

**Pastoral Reflections on Bible Translations:
Why We Preach from the English Standard Version**
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“ . . . the Scriptures . . . bear witness about me . . . ”
— Jesus (John 5:39)

January 2007 marks a significant change at Mars Hill Church. Since our inception as a small Bible study in 1996, all of the preaching and teaching has been done from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible. The NIV was first published in 1978 and has become the most widely read English translation of the Bible, accounting for roughly 30 percent of all Bible sales. Over the years, God has used the NIV greatly in my life, beginning with my conversion in 1990. I praise God for the translation and my friends at Zondervan for publishing it along with numerous study aids and study Bibles.

However, the elders at Mars Hill Church have decided that we should transition from the NIV to the English Standard Version (ESV) as our primary pulpit translation. Some people may have questions about why this shift was made. This paper is my pastoral attempt to give a brief overview of the theological and practical issues associated with translations in general and the ESV in particular.

Before I begin, I would like to simply declare why all of this is important. Some people may wrongly dismiss all of this as scholarly nitpicking, which is not the case. The Scriptures exist for many reasons, and chief among them is the revelation of the person and work of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that He was in fact the very thread that wove all of Scripture together:

- **Matthew 5:17** *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*
- **Luke 24:27** *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*
- **Luke 24:44–45** *Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures . . .*
- **John 5:39** *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me . . .”*

Therefore, having the best possible translation of Scripture is important because it helps us to hear God most clearly and therefore know Jesus most intimately. By way of analogy, if Jesus were to call us on our cell phone we would want to have the best possible coverage so as to hear Him most clearly. In some ways, a good Bible translation is akin to good cell phone coverage in that it facilitates the most effective communication.

What are the Scriptures?

The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as Scripture, for which the Greek word is *graphie*, meaning “writing.” The word *bible* comes from the Greek word for book. *Holy Bible* means the “Holy Book.” It contains sixty-six separate books (thirty-nine Old Testament and twenty-seven New Testament), written in three languages (Hebrew, Greek, and a bit in Aramaic), over a period of more than a thousand years, by more than forty authors (of varying ages and backgrounds) on three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe).

Authors of the Bible include kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, and scholars. The books of the Bible cover history, sermons, letters, songs, and love letters. There are geographical surveys, architectural specifications, travel diaries, population statistics, family trees, inventories, and numerous legal documents. It covers hundreds of controversial subjects with amazing unity. It is the best-selling book of all time and is now available in nearly three thousand languages.

The Old Testament was written on papyrus—a form of paper made out of reeds; the New Testament was written on parchment (prepared animal skins). Because both forms of documents easily degrade under hot and dry conditions, it is providential that we have so many copies of ancient manuscripts. The various chapter and verse divisions in the Bible were not part of the original books. A lecturer at the University of Paris created the chapter divisions in 1228. Its current chapter and verse divisions were not fully developed until 1551.

What does Scripture say about itself?

Some statements from Scripture about Scripture:

- Given by inspiration of God — 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21
- The very words of God — 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- All we need to know God — Luke 16:29, 31
- A perfect guide for life — Proverbs 6:23
- Pure — Psalm 12:6; 119:140
- True — Psalm 119:160; John 17:17
- Trustworthy — Proverbs 30:5–6
- Perfect — Psalm 19:7
- Effective — Isaiah 55:11
- Powerful — Hebrews 4:12
- Nothing to be taken from or added to — Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32
- For everyone — Romans 16:25–27
- To be obeyed — James 1:22

Some poetic images from Scripture about Scripture:

- Sweet like honey — Psalm 19:10
- A lamp to guide our life — Psalm 119:105
- Food for our soul — Jeremiah 15:16
- A fire that purifies and a hammer that breaks us — Jeremiah 23:29

- A sword — Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12
- A seed for salvation planted in us — James 1:21
- Milk that nourishes us — 1 Peter 2:2

By its own declaration, the importance of Scripture can hardly be overstated. We will now examine how we received the precious gift of Scripture in the English language.

How did we get our English Bible?

Many volumes have been written to explain the miraculous and fascinating process necessary for the Bible's existence. To help you understand the process in a brief and simple way, I will explain a five-step sequence that has occurred for you to read the Bible.

God → Revelation/Inspiration → Transmission → Translation → Interpretation → Application → **Your Life**

1. Revelation is the miraculous event whereby God revealed Himself and His Truth to someone and inspired them, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to write down what He had to say—perfectly. This original copy is called the *autographa*.

