-action to the appearance of the TNIV with its gender-neutral language. Some of the leading promoters of the ESV are opponents of the TNIV and are supporters of the complementarian position concerning roles of men and women. The Missouri Synod is amply represented among the consultants and evaluators of the ESV translation project, but not on the translation oversight committee itself.

The translators describe their philosophy of translation thus: “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. 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. 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. Within this framework 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; and, as far as grammar and syntax allow, we have rendered Old Testament passages cited in the New in ways that show their correspondence. Thus in each of these areas, as well as throughout the Bible as a whole, we have sought to capture the echoes and overtones of meaning that are so abundantly present in the original texts.”

Textual Basis

The ESV is based on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible as found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (2nd ed., 1983), and on the Greek text in the 1993 editions of the Greek New Testament (4th corrected ed.), published by the United Bible Societies (UBS), and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.), edited by Nestle and Aland. The ESV attempts wherever possible, to translate difficult Hebrew passages as they stand in the Masoretic text rather than resorting to emendations or to finding an alternative reading in the ancient versions. In exceptional, difficult cases, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and other sources were consulted to shed possible light on the text, or, if necessary, to support a divergence from the Masoretic text. Similarly, 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. The footnotes that accompany the ESV text inform the reader of textual variations and difficulties

Gender Issues

By far the most controversial aspect of the TNIV is its use of gender neutral or, as the publishers would prefer to say, “gender accurate” translation. It seems fair to say that the way in which the TNIV uses gender inclusive language has provided a significant impetus for the production of the ESV. In the area of gender language, the goal of the ESV is to render literally “what is in the original.”

For example, “anyone” replaces “any man” where there is no word corresponding to “man” in the original languages, and “people” rather than “men” is regularly used where

the original languages refer to both men and women. But the words “man” and “men” are retained where a male meaning component is part of the original Greek or Hebrew.

Similarly, the English word “brothers” (translating the Greek word *adelphoi*) is retained as an important familial form of address between fellow-Jews and fellow-Christians in the first century. A recurring note is included to indicate that the term “brothers” (*adelphoi*) was often used in Greek to refer to both men and women, and to indicate the specific instances in the text where this is the case in the opinion of the translators.

In addition, the English word “sons” (translating the Greek word *huiioi*) is retained in specific instances because of its meaning as a legal term in the adoption and inheritance laws of first-century Rome. As used by the apostle Paul, this term refers to the status of all Christians, both men and women, who, having been adopted into God’s family, now enjoy all the privileges, obligations, and inheritance rights of God’s children.

The inclusive use of the generic “he” has also regularly been retained, because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and because an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it. Similarly, 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. In each case 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.

The uproar over the TNIV’s renderings of many passages was discussed more fully in the previous article and will not be repeated here. We will present just a few examples of disputed passages which compare the TNIV with the ESV approach to this issue.

TNIV Ge 5:2 He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them “human beings.”

ESV Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.

TNIV Lk 16:27 Send Lazarus to my family.

ESV Send him to my father’s house.

TNIV Jn 2:4 Mother, why do you involve me?

ESV Woman, what does this have to do with me?

TNIV Ro 16:1 Phoebe is a “deacon” in the main text and a “servant” in the footnote.

ESV Phoebe is a “servant” in the main text. There is no translation note, but a study Bible note explains the two senses of the word *diakonos*.

TNIV Ro16:7 Junia is “outstanding among the apostles.”

ESV Junia is “well known among the apostles.”

Recent linguistic studies support the ESV if it is understood as meaning she is known by the apostles but not one of them.

The most controversial TNIV rendering has been 1 Timothy 2:12, especially the notes:

TNIV 1 Ti 2:12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man;^{b,c} she must be quiet.

^bOr teach a man in a domineering way; or teach or to exercise (or have) authority over a man

^cOr over her husband

ESV I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.

But for all its alleged superiority in regard to gender accurate language, ESV introduces its own problems.

ESV 1 Co 11:2 the head of a wife is her husband

TNIV the head of the woman is man

Here ESV has the wrong translation in the text and the right one in the footnote. TNIV has the reverse.

