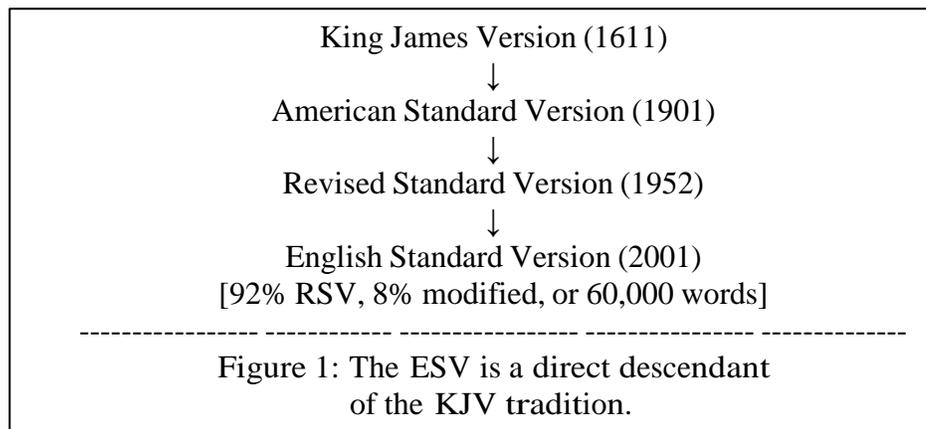


The Advantages of the English Standard Version (ESV) Translation¹
Wayne Grudem

I. Introduction: What is the English Standard Version?

A. The ESV is derived from the King James Version tradition

The English Standard Version (ESV) is an “essentially literal” translation that stands as today’s direct inheritor of the great King James Version (KJV) tradition. The line of descent from the KJV can be seen in the following diagram:



The King James Version (called the Authorized Version in the UK) was first published exactly 400 years ago, in 1611. It eventually became the dominant translation in the English-speaking world for more than three centuries. It won widespread acceptance because of its intrinsic qualities: word-for-word accuracy, unparalleled literary beauty, remarkable oral readability, and an academic precision produced by the best scholarly experts of its age.

But the English language kept changing from the form it took in 1611. English-speaking people today can still read the KJV, but with difficulty, just as they can still read Shakespeare with difficulty (Shakespeare lived 1564-1616 and wrote most of his plays from 1590 to 1611, so his writings are from exactly the same period of English as the KJV.)

Eventually groups of Bible scholars began to produce revisions of the KJV, both to modernize the English and also to take advantage of scholarly advances in knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and in the discovery of older, more reliable Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of various books of the Bible.

¹ This essay is adapted from Wayne Grudem, “The English Standard Version (ESV),” in *Which Bible Translation Should I Use?*, edited by Andreas Köstenberger and David Croteau (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 40-77.

The American Standard Version (ASV) appeared in 1901 as a major revision of the KJV, but many readers found it too woodenly literal, and it failed to gain widespread acceptance. (This was an American translation very similar to an earlier British revision, the English Revised Version of 1881.)

Then in 1952 the Revised Standard Version (RSV) appeared as a revision of the ASV, and it actually reclaimed much of the literary excellence of the KJV itself. The RSV gained much wider acceptance than the ASV, but it failed to gain universal acceptance among evangelical Protestant readers because they detected some liberal bias that had crept into some verses. Nevertheless, the RSV was in many ways an excellent translation, and many evangelicals (such as the present author) continued to use it for their main personal teaching and study Bible. (For example, the RSV was the primary Bible text I quoted in my book *Systematic Theology* when it was published in 1994.)

In 1989 the RSV committee issued a new translation, called the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). I had eagerly awaited its publication, thinking I would probably change from the RSV to the NRSV as my main personal Bible. But I used it for two days and put it aside because I discovered that on nearly every page they had made “gender-neutral” changes that distorted the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek text.² So I put the NRSV away on a shelf because I decided that it would not be helpful for my spiritual life to use a Bible that made me angry every time I read it. (The NRSV never caught on with the general public, and never even rose to 1% of sales in the Bible market, though it is commonly used in more liberal academic circles today.)

Would there ever be, then, a worthy descendant of the great KJV tradition?

In 1997, Crossway Books, an evangelical publisher based in Wheaton, Illinois, obtained the rights to use the 1971 update of the RSV as the basis for a new translation in the KJV tradition, to be called the English Standard Version (ESV).³ The ESV translation committee (called the Translation Oversight Committee) consisted of twelve members, but we made use of suggested changes to the RSV that had been submitted by a wider group of 60 specialist scholars. These consultants had been hired by Crossway to propose revisions to the RSV in the books where they had scholarly expertise (these were mostly scholars who had already published commentaries on the various books). In addition, a wider “advisory council” of 60 additional pastors and Christian leaders sent in their suggestions as well.

² See my detailed analysis of the NRSV in the booklet, “What’s Wrong with Gender-Neutral Bible Translations?” (Libertyville, IL: Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1997). Available at www.cbmw.org.

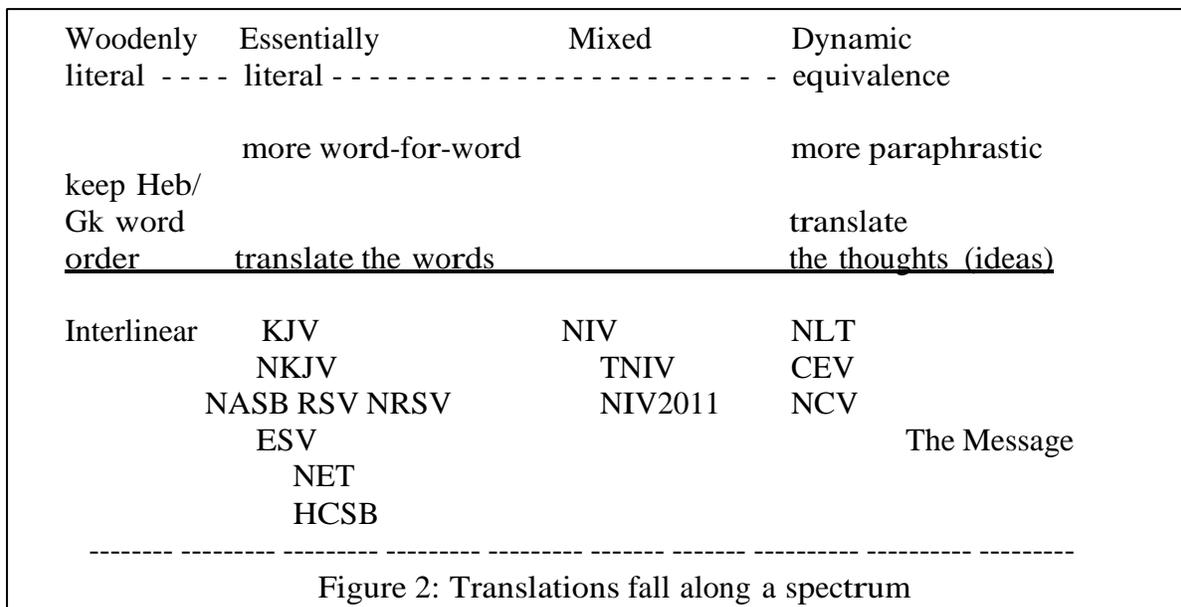
³ Crossway Books made a one-time payment to the owner of the RSV copyright, the National Council of Churches of Christ, to obtain the rights to use the RSV as a basis for the ESV. No additional payment is ever due, and no funds from sales of ESV Bibles go to the National Council of Churches.

The ESV was first published in 2001. It changed about 8% of the RSV, or about 60,000 words. The remaining 92% is the RSV, much of which is simply “the best of the best” of the KJV tradition.

The ESV translation committee removed every trace of liberal influence that had caused such criticism from evangelicals when the RSV was first published in 1952. For example, Isaiah 7:14 was changed back to say, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” Psalm 2:12 once again says, “Kiss the Son,” and Psalm 45:6 is once again a Messianic prediction that says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” The important theological term “propitiation” has been restored to Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17; and 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

B. The ESV falls in the “essentially literal” category on a spectrum of translations from woodenly literal to highly paraphrastic

As the following diagram shows, modern English translations of the Bible fall along a spectrum that ranges from “woodenly literal” to “highly paraphrastic.” I will attempt to show in this chapter that the ESV’s translation theory places it in the optimal place on this spectrum, where a high degree of literal accuracy is combined with readability and literary excellence.



1. Woodenly literal translations

The left side of this chart illustrates that it is possible to make a “woodenly literal” translation that just consists of putting an English word below each Greek or Hebrew word in the original text and then publishing it. In fact, this has been done. It is called an “Interlinear”

translation and it is sometimes used by beginning language students. But it is hardly readable or suitable for general use. Here is an example:

Thus for loved God the world, so that the Son the only he gave, in order that every the believing one in him not should perish but should have life eternal. (John 3:16)

2. Essentially literal translations

A better decision is to make an “essentially literal” translation – one that faithfully brings the meaning of each Greek word into English, but that uses ordinary English word order and syntax. (This is the next column in my “Spectrum of Translations” diagram above.) Here is how the ESV rendered the same verse, in readable English:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

What then is an “essentially literal” translation? Here is my definition:

An essentially literal translation translates the meaning of every word in the original language, understood correctly in its context, into its nearest English equivalent, and attempts to express the result with ordinary English word order and style, as far as that is possible without distorting the meaning of the original.

Now sometimes one word in Hebrew or Greek must be translated with two or three words in English, and other times with just a comma or a period. At still other times, two or three words in the original can best be translated with only one word in English. So “word for word” does not mean exactly one English word for each Hebrew or Greek word. But it does mean that every word in the original must be translated somehow. The goal in an essentially literal translation is to somehow bring the meaning of every word in the original into the resulting translation in English.

The reason for this emphasis on translating the meaning of every word is a belief in the importance that Scripture itself places on the very words of God. “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), and “Every word of God proves true” (Prov. 30:5). Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). “If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Rev. 22:19).