2. Transmission occurred when the autographa was carefully copied by trained scribes so that other copies could be made available for people to read. While these handwritten copies have the occasional minor error (e.g., spelling or punctuation), they were accepted as accurate and authoritative by God's people (e.g., Deuteronomy 17:18 cf. 1 Kings 2:3; Ezra 7:14; Nehemiah 8:8). For example, the apostles, who were the senior leaders in the early church, taught from copies of the books of the Bible (Acts 17:2; 18:8), and the early church tested all teachings against the existing scrolls (Acts 17:11). Furthermore, Jesus Himself taught from copies of the books, not the autographa, and treated them as authoritative (e.g., Matthew 12:3–5; 21:16, 42; Luke 4:16–21; 10:26). In conclusion, God's people have always relied on manuscripts, and these writings have proven to be accurate and trustworthy. Jesus' own perfect example assures us of their trustworthiness.

Tragically, opponents of Scripture have attacked its trustworthiness by falsely stating that our current English translations are built upon poorly transmitted copies. However, the *bibliographical test* of Scripture flatly refutes this false argument. The bibliographical test seeks to determine the historicity of an ancient text by analyzing the quantity and quality of copied manuscripts, as well as how far removed they are from the time of the originals. The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are more than five thousand Greek manuscripts, about eight thousand Latin manuscripts, and another one thousand manuscripts in other languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.). As the following chart illustrates, both the number of transmitted manuscripts we possess of Scripture and their proximity in date to the autographa are astounding and unparalleled in the canon of Western literature.

AUTHOR	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME SPAN	NUMBER OF COPIES	ACCURACY
Homer	ca. 850 BC	-----	-----	643	95%
Herodotus	ca. 450 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1,350 years	8	<i>Not enough copies to reconstruct the original</i>
Euripides	ca. 440 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1,500 years	9	
Thucydides	ca. 420 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1,300 years	8	
Plato	ca. 380 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1,300 years	7	
Aristotle	ca. 350 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1,400 years	5	
Caesar	ca. 60 BC	ca. AD 900	About 950 years	10	
Catullus	ca. 50 BC	ca. AD 1500	About 1,600 years	3	
Livy	ca. 10 BC	-----	-----	20	
Tacitus	ca. AD 100	ca. AD 1100	About 1,000 years	20	
New Test.	ca. AD 60	ca. AD 130	About 100 years	About 14,000	99.5%

**Taken directly from Ken Boa's I'm Glad You Asked, page 78*

Possibly the oldest manuscript is a scrap of papyrus (p52) containing John 18:31–33 and 37–38, dating from AD 125–130, no more than forty years after John's gospel was likely written. A non-Christian scholar, Carsten Peter Thiede, even claims that he has dated a fragment of Matthew to about AD 60. By comparing the ancient manuscripts, we find that the vast majority of variations are minor elements of spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about four hundred (less than one page of an English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of a passage, and most are footnoted in modern English translations. Overall, 97 to 99 percent of the New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages.

Moreover, the Scripture quoted in the works of the early Christian writers (mostly AD 95–150) are so extensive that virtually the entire New Testament can be reconstructed, except for eleven verses, mostly from 2 and 3 John.

Critics of the accuracy of the Bible routinely claim that it is in fact a series of fables and legends that have developed over hundreds of years because there are not enough copies of ancient manuscripts to alleviate their skepticism. However, a simple shepherd boy dealt a death blow to their criticisms in 1947. He wandered into a cave in the Middle East and discovered large pottery jars filled with leather scrolls that had been wrapped in linen cloth. Amazingly, the ancient copies of the books of the Bible were in good condition despite their age and the harsh climate because they had been well sealed for nearly nineteen hundred years. What are now known as The Dead Sea Scrolls are made up of some forty thousand inscribed ancient fragments. From these fragments, more than five hundred books have been reconstructed, including some Old Testament books such as a complete copy of Isaiah.

Simply, if someone seeks to eliminate the trustworthiness of the New Testament, then to be consistent they would also have to dismiss virtually the entire canon of Western literature and pull everything from Homer to Plato to Aristotle off of bookstore shelves and out of classroom discussions. The transmission process of Scripture is, by God's providential grace, without peer.

3. Translation occurs in service to people who want to read the books of the Bible but are not familiar with the original language in which they were written (Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic). Teams of language theory scholars carefully undertake the painstaking process of translating the original languages into the languages of other peoples. Today, the Bible has been carefully translated into nearly three thousand languages. While the thought of a translation may concern some people, the fact remains that most of the canon of Western literature has also been translated because we do not use their original languages either. The first translation of the English Bible was initiated by John Wycliffe and completed by John Purvey in AD 1388.

