Why the ESV Falters as a General Purpose Bible

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The Bible is God’s word, written in ancient times by Spirit-led authors who by redemptive gift had become master-servants of a prophetic-pastoral wisdom beyond the merely human. The Bible’s prime topic, of course, is Jesus Christ. From first to last, Scripture testifies truly of him—with power. How do we convey this powerful message in translation? This question is not mainly for academic debate; it is intensely pastoral. Ministers of the Word must present God’s people with God’s message in words. How ought we best achieve these words in a general purpose Bible, a Bible for Pulpit and Pew?

Translators tell us there are two main methods of translating: (a) formal equivalence, and (b) functional equivalence. In formal equivalence, sometimes wrongly called “literal translation,” the grammatical forms and phrases of the original are preserved to a high degree in the target language. So, a plural noun in the Hebrew OT becomes a plural noun in English; a passive verb in the Greek NT becomes a passive verb in English, and so on. Moreover, the definition of the original word-in-context becomes the key to choosing a translational word with the equivalent meaning, if one can be found. By preserving the original form of the sentence, these defenders claim, formal equivalence often achieves a better accuracy.

In functional equivalence, sometimes unwisely called “dynamic equivalence,” the forms of the original sentences often survive, but they can be sacrificed for the sake of an accurate rendering in the natural forms and phrases of the target language. In functional equivalence translation, the linguistic functions of the words and sentences are crucial. Limited dictionary definitions may be stretched for the sake of making the referent clear. Emotional impact matters. Is the text angry, reprimanding? Or gently lilting? Or in calm reportage? Or in rhapsodic praise? The translation should sound likewise. Defenders of functional equivalence claim that preserving accuracy in function is more important than preserving form.

In mainstream Bible publishing, these two approaches are matters of degree. There is no completely formally equivalent Bible version—even the most ardent formalists make some concession to functional equivalence. And no completely functional equivalence version has ever been published.

Some defenders of the ESV, such as my friends Wayne Grudem and Vern Poythress, try to make the case that formal equivalence translation is more consistent with Scripture’s infallible authority than any other translational method. Wayne, who helped translate the ESV and edited the popular ESV Study Bible, has argued this claim at length. This claim is false. As we saw in the descriptions of formal equivalence and functional equivalence above, the question between the two is not one of accuracy versus error, but rather, of two different kinds of accuracy.

As D.A. Carson wisely says, “[t]o appeal to loyalty and faithfulness toward the Word of God as the ground for preserving formal equivalence is both ignorant and manipulative.” Losing the prophets and apostles’ meaning is irresponsible; but so is losing their zest.

Presenting the Bible’s message in a responsible translation is no easy task. The task is vital to pastoral ministry and the health of God’s people. In this brief paper I shall show why the ESV, the “English Standard Version” (Crossway, 2001, 2006), fails to meet the “Standard of English” required for a general purpose Bible in English. I shall also show why the NIV 2011 (Zondervan) characteristically succeeds at this very task.

By “general purpose Bible,” I refer to the Bible’s use in two essential tasks:

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I shall make two claims regarding general purpose Bibles in English:

(1) The ESV, despite some strengths, fares poorly.
(2) The NIV 2011, despite some weaknesses, fares well.

I do not claim that the ESV is useless. It is, in fact, often useful as a study Bible, especially when used alongside other versions. I use it that way. Nor shall I claim that the NIV 2011 is perfect; no version attains that rank.

Translators typically agree that a general purpose Bible bears three features abundantly:

(1) Accuracy. It doesn’t do much good if the wrong message is eloquently stated.
(2) Clarity. It doesn’t do much good if an accurate message is obscurely expressed.
(3) Fluency. The translated text should “fit” the target language well, preferring its natural rhythms, forms, and phrases when possible.

