



*The
English
Standard
Version*

What today's Christian needs to know about the
ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

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The Revised Standard Version of the Bible, first published on 30 September 1952, has been a theological, spiritual and translational battleground for fifty years. During those years many people from liberal, neo-orthodox and even conservative backgrounds have used it and in many instances endorsed it. Some from the evangelical camp have even classified themselves as “closet RSV people”.¹ This writer has met a number of such in both the United Kingdom and the USA. It is people like these who have formed the movement to produce a conservative revision of the RSV. The English Standard Version is the result. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the ESV is a light revision of the RSV and that, because of the textual basis and translational errors carried over from the RSV, it is not a trustworthy translation of the Bible.

Michael Marlowe gives insights into the origins of the ESV.

This is an evangelical revision of the Revised Standard Version that corrects the non-Christian interpretations of the RSV in the Old Testament and improves the accuracy throughout with more literal renderings. It also updates the language somewhat. The makers of this version undertook the work with the idea that there was a need for an evangelical version that was more literal than the New International Version but more idiomatic than the New American Standard Bible. The Revised Standard Version seemed close enough to this middle ground that it might be suitably revised in a short period of time.²

WORLD Magazine from June 5, 1999, in discussing some of the new translations in English, provides some detail of the circumstances under which the ESV was conceived.

The second translation hoping to pick up some of the Bible share lost by the NIV is the English Standard Version (ESV), announced in February by Crossway Books. The version had its roots in discussions that took place before the May 1997 meeting called by James Dobson at Focus on the Family headquarters to resolve the inclusive NIV issue.

The night prior to the meeting, critics of regendered language gathered in a Colorado Springs hotel room to discuss the next day’s strategy. During the course of the evening it became clear their concerns with the NIV extended beyond gender issues. The group discussed the merits of the Revised Standard Version, first published in 1952 by the National Council of Churches and recently replaced by the New Revised Standard Version, a regendered update.

Some months later, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School professor Wayne Grudem and Crossway President Lane Dennis entered into negotiations with the National Council of Churches to use the 1971 revision of the Revised Standard Version as the basis for a new translation. An agreement was reached in September 1998 allowing translators freedom to modify the original text of the RSV as necessary to rid it of de-Christianising translation choices.³

The ESV has been widely endorsed by numerous conservative theologians, pastors and denominations. The ESV Classic Reference Bible won the Evangelical Christian Publisher

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Association's Gold Medallion Award. It has been thought of as the formal equivalence answer to the New International Version. The Society has received numerous questions from people in churches which are planning to switch to the ESV from the NIV, AV, NKJV and other versions. They want to know if this new version is as good as the advertising says it is. Most of these pastors and church leaders would not give the RSV a chance to become their church Bible and yet are considering a change to the ESV.

The English Standard Version's name has caused some people not to understand that it is a revision of the RSV. It is clearly stated in the ESV itself that the ESV "is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA".⁴ It boasts that "words and phrases themselves grow out of the Tyndale-King James legacy, and most recently out of the RSV" but goes on to state that it is "the 1971 RSV text providing the starting point for our work".⁵ However, the name change from something identifying it as a close revision of the RSV does not seem to have come across to the average reader. Of course, it could not be called the New Revised Standard Version, since that name was already taken by another revision of the RSV. Thus a new name, the English Standard Version, was chosen.

The great similarity between the two versions can clearly be seen in the following verses. The ESV text is quoted in full, with the RSV readings where they differ given in squared brackets []. In some passages, there are no differences between the two.

Genesis 1:1-2

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over [upon] the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering [moving] over the face of the waters.

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.²He was in the beginning with God.³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Romans 3:21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it –²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:²³for [since] all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴and [RSV omits and][they] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that [which] is in Christ Jesus,²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation [an expiation] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

1 John 1:5-10

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.⁶If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice [live according to] the truth.⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us

from all sin. ⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to [and will] forgive us [*omit* us] our sins and to [*omit* to] cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Psalm 51:1-4

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your [thy] steadfast love;
according to your [thy] abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you [thee], you [thee] only, have
I sinned
and done what [that which] is evil in
your [thy] sight,
so that you [thou] may be [art] justified in
your [thy] words [sentence]
and blameless in your [thy] judgment.