4. Interpretation occurs when someone reads the Bible in a language they can understand and determines the meaning of the verses they read by the enablement of God the Holy Spirit who also inspired the writing of Scripture. Each text of the Bible has only one true interpretation and so we must be careful to read the truth out of the Bible (exegesis) rather than reading our beliefs and desires into it (eisegesis).

A common question arises at this point: is the Bible to be interpreted literally? The answer is yes. There are plain-literal and figurative-literal portions of the Bible. We begin by assuming the plain-literal meaning and if that seems absurd then we go with a figurative-literal interpretation. A figurative-literal Scripture teaches a truth in a poetic way and often uses the words "like" or "as" to tip us off that figurative language is being used. But even when figurative language is being used, it is still communicating a literal truth. For example, in the poetic Song of Songs, the man says to his beloved, "your eyes are doves" (1:15). In this figurative language, the man is communicating a very literal truth. He likens her eyes to doves, which come in pairs, and when their tail-feathers flutter they appear like eyelashes. Doves have just one faithful mate throughout their lives, possibly indicating that her eyes are focused on him alone. The dove is also a symbol of peace and purity, alluding to her virginity.

5. Application is the result of taking what we learn from the principles in the Bible and making changes in our thoughts and actions by God the Holy Spirit's empowering grace so that our life is congruent with the Bible. There are a seemingly infinite number of applications for a text of the Bible. For example, when the Bible says that we should love people, the applications for that principle are endless.

In this five-step process (Revelation/Inspiration → Transmission → Translation → Interpretation → Application), we see how God speaks to us and cares deeply about our lives. We also see how the chasm between God and us is graciously filled by God's revelation, which is more accurate and true than our human

speculation (e.g., religion and philosophy). While the first step (Revelation/Inspiration of the autographa) is the only one that is guaranteed to be perfect, the other steps are indeed accurate. We must be increasingly careful as we move through the steps, however, because the opportunity for error increases at each step. Lastly, the third step of translation is incredibly important because that is what we depend on for the learning and living of our Christian faith. On this point, noted theologian J. I. Packer said, "I find myself suspecting very strongly that my work on the translation of the ESV Bible was the most important thing that I have done for the Kingdom, and that the product of our labors is perhaps the biggest milestone in Bible translation in the past fifty years or more."

Why are there different Bible translations?

In translating the Bible into English, four general categories of translation are most common: word-for-word translations, thought-for-thought translations, paraphrases, and corruptions. The same four options are also used in the translation of other ancient books into English.

Word-for-Word

Word-for-word translations (also known as literal translations) make a special effort to carefully interpret each word from their original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic into English. Word-for-word translations emphasize God, the divine author of Scripture, over the human reader of Scripture. The result is a striving for the precision of what the Bible says, much like one would expect in other important communications, such as legal documents, marriage vows, or contracts. Word-for-word translations are generally a high school reading level.

Word-for-word translations tend to be the best for studying because of their accuracy, though they sometimes lose the poetic nuances of the original languages. Probably the best word-for-word translations are the English Standard Version (ESV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New King James Version (NKJV). The King James Version (KJV) is also a word-for-word translation, but because of its use of old English, it is very difficult for some people to read. The NASB was widely regarded as the most scholarly word-for-word translation until the arrival of the ESV. It did not become widely popular, however, because of its tight copyright and sometimes stiff translation of poetry that lost some of the beauty of the original writings. Thankfully, the ESV has preserved the degree of accuracy present in the NASB while also doing a better job of translating the poetic parts of Scripture in a more fluid manner.

The philosophy of word-for-word translation guided virtually every English Bible translation until the middle of the twentieth century. At that time, thought-for-thought translation became popular.

Thought-for-Thought

Thought-for-thought translations (also known as dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence) attempt to convey the full nuance of each passage by interpreting the Scripture's entire meaning and not just the individual words. Thought-for-thought translations may include words that were not included in the original text in an effort to give the same meaning that the reader of the original languages would have had.

The best and most widely read thought-for-thought English translation is the New International Version (NIV). Other thought-for-thought translations include Today's New International Version (TNIV), New Living Translation (NLT), Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Good News Bible (GNB). The benefit of thought-for-thought translations in general, and the NIV, my favorite thought-for-thought translation, in particular, is that they are easy to understand and make the Bible accessible to a wide number of people.

Going one step further than thought-for-thought translations are paraphrases, which combine both Scripture and interpretive commentary into the translation method.