As the chart above indicates, the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) of 2004 falls broadly in the “essentially literal” range on the spectrum of translations. However, its Introduction notes that they prefer the term “optimally literal” to describe their translation

philosophy.⁴ As my analysis below will show, the HCSB is somewhat closer to the NIV's "mixed" translation philosophy than the ESV, but it generally seeks to translate every word of the original faithfully.

3. "Formal equivalence" is an inaccurate and misleading category

The ESV translators do not find the term "formal equivalence" to be an accurate term to describe an essentially literal translation. It puts too much emphasis on the "form" of the sentences, which refers especially to the order of words. That is a low priority in essentially literal translations, for the primary goal is to represent not just the form but the meaning of every word of the original. Therefore the first sentence about "Translation Philosophy" in the Preface to the ESV says, "The ESV is an 'essentially literal' translation."⁵

It is unfortunate that some critics of the ESV continue to call it a "formal equivalence" translation. Then they reject the idea of "formal equivalence" because, they say, "form" must be subordinate to meaning in translation. Of course, we also believe this, so this kind of criticism of "formal equivalence" is just tearing down a straw man. But the phrase "formal equivalence" was an invention of Eugene Nida, the pioneer of "dynamic equivalence" translations, and it is not surprising that he chose a pejorative term (one that suggests ignorant translators who do not realize that meaning is more important than form) to describe a philosophy with which he did not agree.⁶

4. What is a "dynamic equivalence" translation? The New Living Translation as an example

On the right side of my chart above is "dynamic equivalence." A dynamic equivalence translation translates the thoughts or ideas of the original text into similar thoughts or ideas in English, and "attempts to have the same impact on modern readers as the original had on its own audience."⁷ Another term for a dynamic equivalence translation is a "thought-for-thought" translation, as explained in the "Introduction" to the New Living Translation (NLT): The translators say that "a dynamic-equivalence translation can also be called a thought-for-thought translation, as contrasted with a formal-equivalence or word-for-word translation."⁸ The NLT was first published in 1996, and updated in 2004 and 2007.

⁴ Introduction to the Holman Christian Standard Bible, p. vii.

⁵ ESV Bible, Preface, p. vii. Two other major defenses of the ESV's philosophy have also used the term "essentially literal": see Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), pp. 10, 19; and Wayne Grudem, Leland Ryken, C. John Collins, Vern S. Poythress, and Bruce Winter, *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), pp. 10, 13.

⁶ I discuss Eugene Nida's translation theory on pp. 50-55 of *Translating Truth*.

⁷ Introduction," *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1996), p. xli.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Another way to describe the difference is to contrast the kind of question each translator would ask in translating a text. A dynamic equivalence translator would ask, “How would people say that today?” But an essentially literal translator would ask, “How did they say it then?” (with the words translated into English, of course).

A good illustration of this difference between essentially literal and dynamic equivalence translations is actually given in the “Introduction” to the NLT. They mention 1 Kings 2:10, which says, in the King James Version,

So David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David (1 Kings 2:10, KJV; similarly, ESV).

But the NLT translates this verse,

Then David died and was buried in the city of David (1 Kgs. 2:10, NLT).

The NLT translators see this as an advantage, for they say, “Only the New Living Translation clearly translates the real meaning of the Hebrew idiom ‘slept with his fathers’ into contemporary English.”⁹ The argument in favor of the NLT would be that today, when John Doe dies, English speakers don’t say that John Doe “slept with his fathers.” Today people would simply say that John Doe “died,” so that is what the NLT has done. The translation is a “thought-for-thought” translation because the main thought or idea – the idea that David died and was buried — is expressed in a way that modern speakers would use to express the same idea today.

However, some details are missing in the NLT’s thought-for-thought translation of 1 Kings 2:10. This dynamic equivalence translation does not include the idea of sleeping as a rich metaphor for death, a metaphor in which there is a veiled hint of some day awakening from that sleep to a new life. The expression “slept with his fathers” also includes a faint hint of a corporate relationship with David’s ancestors who had previously died and are awaiting a future resurrection. But that is also missing from the dynamic equivalence translation, “then David died.”

Yes, the NLT translated the main idea into contemporary English, but isn’t it more accurate to translate all of the words of the Hebrew original, including the word *shakab* (which means, “to lie down, rest, sleep”), the word *’im* (which means “with”), and the word *’ab* (which means “father,” or in the plural, “fathers”), since these words are in the Hebrew text as well? When

⁹ Ibid., p. xlii.

these words are translated, not just the main idea but also more details of the meaning of the Hebrew original are brought over into English.¹⁰

Will modern readers understand the literal translation, “David slept with his fathers”? Yes, certainly. Even modern readers who have never heard this idiom before will understand it because the rest of the sentence says that David was buried: “Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David” (1 Kings 2:10). The larger context begins in verse 1, “When David’s time to die drew near...” (1 Kings 2:1). Modern readers may ponder the expression for a moment, but they will understand it, and they will then have access to much greater richness of meaning that was there in the original text.¹¹

“Slept with his fathers” is not how we would say it today, but it is how they said it then, and we should translate it that way and convey the full richness of meaning of all the Bible’s words.

5. The NIV is a “mixed” version

The New International Version (NIV) was first published in 1978. I have put it on the chart midway between “essentially literal” and “dynamic equivalence” because it has elements of both. At times it is highly literal, but then at other times it tends in the direction of dynamic paraphrase for the sake of better readability and easier understandability.

The 2011 edition of the NIV contains this statement of its goal in the Preface:

to articulate God’s unchanging Word in the way the original authors might have said it had they been speaking in English to the global English-speaking audience today (NIV Preface, p. v, italics added)

6. The goal of translation: not understanding how the authors might say something today, but understanding how they actually said it back then

I respectfully disagree with that philosophy of translation as expressed in the NIV’s Preface. As a Bible translator, my goal should not be to try to imagine how Moses or Isaiah or Paul might

¹⁰ This ability to convey more details of meaning is frequently evident when the ESV literally translates vivid, concrete expressions in striking metaphors, such as “bones” in Ps. 35:10 or “breath” in Ps. 78:33. These terms are changed to vague abstractions, such as “whole being” in Ps. 35:10 or “futility” in Ps. 78:33, in other versions. (I got these examples from Kevin DeYoung, *Why Our Church Switched to the ESV* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), pp. 21-22. But DeYoung acknowledges (p. 21, note 4) that he got many of his ideas from Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), from which I have also derived much benefit.)

¹¹ Someone might object that in today’s culture, “slept with his fathers” might suggest a homosexual relationship. But no reasonable reader will settle on that meaning, because David’s forefathers had been dead for decades, and the immediate context talks about David dying and being buried. The highly unlikely possibility of a foolish interpretation by a careless reader should not deter translators from making the most accurate translation possible.

say something if they were here today. I want to listen in on how exactly they said it back then. It seems to me that the NIV's philosophy here leans too far in the direction of a dynamic equivalence translation.¹²

Another way of illustrating the difference is to imagine that we had both a time machine and a language translation machine. Should our goal as translators be to use the time machine to bring David to New York City in 2011, give him the language translation machine so that he could understand and speak English, and then ask him to rewrite Psalm 23, but speaking as people would speak in New York City in 2011? Should we tell him, "David, just rewrite your psalm and use 21st century expressions"?

No, as a translator of Psalm 23, I would want to use the time machine to travel back to ancient Israel around 1000 BC where David was writing Psalm 23. I would want to use my language translation machine to translate David's words into English and put them in ordinary English word order. It would sound something like this:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.³ He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (Ps. 23:1-3, ESV)

There is a lot of imagery about shepherds and sheep and pastures, common in David's time but not too familiar today. But I have to translate it this way because I want to know how David said something back then, not how I imagine he might have said something if he lived here today. The job of imagining how David would write Psalm 23 today is the job of a pastor or Bible teacher, not the job of a translator.

II. Excursus: A brief note on two other "essentially literal" translations, the NASB and the NKJV, which are not included in this forum

I understand that the sponsors of this current forum could not, for practical reasons, include representatives of every modern translation, especially since they wanted the forum in the initial stage to be based on an oral debate format (a debate which was held successfully at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA, on September 26, 2011). Therefore in the following pages I interact regularly only with the New International Version (NIV), the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) and the New Living Translation (NLT).

But at this point I wish to comment briefly on two other translations that are not included in this forum. Both have a connection to the KJV tradition, but neither of them builds on the scholarly and literary excellence of the 1952 RSV. One went back to the 1901 ASV, and one went back to the KJV itself. In general, they are both good and reliable translations.

¹² See Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, pp. 93-99, for a discussion of what he calls a translator's "fallacy": the idea that the important question is how we would say something today.

In 1971, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) was published by the Lockman Foundation. It was precise and accurate in its word-for-word literalness, and for that reason it became especially popular among pastors who did verse-by-verse and word-by-word expository preaching. But it had been based on the American Standard Version of 1901, and too often it continued the ASV's practice of duplicating the word order found in the original Hebrew or Greek text, resulting in English that sounded lumpy and lacked a natural flow and oral readability.

Early in my teaching career, I personally tried for a few weeks to switch to the NASB for teaching and memorizing, but I soon found the English unnatural and hard to memorize compared to the RSV, so I stuck with the RSV. One scholar summarized it to me this way, "Reading the NASB is like driving somewhere on a bumpy road – you will reach your destination, but the journey won't be very pleasant." And so the NASB, widely respected for its accuracy, continues to capture only about 3% or less of the Bible Market in the US, and less than that in other countries. (The term "American" in its title partially hinders its acceptance in other English-speaking countries.)

The New King James Version (NKJV) of 1982 took a different approach. Rather than trying to correct the RSV of 1952/1971 or even the ASV of 1901, it went all the way back to the KJV itself of 1611 and updated the archaic language. It stuck to a word-for-word translation philosophy and produced a readable, accurate translation that continues to be quite popular, capturing around 18% - 20% of the Bible Market in the US. I have written notes based on the NKJV for individual New Testament books in two different study Bibles, and I found it to be a translation that is for the most part both readable and accurate.