Thus, the reader can see how light a revision the ESV truly is.

With this in mind, we note the extravagant claim made by Dr. J. I. Packer, General Editor of the ESV:

We are standing on the shoulders of all who went before us. We are drawing on commentaries, which roll off the press in great numbers these days. We are drawing on the increased knowledge of the culture of the ancient world, which modern study has given us. We are drawing on the fact that computers now enable us to search the English Bible, the whole of the Hebrew heritage, the whole of the Greek heritage that has come down to us. It makes it a great deal easier for us to handle particular words and make decisions about how best to translate them. ***And in all these ways I think the ESV is going to go beyond its predecessors and establish itself as, in effect, the new King James for the 21st century.***⁶ [emphasis added]

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATION

The tendency in translation over the past few decades has been toward dynamic equivalence. As seen in the New International Version, the translators seek to find the thoughts behind the text rather than being concerned with the words themselves. However, with the publication of the ESV we find a refreshing move back toward more formal translation.

The ESV is an ‘**essentially literal**’ translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on ‘word-for-word’ correspondence, at the same

time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.⁷

This work was undertaken by a large group of skilled men and women.

The ESV publishing team includes more than 100 people. The fourteen-member Translation Oversight Committee has benefited from the work of more than fifty biblical experts serving as Translation Review Scholars and from the comments of more than fifty members of the Advisory Council, all of which has been carried out under the auspices of the Good News-Crossway Board of Directors. This 100-member team, which is international and represents many denominations, shares a commitment to historic evangelical orthodoxy, and to the authority and sufficiency of the inerrant Scriptures.⁸

The members of the Translation Oversight Committee were:

Dr. J. I. Packer, ESV General Editor

Board of Governors and Professor of Theology, Regent College (Vancouver, BC)

Dr. Clifford John Collins, OT Chairman

Associate Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

Dr. Lane T. Dennis, Publishing Chairman

President, Good News Publishers-Crossway Books

Dr. Wayne A. Grudem

Professor and Chairman, Department of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Dr. Paul R. House, OT Associate Chairman

Professor of Old Testament, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry

Dr. R. Kent Hughes

Senior Pastor, College Church in Wheaton

Dr. Robert H. Mounce, NT Associate Chairman

President Emeritus, Whitworth College

Dr. William D. Mounce, NT Chairman

Professor of New Testament, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Dr. Leland Ryken, Literary Chairman

Professor of English, Wheaton College

Dr. Vern Sheridan Poythress

Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary

Dr. Gordon Wenham, OT Associate Chairman

Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, The College of St. Paul and St. Mary (Cheltenham, UK)

Dr. Bruce Winter
Warden, Tyndale House (Cambridge, England)

Adjunct Members:
the Rev. David Jones
ESV Associate Editor, Good News Publishers-Crossway Books

the Rev. E. Marvin Padgett
Vice President, Editorial, Good News Publishers-Crossway Books⁹

CHANGES MADE TO THE RSV TEXT

One of the aims of the ESV revisers was to eliminate and correct the major translation problems with the RSV which had tended to lessen its acceptance by and usefulness to conservative and evangelical believers. The three most prominent of these are:

Isaiah 7.14 - “a young woman shall conceive” in the RSV which was corrected to “the virgin shall conceive”.

Romans 3.25 - “whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood” (RSV) is changed to “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood” (ESV). “Expiation” means “a covering for sin” whereas “propitiation” means “a wrath-ending sacrifice” which atones for sin.

Romans 9.5 - The RSV states “to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.” The ESV has “To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” Thus the RSV removes the deity of Christ (“God who is over all be blessed for ever”). The ESV restores the deity of Christ (“Christ who is God over all, blessed forever”). Christ is God who is over all.

