

# Generating Confidence in the Bible

## The use of Bible translations in Christian ministry

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I

As a preacher, I am passionately concerned to ensure that I am *faithfully* proclaiming the word of God. Equally important is the question of whether I am *effectively* proclaiming the word of God. It will be of little or no lasting benefit to those who hear if I parade *my* cleverness – my wit or charm, my ability with funny or emotive stories – and not bring people into contact with the word that *God* has spoken. It likewise will be next to useless if I proclaim the truth in a way that obscures its meaning or makes it difficult for people to hear and understand.

These commitments or concerns are actually two of Campbell Morgan's famous three essentials of a good sermon: truth, clarity, and passion.<sup>1</sup> But I'm convinced that there is another dimension to Bible teaching and preaching that we neglect to our peril. The catalyst for my thinking about this further dimension was a comment made many years ago by Donald Robinson: 'whenever you teach the Bible you are also showing people how to use the Bible'. In other words, whether we realise it or not, we teach method whenever we teach matter.

That insight of Donald Robinson caused me to reflect on the impact of my use of the Bible on those who hear me teach or preach. Do I give the people who hear me confidence in the Bible or do I undermine that confidence? Put slightly differently, am I helping people to read the Bible for themselves with the expectation that (with careful study) they can understand it for themselves? Or do I erode that confidence and put in its place dependence upon a new priesthood, namely the theologically trained Bible teacher with his/her knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, or perhaps even the professional biblical scholar?

Obviously there is a place for Bible teachers and biblical scholars. Those who teach have time to reflect upon a passage and place it in the context of the teaching of the entire Bible in a way which should provide an advancement in our knowledge of God and his purposes. But do people leave the Bible study you are running, or the gathering at which you have just preached, saying 'It's so obvious, why didn't I see it before'? Or are they awed by your knowledge,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, 'The Essentials of a Sermon' (1937), excerpted in A. Fasol (ed.), *Selected Readings in Preaching: Classic Contributions from Pulpit Masters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 41.

suspecting they will never really understand the Bible unless you tell them what the text 'really says'?

## II

What has all this got to do with the subject at hand? How does this concern touch upon the question of Bible translations and, in particular, an evaluation of the English Standard Version as a translation for personal and congregational use? I hope you'll see that it has everything to do with it.

One way to erode confidence in the Bible and discourage people from studying the Bible for themselves is regularly to criticise the translation they have in their laps at church or use in other contexts. If your sermons or Bible studies are regularly peppered with 'well, the translators have made a mistake here', or 'the NIV is wrong again at this point' then it won't be long before your hearers reach the conclusion that they cannot trust the Bible they have in their hands.

Of course there will always be occasions when we will want to dissent from the decision of the translators at a particular point. We must remember that every translation involves interpretation. Even those striving for the most literal translation possible recognise that there are always choices to be made. What is more, as Jerome observed back in the fifth century, sometimes a word for word correspondence results in absurdity.<sup>2</sup> Accuracy is not the same thing as literalness. Languages just don't work like that. The communication of meaning involves more than just isolated words. It also involves idiom, syntax and, in some languages, orthography as well. So there will always be room for fallible human decisions.<sup>3</sup>

But if your dissent from the translation becomes more than occasional, if time and again you find yourself disagreeing with the decisions that the translators have made, then its time to get a new translation. For we want people to read the Scriptures confidently, expectantly. And not everyone has the opportunity, the ability, or the inclination to learn the original biblical languages for themselves.

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2 'It is hard to follow another man's lines and everywhere keep within bounds. It is an arduous task to preserve felicity and grace unimpaired in a translation. Some word has forcibly expressed a given thought; I have no word of my own to convey the meaning; and while I am seeking to satisfy the sense I may go a long way round and accomplish but a small distance of my journey. Then we must take into account the ins and outs of transposition, the variations in cases, the diversity of figures, and, lastly, the peculiar, and, so to speak, the native idiom of the language. A literal translation sounds absurd; if, on the other hand, I am obliged to change either the order of the words themselves, I shall appear to have forsaken the duty of a translator.' Jerome, 'Preface to the Chronicle of Eusebius', trans. by W.H. Fremantle, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), VI, 483.