Paraphrase

Paraphrased translations pay even less attention to specific word meanings than thought-for-thought translations in an attempt to capture the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. For this reason, many paraphrased translations do not even have verse divisions in them. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Message (TM), The Living Bible (TLB), and The Amplified Bible (TAB).

Corruption

Corruptions are "translations" of Scripture that clearly seek to undermine the very teaching of Scripture. These "translations" are very poor and should not be used as credible translations for study. These include the Jehovah's Witness translation called the New World Translation, which was written in large part to eliminate the deity of Jesus Christ.

Why is the English Standard Version best for preaching?

There are two lines of reasoning that have led the elders of Mars Hill Church to decide that the ESV is the best translation for our preaching ministry. First, there are important theological reasons why we believe the ESV is the best translation for our preaching ministry. Second, there are practical pastoral reasons why we prefer the ESV to other translations.

Theological reasons we are preaching from the ESV

1. The ESV upholds the truth that Scripture is the very words of God, not just the thoughts of God.

This point is inextricably connected to the doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration, which means that God the Holy Spirit inspired not just the thoughts of Scripture but the very words and details. For example, the biblical theme of “walking” with God begins early in the book of Genesis. There we discover that whole generations, such as Noah’s, as well as whole cities, such as Sodom and Gomorrah, did not walk with God. But Genesis is careful to make note of those people who did walk closely with God, such as Enoch (5:24) and Noah (6:9). Likewise, in the New Testament we are told to also “walk” in a manner worthy of God and some translations say this exactly in places such as 1 Thessalonians 2:12 (ESV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, HCSB). But other translations take the liberty of instead saying we should “live lives” worthy of God (CEV, NIV, NLT, TNIV).

This point is significant because the Bible repeatedly declares that the very words of God are important, not just the thoughts they convey, as the following examples illustrate:

- **Exodus 19:6** “. . . you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”
- **Deuteronomy 32:46–47** “Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”
- **Proverbs 30:5–6** Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.
- **Matthew 4:4** “It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- **Luke 21:33** “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”
- **John 6:63** “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”
- **John 17:8** “For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”
- **1 Thessalonians 2:13** And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.
- **Revelation 21:5** And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”
- **Revelation 22:18–19** I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and 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.

2. The ESV upholds that what is said must be known before what is meant can be determined.

Before we can interpret the meaning of Scripture, we must first accurately understand the message of Scripture. Or, to put it another way, only *after* knowing what Scripture says can we understand what it means. Practically, this requires that Bible translations be separate from and prior to Bible commentaries. A word-for-word translation best enables this to occur by seeking, as much as possible, to not insert interpretive commentary into the translated text of Scripture; rather, it lets the text breathe as a living word and speak for itself. The general problem with thought-for-thought translations and paraphrases is that their English interpreters include commentary that is not part of the original text and thereby commingle Bible and Bible commentary. For the average reader, this is problematic because they do not know which parts of their Bible are from the original text and which parts have been added by commentators who were trying to convey their interpretation of its meaning.

3. The ESV upholds the truth that words carry meaning.

Some scholars will argue that thought-for-thought and paraphrase translations do not change the meaning of Scripture but just the words of Scripture in an effort to clarify the meaning of Scripture. But this reasoning is fallacious because meaning is carried in words. Therefore, when we change the words of Scripture we are changing the meaning of Scripture. For this reason, when we handle other important documents we do not take the liberty to change their words. For example, an attorney is not free to change the words of a signed contract, a husband is not free to rewrite his vows of promise after his wedding, and a public notary is not free to make alterations to the words of a signed legal document. We would be rightly worried if such liberties were taken with our personal affairs and should be even more worried when such liberties are taken with God's affairs. In this way, word-for-word translations like the ESV are following the directives of 1 Corinthians 4:6, which admonishes us "not to go beyond what is written," and Proverbs 30:5–6, which warns, "Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar."

4. The ESV upholds the theological nomenclature of Scripture.

One of the more popular arguments for thought-for-thought translations and paraphrases is that people do not understand the theological nomenclature that Scripture uses to express doctrinal concepts. The reasoning follows that words like "justification" and "propitiation," which the original text of Scripture used, should be replaced with more modern vernacular that people can understand. To illustrate this point two examples will be helpful.