In addition, the ESV translators sought to deal with conjectural emendations in the RSV Old Testament. There are instances in the Old Testament in which the Hebrew text is ambiguous or thought by some to be insufficient; there are a few Hebrew scholars who are unhappy with some readings found in the Masoretic Text, and even the ancient translations do not provide what they believe to be the correct reading. Therefore, they propose a conjectural emendation, “a suggestion for the wording of a particular problematic passage that is not supported by any extant manuscript evidence but seems nevertheless to be the best estimation as to the original text”.¹⁰ The RSV contained as many as six hundred such instances.¹¹ In almost all instances, emendations go well beyond acceptable practices in conservative translation. These emendations are especially numerous in the book of Job. The ESV translators corrected most of these changes to the Old Testament text.

Thus, in several ways the ESV is a definite improvement in translation over many of the modern versions. But even with these corrections, numerous problems still remain and are perpetuated in the ESV.

THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

The ESV boasts its close relation to “the Tyndale-King James legacy”, but it needs to be remembered what the introduction to the RSV stated about this tradition. “The King James Version of the New Testament was based upon a Greek text that was marred by mistakes, containing the accumulated errors of fourteen centuries of manuscript copying”. Of the text underlying the RSV, they said, “We now possess many more ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, and are better equipped to seek to recover the original wording of the Greek text”.¹² The RSV translators used eclectic principles for each variant, but the text used approximates the Nestle 17th edition of the critical text of the Greek New Testament.¹³

The ESV translators used similar textual principles for each variant and for the most part followed the United Bible Societies’ 4th edition/Nestle-Aland 27th edition¹⁴ which is based upon modern eclectic principles of text criticism. Thus in the New Testament there are the normal serious problems associated with the use of the Critical Greek text. The following verses are **omitted** from the ESV Bible in their entirety but are found in the Textus Receptus Greek New Testament, the text which underlies the New Testament of Reformation-era translations:

Matthew 17.21, 18.11, 23.14

Mark 7.16, 9.44, 9.46, 11.26, 15.28

Luke 17.36, 23.17

John 5.4

Acts 8.37, 15.34, 28.29

Romans 16.24

1 John 5.7 (the famous Trinitarian reading known as the Johannine Comma is **omitted without any footnote** to explain its omission)

Although there are a few attempts to correct the textual basis of the RSV using the eclectic method (“God” is returned to Matthew 6.33 and all of Matthew 21.44 is found in the ESV), there are still many hundreds of omissions and changes (see the Society’s article 100, *A Textual Key to the New Testament*, for a list of these). Following are examples of these:

1 Timothy 3.16

AV God was manifest in the flesh

RSV He was manifested in the flesh

ESV He was manifested in the flesh

Thus a clear reference where Jesus is called God is removed in the RSV and is not revised or corrected in the ESV.

Matthew 19.9

AV And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

RSV And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.

ESV And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.

Thus the prohibition of marriage to a divorced wife is omitted. In our day and age we do not need omissions like this:

Matthew 5.44

AV But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you

RSV But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

ESV But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

Thus the missing phrases rob the reader of the extent and intensity of those persecuting the believer (note the RSV and ESV are identical).

Two further problematic textual readings should be noted. In Matthew 1.7 the genealogy of Jesus has “Asa”, who was most certainly a king, and the Textus Receptus has Asa here. The Critical Text, both the Westcott-Hort text and the UBS 4th editions, has “Asaph”, who was a singer and not a king. Most English translations would not dare to put “Asaph” as an ancestor of Jesus even though this is the Critical Text reading. The RSV, ASV, NASB, NASB revised, NIV and the New Jerusalem Bible have “Asa”. The ESV, NRSV and the NLT have “Asaph”. The same problem is found in Matthew 1.10 where “Amon” (the king) is in many modern versions while “Amos” (the prophet) is in the Critical Text. The ESV follows the RSV and has “Amos” (“Amon” in ASV, NASB, NASB revised, NIV).

In addition to the textual problems, there are the related footnotes which attempt to inform the reader of textual changes made to the text. The most common phrase is the non-committal “Some manuscripts add...”. This phrase attempts to avoid the problems associated with notes which evaluate the evidence from a biased viewpoint, e.g., “early (or later) manuscripts...”, “the best manuscripts...”, “very few manuscripts...” etc., but does not help in explaining the reasons for the changes and omissions. It comes across to some people that the Word of God is being called into question.