All three features can be tricky. No Hebrew or Greek word has exactly the same range of meaning and usage as even its closest English equivalent. Simple word-for-word substitution fails. Nonetheless, the preface to the ESV commits the translators to “what is essentially a word-for-word translation.” The ESV does not actually follow this practice; departures are frequent, and on every page. However, the method is flawed from the start. While ESV and NIV 2011 are often equivalent in meaning, the ESV is a stilted translation that obscures the transforming message of the Bible. This unclear “Biblish” perplexes congregations, and can even deafen our ears to God’s word. That’s a pastoral crisis.

There are other aspects of the “trickiness” of these three features. Occasionally the Bible’s Hebrew or Greek rhetoric challenges intellect, opaque to the casual Judean or Athenian. This didn’t happen much. The Bible’s rhetoric in Hebrew and Greek is typically powerful, often artful, sometimes sly or shocking, but persistently vivid. Today, general purpose Bibles should feel the same way. The best general purpose Bibles persistently present the reader and hearer with clear, fluent language that accurately conveys the meaning and force of the original. As D.A. Carson says, “Functional equivalence, rightly understood, is essential for good translation.”

In lieu of a lengthy discourse, with the dreaded pastiche of allegedly serious ESV errors drawn from Genesis to Revelation, I instead present one longish, characteristic text, Psalms 2–5. My format displays the ESV 2006 and the NIV 2011 in parallel columns, and shows the general characteristics of both versions, weaknesses and strengths. I highlight some bits of text, and annotate them in footnotes to display the issues. Afterwards, I briefly address three further issues, archaisms, gender, and reference.

In general, our comparison yields these two conclusions:

(1) The English Standard Version is often averse to standard English.
(2) While the ESV falters at general purpose reading, the NIV 2011 excels.

In the Psalms below, ESV highlights are underlined. NIV 2011 highlights appear in bold italics. Not every highlighted text is annotated; some simply invite comparison.

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Psalm 2 ESV
1 Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
3 “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”
4 ¶ He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
6 “As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”
7 ¶ I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”
10 ¶ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
12 Kiss the Son, lest you be angry,
and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 3 ESV
A PSALM OF DAVID,
WHEN HE FLED FROM ABSALOM HIS SON.
1 O LORD, how many are my foes!
2 Many are rising against me;
there is no salvation for him in God. Selah
3 But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,
my glory, and the lifter of my head.
4 I cried aloud to the LORD,
and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah
5 I lay down and slept;
I woke again, because the LORD sustained me.
6 I will not be afraid of many thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around. 4
7 Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God!
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked.
8 Salvation belongs to the LORD:
your blessing be on your people! Selah

Psalm 2 NIV 2011
1 Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
3 “Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
4 The One enthroned in heaven
laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.
5 He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
6 “I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”
7 ¶ I will proclaim the LORD’s decree:
He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have become your father.
8 Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”
10 Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the LORD with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
12 Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 3 NIV 2011
A PSALM OF DAVID.
WHEN HE FLED FROM HIS SON ABSALOM.
1 LORD, how many are my foes!
2 Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.”
3 But you, LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
4 I call out to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.
5 I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
6 I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.
7 Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
bring the teeth of the wicked to silence.
8 From the LORD comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.