First, one of the central debates of the Protestant Reformation was how a sinful person is justified before a holy and righteous God. This issue was so contentious that people died over it and Christianity split over it; it is not a trivial matter. Romans 3:24 is one of many places where "justification" is spoken of in the

original text of Scripture. An examination of various translations, however, shows how the word is sometimes omitted altogether:

- (ESV) *justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . .*
- (NASB) *justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus . . .*
- (NIV) *justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*
- (TNIV) *justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*
- (KJV) *Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*
- (NKJV) *being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*
- (CEV) *God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins.*
- (TM) *Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.*
- (NLT) *Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.*

Some of these translations (CEV, TM, NLT) would perhaps not be problematic if they were presented as commentary on Romans 3:24. But they are simply unfit to be the biblical text of Romans 3:24 because they do not say what God the Holy Spirit said through Paul; the reader would have no way of knowing that they were reading commentary instead of Scripture.

Second, in the fall of 2005 I preached a three-month series called “Christ on the Cross” (available at www.marshillchurch.org for free). That series looked at what Jesus accomplished for us through His death on the cross. One of the sermons focused explicitly on the biblical doctrine of propitiation. In that sermon I explained how God’s wrath is mentioned nearly six hundred times in the Old Testament by some twenty words, in addition to its occurrences in the New Testament. I then explained how the biblical word “propitiation” literally means that Jesus Christ stood in my place and suffered and died for my sins, thereby propitiating or averting the just wrath of God away from me. Because other translations have entirely removed the word that God chose to explain the work of Jesus, I used the ESV translation of the verses for that sermon.

- **Romans 3:23–25** . . . *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness . . .*
- **Hebrews 2:17** *Therefore he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

- **1 John 2:2** *He [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*
- **1 John 4:10** . . . *this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

In the NIV and NRSV these verses do not say propitiation at all, but rather “sacrifice” or “atonement.” Worse still are the RSV and NEB, which say “expiation” instead of “propitiation.” These latter two translations change the entire meaning of the verse because propitiation deals with my penalty for sin whereas expiation deals with my cleansing from sin. While the doctrines are related, they are distinct and to confuse them is to make a major theological error.

The question begs to be answered: why should we stop with only some theological words that the average person does not understand? The sad truth is that we live in a culture that has very little biblical knowledge and many if not most of the central words that Scripture uses are not understood by the average person. For example, in a place like Seattle, where there are less Christians than dogs, the average person probably has little if any biblical understanding of what is meant by basic words such as “God,” “sin,” and “Jesus.” By way of illustration, I was once writing an article for a non-Christian newspaper and in my column I said that God had convicted me of a sin in my life. The editor responded that I would need to explain what conviction meant because they were not familiar with the word and assumed my readers would not know what I was talking about. Why? Because outside of Christianity even something as simple as conviction is not understood.

My point in all of this is that words open up worlds of new truths, much like a link on a website ushers us into an entirely new realm. Therefore, if people do not know the words of Scripture, we should not give them new words that close off new truths. Rather, we should give them the old words of the original text, literally translated into English, so that a new world of truth can be opened to them. Because we love the people God entrusts to our care, we who preach and teach Scripture should strive to explain the words that they do not understand so that they can fully appreciate what God is saying to them through Scripture.

5. The ESV upholds the truth that while Scripture is meant for all people, it cannot be communicated in such a way that all people receive it.

Scripture teaches us that God loves the whole world (John 3:16) and that we should seek to reach as many people as possible (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Subsequently, the desire to make the Bible understandable so that more people can learn about Jesus is something that every Christian should wholeheartedly agree to.

However, we must remember that we cannot change the words of Scripture because God has called us to not only communicate widely, but also communicate truthfully. We must accept that not all Scripture is easy to understand for many reasons. First of all, we are sinners. Consequently, we

sometimes suppress the truth we do receive because we disagree with Scripture and are unwilling to repent. The problem is a hard heart and not just a difficult translation (Romans 1:28). On this point, perhaps Mark Twain said it best, “Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.” Second, God’s thoughts are much higher than our own (Isaiah 55:9). Third, God has secrets that He has not revealed to us (Deuteronomy 29:29). Fourth, we sometimes see the truth dimly and know it in part (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Furthermore, even the greatest of communicators were known to be hard to understand when they spoke God’s truth. For example, some of Jesus’ teaching was declared to be a “hard saying” by His hearers (John 6:60). Jesus also taught in parables, knowing that His teaching would not be readily understood by all his hearers, but only those with “ears to hear” (Mark 4:10–23). Speaking of Paul’s writings, around which controversy continues to swirl today, Peter said, “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are *hard to understand*, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15–16).

We should make every effort to have the Bible translated in words that as many people as possible can understand. But we must also be careful not to cross a line where we change God’s words in hopes that more people will be willing to accept them. Apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit working in us, there is no way we can gladly receive the truth. Even with the Holy Spirit, some parts of Scripture remain for us “hard to understand,” as they were even for Peter, who was trained by Jesus and himself penned Scripture.