In John 7.53-8.11 (ESV) there is a set of in-text squared brackets which includes the statement “[the earliest manuscripts do not include John 7:53-8:11]”. The entire passage is blocked off with double brackets and then adds the footnote “Some manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11; others add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38 with variations in the text”. This calls into question the authority of this familiar passage by making it appear that, not only do we not know if the passage should be in the text, but we do not even know *where* it should be located if it is included!

In Mark 16.9-20 there is a set of in-text squared brackets which includes the statement “[Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9-20.]”. This passage is enclosed in double brackets and includes a long technical textual footnote which questions the inclusion of this passage and mentions the alternative “short ending” of Mark’s Gospel. It is doubtful

whether the average layman reading the footnote would be able to understand it. More problematic, what the footnote does not tell the reader is that the “long ending” of Mark’s Gospel is included in *every* manuscript which includes this portion of the Gospel with the exception of three: the two famous Alexandrian uncial manuscripts, the Sinai (Ⲁ) and the Vatican (B), and the minuscule manuscript 304.

TEXTUAL PROBLEMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament text which was used by the ESV translators/revisers was *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (2nd ed., 1983). Further reference came from the Dead Sea Scrolls and ancient translations of the Hebrew text such as the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Latin Vulgate and the Syriac Peshitta. The Old Testament in the RSV had numerous problems. Although the revisers/translators of the ESV attempted to correct these weaknesses, they continued to let speculative RSV readings stay in the ESV. Although using the Hebrew text as the basis of their revision, there are places where they did not feel it necessary to follow the Hebrew text fully. One famous example is Judges 16.13b-14a.

AV ¹³And Delilah said unto Samson, Hitherto thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: tell me wherewith thou mightest be bound. And he said unto her, If thou weavest the seven locks of my head with the web. ¹⁴And she fastened *it* with the pin, and said unto him, The Philistines *be* upon thee, Samson. And he awaked out of his sleep, and went away with the pin of the beam, and with the web.

RSV ¹³And Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me, and told me lies; tell me how you might be bound.” And he said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web **and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man.**” ¹⁴**So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web.** And she made them tight with the pin, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web. (footnote: Compare Gk: Heb lacks *and make it tight... into the web.*)

ESV ¹³Then Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound.” And he said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web* **and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.**” ¹⁴**So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web.** And she made them tight with the pin and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web. (footnote: *Compare Septuagint; Hebrew lacks *and fasten it tight... into the web.*)

The ESV follows the lead of the NASB, NIV, NRSV and others in leaving the Hebrew text at this point and including the reading from the Septuagint.

In Psalm 84.5, the ESV follows the RSV and makes the interpretative addition of “to Zion”.

AV Blessed *is* the man whose strength *is* in thee; in whose heart *are* the ways *of them*.

RSV Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

ESV Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
(footnote: Hebrew lacks *to Zion*.)

This prepositional phrase is added to the RSV and ESV not because it is found in the Hebrew, but because of Hebrew poetry (in parallel stanzas) in the passage. In verse seven “in Zion” is used. It appears to be borrowed and placed in verse 5.

Another example of these additions/corrections is Psalm 145.13. On the basis of one Hebrew manuscript plus several ancient versions the ESV reads:

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
[The LORD is faithful in all his words
and kind in all his works.]

(footnote: These two lines are supplied by one Hebrew manuscript, Septuagint, Syriac [compare Dead Sea Scroll])

The RSV does not use brackets but separates the last sentence by double spacing.

“Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.” (Regarding the last fourteen words there is a footnote: “These two lines are supplied by one Hebrew Ms, Gk and Syr”.)

The problem with these and other textual additions and changes is that they do not come from the Hebrew text. Secondary translations such as the Septuagint may or may not be accurate translations of the Hebrew. Thus, the reader is at the mercy of the translator’s interpretative whims.

LANGUAGE ADDRESSING GOD

The AV translators, following the Greek and Hebrew texts, used “thee”, “thou” and “thine” to indicate “you” singular and “ye”, “you” and “your” for “you” plural. The RSV translators abandoned the practice of differentiating the second personal singular pronouns but continued to use “Thee”, “Thou” and “Thine” as a special form of language used for addressing God. The ESV translators/revisers saw this use as archaic and discontinued the practice. Regardless of the view one takes of the RSV’s use of the singular for God, not differentiating the singular and plural pronouns too often results in problematic interpretation or misinterpretation.

