

# WHY IS THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION BEST FOR PREACHING?!

There are two lines of reasoning that have led the elders of Delta 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-forward 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, we need to rightly understand what propitiation means. 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. 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. Other translations have entirely removed the word that God chose to explain the work of Jesus, yet the ESV translation remains true to the biblical word “propitiation.”

- **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. Pastor Mark Driscoll tells of the following:

*"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).

Psalms 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 imagebearers) 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 leadership of Delta Church has 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 Delta 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 Delta, 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 the fine leadership of the elders. All spoken and written theological communication is approved collectively by the elders, including this position paper. The following outlines the practical implications of using the ESV in our weekly ministries, with special regard to the preaching ministry of Delta:

### **1. Our pulpit is theologically oriented.**

The people of Delta Church have been very gracious to allow me to preach lengthy sermons that include a great deal of theological instruction. 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 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.

### **4. 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. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, once said, “A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone whose life is not.”

### **5. Our pulpit is plugged in.**

One of the great blessings and curses of our age is the Internet. Our tech ministry posts the audio files of my sermons online for free. The result is a much broader sphere of influence, and opens up 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 DELTA?**

We have never divided over the issue of Bible translations. We maintain 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 word-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 Delta Church we believe that the student of Scripture is best served by enjoying multiple translations of God's Word. As I labor each week in prayerfully preparing my sermons, I constantly check many different translations under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help me communicate God's truth as clearly and effectively as I am able.

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.

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