Therefore, the pursuit of all Bible translation and teaching must be both accessibility to the reader *and* accuracy to God the Holy Spirit who inspired the writings of Scripture. Indeed, much of what passes today as a criticism of the clarity of Scripture is little more than the self-condemnation of those with blind eyes caused by hard hearts. The church father Athanasius spoke of this with great pastoral insight, saying, “For the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life.”

6. The ESV upholds the complementarian nature of gender in Scripture.

Unbeknownst to the average Bible-reading Christian, there is a great debate raging in academic circles about the language of gender and how it relates to biblical translation. The argument is commonly made that in generations past people used the word “man” or “mankind” to refer to humanity in general as an all-encompassing term that included both men and women. But, it is said, the understanding of these words has changed so that in the minds of the average person today it refers only to males and excludes females.

I would, however, argue that the general assumption is not clear. For example, one of the most widely known feminist icons of our era is Madonna. Curiously, in defense of the mock-crucifixion she staged at the end of each concert during her \$193.7 million-grossing 2006 Confessions tour, she said she struck the pose “to encourage *mankind* to help one another and to see the world as a unified whole. I believe in my heart that if Jesus were alive today he would be doing the same thing.” The two striking things about the quote are that Madonna is apparently unaware that Jesus is alive today and that she referred to the human race by the masculine pronoun “mankind.” This illustrates my point that it is still common for people to understand words like “man” and “mankind” as a reference to both males and females. Furthermore, it is God who called the human race “man” in Genesis 5:1 (ESV, NIV, NASB, TAB, KJV, NKJV, HCSB) and not the “human race” (TM) or “human beings” (TNIV, NLT, CEV).

Psalm 8:4 serves as yet another practical example of the varying ways that differing translations take liberties with the clear text of Scripture regarding the issue of gender. The original text simply says “man,” yet some translations take the liberty to deviate from that markedly:

- (ESV) *What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?*
- (NASB) *What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him?*
- (NIV) *What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?*
- (TNIV) *What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?*
- (KJV) *What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?*
- (NKJV) *What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?*
- (CEV) *Then I ask, “Why do you care about us humans? Why are you concerned for us weaklings?”*
- (TM) *What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?*
- (NLT) *What are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us?*

It must be pointed out that, in its more insidious forms, the push for gender-neutral language is in fact a clear push against Scripture. For example, Scripture states that God made us “male and female” (for example, Genesis 1:27). Consequently, in God’s created order, there is both equality between men and women (because both are His image-bearers) and distinction (because men and women have differing roles). This position is called *complementarianism* and teaches that men and women, though equal, are also different in some ways and therefore function best together in a complementary way, like a right hand and left hand (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22–33; Colossians 3:18–19; 1 Timothy 2:8–3:13). But those with a feminist and/or homosexual agenda are seeking to

eradicate the created distinction between males and females so as to validate new alternative lifestyles that are not acceptable according to Scripture. Translations such as the New Revised Standard accommodate this by wrongly translating “male and female” in Genesis 1:27 as the androgynous “humankind.” The New Living Bible translates it as the genderless “people.” There are many reasons why all of this matters to Bible translation.

First, there is pressure from some theological teams to change the masculine language that Scripture uses in favor of more feministic and/or gender-neutral language that is not the language of the original text. Translations that use gender-neutral language include the NRSV, TNIV, NLT, NCV, GNB, and CEV.

Second, even more insidious is the effort by some to feminize God. Perhaps the worst example of this is a recent translation released by a group of fifty-two biblical “scholars” called *The Bible in a More Just Language*. In an effort to remove what the group sees as unjust treatment of women and homosexuals, God the Father is now “our Mother and Father” and Jesus is no longer the Son of God but rather the “child” of God. Satan, of course, is still referred to as male.

Theologically speaking, God does not have a biological gender because God is Spirit, without physical anatomy (John 4:24), and is therefore not a man (Numbers 23:19). In using the word “He,” the Bible is not saying that God is merely a man, but rather that God is a unique person who reveals Himself with terms such as “Father” when speaking about Himself. By way of analogy, John Calvin said that God uses terms such as “Father” to speak to us in baby talk, much like a parent uses words that their young child can understand in order to effectively communicate with them. Jesus said “Our Father” when he gave us our model of how to pray. Therefore, referring to God as Father is not an antiquated oppression from a patriarchal culture, but an echo of the prayer life of Jesus. It is the predominant way in which God has chosen to reveal Himself to us.