Luke 22.31-32

AV And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired *to have* you, that he may sift *you* as wheat: ³²But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.

RSV Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you,* that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned

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again, strengthen your brethren. *(footnote: "The Greek word for *you* here is plural; in verse 32 it is singular").

ESV Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you,* that he might sift you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. *(footnote: "The Greek word for *you* [twice in this verse] is plural; in verse 32, all four instances are singular")

The ESV's footnote helps (for those who bother to read footnotes) but many people still think that Jesus is saying that Satan desires to have Peter rather than Satan desiring to have the disciples. Jesus then gives the specific prayer that he has prayed for Peter.

1 Corinthians 3.16-17

AV Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and *that* the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? ¹⁷If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which *temple* ye are.

RSV Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.

ESV Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. (footnote: "The Greek for *you* is plural in verses 16 and 17")

Again, the footnote helps if the reader takes note of it, but many people still think that the temple referred to in these verses by Paul (and in 1 Corinthians 6.19-20) is the individual believer and not the *body* of Christ. In this individualistic "Me" generation (the secular man is often heard to say "My body is a temple, therefore I exercise"), this is an important point to notice which the AV clearly states.

Although the ESV in some instances attempts to help the reader by the use of footnotes to show how the original language text reads, this is at best inconsistent. A problem example is found in John 1.49-51 (bold added), in which no footnote is found.

AV Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, **thou** art the Son of God; **thou** art the King of Israel. ⁵⁰Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto **thee**, I saw **thee** under the fig tree, believest **thou?** **thou** shalt see greater things than these. ⁵¹And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto **you**, Hereafter **ye** shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

ESV Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, **you** are the Son of God! **You** are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered him, "Because I said to **you**, 'I saw **you** under the fig tree,' do **you** believe? **You** will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to **you**, **you** will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

In verses 49 and 50 in the ESV, the uses of "you" are singular. In verse 51 the two uses of "you" are plural. There is no footnote to indicate this. The AV reading of "thou" and "thee" in verses 49-50 indicate "you" singular. In verse 51 the "you" and "ye" indicate "you" plural. Thus Jesus is not just addressing Nathaniel. This direct reference from Genesis 28.12 has a wider audience. This can be easily seen from the AV but is impossible to see from the ESV.

GENDER ISSUES

One of the most noticeable features of the ESV is the numerous changes in gender. Since 1986, most translators have made it a point to remove “male orientated” language from modern translations. Many have sought to remove the “patriarchal language” of the Bible and change the gender of pronouns to make the text more politically correct and thus more acceptable to the masses. Translations such as the New Century Version, New RSV, NIV, Today’s NIV, NET and the New Living Translation are examples of these. Some are more radical than others.

In 1997, out of this gender confusion came a list of principles that modern translators could sign and follow. This document was called the Colorado Springs Guidelines. The ESV translators/revisers, while not endorsing the Colorado Springs Guidelines, make changes in the text based upon each individual word in the Hebrew and Greek which applies. This means that if a word in Hebrew or Greek is gender non-specific then it can be translated this way. The ESV promotional material says:

In the area of **gender language**, the goal of the ESV is to render literally what is in the original. For example, “anyone” replaces “any man” where there is no word corresponding to “man” in the original languages, and “people” rather than “men” is regularly used where the original languages refer to both men and women. But the words “man” and “men” are retained where a male meaning component is part of the original Greek or Hebrew.

The inclusive use of the generic “he” has also regularly been retained, because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and because an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it.¹⁵

In actual practice, this is used inconsistently. Notice that in Psalm 32 “he” is used in verse one and “the man” is found in verse two in both the AV and the RSV. The ESV changes the generic “he” to “the one” while retaining “the man” in verse two. Why could not the generic “he” be left in the text?

Psalm 32:1-2

AV *A Psalm of David, Maschil.*

Blessed is *he* whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.² Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit *there is* no guile.

RSV *A Psalm of David. A Maskil.* Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.² Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

ESV *A Maskil of David.*

¹ Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts
no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

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One of the practical problems is that verses – even from the RSV – which are familiar to many believers have these gender inclusive word changes. This use can have an awkward or jarring effect to the reader or hearer. Please note the following examples.