But the NKJV has one serious shortcoming that, in my opinion, makes it incapable of ever capturing the allegiance of the majority of seminary-trained pastors in the English-speaking world. The shortcoming is this: The NKJV is based on inferior Greek manuscripts for the New Testament. This is because the NKJV translators decided they would base their New Testament translation only on the published Greek text that was used by the original KJV translators back in 1611. That Greek text is called the Textus Receptus (Latin for "received text").

The Textus Receptus was the first Greek New Testament ever published. It was edited and published by the Dutch scholar Erasmus in Basel, Switzerland, in 1516, then updated in later editions. His third edition (1522) contained the text used by the King James Version translators. But Erasmus only had six Greek manuscripts to use, and the copies he depended on most dated from the 12th century AD.¹³

Why would that be a problem? Erasmus's Greek manuscripts were copies of copies of copies, and they were all derived from one standardized source, what is called the "Byzantine text tradition." Erasmus's copies were all made in the 11th or 12th centuries.

¹³ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 99.

But archaeological discoveries of manuscripts did not end when Erasmus published his Greek New Testament in 1516, or when the KJV was published in 1611. For the past 400 years, experts in ancient manuscripts have continued to explore archaeological digs, ancient museums, and old European and Middle Eastern libraries, and they have discovered over 5,000 additional copies of parts or all of the New Testament in Greek. By analyzing the kind of papyrus or animal skin that these manuscripts are written on, and analyzing the kind of ink and style of handwriting, experts in such manuscripts have concluded that many of these newly discovered manuscripts are much older and more reliable than the few that Erasmus had available in 1516. Many of these manuscripts are hundreds of years older, since they were copied by scribes in the 4th, 3rd, and even 2nd centuries AD.

Nobody has yet discovered the actual “original copy” of Matthew or Romans or any other New Testament book, but we now have thousands of very reliable copies, many of them going back to the early years of the Christian church.

Therefore the translators of the American Standard Version in 1901 made use of many of these older and better Greek manuscripts (depending especially on the expert conclusions about the most reliable ancient manuscripts that were published by two Cambridge professors named B. Westcott and F. Hort). And the RSV similarly made use of the most reliable ancient manuscripts that had become available by 1952, and then by 1971.

But if you had asked the New King James Version translators in 1982, “Would you like to make use of these older and more reliable Greek manuscripts that we have now discovered?” they would have said, “No thank you! We think that the Greek manuscripts that had already been discovered by 1611, the manuscripts that the remarkable KJV translators used, are good enough. We really aren’t interested in the manuscripts that you say are older and better. The ones they had in 1611 are good enough for us.”

And so the NKJV is based on what I think to be inferior Greek manuscripts.

A few New Testament scholars still defend these manuscripts that were known in 1611 as superior, but they are a tiny minority, probably less than 1% of scholars with a Ph.D. in New Testament today. And they have to defend the unlikely position that after the KJV was published in 1611 no Greek manuscripts have ever been discovered that are more reliable and that get us closer to the New Testament books as originally written than the Byzantine text tradition on which the KJV was based.

(It should be noted that defenders of the KJV texts today do not defend the actual Erasmus editions themselves, what is known as the Textus Receptus. Instead, they defend the best readings that they can determine from the wider Byzantine text tradition, of which the Textus Receptus is only one representative. But they still defend the form of the Greek text as it was stabilized in the churches in the 5th century AD and then copied and recopied after that. Defenders of this Byzantine text call their Greek text the “Majority Text” because most of the later copies of the Greek New Testament were copies of this “Byzantine text type.” Therefore the

“majority” of old Greek manuscripts are based on this text tradition. But this “majority” consists of copies made mostly in the 10th to 15th centuries AD. There are many hundreds of such copies that exist, but that is just because it was the text type used and repeatedly recopied in the Greek Orthodox churches and in Roman Catholic churches during those centuries. These copies are far from the earliest or most reliable forms of the Greek text.)

Does this different Greek text make any difference? Most of the time the differences are small. The Byzantine text tradition generally includes many additions and explanatory comments that had been added by scribes who hand-copied the Greek manuscripts over the years between the 1st century and the 5th century AD. For example, often where the oldest and best manuscripts will say simply “Jesus,” the Byzantine text will say “the Lord Jesus Christ.” And in the book of Acts many little explanatory comments are added that some scribe thought would help the reader. See, for example, Acts 5:23; 6:13; 7:37; 9:5-6; 13:17; 15:34.

In a few places, the differences are significant, as in 1 John 5:7, which in the NKJV reads, “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.” This makes a nice verse to prove the Trinity, but the problem is that this wording is not in any early Greek manuscript and it is not what John wrote. It was a later addition by a well-meaning scribe. Other passages that are in the KJV and NKJV but not in the best Greek manuscripts are John 7:53 – 8:11 and Mark 16:9-20.

It is easy for any English reader of the NKJV to discover where all the differences are. In the margin of the NKJV, the translators have put a footnote that says “NU-Text reads [or omits, or adds] ...” wherever the Greek manuscripts accepted by the majority of New Testament scholars today contain a different Greek word or phrase from the word or phrase that the NKJV is based on. (NU stands for “Nestle-Aland and United Bible Societies,” which are the names of the publishers of the two most widely-accepted editions of the Greek New Testament today.)

The differences between the NKJV and all other modern English translations do not change any point of doctrine, and most of them are fairly minor, but they are still differences. In fact, the footnote that begins with “NU-Text ...” is found 846 times in the NKJV. That is 846 times where the NKJV is not based on the oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts.¹⁴

The NKJV stands alone among modern translations in its decision to use the Textus Receptus rather than the oldest and best Greek manuscripts in the eyes of 99% of New Testament experts today. All other modern English translations today (and, so far as I know, all other translations into all other modern languages) are based not on the Textus Receptus, but on the Greek text found in the two major published editions of the New Testament in Greek, the Nestle-Aland edition and the United Bible Societies edition. These represent the oldest and most reliable Greek

¹⁴ I wish to thank Charlie Gibson of Covenant Seminary for figuring out how to search the NKJV database in Bible Works to perform a search on “NU-Text” in the notes to the NKJV, and then providing me with this count.

manuscripts for each section of the New Testament, but they are not the basis for the New Testament in the NKJV.

III. The advantages of the ESV: Discussion of specific passages

My assigned task in the rest of this essay is to point out the advantages of the ESV in contrast with the HCSB, the NIV, and the NLT. I want to emphasize that all of these versions can be read with much spiritual benefit, and that we should be thankful to God that there are so many good translations available in English. However, the translations have differences, and as I consider the sixteen agreed-upon “test passages,” at various points I will emphasize the following six advantages of the ESV:

1. It preserves more literal accuracy in details
2. It preserves the best of the best in the KJV tradition
3. It has better literary excellence
4. It preserves more of the interpretative options that were available to original readers
5. It is not gender-neutral but more accurately translates terms that refer to men and women
6. It preserves more theological terms

Passage #1: Exodus 2:5-6: More literal accuracy in details

Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children."
(Exodus 2:5-6 ESV; I have underlined the word that I will discuss, and I will follow this process throughout this essay.)

I find one of the primary advantages of the ESV to be more literal accuracy in the details of a translation. This is evident in the ESV’s use of “behold” in Exodus 2:6, a word which the HCSB, NIV and NLT all omit. But it translates a word in the text, the Hebrew word *hinneh*.

In earlier translations (KJV, ASV, RSV), the word “behold” was found many times. It was the common translation used for the Hebrew word *hinneh* in the Old Testament and the Greek word *idou* in the New Testament. Both words simply mean something like “Pay attention -- what follows is especially important or surprising!”

Early in our translation work on the ESV, our committee discussed what to do about “behold.” We realized that in some cases there was an alternative such as “look!” or “listen!” and in a few cases that was what we used. But in hundreds of other cases, neither “look” nor “listen” seemed quite suitable (as in Exod. 2:6 above). We also found that some modern translations had just decided to leave Hebrew *hinneh* and Greek *idou* untranslated in many places where “look” or “listen” did not seem to fit (the HCSB, NIV, and NLT simply fail to translate it here). But we

believed that all the words of God are important, and we did not want to leave *hinneh* and *idou* untranslated.

After a lot of discussion, we concluded that there simply was no other English word that meant, “Pay attention to what follows because it is important or surprising.” But the word “behold” still carried that meaning in English.

We realized that people didn’t often use the word “behold” in conversation today, but we also recognized that almost everyone knew what it meant. It was in people’s “passive” vocabulary rather than in their “active” vocabulary. So we decided to retain “behold” as the common translation that we would use for *hinneh* in the Old Testament and for *idou* in the New Testament. We were striving for literal accuracy in the details, and we recognized that these words conveyed meaning for the original reader, meaning that we did not want today’s readers to miss.

Therefore readers will find “behold” 1,102 times in the ESV. Often it seems to me to add dignity and strength to important verses in the Bible, such as the following:

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isa. 7:14 ESV)

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29 ESV)

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. (1Cor. 15:51-52 ESV)

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev. 3:20 ESV)

I have come to really enjoy the “beholds” in the ESV. They make me pay attention to what follows and ask why the author put emphasis here. And they seem to me much stronger than the great variety of alternatives that other translations use when they do translate *hinneh* or *idou* at all. For instance, in Revelation 3:20 (see above) other translations have a variety: “Listen!” (HCSB). “Here I am!” (NIV). “Look!” (NLT). It seems to me that “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” is much stronger, and more consistent.

In addition, now I actually notice “behold” from time to time in contemporary English, whether it be in a shop window with a sign that says “Behold: New low prices!” or an ad on TV that says something like, “Behold! The new Honda sedan!”