1 Psalm 2:3—the ESV is especially cumbersome here. NIV reads much more clearly, with the same meaning.
2 Psalm 2:9b ESV shows wooden literalism. In English, we “dash to pieces.” In Hebrew, “a potter’s vessel” is not a vessel owned by a potter, but simply “pottery” (NIV).
3 Psalm 2:12—“Lest” (ESV) is becoming scarce. The NIV’s “or” renders the exact meaning, in standard idiom.
4 Psalm 3:6—ESV is awkward; NIV has identical meaning, but is far smoother.
5 Psalm 3:10—NIV’s “Therefore, you kings” is strong.
6 Psalm 3:2—NIV’s “God will not deliver him” well expresses the exact meaning and force of the Hebrew, and avoids the dull formal equivalence of the ESV.
7 Psalm 3:3—NIV’s “One who lifts my head high” means the same as ESV’s weirdly awkward “lifter of my head.”
8 Psalm 3:8—NIV’s “From the Lord comes deliverance” is clear. ESV’s “Salvation belongs to the Lord” is obscure.
Psalm 4 ESV
TO THE CHOIRMASTER:
WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS.
A PSALM OF DAVID.
1 Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!\footnote{Psalm 4:1—"God of my righteousness" (ESV) is an old but serious error. The actual Hebrew word order is indeed "God–righteousness–my." However, recent studies in Hebrew syntax show that when a "construct chain" (usually two adjacent nouns in a certain form, as here) is modified by a final possessive pronoun, the pronoun modifies the first noun in the chain, not the second noun, which often functions as an adjective; or else it modifies the entire chain. Hence, God+righteousness = "righteous God," and God+righteousness+my" = "My righteous God," as in NIV 2011. It isn’t the Psalmist who is righteous; it is God, whose righteousness here consists in the fact that he attends to the prayers of the needy.}
You have given me relief when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!
2 \footnote{Psalm 4:3—Who brings God’s glory to shame? NIV has clarity about the doers, a clarity present in Hebrew, but absent in the passive voice construction in the ESV.} O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?
How long will you love vain words
and seek after lies? \textit{Selah}
3 But know that the LORD has set apart the godly\footnote{Psalm 4:3—ESV’s "set apart the godly" is ambiguous as to singular/plural. \textit{Hasîd} is singular, as is clear in NIV.} for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.
4 Be angry, and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds,
and be silent. \textit{Selah}
5 Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the LORD.
6 There are many who say,
"Who will show us some good?
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!"
7 You have put more joy in my heart
than they have when their grain and wine abound.
8 In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD,
make me dwell in safety.

Psalm 4 NIV 2011
FOR THE DIRECTOR OF MUSIC.
WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS.
A PSALM OF DAVID.
1 Answer me when I call to you, \textit{my righteous God}.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.
2 \footnote{Psalm 4:4—NIV is far clearer about the circumstance in which the hearers are to respond to the command, “be silent”} How long will you people turn my glory into shame?\footnote{Psalm 4:6—NIV’s “who will bring us prosperity?” is the exact nuance of the Hebrew line, rendered blandly by the ESV’s “who will show us good?”}
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?
3 Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.
4 Tremble and do not sin;
\textit{when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.} \footnote{Psalm 4:6—NIV’s “who will bring us prosperity?” is the exact nuance of the Hebrew line, rendered blandly by the ESV’s “who will show us good?”}
5 Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD.
6 Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?"
Let the light of your face shine on us.
7 Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.
8 In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD,
make me dwell in safety.
Psalm 5 ESV
TO THE CHOIRMASTER:
FOR THE FLUTES. A PSALM OF DAVID.
1 Give ear to my words, O LORD;
consider my groaning.
2 Give attention to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you do I pray.
3 O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you
and watch.
4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil may not dwell with you.
5 The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
6 You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.
7 But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house.
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in the fear of you. 
8 Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies—
make your way straight before me.
9 For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction;
their throat is an open grave;
they flatter with their tongue.
10 Make them bear their guilt, O God;
let them fall by their own counsels;
because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, /for they have rebelled against you.
11 But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
and spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may exult in you.
12 For you bless the righteous, O LORD;
you cover him with favor as with a shield.

Psalm 5 NIV 2011
FOR THE DIRECTOR OF MUSIC.
FOR PIPES. A PSALM OF DAVID.
1 Listen to my words, LORD,
consider my lament.
2 Hear my cry for help, my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
3 In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you 
and wait expectantly.
4 For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome.
5 The arrogant cannot stand in your presence.
You hate all who do wrong;
6 you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, LORD, detest.
7 But I, by your great love,
can come into your house;
in reverence I bow down toward your holy temple.
8 Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies—
make your way straight before me.
9 Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.
10 Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.
Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you.
11 But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
12 Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.

