



Why I Use the English Standard Version and Hope Our Church Will Too ~ Kevin DeYoung

Important Note: This is a shortened version of a 12 page essay I wrote for the elders. The longer essay can be accessed on our website, www.urb-msu.org. I encourage you to read the longer essay for more illustrations and explanation. If you have any comments or questions regarding Bible translation and a possible switch from the NIV to the ESV, the elders would be happy to talk with you at our next meeting—June 14 at 7:30pm in room 202.

The need to replace our the “pew” Bibles in the multi-purpose room has prompted the Elders to consider which English translation we would like to use in our church. The Elders, as those charged with oversight and teaching in the church, are seriously considered switching from the New International Version (NIV) to the English Standard Version (ESV). This would mean the ESV would be used in our worship services and in our classrooms. This would not force anyone to switch translations in their family or devotional life. The Lord will continue to use many different English translations to build his kingdom. I have personally read through the Bible in several translations and been blessed. But my preference is for the ESV.

Here are seven reasons why I prefer the ESV over the NIV:

1. The ESV employs an “essentially literal” translation philosophy. The NIV, by contrast, has a less literal “dynamic equivalence” philosophy (though it is probably the most literal of the dynamic equivalent translations). The difference means the ESV tries to translate “word-for-word” as much as possible while the NIV translates “thought-for-thought.” The difference between the NIV and ESV is not a chasm, but one of degree. Anyone who has translated from one language to another knows that a rigid word-for-word translation is a naive goal. Languages work differently

and the words fit together in different orders, making rigid word-for-word translations overly clumsy and often impossible. That’s why the ESV is called an *essentially* literal translation. Its goal is to translate word for word wherever possible. Because every single word of Scripture is breathed out by God and for our edification (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21; Prov. 30:5; Matt. 4:4; 5:18; John 10:34), it is important to translate, in so far as possible, not just the thought of the biblical writers, but the meaning that each word contributes to the sentence.

2. The ESV is a more transparent translation.

That is to say, the ESV leaves interpretive ambiguities unresolved so that the reader or preacher or student, rather than the translator, can determine which meaning is best. A common example in Greek involves genitives. The most basic translation for a noun in the genitive case is “of.” For example, 2 Cor. 5:14 reads (in the ESV) “For the love of Christ controls us...” The phrase “the love of Christ” translates the Greek *agape tou Christou* which is, grammatically, a nominative noun followed by a genitive noun. The love of Christ could mean the love Christ has for us, or the love we have for Christ, or both. All three are possible from the Greek and from the ESV translation. The NIV, however, translates 2 Cor. 5:14 “For Christ’s love compels us...” This may be what the Greek phrase means (or it may not), but the NIV has settled the matter for us—*agape tou Christou* means the love Christ has for us (i.e., “Christ’s love”)—and has not allowed the reader to come to his own conclusion. This is what I mean when I say the ESV is more transparent. It makes more of an effort to leave ambiguities in the English that are actually there in the Greek.

3. The ESV engages in less over-translation. The NIV often adds words unnecessarily, not in order to better translate a Greek or Hebrew word, but in order

to convey what the translators think the passage means. The result is that the NIV sometimes over translates. For example, I remember hearing a fine sermon on Colossians 3:1-2 where Paul (in the ESV) tells us to seek the things (*zeteite*) that are above (v. 1) and set your minds on things that are above (v. 2). The only trouble with the sermon was that the preacher was using the NIV which has Paul saying “set your hearts on things above” (v. 1) and “set your minds on things above” (v. 2). The preacher went on to talk about how we first set our hearts on things above and then set our minds on things above. But this is a point drawn from the NIV and not from the Greek. Paul, in verse 1, simply tells us *zeteite* (“seek”). The language of heart then head is found in the NIV, but not in the actual text.

4. The ESV engages in less under-translation.

In order to make the thought (not the words) of the biblical writers clearer, the NIV, at times, avoids theological words and important concepts found in the original languages—concepts like “Lord of hosts” (*YHWH tsavaoth*) and propitiation (*hilasmos*).

5. The ESV does a better job of translating important Greek and Hebrew words with the same English word throughout a passage or book. A good example of this comes from the book of Ruth. In 2:12, Boaz tells Ruth, “The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings (*kanaph*) you have come to take refuge.” Then in 3:9, at the threshing floor, Ruth tells Boaz, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings (*kanaph*) over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” Ruth is in effect telling Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer: “You told me to find refuge under the Lord’s wings, so why don’t you spread your wings over your servant and be my refuge as you prayed?” The NIV translates 3:9 as “the corner of your garment.” This is an acceptable translation of *kanaph*, but translating the same Hebrew word with the same English word in 2:12 and 3:9, as the ESV does, helps the reader see the connection between Boaz speech and Ruth’s petition.

6. The ESV retains more of the literary qualities of the Bible. Leland Ryken, professor of English at Wheaton College and literary stylist for the ESV, argues that dynamic equivalent translations often don’t do justice to the artistry, meter, subtlety, multi-layeredness, and concreteness that can be found in the literature of the Bible, especially poetry. So “all my bones” in the ESV becomes in the NIV, “my whole being” (Psalm 35:10), vanishing like a “breath” be-

comes “futility” (Psalm 78:33), and walking in a manner worthy of the Lord becomes living worthy of God (1 Thess. 2:12). By aiming first of all at what a modern reader can grasp, dynamic equivalent translations undermine the literary nature of the Bible. And “what is bad about an unliterary Bible?” asks Ryken. “It distorts the kind of book the Bible is (mainly an anthology of literary genres). It robs the Bible of the power that literature conveys. And it changes the nature of the writing that God by his Holy Spirit moved the biblical authors to produce.”

7. The ESV requires much less “correcting” in preaching. This may be the most important reason for switching to the ESV. I have preached from the NIV for five years now. It is a good translation in many respects, but it is difficult to preach from—especially if one wants to preach exegetically and with an eye to the original languages. There are a number of times over the past five years where I have had to unexplain the NIV in order to make a point in sermon. Other times I have simply skipped a point I would have otherwise made because to get behind the NIV text in the sermon would have taken too much work.

To do careful preaching requires a more careful (literal) text than the NIV. The other option is to frequently un-explain the English translation, which is a bad habit for several reasons. First, because it makes for laborious preaching. Second, because it leads people to think they need an “expert” in Greek or Hebrew to really explain the Bible. And third, because it causes people over time to come to their English Bibles with less confidence.

It is worth mentioning, in conclusion, that the NIV is not a bad translation. Churches will continue to grow using the NIV. The lost will still be saved through the NIV and Christians will be built up in the faith with the NIV. I don’t want to tear down the NIV. I do, however, want to lift up the ESV. I believe it is a better translation based on better principles with a better sense of style and a better text from which to preach. I plan on using the ESV for many years in my personal study, writing, and devotions. I hope to use the ESV for many years in my preaching and in my ministry at URC. Furthermore, I hope URC will be open to changing Bible translations in our corporate worship and education ministries and that you might even try out the ESV in your own personal and family devotions and group Bible study. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). So why not get as many of those words over into English as we can?