

Three Basic Challenges to the ESV

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November 23, 2010

Crossway publishers continue their very successful (dare we say relentless) marketing of the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible. Crossway editor Justin Taylor's recently featured a new video on his blog in which "various leaders" explain "why they trust and appreciate this translation." The ESV is, without doubt, the translation of choice among those whom Colin Hansen has described as the "young, restless, and reformed."

Here, however, are three basic challenges that might give one pause before jumping on the ESV bandwagon:

1. The ESV has a National Council of Churches copyright.

If you turn in a copy of the ESV to the bottom of the copyright page, you will find this note:

"The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV) is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved."

The note is a bit ambiguous. Does it mean that the ultra-liberal National Council of Churches holds the copyright to the RSV, upon which the ESV is based, or does it mean that the NCC retains, as well, some rights to the ESV? What agreement did Crossway reach with the NCC in order to revise the RSV and create the ESV? Did they pay them a one-time fee? Or, does the NCC receive ongoing royalties from sales of the ESV? On this point Alan J. Macgregor queries:

Does this mean that every time a believer purchases an ESV Bible, he is financially supporting the National Council of Churches? (That body denies most of the fundamental doctrines of the Evangelical Reformed Faith). There are still many professing Evangelical and Reformed groups and publications, all enthusiastically encouraging us to buy and use this new version. The separation principles commanded in the Scriptures, and which our discerning forefathers solemnly held to, seem to have been discarded and forgotten (*Three Modern Versions: A Critical Assessment of the NIV, ESV, and NKJV* [The Bible League, 2004]: p. 50).

Even if there is some contractual arrangement whereby the NCC received an upfront lump payment and does not receive royalties for individual ESV sales, challenge # 2 remains.

2. The ESV is not, in fact, a new translation but an evangelical revision of a notoriously liberal translation.

A close inspection of the preface to the ESV is revealing. Though it claims to stand “in the classic mainstream of English Bible translations,” it is clear that the ESV actually issues from a far more liberal source. On one hand, the ESV wants to claim a place in the tradition of the classic English translations of the Protestant Reformation, but, on the other, it must admit that its roots are actually in later Protestant liberalism. Again, the preface captures the ESV’s awkward stance: “The words and phrases themselves grow out of the Tyndale-King James legacy, and most recently out of the RSV, with the 1971 RSV text providing the starting point for our work.” So, in truth, the ESV’s lineage is through the infamous English Revised Version of 1885, the American Standard Version of 1901, and the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and 1971.

The old RSV was roundly condemned by evangelicals when it first appeared. The most criticized passage was Isaiah 7:14 in which the RSV translated the Hebrew word *almah* as “young woman” rather than “virgin.” Conservatives, no doubt rightly, took this as a not so subtle undermining of the doctrine of the virginal conception of Christ. When the NT portion of the RSV was completed in 1946,

Westminster Theological Seminary Oswald T. Allis wrote a stinging critique of the work titled *Revision or New Translation?* (P & R, 1948).

Granted, the ESV has corrected passages like Isaiah 7:14 (i.e., it reads “virgin” and not “young woman”). Still, the fact that the ESV springs from the RSV cannot be an irrelevant consideration. If one compares the ESV and RSV, he finds that the translations are very often in full agreement with one another. Some have suggested that despite corrections like that made with Isaiah 7:14, the ESV still retains some doctrinally questionable renderings from the RSV. Alan J. Macgregor cites the following passages as examples: Micah 5:2; Isaiah 53:9; 1 Corinthians 3:3-4; 1 Corinthians 7:36-38; Philippians 2:6; 1 Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 13:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; and Revelation 19:8) (see Macgregor’s *Three Modern Versions*, pp. 55-58). Let’s take Micah 5:2 as an example:

KJV: But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *though* thou be little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of thee shall he come forth unto me *that is* to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth *have been* from of old, from everlasting.

RSV: But you, O Bethlehem Eph’rathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.

ESV: But you, O Bethlehem Eph’rathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.

Note that the ESV follows the RSV verbatim except for the insertion of the word “too.” The doctrinal issue here would have to do with the change of “from everlasting” to “from ancient days.” Macgregor concludes, “the liberal rendering of the RSV is retained in full, so undermining the Deity of Christ, reducing Him to a created being who has a point of origin!” (*Three Modern Versions*, p. 56).

There are other issues related to the ESV’s general translation philosophy which Macgregor pinpoints. Despite the fact that it is championed by gender complementarians, “it appears that concession is sometimes made to the gender neutral lobby” (Macgregor, p. 54). Oddly enough, some of the old RSV’s gender

specific renderings (composed before the ascendancy of academic feminism) are made gender neutral in the ESV. Here are three examples from Romans (emphasis added):

Romans 2:28:

RSV: “For **he** is not a real Jew....”

ESV: “For **no one** is a Jew....”

Romans 3:4:

RSV: “...Let God be true though **every man** be false....”

ESV: “...Let God be true though **every one** were a liar....”

Romans 3:28:

RSV: “For we hold that **a man** is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

ESV: “For we hold that **one** is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

Finally, despite its claim in the preface to be an “essentially literal” translation, the ESV often makes use of dynamic equivalent methods, as does the RSV. One example cited by Macgregor is the rendering of the phrase ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ (literally “in the regeneration”) in Matthew 19:28 as “in the new world” (though a note in the ESV provides the literal rendering).

3. The ESV is based on the modern critical Greek text.

The final challenge comes in the fact that the ESV is not based on the traditional texts of Scripture that were used by the Protestant Reformers in their vernacular translations (the Masoretic text of the OT and the received text of the NT). For the NT, most significantly, the ESV is based on the modern critical Greek text as found in the UBS 4th ed. and the Nestle-Aland 27th ed.

This means that as one reads through the ESV he will find translations based on texts that diverge from the Tyndale-Geneva-King James Version tradition.

Examples:

Though the primary textual issues relate to the NT, here is one example from the OT: In Psalm 145:13 the ESV includes a bracketed half verse in the text that the footnote explains “is supplied by one Hebrew manuscript, Septuagint, Syriac (compare Dead Sea Scroll).”

The other examples are from the NT:

The ending of Mark’s Gospel (16:9-20) is included in double brackets after an inserted note which reads: “[SOME OF THE EARLIEST MANUSCRIPTS DO NOT INCLUDE 16:9-20].”

The *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11), likewise, appears in double brackets with a similar introductory note inserted into the body of the text.

Philip’s confession in Acts 8:37 is removed from the text proper and relegated to a footnote.

Though these departures from the traditional text ought to raise considerable alarm, the more fundamental worry is the basic fact that the ESV is based on the modern critical Greek text. This means that one day a new critical text will be produced (UBS 5th ed./Nestle-Aland 28th ed.) by the secular academy. This means that eventually there will also be, in all likelihood, a NESV (New English Standard Version) or perhaps RESV (Revised English Standard Version) placed on the market. Who knows what decisions future editors of this Bible will make? Perhaps, for example, in future editions Mark 16:9-20 will be exiled to the footnotes! Translations joined to the modern academy must, of necessity, be unstable.

Conclusion:

Let’s leave the final word to Alan J. Macgregor:

Despite all the hype and glowing statements about the ESV, it fails to deliver on its promises. It is in reality nothing more than a very mild revision of a very liberal Bible version. While there are some pleasing

improvements over the RSV, not all the changes are for the better. By using the RSV, as their reference point, the translators have started in the wrong place. The leaven of liberalism is still there. The conclusion of the matter must be that it is “weighed in the balances and found wanting” (*Three Modern Versions*, p. 59).