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The Excellence of the English Standard Version

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In 2011 the Session introduced the English Standard Version (ESV) as the pew Bible for North Toowoomba Presbyterian Church. It is therefore the translation of the Scriptures used for preaching and readings in church services and at Bible studies. We are very blessed to have the most accurate and reliable translation ever produced in our language.

I was brought up with the King James Version (KJV), also known as the Authorised Version (AV), which dates back to 1611. My heart will always resonate with its style and beauty. I was still carrying my old KJV when I commenced studies at the Presbyterian Theological College in Melbourne in 1992. One of the reasons I had chosen that institution was because of its high standards in teaching the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew and Greek) in which I majored in my degree.

I spent more time translating these ancient languages than in any other subject by far. It is a time-consuming labour, but deeply rewarding as well. I am grateful to be able to have the original texts open before me when I prepare messages.

I think one of the key reasons that the Presbyterian Church of Australia is a gospel-preaching denomination today is the deep respect for the

Scriptures that is instilled in those studying for the ministry.

The principal at the college at the time was Dr Allan Harman, who was also Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew. He was one of the translators of the New King James Version (NKJV), which was published in 1982. He gave me a copy, and graciously encouraged me to consider it.

I could see the precision of the updated language, and I enjoyed the fact that most of the wording and metre of the KJV had been retained. I could also see why it was a much better update of the KJV than the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of 1952.

The NKJV remained my personal favourite for many years. However, like most Presbyterian ministers I had to deal with the New International Version (NIV) when it came to preaching. It was the standard pew Bible in most churches.

The NIV first appeared in the 1970s, and the edition most people know is that of 1984. Its plain style made no attempt to follow the cadence of the KJV and proved popular with people wanting a modern presentation.

However, the NIV is an example of a different method of Bible translation. It is called “dynamic equivalence” as opposed to the “formal equivalence” used in the KJV and NKJV and also in the New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1971).

To understand this, imagine that we are in a hardware store together. We are in the paint section, and we are looking at all the colour cards available in one brand. We’ll call that display the Greek language. We then move to another brand’s area, with all of its unique colour cards, and we’ll call that the English language.

Now imagine if we were to take all the colour cards of the “Greek” brand, with their subtle hues and various finishes, and we tried to match them as closely as we could to the “English” brand.

For the purpose of this illustration, let’s say that most of the matches are exact or so close you can hardly tell them apart. Others are reasonably close, some vaguely close, and for some there are no effective matches at all.

Trying to match the colours as closely as possible is a demonstration of what happens with word-for-word “formal equivalence” translation.

However, imagine now that someone else has come along and, instead of matching the colours, they

open the tins of paint and try to mix the “English” colours together to create “thoughts” to match the “Greek” ones. This may seem like a good idea, but it is more subject to a person’s preferences and biases. This is what happens in “dynamic equivalence” translation, and conservative scholars tend to be wary of it.

Most preachers who have been trained in the original texts experience a degree of frustration working with the NIV. In many respects it is quite a good translation, but often there is a looseness where the translator has tried to innovate in getting an idea across. He may think he has succeeded, but often preachers wish he had stuck closer to the original words instead of paraphrasing it.

More extreme “dynamic equivalence” translations are The Living Bible (TLB, 1971), the Good News Bible (GNB, 1976), and the New Living Translation (NLT, 1996). These translations still convey the gospel, and our unlimited God can use them despite their limitations. I have no doubt that many people have been converted and comforted by the promises of God with such a text in their hands. However, when we have a choice, there is a much better alternative for a Bible translation, and that is the ESV.

The English Standard Version is a “formal equivalence” translation in the KJV/NKJV family. It is both a successor of, and an improvement upon, this heritage. In the opinion of leading Reformed scholars around the world it has the greatest accuracy and faithfulness to the original text, conveyed with the clearest expression of English.

The reason that the KJV had such poetic style was not because the translators were trying to emulate Shakespeare (who was a contemporary). It came about because the KJV was a close word-for-word substitution of the original language. This meant that to some extent it modified the way the English words were ordered and phrased. This sounds poetic to our ear, even though it is really just because it is English that sounds “a bit Hebrew or Greek”!

The ESV follows in this tradition of complete loyalty to the original text. Often long sentences could have been broken into shorter ones, words rearranged, and paraphrases used, but instead the translators have kept as close as possible to the original constructions, which again makes it sound “a bit Hebrew or Greek”. Some people consider this too “wooden” whereas others see it as a badge of faithfulness.

Gender has become an area of controversy in modern translations with some, like the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989) and the

latest revision of the New International Version (NIV, 2011), opting for gender-inclusive language.

It is a serious error to minimise the gender characteristics in the Bible; however, it is equally a mistake to over-emphasise them. There are always conspiracy theories surrounding translations, and even the ESV has been accused of fudging on gender. However, such claims are misguided and ignorant when they rely on the KJV as a standard of measure instead of the original text and a knowledge of its meaning, grammar and usage.

It is easy to demonstrate that the ESV is extremely accurate and consistent in all aspects, including gender.

For example, in the Letter of James, the readers are repeatedly addressed as “brothers” (1:2, 2:1, etc.), but there is no doubt that, in the original usage of the underlying Greek word, James was speaking to the women in the church as well. To claim otherwise is to deny what the Bible is saying.

A faithful preacher will make this clear by applying the passage to all “Christians” (male and female) or to “brothers and sisters”. He would be failing if he did otherwise.

We can thank the ESV translators for using the word “brothers” and not adding two words that aren’t there “and sisters” (NRSV, NIV 2011) or paraphrasing it as “friends” (GNB). But at the same time we dare not add an exclusive meaning to the Greek word for “brothers” when the usage of the language includes women as well.

Similarly, James 1:12 says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial”. The Greek word here is a basic word for “man”, and so the ESV has translated it as such. But in terms of the grammar and meaning of the sentence, the blessing also applies equally to women.

Another helpful example is seen in James 1:7, which the ESV renders as “For that person must not suppose...”. The Greek word in this case is one that generally means “person”. The KJV is actually less accurate when it translates it as “man”, especially if anyone takes it to mean that James is addressing males only. Again, the ESV serves the original text very well.

When the Bible wants to address males and females distinctly it uses different language, constructions, and contrasts, and this is most carefully reflected in the ESV.

As the respected Presbyterian preacher Rev Eric Alexander has said, “I thank God for the ESV. It combines up-to-date accuracy in the text and absolute faithfulness to the words of Scripture with a literary skill and beauty in the translation which, in my judgment, is unsurpassed.”