3 'In pointing these things out, I do not mean to encourage such skepticism for our translations (whether KJV or NIV or any other) that henceforth they will be regarded with profound suspicion. Rather, I am opposing the simplistic cast of mind that makes rigid distinctions between a 'literal' translation and a 'loose' translation, or between a translation and a paraphrase. In thousands of instances, the person who translates the New Testament from Greek into some other language must make decisions that some with equal knowledge may contest, or which involve his understanding of what the text means. Translation is not a purely mechanical process. In a paraphrase from the extreme end of the spectrum, attention is focused on the drift of what a passage means; but even in the most 'literal' of translations, the translator must on occasion make decisions as to the meaning of a passage. Or if he rightly understands the meaning, he may nevertheless be forced to choose among several options in the receptor language, all of which leave something to be to be desired.' D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 88.

You see, being fussy about Bible translations has a point. Since the truth God has made known to us in the Scriptures is the most vital truth of all, and since understanding God's truth better is the joyful pursuit of all who truly love God, we cannot afford to ignore the problems with certain translations. And yet neither can we afford to undermine the confidence of God's people that they have access to God's truth, that they will not be misled by the Bible they have in their hands.

### III

There is, of course, another factor to consider. Translations may not all be purpose specific, but neither are they properly assessed if we do not take into account the purpose for which they will be used.

I was brought up on the Revised Standard Version. For all its faults I am most comfortable with that translation simply because I am most familiar with it. But it is not the translation I would use when reading the Bible to my two-and-a-half year old. It is not the translation I would choose to give to a new Christian or to someone considering the claims of Christ.

In some cases a translation which works hard to reflect as many features of the original as possible will be the best translation for the job. That's the sort of translation we should, in my view, select for Bible Study and perhaps even for preaching. In other cases, however, it may be that a translation that has placed its emphasis on idiomatic English, with a style easily comprehended by the majority of English speakers, is the one we should choose. The *Good News Bible* and the *Living Bible*, with all their limitations, are the best translations in certain contexts. Which translation would you choose to serve the needs of an ESL congregation?

So when we assess a translation of the Bible, we need to keep in mind both the purpose and the intended readership/audience. I take it that's quite an uncontroversial and even an obvious point to make. Yet it really should 'rein in' some of the more grandiose claims made, not just for the ESV, but for the NASB and the TNIV as well. Aside from the obvious linguistic point that 'most literal' is really not the same as 'most accurate', and the theological point that the practice of translation is as open to error, limitation, and mixed motives like every other human endeavour, there is this very practical point to be made about the use to which the translation will be put.

### IV

The newly published *English Standard Version* is being commended to us as, to use Tony Payne's words, 'the general purpose reference-point Bible' for evangelicals and evangelical churches. There are very good reasons why this should be the case and I for one want to join in the commendation. While it is not a 'perfect translation', while there are some points at which I would want to disagree with the decisions made by the translators, I am nevertheless in sympathy with their aim to be as transparent as humanly possible and as far as the realities of the translation process allow.

Here is the statement of purpose from the new version's own preface. It reveals both the translators' commitments as well as their awareness of some of the issues we have mentioned above.

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.

[...] 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.<sup>4</sup>

It ought to be said that ESV is a revision of the RSV (1971) in the light of both a fresh examination of the original Greek and Hebrew texts and the developments in modern English. The preface to the translation is worth reading to understand all the principles which were applied to the work.

A number of features result from the application of these principles which make this translation a very useful one. Tony has touched on some of these and I have time now only to list them for you.