Matthew 6.1

RSV Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them;

ESV Beware of practicing your piety before other people in order to be seen by them;

Matthew 10.41

RSV he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.

ESV the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.

Matthew 18.7

RSV but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!

ESV but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!

Matthew 19.11

RSV But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this saying

ESV But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying

These are but a few examples of how the ESV treats gender language. Thus the ESV attempts to make generic changes which, it is speculated, meet a need (real or perceived) in modern Bible readers. This "gender-segregation" is more than that seen even in the 1995 NASB Revised edition which "makes about 85 changes that introduce gender-inclusive language",¹⁶ but is much less than the use in Today's NIV New Testament.

OTHER PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION

Further problems with the ESV include the normal errors made by modern translators. The phrase "through his blood" is missing from Colossians 1.14 (it is omitted from the majority of Greek manuscripts but is present in the Textus Receptus). It is usually stated that since the parallel idea is found in Ephesians 1.7, there is no loss of doctrinal meaning in modern versions. The problem is that if someone reads Colossians 1.14, the blood atonement is missing. If someone happens to use a reference Bible and looks up the reference in Ephesians, he will find the phrase "through his blood". But this is lost on the person who reads the text as it is written in Colossians. The same kind of problem is found in other passages which deal with subjects such as the virgin birth (Luke 2.33, 43) and the deity of Christ (1 Timothy 3.16). Whenever something is omitted in the text being read or memorised, it is usually found in other passages, but this does not help the reader who is not aware of the other verses.

Another problematic translation is the use of the term “only begotten”. The ESV follows the RSV by changing “only begotten Son” referring to the Lord Jesus Christ to “only Son” in the Gospel of John. So, John 3.16 reads “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (see also John 1.14, 18; 3.18 and 1 John 4.9). This is particularly problematic in John 3.16, that great verse so often used in witnessing of salvation through the distinctive Son of God.

It is very clear that there is a very close relationship between the ESV and the RSV. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publisher in the USA, have said in correspondence that 91% of the ESV is word-for-word the same as the RSV. When gender-related language changes and the uses of “Thee”, “Thou” and “Thine” referring to Deity are removed, the percentage would be much higher. It is essentially the same version as the RSV but with some evangelical changes to make it more appealing to conservative Christians.

MARKET FOR THE ESV

An important question must be asked. It is, “To whom will the ESV appeal?”. First, the “Bibleholic” will like it. This is someone who just has to have every new translation which comes onto the market. Second, it will appeal to those who are never satisfied with any translation and hope that the newest one will finally be the best. Third, people who perhaps secretly used and enjoyed the RSV but were concerned about the liberal elements in it may like the ESV.

Many NIV users may be tempted to change to the ESV. The past twenty years has seen many individuals and churches change to the NIV, having accepted the Zondervan marketing statements that the NIV is the best. But some of these Christians have become concerned over its lack of accuracy and literalness, complaining that it takes too much freedom with basic Bible truth. They claim that they would switch if something more accurate and readable was produced. In addition, NASB users may want to switch to a formal equivalence version which is not as “wooden” or difficult to read as the NASB, and the NKJV user who is not concerned with textual matters but desires a Bible which is easier to read may see the ESV as the legitimate choice. It seems there will always be a market for whatever is new in Bible publishing.

People who are concerned with the truth of the Bible will not be fooled by this new version once they see that it is merely a slightly revised edition of the RSV. Since Crossway does not have the financial backing of the publishers of the NIV, there does not seem to be much of a future for the ESV. Perhaps if there had been an ESV in the 1970s, there would not have been an NIV and the even worse translations which have flooded the market today. Regardless, it appears that the desire for, and flood of, new translations will never end.

CONCLUSION

The preface to the ESV refers to the legacy of translation, stating that the words and phrases of the ESV “grow out of the Tyndale-King James legacy...”.¹⁷ This is written to give a sort of solidarity to the line of succeeding translations. The ESV is not an entirely new translation, and claims to fall into the traditional line of formal equivalence translations seen since the beginning of English versions. The ESV attempts to fit easily into the kind of translations which have the same characteristics as the Tyndale New Testament and the AV. But does it succeed? When given a cursory consideration, it appears to; it appears that the statements made about it are true. But does this bear up under closer examination? Consider the following facts.