This example also shows one reason I don’t put too much stock in statistical counts of word frequency such as the Collins Word Bank that was used by the NIV translators. No doubt it would show “behold” to be uncommon in modern English. But if we ask, “How did they say it back then?” we find the need to use “behold” quite frequently, because there is no other single word in English today that means, “Pay attention—what follows is important or surprising.”

Passage #2: Psalm 1:1: Preserving “the best of the best” in the King James tradition

Blessed is the man who
walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers (Ps. 1:1, ESV).

The ESV in this verse has several advantages over other translations. It seems to me that “blessed” is a better translation of the Hebrew term ’ashrē than the HCSB’s “happy,” because “blessed” indicates a special kind of happiness in connection with God. I think that “blessed” is also better than the NLT’s “Oh, the joys” for the same reason.

The word “man” in singular is a more accurate translation of the singular Hebrew word ’ish, which regularly means “male human being” in the Old Testament (apart from certain idioms). Therefore “the man” is more accurate than “the one” (NIV 2011) or the plural “those” (NLT).

The ESV literally translates the common Hebrew words for “walks,” “sits,” and “stands” in Psalm 1:1. These metaphors accurately reflect a process of slowing down and then staying in the place of wicked people. This is more vivid and precise than the HCSB’s “follow the advice of” and “take the path of” and “join.” It is also more literal and precise than “follow the advice of” and “join” in the NLT. (One objection might be that “stands in the way of sinners” might be misunderstood to mean, “blocks their way,” but that is unlikely from the context of not following evil paths.)

Someone may object that the ESV’s “walks not” is unnatural English and sounds strange. Why not say with the NIV, “does not walk”? The answer is that this is poetry. Poetry often inverts word order for rhythm or better flow, or for emphasis. Here is where the ESV really shines, when we examine the oral sound of the translation. The ESV as a whole has better rhythm, beauty, smoothness of word flow, and ease of memorization.¹⁵

When English is read aloud, what gives a piece of literature beauty and ease of readability is a regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. With this in mind, compare the number and placement of stressed syllables in the second, third and fourth lines of Psalm 1 (especially as you read it aloud):

ESV Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the man who	
walks not in the counsel of the wicked,	4 stressed
nor stands in the way of sinners,	4

¹⁵ See Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, pp. 251-253, for a discussion of how many of the poetic elements of Psalm 1:1 are lost in many modern translations.

nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 4

CSB Psalm 1:1 How happy is the man who
does not follow the advice of the wicked 5
or take the path of sinners 3
or join a group of mockers! 3

NIV Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the one who
does not walk in step with the wicked 5
or stand in the way that sinners take 4
or sit in the company of mockers, 3

NLT Psalm 1:1 Oh, the joys of those who
do not follow the advice of the wicked, 5
or stand around with sinners, 3
or join in with mockers. 3

The ESV has a beautiful rhythm and flow of words. The second, third, and fourth lines each start with two stressed syllables, then alternate between unstressed and stressed syllables in a regular pattern for the rest of the line. It sounds almost musical in its beauty.

The other translations do not do this. The HCSB begins the second line with a staccato rhythm of three stressed syllables in a row (“does not follow”). The NIV does the same (“does not walk”), and so does the NLT (“do not follow”).¹⁶

At this point the perceptive reader may be wondering, how did the ESV Translation Committee do such a fantastic job with Psalm 1:1?

The answer is, we didn’t. We didn’t touch it. We inherited it almost unchanged from the King James Version:

1611 KJV Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

1901 ASV Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked, Nor standeth in the way of sinners, Nor sitteth in the seat of scoffers:

1952 RSV Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

¹⁶ An excellent discussion of the importance of rhythm in Bible translation is found in Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, pp. 257-268. Ryken contrasts the attention to rhythm in the ESV with the apparent absence of care for rhythm in several modern translations.

2001 ESV Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

The KJV translators in 1611 could easily have said, “Blessed that doth not walk in the counsel of the ungodly.” That would have been ordinary word order for them. But the staccato rhythm sounded all wrong so they put “walketh not.”

In 1901 the ASV hardly touched the KJV. They only changed the word “ungodly” to the word “wicked.” And so by 1901, the work of the ESV translators was nearly done, though none of us had yet been born. When the RSV came along in 1952, it just changed “walketh” to “walks,” and “standeth” to “stand” and “sitteth” to “sits.” They retained the best of the best in the great KJV tradition, and its poetic beauty was preserved.

Then when we came to Psalm 1:1 as we produced the ESV, we realized that the verse was already perfect. It was accurate and the English was beautiful. All we had to do was not to touch it. The ESV also preserves the “best of the best” in the great KJV tradition.

Many people have asked whether any Bible translation will ever take the place of the King James Version as the accepted “standard” for the English-speaking world. My suggestion is this: If you are looking for a successor to the King James Version, consider the ESV Bible. It is a direct descendant of the King James Version (see Figure 1, above).

The other three translations represented in this forum (HCSB, NIV, NLT) are entirely new translations made by modern scholars and based on the original Hebrew and Greek texts. This was a gigantic task, and I admire the skill with which their committees have carried it out. But the ESV did not start from scratch to make an entirely new translation. It was a revision of a previous excellent translation, the Revised Standard Version, which was itself a descendant of the King James Bible tradition.

Even the King James Bible itself was not an entirely new translation, but was based on the best readings from at least five earlier English translations. In fact, the KJV translators said in the original preface, “truly (good Christian reader) we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation nor to make of a bad one, a good one. . .but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one.”¹⁷

I discovered how close the RSV (of 1952) was to the KJV when, as a college sophomore in 1967, I switched from the KJV to the RSV as my personal Bible. I had already memorized many passages in the KJV, including the 108 passages in The Navigators’ “Topical Memory System.” But the transition to the RSV was easy, as “thee” and “thou” readily changed to “you,” and

¹⁷ The Translators to the Reader: The Original Preface of the King James Version of 1611 Revisited, edited by Erroll Rhodes and Liana Lupas (New York: American Bible Society, 1997), p. 54.

“wouldst” and “couldst” changed to “would” and “could.” So much of the beautiful wording and sentence structure of the KJV was retained, and I quickly felt “at home” in the RSV. Then I used the RSV as my personal Bible from 1967 until September, 2001, when the ESV came out. Once again, the transition from the RSV to the ESV was easy. The ESV preserves the “best of the best” in the great King James tradition.

Passage #3: Ezekiel 18:5-9, 21-24: Precise translation of gender language

I will not quote this long passage here, but I think the ESV is correct to begin the section with “If a man is righteous . . .” The Hebrew word *’ish* ordinarily in the Old Testament means “man” and not just “person.” The HCSB, NIV, and NLT all correctly translate this as “man” in Ezekiel 18:5.

Then I think the ESV correctly switches to a non-male oriented word in verse 21, when it says, “But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed . . .” This is because the Hebrew text has no word here meaning “man” but just an adjective, “a wicked one” or a “wicked person.” The NLT incorrectly makes this plural, diminishing the emphasis on the individual responsibility in the Bible: “But if wicked people turn away from all their sins . . .” (I will discuss the translation of gender language in more detail at Luke 17:3 and Revelation 3:20, below.)

Passage #4: Matthew 5:1-3: Literary excellence, and not capitalizing “he”

ESV Matthew 5:1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The literary excellence of the ESV is seen in verse 3. The traditional wording, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” goes directly back to the KJV. It is beautiful and accurate, and neither the ASV (1901) nor the RSV (1952) nor the ESV (2001) saw any reason to tamper with it. Its sound is both aphoristic and memorable, and it readily connects with several other Old Testament and New Testament statements that began with “blessed are” or “blessed is” (such as Ps. 1:1; 2:12; 32:1; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4, 5; 112:1; 119:1, 2; 128:1; 144:15; Prov. 3:13; 8:32; 28:14; John 20:29; Rom. 4:7; James 1:12; Rev. 1:3; 14:13; 19:9; 22:14). The NIV similarly sticks with the tradition here, but the renderings, “The poor in spirit are blessed” (HCSB) and “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him” (NLT) lose something of the richness and beauty of this verse.

“Seeing the crowds” in the ESV is a more literal rendering of the Greek participial phrase, and it opens the possibility that it was not just “when” he saw the crowds, but because he saw the crowds that he went up on the mountain to teach. In verse 2, “he opened his mouth” again is a literal translation of the Greek text which is preserved in the ESV.

The ESV does not capitalize pronouns referring to God, but Matthew 5:1-3 is one of many examples where the HCSB capitalizes “He” and other pronouns referring to Jesus or to God or the Holy Spirit:

When He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him (Matt. 5:1, HCSB).

Such capitalization was not done in the King James Version or the RSV, ESV, NIV or NLT. The question of capitalizing pronouns that refer to God is simply a matter of stylistic preference in English. There is nothing in the original Hebrew or Greek texts that represents such a practice, for those texts did not make any distinction between capital letters and lowercase letters—all the letters were the same.

Some readers may feel that it helps them to know when a pronoun refers to God rather than somebody else in the context, but there are actually not many cases where the context doesn’t immediately make it clear. (For example, no reader doubts that Matt. 5:1 is talking about Jesus.) Other readers may feel that it attaches a level of reverence to these pronouns, but it may be said in response that the original authors did not do this, and they probably felt that the content of the Bible itself honored God appropriately.

Another reason against capitalizing these pronouns is that there are so many thousands of pronouns that refer to God in the Bible that this practice makes for a very cluttered-looking text (see the HCSB of Matt. 5:1 above, for example.) It does not seem to me that meaning is affected in any significant way, whichever decision is made. On this question, the ESV has stuck with the practice of the primary translations in the great KJV tradition.

Passage #5: Mark 1:40-45: Leprosy or a skin disease?

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean."⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean."⁴² And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. (Mark 1:40-42 ESV)

The difference between “Moved with pity” (ESV) and “was indignant” (NIV) is based on a close judgment call between two different sets of Greek manuscripts, but it seems to me that the Greek manuscript evidence supporting “Moved with pity” is more diverse and substantial than that supporting “was indignant.”