Third, we acknowledge that Scripture does infrequently refer to God in terms that are more feminine in nature, such as a hen who cares for her chicks (Matthew 23:37). Nonetheless, such language is both infrequent and metaphorical because God is no more a woman than God is a chicken.

In conclusion, God created mankind “male and female” (Genesis 1:27; 5:2). We must not bend to the pressures of an androgynous culture that would oppose His created order and refer to men and women as anything less than simply “man,” as God does (Genesis 5:1). We must likewise not bend to the pressure to recognize God as someone other than “our Father” because that is the primary means He has chosen to reveal Himself to us. Simply, God the Father commands all who disagree with Him on this point to repent of their nonsense rather than revise His name.

Practical reasons we are preaching from the ESV

In addition to the above theological reasons why the elders of Mars Hill Church have concluded that the ESV is the best translation for our preaching, there are

also numerous practical reasons why we are transitioning to the ESV. In explaining these practical reasons, I will refer to “our pulpit” rather than “my pulpit” because it belongs to our Senior Pastor/Chief Shepherd Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4) and the elders He has chosen to lead our church in His purposes. I am privileged to be one of the elders at Mars Hill Church and, though the lead elder, am humbled, blessed, and honored to serve with fine men who have the right and duty to discipline me, and even fire me, if God forbid the need should ever arise.

I praise God for His plan that elders/pastors would labor together as a mutually submissive and accountable team of equals under the senior leadership of Jesus. Although I preach most of the time at Mars Hill, the pulpit is under the authority of the elders collectively and should I for any reason be unable or unfit to preach, the proclamation of the gospel would continue under their fine leadership. Furthermore, when the texts of Scripture that I am expositing require me to arrive at theological conclusions on difficult and debated matters, it has always been my habit to meet with the elders and arrive at a consensus on what we believe together, so that I can preach on behalf of all the elders, not merely myself. I am happy to report that in more than ten years of preaching at Mars Hill, our elders have always arrived at a unified theological position on various matters. We have never suffered from a divided eldership because of the grace of God, leading of the Holy Spirit, and humility of our men under the authority of Scripture. Therefore, out of a sincere respect for my fellow elders as brothers called of God to be respected peers in our joint ministry, I am referring to my preaching ministry as “our pulpit.” Lastly, this submission of my work to the approval of our elders also extends to the books and booklets I publish, including this position paper, which has greatly benefited from their wise input.

1. Our pulpit is theologically oriented.

The people of Mars Hill Church have been very gracious to allow me to preach lengthy sermons that include a great deal of theological instruction over the years. While I do believe that all doctrine is practical, I agree with the Puritans who taught that biblical living can only flow out of correct biblical doctrine. Subsequently, preaching doctrine requires the best word-for-word translation in an effort to provide theological accuracy.

2. Our pulpit exists to teach people what they may otherwise not know.

God has called pastors to be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Practically, this means that people do not merely need a good Bible translation, but they also need a good church with good teaching from good pastors. One of the things we learn from the Trinitarian community of God is that truth rests most gladly in loving Christian community. As a result, Christians who sit down alone with their Bible are missing out if they do not also have Christian friends with whom to examine and apply Scripture and pastors who help them to understand the parts they find confusing. As a pastor, I do not fear handing our people a word-for-word translation that may have some theological terms and such that they do not immediately understand for three reasons. First, it will compel them to prayerful

and careful study, which is a wonderful gift. Second, it will compel them to be connected to our church family where they can learn from other Christians, including the pastors who find profound joy in explaining the truths of Scripture to eager learners. Third, I trust that God the Holy Spirit illuminates the understanding of those who humbly read the Scriptures that He inspired to be written.

3. Our pulpit is in the most educated and literate city in America.

According to recent polls, the city of Seattle is the most educated and literate city in America. While I do accept that for some people a simplified Bible written at a lower reading level may be necessary (e.g., younger children, people with severe learning disabilities, those for whom English is a new and non-native language), that is generally not the case in our city. Rather, what is needed in our city is an accurate and careful translation that does not seek to dumb down the truth because the people in our city would be insulted by such a translation.

4. Our pulpit must strengthen and not weaken the trustworthiness of Scripture.

Like all preachers who love Scripture, I need to be able to read the English translation to our people and tell them with confidence that they are hearing what God, through the original author, actually said. When I have to tell our people that their translation is not accurate, I wince because I fear I am weakening the trustworthiness of the Bible they are holding in their hand. What I do not want is our people to put their Bible down or read it halfheartedly because they are uncertain of its accuracy. Conversely, what I do want is for our people to continually enjoy their Bible and read it in faith that God is speaking to them through it. For this to occur I need to preach from a translation that is accurate and does not need me to clarify it in order to accurately teach.