Differences of Interpretation

TNIV substitutes the Hebrew “Messiah” for the Greek “Christ” in such New Testament passages as Matthew 16:16, 1 John 5:1 and Romans 9:5. ESV retains “Christ.” In Matthew 16:16 and other passages where it is clear that *christos* is a title, ESV makes this clear by the presence of the article, ““You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

TNIV carries over from the NIV the tendency regularly to interpret the Hebrew and Greek words for “flesh,” rather than to translate them more literally so that the reader can become familiar with the idioms and word play of the biblical text. An example in the TNIV occurs in Genesis 6:3 where the choice of “mortal” rather than “corrupt” as the rendering for “flesh” in the main text unnecessarily limits the interpretation and, what’s worse, is probably the wrong choice. ESV retains the term “flesh” here and in many similar cases.

TNIV sometimes renders “saints” (Greek *hagios*, plural) as “believers” or some such term (Acts 9:32; Acts 26:10). ESV retains “saints.”

TNIV sometimes renders “Jews” as “Jewish leaders” to avoid offending Jews and to avoid inadvertently promoting anti-Semitism by giving the impression that all Jews are responsible for the death of Christ. Passages in which the Jew(s) (*hoi ioudaioi*) become Jewish leaders include: John 18:14, 36; 19:12, 31,38; 20:19). ESV retains the more literal “the Jews.”

Problem Translations That May Affect Doctrine

A number of translations in the TNIV diminish the Messianic interpretation of various passages. Compare the TNIV renderings with the ESV, which has a proclaimed aim of stating more clearly the Messianic emphasis of the Old Testament.

TNIV Hebrews 2:6-7 (Ps 8) But there is a place where someone has testified:
"What are *mere mortals* that you are mindful of them, *human beings* that you care for them? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor.

ESV has, "It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? ⁷You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor."

Advantage: ESV

In Psalm 2 of TNIV divine references are capitalized. "His anointed" is not capitalized as it was in the NIV. ESV does not capitalize "his anointed" though it does capitalize "his Son" and "his King." A tie.

In Psalm 45 the TNIV's correct translation of verse six, "Your throne, O God, will last forever" is negated by the translator's note which says that the king here is addressed as God's representative. Direct prophecy becomes, at best, typical prophecy. In the ESV study Bible note, a direct reference to Christ is specified.
Advantage: ESV.

In Isaiah 7:14 TNIV retains "the virgin" in the text, but adds "young woman" as a note. The ESV translation has no such note. Advantage: ESV.

In Daniel 7:13 TNIV retains "son of man," but the translator's note says it simply means "human being" and is retained because of its traditional associations. The ESV simply has "son of man." Advantage: ESV.

In providing clear Messianic references, the ESV is more accurate than the TNIV. Some of the *Reformation Bible* study notes (to be distinguish from translators' notes) introduce typical prophecy where we would see direct prophecy.

A number of TNIV passages introduce unclarity into the doctrine of justification.

NIV Ti 2:11 The grace of God that *brings* salvation has appeared to all men.
TNIV The grace of God has appeared that *offers* salvation to all people.
ESV For the grace of God has appeared, *bringing* salvation for all people.
Both NIV and ESV are better than TNIV.

NIV Ro 3:21 A righteousness of God, apart from law, has been made known.
TNIV Apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known.
ESV The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.
TNIV and ESV both state that it is not the law that reveals the righteousness of God (the revelation is apart from law), but the NIV states more clearly that the

revealed righteousness is not by the law (it is the righteousness which is apart from law).

In Romans 3:22, according to the TNIV footnote we are justified through Christ's faithfulness rather than through faith in Christ. The ESV has only "through faith in Jesus Christ."

NIV Ro 1:5 to the obedience that comes from faith
TNIV to call the Gentiles to faith and obedience
ESV to bring about the obedience of faith
Literally to the obedience of faith (i.e., the obedience which is faith)
The TNIV is worse than the NIV in correlating faith and obedience. The ESV better than either.

TNIV Ro 3:27 the law that requires faith
ESV the law of faith
Literal: the law of faith.

TNIV Ro 3:25 a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.
ESV a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith
NIV a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood
NIV is better than ESV or TNIV.