While some might argue that the words “leper” and “leprosy” found in the ESV represent too narrow a range of skin diseases, on the other hand, the translation “a serious skin disease” (HCSB) is so broad and vague as to be unhelpful to the reader. There is much to be said for the ESV’s decision to keep the term “leprosy” (as the NIV did and the NLT).¹⁸

¹⁸ The ESV has a note at Mark 1:40: “Leprosy was a term for several skin diseases; see Leviticus 13.”

In verse 45, the ESV's, "people were coming to him," seems preferable as a rendering of the imperfect tense of the Greek verb, indicating continual but uncompleted action over a period of time.

Passage #6: Endings to Mark's Gospel

I think the ESV and the NIV have made the best decision on a very difficult question: Was the section that we now call Mark 16:9-20 part of what Mark originally wrote in his gospel? New Testament scholars on all sides of this question will admit that a decision is not easy, because there is evidence on both sides.

Many ancient Greek manuscripts include these verses. But a significant number of very early and very reliable manuscripts of Mark's Gospel do not include them, and a number of other early copies of Mark either include special marks indicating that the verses are doubtful or else say that the verses are not found in the copies in Mark that they are using. In addition, the vocabulary, grammar, and style of these verses seem significantly different from the Gospel of Mark, particularly in Greek, but even to some extent in English.

Therefore the ESV translation committee decided to enclose these verses in double brackets, and to precede them with a note that says, "[Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9-20.]" This seems to me to be a fair decision that does not exclude these verses but also shows that there is considerable question about them.

It should be noted that no significant point of doctrine is affected by either including or excluding these verses. Everything that is taught in them can be deduced from other places in the New Testament as well, and the verses do not contradict anything that is taught elsewhere in the New Testament.

Passage #7: Luke 17:3: The translation of gender language

Before I discuss the translation of "brother" as "brother and sister" in Luke 17:3, I will include some general comments about translating gender language. My point will be that another advantage of the ESV (and the HCSB as well) is that the ESV accurately translates words with masculine meaning in Greek and Hebrew into words with masculine meaning in English.

a. What is the heart of the issue in translating gender language?

In the discussion over the translation of gender language in the Bible today, the question is not whether a translation has more or fewer male-specific words, nor is the question whether we want more or fewer male-specific words in the Bible. What we want should have nothing to do with a translation!

The proper question, rather, is this: When the original Greek or Hebrew word meant a male person, do we faithfully show that meaning in English?

b. Some changes in gender language are appropriate

There are some very appropriate changes to gender language that should be made when older versions are updated. If there is no male meaning in the original Greek or Hebrew, then we should not use a male-oriented term in English to translate it. Here is one example of a good change that was made from the 1971 RSV to the 2001 ESV:

RSV Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man (Greek tis, "anyone") would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

ESV Matthew 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

It was right for the ESV to change "any man" to "anyone," because the Greek word tis did not mean "any man" and did not have a masculine meaning but simply meant "anyone." (This is an example where a word had a grammatically masculine gender but not a masculine meaning in Greek.)

c. But the 2011 NIV has gone too far

Recent gender-neutral Bibles, however, have gone too far with this process and have removed thousands of examples of the words "man," "father," "son," "brother" and "he/him/his" in places where the original Hebrew or Greek meant a male human being or meant a single individual person. They have replaced these words with "gender-neutral" terms that the original Greek or Hebrew simply did not mean, as shown on the following chart:

man	-7 person
father	-7 parent
son	-7 child
brother	-7 friend, brother or sister
he/ him/ his	-7 they, them, their; you; we

Figure 3: The 2011 NIV replaces male-specific words with "gender-neutral" terms in many cases where the original Hebrew or Greek meant a male human being.

These substantial changes in gender language are in some ways more significant than they were with the TNIV, when readers could still buy the old 1984 NIV if they did not agree with the TNIV. But now there is no choice of NIVs, because the 1984 edition has been discontinued, and the 2011 NIV is the only one available.

I should also note that the HCSB and the ESV generally agree on the translation of gender language, so I will not generally include the HCSB in my discussion in this section.

d. Luke 17:3: Improperly adding “and sister” to the NIV

One example of the gender-neutral changes that I object to in the NIV is found in Luke 17:3:

ESV Luke 17:3 If your brother (Gk. adelphos) sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,

Luke 17:3 Εαν κμ ἰρητν ὁ ἀδελφος σου Επιτιμησον α1τφρ, κατ Εαν μετανοῖση Ὑφες α1τφρ.

1984 NIV Luke 17:3 If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.

2011 NIV Luke 17:3 If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.

NLT Luke 17:3 If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive.

The Greek here is not difficult or controversial, and the translations of the ESV, the HCSB, and the 1984 NIV were exactly the same in every word: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” But in the 2011 NIV, the verse has been changed to say,

If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.

The problem with the translation “brother or sister” is that the Greek word adelphos in singular means “brother.” It does not mean “sister” and it does not mean “brother or sister.” There is a different Greek word that means “sister,” the word adelphē, and it does not occur in this verse. It was not part of what Jesus said.

Now at this point someone with some knowledge of Greek might object, saying, “But the masculine plural form adelphoi often means ‘brothers and sisters.’” And I agree that is correct. But that does not affect the meaning of the singular word adelphos, and in this verse the word is singular.

The plural form can mean “brothers and sisters” because of the way singulars and plurals function in many languages that have grammatical genders for nouns and adjectives. Anyone who has studied a common foreign language (such as French or German or Spanish) will probably realize how this works in many languages. If you are speaking about a group of male

human beings, you use a masculine plural noun to refer to them. If you are speaking of a group of female human beings, then you use a feminine plural noun to refer to them. But if you are speaking about a mixed group of both male and female people, then you use the masculine plural form of the noun. This is just the way plurals work when you have to make a choice. And it happens that way in Greek too, so that the plural form adelphoi often will mean “brothers and sisters.”

But you never use a masculine singular noun to mean a “male or a female person.” Never in the ancient Greek world would you see a woman walking down the road and say, “There goes an adelphos” (using the masculine singular form of the word). And that is the form that Jesus uses in Luke 17:3. It does not mean “brother or sister.”

In fact there is a very easy way to say “brother or sister” in Greek. There is an example of it in James 2:5, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed.” The Greek phrase is adelphos ē adelphē, “brother or sister.” But Jesus did not say that in Luke 17:3.

Another objection might be that the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament defines adelphos to mean not only “brother” but also in meaning (2), “fellow member, member, associate” (p. 18). Doesn’t this give justification for translating it “brother or sister”? Or “another believer” (as in the NLT)?

My response is to say that the person who makes this objection is not reading the Bauer Lexicon carefully enough, because that second meaning is described as a “figurative extension of meaning 1” (which is “brother”). And therefore, for the original readers, the masculine singular sense of “brother” was always present even with this additional figurative meaning, “member.” At any rate the NIV did not translate this word as “fellow member” or anything like that. They translated it more specifically as “brother or sister” which is equivalent to something like “male or female fellow member” which is something that adelphos never means.

Anybody can also do a word study to demonstrate this. The singular Greek term adelphos appears 428 times in the Greek New Testament together with the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), and 428 out of 428 times it refers to a male human being, a “brother.” If adelphos can mean “brother or sister,” then I wonder if someone would please show me one place in the Bible where this singular form is used to speak of a female person. I do not think it exists.

And if you are doing a word study on a particular word in the Bible, and 428 times out of 428 examples it has the same meaning, I think you are quite safe in saying that it takes this meaning 100% of the time. The singular word adelphos simply means “brother.” It does not mean “brother or sister.”

Therefore Jesus did not say “brother or sister” in Luke 17:3. But the NIV says “brother or sister.” It seems to me they are adding words to the Bible that Jesus did not say. And Jesus did not say “another believer” (NLT). He said “brother,” and we should not change what he said.

e. Application is different from translation

At this point someone might object, “But the verse also certainly applies to a sister who sins!”

Of course it does. The Bible has many gender-specific examples that apply to both genders. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), for example, also applies to prodigal daughters. But we don’t translate it as the parable of the prodigal “son or daughter” because the words don’t mean prodigal “son or daughter.” Readers understand that the parable also applies to prodigal daughters. They understand that easily from an accurate translation that simply speaks of the prodigal “son.”¹⁹ Translation is different from application.

The parable of the persistent “widow” (Luke 18:1-8) also applies to teaching men to be persistent in prayer, but we don’t translate it by saying, “And there was a widow or widower in that city.” People can read a story about a person of one gender and easily make the application to someone of the other gender. People get it.

Here is another example, this one from the Ten Commandments:

You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife (Exod. 20:17).

I am thankful the 2011 NIV did not change this verse, but on the same principle they used to change “brother” to “brother or sister,” shouldn’t they also change this commandment to say, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or husband”? After all, maybe somebody will read, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” and think, “Well, I guess it’s OK then to covet my neighbor’s husband.” Will that happen?

No, of course not. Bible readers are not that foolish. Readers understand that when the Bible uses a specific female example to teach a general truth, that it naturally applies to men as well. And when it uses a specific male example to teach a general truth, it naturally applies to women as well. That is not difficult for readers to understand.

f. Are we willing to let the Bible use specific male examples to teach a general truth?

Here is the heart of the dispute over gender language in the Bible: The Bible uses both male and female individual examples to teach a general truth, but it has many more male-specific examples than female ones, examples where the author holds up one male individual to teach a general truth. Should we just go ahead and change all of these male-specific examples to be gender-inclusive when we translate the words of Scripture? If Jesus said, “brother,” should we just go ahead and change it to “brother or sister”?

No, we should not. Translators should not change Jesus’ words and tamper with what he said.

¹⁹ The word “prodigal” is not actually found in the text of Luke 15:11-32 but is used as a common summary of the story, which just refers to the “younger son.”