- The ESV corrects some of the translation decisions of the RSV which arose from the theological perspective of the earlier translators. One of the most obvious examples is the move from 'expiation' to 'propitiation' in 1 John 2:3 and Romans 3:25.
- Related to this is a general concern to retain rather than paraphrase key theological terms.
- The ESV generally attempts to be consistent within a passage in the way it translates repeated words (though we note an exception in a few minutes).
- The ESV does not generally ignore the connectives between sentences in the way the NIV does and so makes more accessible the flow of the argument, particularly in the Pauline epistles.
- The ESV is less inclined to replace participles with finite verbs in order to shorten sentences. On a number of occasions (and we will look at one in a minute or two) this makes a significant contribution to understanding the passage in question.

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4 'Preface', *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), vii, viii.

- The ESV has tried hard to show how NT quotations of – and allusions to – the OT correspond to the OT passage in its own context within the limits of the actual language used in the NT.
- The ESV does not follow the NRSV in inserting a passage at the end of 1 Samuel 10 which is found in the Qumran scrolls but not in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament.

On the controversial issue of gender language, the ESV takes a conservative stance. It generally retains the pronoun 'he' in contexts where it is clearly generic as well as retaining the generic use of the word 'man'. While not entirely consistent in the application of this decision, when this is the case a footnote usually indicates the generic meaning.

A few of the weaker features of the ESV include:

- The ESV retains some archaic expressions, e.g. 'Behold' and 'adjure'.
- The ESV departs from the Hebrew text in the direction of the Septuagint on a few occasions (e.g. 1 Samuel 10:1; 12:3)
- The ESV is not entirely consistent in its translation of a repeated word in a very few cases.
- The ESV doesn't go for 'the faithfulness of Jesus Christ' in Romans 3:22 and Galatians 2:16 (neither do most translations but the new *TNIV* includes it as an alternative in a footnote).

## V

Verse comparisons are not the only and perhaps not even the best way to show the benefits of a biblical translation. However, it is a concrete way of showing that are real differences. In the examples which follow I have compared only the ESV, the RSV, the NRSV, and the NIV. I've also stuck to the New Testament. However, I have attempted to select verses for comparison which illustrate one or other of the principles mentioned above.

### (1) Ephesians 1:18-20

NIV: [...] that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead [...]

NRSV: [...] you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who

believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead [...]

RSV: [...] that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead [...]

ESV: [...] that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead [...]

GNT: [...] *eij' to; eijpexai utha" tiv' estin hJepi;" th" klhzew" aujtu'; tiv' oJ plouto" th" doxh" th" klhronomia" aujtu' ejh toi" agiwi", kai; tivto; uperbavlon megeqo" th" dunamew" aujtu' eij' htha" tou;" pisteuonta" kata; thn energeian tou' kratou" th" iJscuq" aujtu'. hJh ejhvwghsen ejh tw/Cristw/egjeiva" aujton ek nekrowh [...]*

## (2) Ephesians 5:18-21

NIV: [...] instead be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

NRSV: [...] but be filled with Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

RSV: [...] but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

ESV: [...] but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

GNT: [...] *aJla; plhrousqe ejh pneumati, Ialouhte" eJautoi" <sup>a</sup>ejh<sup>o</sup> yalmoi" kai; ufnnoi" kai; wJdai" pneumatikai", aJlonte" kai; yavlonte" th'kardia/uthwh tw/ kuriw/ euparistouhte" partote uper partwn ejh onomati tou' kuriou 'Ihsou' Cristou' tw/qew/kai; patriw upotassomenoi aJlhvoi" ejh fobw/Cristou'.*

## (3) Romans 3:22b-25a

NIV: There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

NRSV: For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

RSV: For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

ESV: For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

GNT: *ouj gar eŷtin diastolh<sup>h</sup> parte" gar h<sup>h</sup>arton kai; u\$terouhtai th" doxh" tou' qeou' dikaioumenoi dwrean th'/ aujtou' cariti dia; th" apolutrwzew" th" ejh Cristw'/Ihsou': ojh proergeto oJ qeo;" iJlathrion dia; <sup>a</sup>th"° pistew" ejh tw/aujtou' aiŷati [...]*