1. Does the ESV New Testament textual basis follow this “legacy”? No, it does not. The textual basis of the AV was the Textus Receptus New Testament while the textual basis of the ESV was the modern UBS 4th edition/Nestle-Aland 27th edition Greek text using modern eclectic principles of text criticism.

2. Does the ESV Old Testament textual basis follow this “legacy”? No, it does not. The AV used the Bomberg text with a few references to the Latin Vulgate and several other translations of the Old Testament; the ESV's use of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, which is almost identical to Bomberg (less than 12 differences which make a difference in the English text), can indeed be considered a part of the legacy. But the ESV preface states that “in exceptional, difficult cases, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and other sources were consulted to shed possible light on the text, or, if necessary, to support a divergence from the Masoretic text”.¹⁸ This use of other sources goes beyond the legacy and removes the ESV from the lineage it boasts.

3. Is the use of second person pronouns the same in the ESV and its predecessors? No, it is not. The AV and other editions use different pronouns for “you” singular and “you” plural in keeping with the Biblical language texts in order to avoid confusion in understanding the text. The ESV uses forms of “you” with what the translators considered to be the more important places indicated by a footnote. Not every occurrence that causes difficulty has such a footnote, however.

4. Is the use of italics the same in the ESV as in other versions in the legacy? No, it is not. The AV used italics to indicate places where the Biblical language texts did not have the words represented in the text but were demanded usually by the syntax or grammatical structure of the Hebrew and Greek. The ESV, following the RSV lead, has no use of italics whatsoever.

One further point needs to be added to the “legacy issue”. When theological terms such as “only begotten”, “firstborn” and “grace” are altered to “only” (John 1.14), “a son” (Matthew 1.25) and “favour” for “grace” in numerous places in the Old Testament, does this merit the ESV a place in the “Tyndale-King James legacy”? Although not a new translation, it departs in many and varied ways from the AV legacy.

The ESV, along with several more new translations which are due to come on the market in the next several years, cannot begin to compete with the numbers and influence of NIVs and NIV study note Bibles which have been sold. Thus, the likelihood that it will indeed become the “English standard” is slim. In addition, God’s people have the option of the Authorised Version which has stood the test of time and critics, and still remains the king of Bible versions for those who take the time to appreciate it. People who like the AV for its accuracy, excellence and sound textual basis will not want this new revision. Thus it can be seen that the ESV is a light revision of the RSV and that because of the textual basis and translational errors carried over from the RSV it cannot be considered a trustworthy translation of the Bible.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL, USA: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 16.
- ² Michael Marlowe, *English Standard Version*, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/esv.html>, 18 February 2003.
- ³ David Bayly, “Decline of the NIV?”, *World Magazine*, 5 June 1999. http://www.worldmag.com/world/issue/06-05-99/national_6.asp, 18 February 2003.
- ⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL, USA: Crossway Bibles, 2001), p. iv.
- ⁵ *ESV*, p. vii.
- ⁶ J. I. Packer, *English Standard Version: Introducing a Bible Translation that Doesn’t Improve on the Original*. http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_video, 18 February 2003.
- ⁷ *English Standard Version Bible*, “Translation Philosophy”, http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_philosophy, 18 February 2003.
- ⁸ *English Standard Version Bible*, “Translation Team”, http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_team, 18 February 2003.
- ⁹ *English Standard Version Bible*, “Translation Oversight Committee”, http://www.gnpcb.org/page/esv_committee, 18 February 2003.
- ¹⁰ Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Downers Grove, IL, USA: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 35.
- ¹¹ Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: 1991), p. 110.
- ¹² Harold Lindsell, ed. *Harper Study Bible* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. v.
- ¹³ Lewis, pp. 110-111.
- ¹⁴ *ESV*, p. ix.
- ¹⁵ *English Standard Version Bible*, “Translation Philosophy”.
- ¹⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 151.
- ¹⁷ *ESV*, p. vii.
- ¹⁸ *ESV*, p. ix.

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