5. Our pulpit is precedent-setting for the life and doctrine of our people.

In 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul tells a fellow pastor, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” As a preaching pastor I cannot only look out for my own life and doctrine, but must also keep in mind that others are following and imitating both my life and teaching. James 3:1 is likewise a constant reminder that I face greater judgment than the average Christian. As a result, it is imperative for pastors like myself to be careful with our teaching. A good word-for-word translation is a gift that helps us to be as effective in our teaching as possible, benefiting both ourselves and those who call us husband, father, and/or pastor. As one of my heroes, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, once said, “A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone whose life is not.”

6. Our pulpit is plugged in.

One of the great blessings and curses of our age is the Internet. For years the tech army at our church has been kind enough to post the audio files of my sermons online for free. More recently this has also included high-definition video of my sermons. The result has been a much broader sphere of influence and a

corresponding broader sphere of criticism. In years past, it was not uncommon for a pastor to preach a sermon and then have it disappear forever. But in our age, what we preach can and will live on indefinitely in various media forms. Subsequently, because the impact of our preaching can be far larger and longer-lasting than at any time in history, it is all the more imperative that we are preaching from the best possible translation of the Bible.

What is the place of other translations at Mars Hill?

In the history of Mars Hill Church we have never divided over the issue of Bible translations. We have always maintained that various translations have various strengths and weaknesses and that the student of Scripture benefits from enjoying multiple translations. Furthermore, we have always praised God for every good English translation and trust God the Holy Spirit to use them to transform our lives.

Furthermore, we would not discourage our people from enjoying multiple good English translations of Scripture. However, we would encourage them to use the English Standard Version or another good world-for-word translation as their primary study tool while also using other translations as secondary resources for their studies. We are not saying that the ESV is good and that other translations are bad. Rather, we are saying that for the purposes of theological accuracy and preaching/teaching, we believe the ESV is the best while other translations are also helpful and good for such purposes.

On this point I would like to be both clear and emphatic. At Mars Hill Church we believe that the student of Scripture is best served by enjoying multiple translations of God's Word. By way of illustration, one evening recently I went in to check on my first grade son, Zachariah Blaise. I found him awake on his top bunk studying. I asked what he was doing and he said that he was examining a verse in Scripture that he had been thinking about all day. He was using multiple Bible translations to see how they each articulated God's truth. As a father, I was delighted both to see my son so interested in God's Word that he had to have his theological curiosity assuaged before falling asleep, and also his willingness to examine multiple English translations to further his theological development. Simply, I would exhort everyone to have the same zeal for Scripture and appreciation of its multiple translations as my "buddy Zac."

Lastly, while purchasing a study Bible can be quite expensive, it is imperative that every serious student of the Bible invests some money purchasing at least one nice Bible with some helps (footnotes, cross-references, etc.) and room for their notes. When buying a Bible, the general rule is that the more money you spend, the better the quality of paper, binding, and leather you will receive. Because your primary Bible will be filled with notes and become so familiar to you, it is wise to invest in a good Bible so that it lasts. This will enable you to spend considerable time reading it, memorizing it, studying it, and meditating upon it as God the Holy Spirit reveals to you the person and work of Jesus on every page.

Appendix

Translations

CEV – Contemporary English Version
ESV – English Standard Version
GNB – Good News Bible
HCSB – Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV – King James Version
NASB – New American Standard Bible
NCV – New Century Version
NIV – New International Version
NLT – New Living Translation
NKJV – New King James Version
NRSV – New Revised Standard Version
NTME – New Testament in Modern English (Phillips)
REB – Revised English Bible
RSV – Revised Standard Version
TAB – The Amplified Bible
TLB – The Living Bible
TM – The Message
TNIV – Today's New International Version
TSB – The Street Bible

Word-for-Word Translations

ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV, RSV

Thought-for-Thought Translations

NCV, NIV, TNIV, NLT, CEV, GNB, REB

Paraphrases

NTME, TAB, TLB, TM, TSB

Corruptions

New World Translation

For Further Reading on Bible Translations

The Indestructible Book by Ken Connolly
The Word of God in English by Leland Ryken
Choosing a Bible by Leland Ryken
The Bible in Translation by Bruce Metzger
How We Got the Bible by John Sailhamer
A General Introduction to the Bible by Norman Geisler

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