TNIV Ro 9:33 Christ is called a stone that *causes* men to stumble and a rock that *makes* them fall. The NIV is no better.
ESV's more literal "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense" is better than the false interpretations of NIV and TNIV.
Better: "stone over which they stumble, a rock over which they fall"

TNIV 1 Co 7:39 retains the same dubious addition as the NIV, "he must belong to the Lord." ESV has the more literal "only in the Lord."

The ESV is better on these passages than the TNIV and to some degree the NIV. That is not to say that ESV does not introduce doctrinal problems of its own.

ESV Jude 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation
NIV For certain men whose condemnation was written about^[a] long ago have secretly slipped in among you. [a] Or men who were marked out for condemnation
ESV like the KJV is more Calvinistic than NIV or TNIV which correctly show that this is prophecy not predestination.

ESV 1 Co 2:13 interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual
TNIV explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words

None of the three translations of ESV reflect a possible reference to verbal inspiration.

Individual Improvements

ESV Ac 3:21 whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things
NIV He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore
everything,
ESV is a marginal improvement of NIV.

In 1 Cor 11:16 ESV's "participation in the blood of Christ" is no improvement of NIV.

The pluses and minuses of the ESV would be a good subject for a more detailed study.

Summary

The ESV is better than the TNIV in so far as, it introduces fewer questionable or wrong interpretations into the translation. It is not entirely immune to the TNIV's negative reputation as a divisive translation, in that it is something of a counter-translation to the TNIV, but it carries less negative baggage than the TNIV. Neither the TNIV or ESV will win the degree of acceptance that the NIV enjoyed in Evangelical Christianity. If the choice was between the TNIV and ESV, my vote, based on an initial study, would go to the ESV. What if the choice were between the NIV and the ESV? This decision would not be so easy. While the ESV does enjoy some advantage in not introducing as much interpretation into the text, it reads less smoothly than the NIV. It is not that its language is very archaic and hard to understand like the King James, but just that it does not have the natural flow of contemporary English. In many places it sounds quite stilted even to a reader used to the idioms of the King James. Perhaps some of this is due to the fact that the ESV is not a fresh translation but a touch-up of the RSV, done in part to meet the need for a quickly available alternative to the TNIV.

If the time comes for WELS to consider a new translation to replace the NIV for general use in WELS, we should consider other options beyond the TNIV and ESV, perhaps a new, fresher translation which does not yet exist, a translation which incorporates many of the principles of the ESV but is less stilted in its language. If the use of Bible translations in Evangelical Christianity is going to become more fragmented (as seems inevitable), perhaps a fresh, distinctly Lutheran translation would have fewer disadvantages than previously believed. Time and cost would be a problem, but publishers of existing translations such as RSV seem more ready to negotiate agreements to allow revisions and special versions of their base product. If niche translations are going to be the wave of the future (unfortunate as that may be), then something better than either TNIV or ESV is needed to fill the confessional Lutheran niche. Since Zondervan is now

owned by a publishing conglomerate, perhaps even the NIV would be open to such revisions if it would enhance the conglomerate's bottom line.

The ESV in its present state can be recommended as a good translation to be used along side the NIV as a more literal check against that translation. Having said that, I would not recommend that readers of *WLQ* rush out to buy one. The reason for this recommendation is that Concordia Publishing House is preparing a fresh Lutheran study Bible based on the ESV. This is likely related to the fact that the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has adopted the ESV as a semi-official translation to be used in the 2006 LCMS hymnal.

That brings us back to the *Reformation Study Bible*, the version of the ESV used for this review. When I began this project I was planning to provide a review of both the ESV text and the *Reformation Study Bible* notes. As I progressed through the work, it became clear that such a double review would not serve much purpose for the readers of *WLQ*. While it is true that the *Reformation Study Bible* has many fine qualities (high view of Scripture, etc.), it is not a suitable study Bible for our readers. Its strength for its intended audience is a weakness for us. It is very faithful to its Reformed (that is, Calvinist) heritage. It presents a clear Calvinist interpretation at all those points where Calvinism differs from Lutheranism. Lutherans who want a study Bible of the ESV should wait for the CPH version. Unlike the NIV-based *Concordia Study Bible*, which was a revision of Zondervan's *NIV Study Bible*, Concordia's ESV study Bible will be a from-scratch Lutheran study Bible. Hopefully, it will fill a need which the *Reformation Study Bible* does not.