## (4) Romans 8:1-4

NIV: Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

NRSV: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

RSV: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the

law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

ESV: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

GNT: *Oujden afa nuh katakrima toi" ejh Cristw/'Ihsou.' oJ gar nomo" tou' pneumatou" th" zwh" ejh Cristw/'Ihsou' hjeuqerwsem se apo; tou' nomou th" aqmartia" kai; tou' qanaψou. to; gar aduqaton rou' nomou ejh w' hsqemei dia; th" sarkov, oJqeo;" ton eautou'uidh pemya" ejh orhoiwmati sarko;" aqmartia" kai; peri; aqmartia" katekrinen thn aqmartian ejh th' sarkiv ifa to; dikaiwma tou; nomou plhrwqh'/ejh hthih toi" mh; kata; sarka peripatousin ajlla; kata pneuma.*

(5) John 5:24

NIV: I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

NRSV: Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

RSV: Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

ESV: Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

GNT: *'Amhn ajhn legw uqh h oti oJton logon mou akouwn kai; pisteuwn tw' pemyantiv me epei zwhn aiwvion kai; ejh' krisin ouk efqetai, ajlla metabebhken ek tou' qanaψou ejh' thn zwhn.*

(6) 1 Corinthians 11:3-7

NIV: Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head — it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have

her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;

**NRSV:** But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man.

**RSV:** But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours her head – it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.

**ESV:** But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.

**GNT:** *qelw de; utha" eijpenai oxi panto;" ajdro;" hJkefalh; oJ Cristoŧ ejstin, kefalh; de; gunaiko;" oJajhv, kefalh; de; tou' Cristou' oJqeoŧ. pa" ajhr proseucomeno" h] profhteuwn kata; kefalh" eŧwn kataiscumei thn kefalhn ajjtou.' pasa de; gunh; proseucomexh h] profhteuŧusa akataluptw/th/ kefalh/ kataiscumei thn kefalhn ajjth": efi gar ejstin kai; to; ajjto; th/ ejurhmenh/ eij gar ouj katakaluptetai gunh; kai; keirasqw: eij de; aijsron gunaiki; to; keirasqai h] xurasqai, katakaluptesqw. Ajhr men gar ouk ofeivei katakaluptesqai thn kefalhn eikwn kai; doxa qeou' uparcwn: hJgunh; de; doxa ajdroŧ ejstin. oujgar ejstin ajhr ek gunaiko;" ajlla; gunhp ek ajdro":*

## VI

As I have said, I think there are very good reasons for making the ESV the standard translation we use in Bible study and public preaching. In certain circumstances, of course, this may not be appropriate. However, what we have here is a translation that should assist us in generating confidence in the Bible rather than undermining that confidence.

The ESV is not the Holy Grail of Bible translations. We haven't undone the chaos of Babel and it would be dangerous to think we had. It certainly doesn't do away with the importance of original language study of the Scriptures where that is possible. I hope that improvements will be made in subsequent printings. But without a doubt the ESV is a translation we can be comfortable about placing in the hands of people and encouraging them to study.

I was given a copy of the ESV by a friend just before Christmas last year. I think I first heard about it from Jim Packer last June – he was very enthusiastic about the whole project and encouraged me to get hold of one as soon as I could. I now understand why. So far, despite my rebellious, iconoclastic tendencies, I've had no reason to doubt that all the time, effort and money spent on bringing this translation to birth has been thoroughly worthwhile.

My own decision has been to make the ESV my working Bible for this year, to get a feel for it and to compare it to the NIV and the original texts when it comes to my preaching. Perhaps that might be a way ahead for you.

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