This same procedure affects thousands of verses in the 2011 NIV.²⁰ “Brother” wrongly becomes “brother or sister” or some other gender-neutral expression 63 times. Then there are many other verses where “man” is incorrectly changed to “person,” and “father” is changed to “parent,” and “son” is changed to “child.” Here are two more examples: 1Samuel 18:2 speaks of David not returning to his “father’s house,” but in the new NIV this is changed to “family,” even though the Hebrew words for “father” (‘ab) and house (bayit) are in the verse. Or in Nahum 3:13 the prophet Nahum prophesies judgment on Nineveh by saying, “Your troops are women.” But apparently it was thought unacceptable to speak in this negative way about women serving as soldiers, so the new NIV has changed this to, “Your troops are weaklings,” even though the ordinary Hebrew word for “women” (nashîm) is in the text. There are many other such changes.

One final problem with the gender-neutral tendencies of the 2011 NIV has to do with a diminishing of the Bible’s emphasis on individual, personal relationship to God through changing singulars (“he, him”) to plurals (“they, them”). I will discuss this below, in connection with Revelation 3:20.²¹

Passage #8: John 1:3-4, 18: “In him was life”

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. (John 1:3-4 ESV)

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (John 1:18 ESV)

In verse 4, the translation “In him was life” (ESV), is literal and accurate while the NLT’s translation, “The Word gave life to everything that was created,” is an extensive interpretation that has been added to the text, while regrettably excluding the more profound truth of the verse, that Christ had in himself the eternal, uncreated life of God.

The ESV’s translation “of men” in verse 4 is a direct and literal translation of the Greek text (plural genitive of anthrōpos). It seems to me that the ESV here is more accurate than “everyone” (NLT) or “all mankind” (NIV), both of which include the idea of “all” which is not

²⁰ Detailed information about such changes in the 2011 NIV can be found at www.cbmw.org. A study published there by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood claims that the 2011 NIV corrected 933 of the problematic translations found in the 2005 TNIV, but that the 2011 NIV still has 2,766 inappropriate translations of gender language that do not accurately render the meaning of the original Hebrew or Greek text.

²¹ Another significant analysis of the gender language of the 2011 NIV is found in Vern Poythress, “Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011,” Westminster Theological Journal 73 (2011), pp. 79-96.

in John's Greek text. The NIV and NLT expand the meaning to say explicitly that Jesus enlightens all people, not just believers (this idea is in vs. 9, but not in vs.4).

In verse 18 the difference between calling the Son of God "the only God" (ESV), and "The One and Only Son" (HCSB) is based on a difference in Greek manuscripts, but more recently discovered early papyrus manuscripts favor the remarkable reading, "the only God," adopted by the ESV. The NLT's reading, "the unique One, who is himself God," is based on the same manuscripts as the ESV but expresses a more expanded explanation of the meaning. The NIV's translation "the one and only Son, who is himself God" is an expanded paraphrase that seems to want to translate both of the differing manuscript traditions (one reading "Son" and one reading "God") rather than just one or the other. All these translations except the HCSB agree that the person being talked about is God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, and that the verse calls him "God" (the HCSB has this in the footnote.)

Passage #9: John 2:25-3:1: Preserving an evident connection when the same Greek word is used

[Jesus] . . . needed no one to bear witness about man for he himself knew what was in man (Gk. anthrōpos). Now there was a man (Gk. anthrōpos) of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. (John 2:25-3:1 ESV)

The ESV rightly picks up the intentional connection between the use of "man" (Greek anthrōpos) in John 2:25 and John's use of the same Greek word just three words later in the Greek text (John 3:1) to refer to Nicodemus, "a man of the Pharisees." (The HCSB also does this.)

John is telling us that Jesus knew what was in every human being (every "man") and therefore certainly Jesus knows the heart of this "man" named Nicodemus who was coming to see him. But the NIV partially obscures the connection because they translate the first occurrence as "mankind," and the second occurrence as "man." The NLT is even more troubling, because it completely fails to translate the entire Greek phrase which is rendered in English, "for he himself knew what was in man." Perhaps they thought it was redundant, but the additional statement is there in Greek and it should be included in English as well.

This is an example of how an "essentially literal" translation such as the ESV will often show consistency in translating key terms, especially within a single author. Of course this cannot be done 100% of the time, because the range of meanings that a Hebrew or Greek word will take in different contexts frequently does not exactly match the range of meanings that a single English word would have. But often using the same word in English is possible and beneficial, because the author wanted the reader to see the connection in his frequent repetition.

Another clear example of this consistency is the use of the word "abide," which represents an important concept in 1 John. It translates the Greek word menō, which can mean "remain, stay, abide, persist, continue to live, await." The ESV decided to retain "abide" 23 out of 24 times where menō occurs in 1 John (the exception is 2:19, with "continued"). For example, "Whoever

says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). An English reader can easily trace the uses of “abide” through the entire epistle of 1 John.²²

But in the NIV, *menō* is translated 5 different ways, “live,” “remain,” “continue,” “reside,” and “be.” English readers cannot see the connection in John’s frequent use of this important word. The NLT similarly uses 5 different words: “live,” “remain,” “continue,” “stay,” “be.” The ESV more consistently translates such key terms.

Passage #10: 1 Corinthians 2:1-13

I do not object to the NIV’s translation of 1 Corinthians 2:1, “And so it was with me, brothers and sisters.” The NLT is similar, with “dear brothers and sisters.” The meaning “brothers and sisters” is an acceptable sense of the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (as I explained above in the discussion of Luke 17:3). But it seems to me another acceptable solution is the one taken by the ESV using “brothers” in the text and adding a footnote that says, “Or brothers and sisters.” However, I think the HCSB’s use of “brothers” here without any footnote giving the alternative “brothers and sisters” fails to inform readers of this legitimate alternative translation.

Passage #11: Galatians 5:2-6

It seems to me that the expression “faith working through love” (ESV, HCSB) is more literal and precise than “faith expressing itself through love” (NIV) or “faith expressing itself in love” (NLT). The Greek verb *energeō* simply means “work, be at work, be active, operate, be effective.” Perhaps Paul means that faith is “expressing itself through love” but maybe his thought is not that faith is expressing itself at all, but is remaining hidden, and is simply energizing and empowering love. The ESV and the HCSB are less interpretative and leave open to the reader more of the interpretative options that were available to the original reader.

Passage #12: Colossians 2:8-15: Preserving the interpretative options that were available to the original reader, and translating “Christ” rather than “Messiah”

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, (Col 2:11 ESV)

Colossians 2:11 shows another benefit of an “essentially literal translation,” namely, preserving more of the interpretative options that were available to the original reader. In this verse, the ESV simply translates the genitive phrase, “by the circumcision of Christ.” Does this mean “the spiritual circumcision that Christ performed on you” or “the spiritual circumcision that comes when you trust in Christ,” or something else? The original readers had to ponder that question as they read what Paul wrote.

²² I found this example of *menō* in 1 John and several other examples in this essay from Kevin DeYoung, *Why Our Church Switched to the ESV* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), p. 23.

But the NIV decides for the reader that one of the possible meanings is correct, and so it says, “you were circumcised by Christ” (Col. 2:11 NIV). There was an explicit way to say that in Greek, but that is not what Paul said. The NLT goes even further with a detailed explanation: “Christ performed a spiritual circumcision-- the cutting away of your sinful nature” (Col 2:11 NLT), all this to translate a brief Greek expression that literally says, “the circumcision of Christ.” The NIV and NLT remove some interpretative options that were available to the original readers.

The HCSB uses term “Messiah” in Colossians 2:11: “the circumcision of the Messiah,” rather than using the word “Christ” to translate Greek *christos*.

The HCSB promotional material indicates that the HCSB committee considers it an advantage to have translated the Greek word *christos* as “Messiah” rather than “Christ” in contexts where a Jewish background is particularly in view. And so the HCSB translates the same Greek word *christos* as “Messiah” 116 times in the New Testament, but as “Christ” 405 times in the New Testament.

Is this helpful? It does highlight the Messianic background to the Greek word for “Christ,” and one legitimate meaning of the word *christos* is “anointed one” (or therefore, “Messiah”). But the disadvantage of this translation is that readers don’t evidentially see that “Messiah” and “Christ” are representing the same Greek word, where two different English names are used. And how do we know when a specifically “Jewish background” is in view, especially since, by the time the epistles were written, most of the churches had mixed backgrounds of both Jews and Gentiles that had come into the church and become Christians? So the translation seems inconsistent.

In addition, it seems that at some point in the early New Testament church the name *christos* came to be used more as a name or title of Christ than simply meaning “anointed one.” Therefore I think it better to follow the majority of English translations today and to translate the word *christos* consistently as “Christ,” as the ESV has done.

Passage #13: 1 Thessalonians 1:3: Preserving interpretative options

Another example of preserving interpretative options is seen in 1 Thessalonians 1:3.²³

1 Thessalonians 1:3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess. 1:3 ESV)

²³ I got the idea for mentioning 1 Thessalonians 1:3 from Kevin DeYoung, *Why Our Church Switched to the ESV* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), pp. 12-13. Excellent discussions of the importance of preserving ambiguity that is in the original text are found in Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, pp. 208-211.

The Greek phrases in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 are simple genitive constructions that might have a variety of meanings. The range of meanings is quite similar to the possible meanings in our English phrases “work of faith,” “labor of love,” and “steadfastness of hope.” Therefore the ESV and the HCSB, by retaining these phrases quite literally, preserve for modern readers the opportunity to think through the question, “Just what kind of ‘work of faith’ did Paul mean?” Just as the original readers would have wondered that, so modern readers have to ponder that question and think about the phrase in its context and in light of what else Paul has said about work and faith.

But the NIV has taken away the options and decided that only one of them is the correct one: “Your work produced by faith.” So in this case the readers are not even aware that other options are available. They just think that Paul is talking about work that resulted from the faith that the Thessalonians had.

But then they turn to the NLT and they find that it says something completely different: “Your faithful work.” This is not work “produced by faith” but work done faithfully, reliably, dependably, obediently. This is also a possible meaning, but it too might not be the correct one. In any case, the readers of the NLT only have one interpretative option available to them as well.

And so it is with many genitive phrases and with dozens of other examples in the NIV and NLT. In the interests of making the translation immediately understandable to modern readers, the translators of the NIV and NLT have decided on one “correct” interpretation of expressions which have several possible legitimate interpretations in Greek.

I’m not saying the ESV and HCSB never do this kind of thing. It certainly is a judgment call. Sometimes translators agree that only one of the options really has legitimate claim as a possible interpretation, and then that is what they will put in the text. But my point is that an essentially literal translation like the ESV has the advantage of doing this less often than other translations. Our translation committee consciously attempted to leave open the interpretative options that would have been available to the first readers, whenever we thought there were legitimate alternatives that could be justified from the Greek or Hebrew text.

Passage #14: 1 Timothy 2:12: Are women told not to “exercise authority” or “assume authority”?

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. (1Tim. 2:12 ESV)

This is another verse that is translated accurately in the ESV but, by contrast, it shows the “gender-neutral” tendencies of the 2011 NIV. To my mind this is the most objectionable verse of all because it is a key text that has been under much scrutiny for the last 30 years in the debate over whether women can be pastors and elders in churches. The NIV in 1 Timothy 2:12 has adopted a translation (“assume authority”) that has never before been seen in any major English translation of the Bible (except the discontinued TNIV).

I do not object to the 1984 NIV here, which had a meaning similar to the ESV:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

But now the 2011 NIV has made a significant change:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

What is the difference? Now any woman who becomes a pastor can just say, “I’m obeying this verse because I didn’t ‘assume authority’ on my own – I waited until the church gave it to me.”

I realize that the verse still says that Paul does not permit a woman to “teach” men, and that alone should prevent women from seeking the role of a teaching pastor. But I also recognize that egalitarian interpreters are quick to claim that Paul is only prohibiting one thing, “assuming authority in order to teach,” and so they will soon claim that both verbs are only prohibiting teaching or having authority that has been wrongly self-assumed, not teaching or having authority that has been given by the church or the elders. (I think these are incorrect interpretations, but my point is that the 2011 NIV has made it much more difficult to argue against them from the English text.)

The NIV’s translation committee claims “assume authority” is “a particularly nice English rendering because it leaves the question open.”²⁴ They mean that “assume authority” could be understood in either a negative way (meaning “wrongly assume authority on one’s own initiative”) or a positive way (meaning “begin to use authority in a rightful way”).

But I think the translation is simply wrong. Why? Because it allows people to give a negative sense to the Greek verb *authentēō*, which is not supported by the most relevant evidence, and which no other modern English translation has ever done (except the discontinued TNIV).

For nearly twenty years I have watched as evangelical feminists have tried one novel idea after another, always seeking to give a negative sense to this important verb in 1 Timothy 2:12 so that they could argue that there was still a rightful use of authority that Paul was not prohibiting. As I summarized the arguments in 2004, I noted that David Scholer claimed that *authentēō* implied “violence and inappropriate behavior.” Craig Keener said it meant “a domineering use of authority.” Rebecca Groothuis suggested it meant “take control by forceful aggression.” Leland Wilshire said it meant “instigate violence.” Richard and Catherine Kroeger proposed different meanings, such as “cultic action involving actual or representational murder” or teaching that

²⁴ “Updating the New International Version of the Bible: Note from the Committee on Bible Translation,” (booklet distributed by the Committee on Bible Translation at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Atlanta, GA, Nov., 2010), p. 7. (Available at www.niv-cbt.org)

would “proclaim oneself the author of a man,” or even “thrust oneself (in pagan sexual rituals).”²⁵

The reason evangelical feminists sought to discover a negative sense for the word was evident: If Paul was only prohibiting women from somehow misusing authority, then the verse would not stop women from being pastors. Paul would be saying, “I do not permit a woman to misuse authority in order to teach a man,” but that would imply that rightful use of authority as a pastor was just fine. If someone wanted to dismiss the verse’s implications in this way, any negative meaning would do, and many were proposed.

Now the TNIV and the 2011 NIV have come up with yet another negative meaning, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet” (1 Tim. 2:12). This meaning was also proposed by Philip B. Payne, in his book, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*.²⁶ He claims the verse means, “I am not permitting a woman to assume authority to teach a man.”²⁷ He says, “The false teachers were teaching their own unauthorized doctrines with self-assumed, not delegated, authority . . . This prohibition does not, however, restrict teaching by authorized women, such as Priscilla (2 Tim 4:19).”²⁸

However, there are significant objections to the translation “assume authority”.²⁹

(1) An exhaustive survey of 82 ancient examples of this verb by H. Scott Baldwin found that it overwhelmingly indicated a neutral or positive concept of ruling or reigning, not a negative idea.³⁰ Although Baldwin concludes that one possible meaning was “assume authority,” he warns that he does not intend this to be understood in a negative sense: “Meaning 3a, ‘to assume authority over,’ is a positive term that appears to imply that one moves forward to fill the leadership role.”³¹ Therefore Baldwin’s study cannot rightly be used in support of the NIV’s rendering, which will frequently be taken in a negative sense of wrongly taking self-assumed authority.

²⁵ See quotations in Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), pp. 305-306.

²⁶ Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 361-397.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 396, emphasis added.

²⁹ See Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), pp. 304-318, for a fuller discussion of these objections.

³⁰ H. Scott Baldwin, “A Difficult Word: Authenteō in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 65–80 and 269–305.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

(2) A study by Andreas Köstenberger of 100 parallel examples of the same sentence structure in Greek (the structure “neither X nor Y”) showed that in every example, both of the actions were viewed positively (as in “they neither sow nor harvest”) or negatively (as in “neither break in nor steal”). But in 1 Timothy 2:12, the verb “teach” represents an activity that is viewed positively in Paul’s writings, and therefore the verb “exercise authority” must also be an activity that is viewed positively.³²

(3) A massive study not only of the verb *authentēō* but also of several cognate terms by Albert Wolters concludes, “There seems to be no basis for the claim that *authentēō* in 1 Tim. 2:12 has a pejorative connotation, as in ‘usurp authority’ or ‘domineer.’”³³

(4) In a very recent article, Al Wolters finds fresh new evidence for this verb from a previously-misdated papyrus. He argues again that *authentēō* did not have a negative sense in examples close to the time of the New Testament, and that the “ingressive” sense (“begin to exercise authority”) is found only in the aorist tense, not in the present tense as in 1 Timothy 2:12.³⁴ This implies that both the “positive” sense and the “negative” sense of the NIV’s “assume authority” are incorrect.

(5) Another problem with all of these negative meanings is that they cannot adequately explain why Paul prohibits only women and not men from this activity. Why would he say, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to misuse authority”? Would it not also be wrong for men to misuse authority?

Why, then, does the 2011 NIV use the translation “assume authority”? The NIV’s translation committee says that the benefit is that this “leaves the question open.” But leaving a verse open to an incorrect interpretation is not a virtue.

I think the NIV committee failed to appreciate that evangelical feminists who want to become pastors are not going to take “assume authority” in a positive sense at all. They will uniformly take it to prohibit a wrongful “self-assumed authority,” and then say they are not “assuming authority” on their own but just accepting it from the church. And so 1 Timothy 2:12 in the NIV has become useless in the debate over women’s roles in the church. In any church that adopts the 2011 NIV, no one will be able to answer their argument using this English Bible.

³² Andreas J. Köstenberger, “A Complex Sentence Structure in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church*, ed. Köstenberger et al., 81–103. See also Köstenberger’s response to inadequately-grounded criticisms by Philip B. Payne in *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Fall, 2008, p. 5 (available at http://www.cbmw.org/images/jbmw_pdf/13_2/odds%20ends.pdf).

³³ Al Wolters, “A Semantic Study of *authentēs* and its Derivatives,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000), 170-71. (This journal is so far only available online; see <http://divinity.mcmaster.ca/pages/jgrchj/index.html>).

³⁴ Al Wolters, “An Early Parallel of *authentēin* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” forthcoming in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, December, 2011. [*need page numbers]. I am grateful to Al Wolters for providing me with a pre-publication copy of this article.

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood is surely correct to say, “This verse alone in the 2011 NIV gives evangelical feminists the most important advance for their cause in the last thirty years. But the translation is simply incorrect, as many writers have demonstrated in extensive scholarly discussion elsewhere, and as all other modern English translations agree.”³⁵

Because of these changes in gender language is not surprising that in June, 2011, the Southern Baptist Convention overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling the 2011 NIV “an inaccurate translation” and said, “We cannot commend the 2011 NIV to Southern Baptists or to the larger Christian community.”³⁶

Passage #15: Jude 1:7

The surprising translation, “that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe” (Jude 1:5, ESV), is also adopted by the NLT (“Jesus first rescued the nation of Israel from Egypt”). This is based on a judgment about different Greek manuscripts. The HCSB and NIV have the phrase “the Lord” instead of the word “Jesus.”

I think that the ESV and NLT have made the right decision in this case. The Greek manuscripts that have the reading “Jesus” are older, more reliable, and more diverse. In addition, this is a “more difficult” reading (that is, it is more likely to have been changed by scribes who puzzled about it), and it is the reading that best explains the other manuscripts (because scribes would easily switch “the Lord” for “Jesus,” but it is hard to understand why they would switch in the other direction). Therefore, this reading meets the criteria usually used to decide such questions among Greek manuscripts. Theologically, it reminds us that the same Jesus who walked the earth during the period of the Gospels is also the eternal Son of God who was actively at work in the world during the time of the Old Testament.

Passage #16: Rev. 3:20: Loss of “he” and “him” and emphasis on personal relationship with God

a. “He” and “him” in Revelation 3:20

ESV Rev. 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

³⁵ Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, *An Evaluation of Gender Language in the 2011 Edition of the NIV Bible*, p. 6 (found at www.cbmw.org). CBMW also objects to feminist bias in the translation of 1 Cor. 14:33-34 (which now implies a limited local regulation) and Rom. 16:1 (which now makes Junia unambiguously an apostle).

³⁶ See <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=35565>.

BGT Rev. 3:20 Ἴδου Ἰστηκα Ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν κατὰ κρούω· Ἐἴν τις ἀκουσῆ τῆς φωνῆς μου κατὰ ἀνοίξῃ τὴν θύραν, [κατὰ] εἰσελευσομαι πρὸς αὐτὸν κατὰ δεῖπνῶσω μετ' αὐτοῦ κατὰ αὐτοῦ μετ' ἐμοῦ.

NIV Rev. 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

NLT Rev. 3:20 "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.

This is a troubling example of the damage that is done to a translation when it is trying every way possible to avoid the unacceptable words “he” and “him.” The ESV has translated the verse accurately, because the three words “him,” “him,” and “he” accurately represent the three occurrences of the masculine singular Greek pronoun *autos* (“he, him”) in the Greek text.

But if you are trying to avoid “he” and “him” because they are thought to be objectionable today, then changes have to be made. So the NIV changes “him” to the awkward expression, “that person” which sounds distant and impersonal, and simply draws attention to itself as a sort of “gender-neutral,” politically correct terminology. In addition, the NIV has to say, “and they with me,” and the reader wonders if it’s a personal relationship with Jesus anymore, or if it includes the whole group of all the people included in “if anyone hears my voice” in the earlier part of the sentence. The idea of personal relationship with Jesus is obscured. (A similar loss of personal relationship through a change to plurals is seen in John 14:23, where the “anyone” will make readers think of a plural group that Jesus and the Father will come to.)

Furthermore, part of the verse is left out. In the Greek text, Jesus clearly says, “I will come in to him.” But the new NIV just decides to leave out “to him” altogether (it is *pros autōn* in Greek).

The NLT also wanted to avoid the words “him” and “he” so they changed it to “if you hear my voice.” But the reader does not know if the “you” is singular or plural. Once again personal relationship with Jesus and the individual believer is obscured. And once again, “to him” is completely omitted. The NLT’s idea of sharing a meal “as friends” is a nice thought, but there is nothing in the Greek text that speaks about friendship. This is just the NLT’s attempt to recover some personal nuance to the verse even though the idea of Jesus eating with an individual person is no longer found.

b. A broader loss of emphasis on an individual’s relationship with God

Does this kind of change from “him” to “them” make any difference? Of course it does. The Bible’s emphasis on an individual’s personal relationship with God and personal responsibility to God is of great importance. But in the 2011 NIV the singular words “he/him/his” in such verses were found to be objectionable, because they were too “masculine” sounding. And so they were changed to plurals such as “they,” “them,” or to “you,” or to something else over 2,000 times.

(This does not count the times when the NIV was using “them” in a “singular” sense in specific contexts.)³⁷

When a translation makes this many changes, the Bible’s emphasis on the relationship between the individual person and God is significantly blunted. This is distorting one strand of the Bible’s teaching—the strand that uses a lot of individual male examples to teach a general truth. The 2011 NIV found that kind of teaching to be objectionable and it has removed it over 2,000 times from the Bible.

It is interesting and somewhat baffling, however, that the 2011 NIV still used “he” occasionally in sentences like this:

Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves (Rom. 14:22).

Psalm 34:19, which was widely criticized in the TNIV because of the loss of the singular in a Messianic prophecy, has now been corrected in the 2011 NIV:

The righteous person may have many troubles but the Lord delivers him from them all (Ps. 34:19, NIV 2011).

This is a change from the 2005 TNIV. That edition removed, as far as I know, every instance of “he” used in a generic sense in statements like this where a singular male example is used to teach a general truth. But now in the 2011 NIV they have used it occasionally, but rarely. The apparent reason is that the Collins Bank of English, a database of more than 4.4 billion words, showed that this construction was still used about 8% of the time.³⁸

This indicates to me the weakness of simply depending on the Collins Bank of English and their perception of frequency of English usage. Even if this construction only occurs 8% of the time in English, what if the use of such masculine singular pronouns in Greek and Hebrew occurs 100% of the time in this kind of construction in the Bible? Shouldn’t we then translate it accurately 100% of the time in verses like John 14:23?³⁹

A construction that occurs 8% of the time is still quite frequent in English. It means that people can still understand such an expression quite well. And it is the most accurate representation of the original statement in Greek in verses like John 14:23.

c. Some respected authorities consider singular “they” unacceptable in formal English

³⁷ See the detailed list of verses at www.cbmw.org.

³⁸ “Summary of Collins Corpus Report,” available at www.NIV-cbt.org, p. 2.

³⁹ More detailed analysis and criticism of the use of the Collins Bank of English is found in Vern Poythress, “Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011), pp. 89-95.

In addition, a use of “they” in a singular sense is still considered by many experts and many ordinary readers to be unacceptable in written English today. For example, the 2010 edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the most authoritative guide to English usage today, says,

Many people substitute the plural they and their for the singular he or she. Although they and their have become common in informal usage, neither is considered acceptable in formal writing, so unless you are given guidelines to the contrary, do not use them in a singular sense.⁴⁰

The latest edition (2009) of the *Associated Press Stylebook* says,

Use the pronoun his when an indefinite antecedent may be male or female: A reporter tries to protect his sources. (Not his or her sources . . .)⁴¹

I mention these authorities to say that the NIV has clearly taken one side of a disputed matter in English today. It certainly was not a necessary matter of modern English usage that led the NIV translators to decide to use “they” in a “singular” sense when translating masculine singular pronouns in Hebrew or Greek in the Bible. And when the context makes readers think (as in John 14:23) that “they” should be understood in a plural sense, the translation wrongly loses the focus on the individual person that was there in the original Hebrew or Greek text.

d. Which pronouns can you now trust?

There is yet a more serious problem that comes when the NIV and NLT change many hundreds of examples of “he/him/his” to something like “they” or “you” (see Luke 16:13, for example, where “he” has become “you” in the NIV and NLT). The problem is not only the hundreds of verses that were changed, but the lack of confidence that readers now will have in every example of “they” and “you” in the NIV and NLT.

Pastors and Bible study leaders can no longer be confident that they can make a point based on the third person plural pronouns (“they/them/those”) or the second person pronouns (“you/your/yours”) in the NIV and NLT, because these words might not accurately represent the actual meaning of the Greek or Hebrew text. This affects not just the hundreds of pronouns that were changed from singulars, but all the second person pronouns and all the third person plural pronouns, a total of around 40,000 pronouns in each of these versions. Maybe the original was a plural (“them”), but then again maybe “them” is a gender-neutral substitute for an underlying masculine singular pronoun (“he”). How can ordinary readers know? They can’t, unless they check the Greek or Hebrew text in every case, and who is going to do that? Do Bible readers

⁴⁰ *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), section 5.227, p. 303.

⁴¹ *Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 131.

really want to study or memorize or teach from a text where tens of thousands of pronouns are thrown into doubt?

Because the ESV and the HCSB followed a philosophy of accurately translating masculine singular pronouns in Hebrew and Greek with masculine singulars in English (“he/him/his”), these two translations are much more trustworthy in rendering the tens of thousands of pronouns that occur in the Bible.

Passage #17 (wildcard verse): Romans 3:25: Retaining theological terms like “propitiation”

As an essentially literal translation, the ESV is willing to preserve more theological terms. One example is seen in Romans 3:25:

ESV Rom. 3:25: [Christ Jesus] whom God put forward as a propitiation (Gk hilastērion) by his blood, to be received by faith.

HCSB Rom. 3:25 God presented Him as a propitiation through faith in His blood,

NIV Rom 3:25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood--to be received by faith.

NLT Rom. 3:25 For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.

The Greek word hilastērion means “a sacrifice that bears God’s wrath and turns it to favor.” This was a common term in the ancient world where, even in pagan religions, people were familiar with the concept of sacrifices that would turn away the wrath of an offended deity. This was the term the New Testament writers used in several key verses to speak of Jesus’ death as a “propitiation” (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; and 1 John 2:2 and 4:10).

There is no other English word than “propitiation” that means “a sacrifice that bears the wrath of a deity.” But the word “propitiation” has that meaning. This presents us with two choices. We can simply abandon the word and thereby give up (or make much more difficult) the idea of teaching people this important concept, central to the doctrine of Christ’s atoning death for us. Or we can retain the word and thereby retain this important concept in the New Testament. It is very difficult to teach the concept to people who do not even have this word in their Bibles.

For this reason, the ESV and the HCSB have retained the word “propitiation” and thereby retained the ability of pastors to explain this doctrine that is at the heart of our understanding of salvation.

But the NIV has given up the term “propitiation” and has substituted the more vague expression, “sacrifice of atonement.” The NLT has used the phrase “sacrifice for sin.” Both of them are devoid of the concept of bearing the wrath of God against sin, a concept that is being

challenged by a number of writers today, and one that is crucial for a correct understanding of salvation in the New Testament.

I do not have space to discuss other terms with theological implications here, but for other examples I would mention that in contrast to some of the other versions in this forum, the ESV retains “saints” as a term for Christians, shows a pattern of literally laying on of hands in passages such as Mark 6:2 and Acts 5:12, and retains “spirit” in verses like Acts 17:16 and 2 Corinthians 2:13.

One advantage of the ESV is that it retains such theological terms.

IV. Conclusion

Out of several good translations today I prefer the ESV because

1. It preserves more literal accuracy in details
2. It preserves the best of the best in the KJV tradition
3. It has better literary excellence
4. It preserves more of the interpretative options that were available to original readers
5. It is not gender-neutral but more accurately translates terms that refer to men and women
6. It preserves more theological terms

I believe that the ESV has these advantages because it is an excellent example of an “essentially literal” translation. It takes seriously the responsibility to translate faithfully every word of God that he gave us in the Bible. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).