16 Psalm 5:5b—“all evildoers” (ESV) is antiquated.
17 Psalm 5:7 in ESV is awkward in the extreme. “In the fear of you” is even worse. Compare NIV: “in reverence.”
18 Psalm 5:7’s “in fear” (ESV) is far better rendered by NIV’s “in reverence.” The Hebrew concept is not terror, but religious awe.
19 Psalm 5:9—ESV’s “no truth in their mouth” is very odd in English.
20 Psalm 5:10—ESV is awkward and imprecise.
21 Psalm 5:10b—ESV is awkward, and “counsels” is bland.
NIV’s “intrigues” catches the sense well.
22 Psalm 5:12—“For” (ESV) is much better rendered as “Surely” (NIV 2011). The introductory particle kî often means “for,” especially when introducing a subordinate clause. However, when kî introduces a new rhetorical unit, such as in this final couplet in vs 12, it is much more likely emphatic: “surely.”

23 Psalm 5:1-2—NIV 2011 is much clearer, and identical in meaning.
24 Psalm 5:3—“Prepare a sacrifice” (ESV) or “lay my requests” (NIV 2011)? The Hebrew is “arrange,” (’arak) but “arrange” what?—animal on an altar or words of request to God? The context (“hear my words” and “I will watch”) strongly suggests arranging prayer.
25 Psalm 5:4—The NIV’s “evil people” correctly translates the referent of the adjectival substantive ra’, as suggested by the following clauses about the arrogant and wicked.
26 Psalm 5:6—“Speak lies” (ESV) versus “Tell lies” (NIV) reveals much about the difference in these two versions. Which expression is standard, idiomatic English?
27 Psalm 5:10—Compare the cumbersome ESV to the NIV’s “Banish them for their many sins,” identical in meaning, far superior in diction.
This display of Psalms 2–5 with the two translations in parallel columns abundantly shows the main weaknesses of the ESV, and the main strengths of the NIV 2011. What about our three main features of good, general purpose Bibles—accuracy, clarity, and fluency?

1. **Accuracy**—the two versions are roughly equal for achieving accurate meaning. In my judgment, the NIV 2011 is more frequently accurate in meaning.

2. **Clarity**—the two versions are rather unequal here. The ESV fares poorly; NIV 2011 fares well.

3. **Fluency**—the two versions are utterly unequal here. The ESV fails; the NIV 2011 flies.

Before I conclude, I briefly raise three issues. **First**, antique language. The ESV persistently presents the reader and hearer with antiquated expressions. Nearly 8,000 sentences begin with “And”—“And it was so.” The first hour I spent with my ESV, after receiving it from Wayne Grudem, was in the company of Genesis. I was instantly dismayed to find initial “And” all over Genesis 1, just as in the 1611 KJV. The “And” allegedly translates the Hebrew initial vav, but vav often does not mean “and.” My Hebrew students know that initial vav can mean several conjunctions or disjunctions—“and, but, yet, however, or, then, since,” etc.—depending on discourse. Often it means nothing more than our capital letter after a period, that is, the beginning of a new sentence. The KJV used initial “And” about 13,000 times, but modern versions resist. The NRSV has it about 2,400 times; and the NIV about 1,400 times. Your Middle School teacher said, “Don’t,” but sometimes you did. So, why initial “And” 8,000 times?

“Behold”—The old KJV famously rendered Hebrew hinneh and Greek idou as “Behold!” About 1300 sentences begin with “Behold” in KJV, 1611 AD. The ESV is nearly so, with initial “Behold” about 1100 times. When I hear a TV character utter an initial “Behold,” I look to see if it’s John Cleese in Monty Python. Hebrew hinneh does not mean “behold,” which is an English command to “look.” “Hinneh” is an adverb of place, like our “Here!” It can be rendered well by any number of attention-getting interjections: “Look!” “Pay attention” “Hear this!” or even by an emphatic bit of punctuation (!). Initial “Behold” is antique. In 1600, Shakespeare loved it; by 1820, Jane Austen shunned it. In the ESV it just sounds tired.

**Second, gender**: Does the NIV 2011 kowtow to an unscriptural philosophy, Feminism? That’s the charge leveled against it by ESV champions. For example, my friend Wayne Grudem takes deep offense at the NIV 2011 in the strange once-in-the-Bible verb, authentein, which we read only in 1 Timothy 2:12—“I do not permit a woman to teach or authentein over a man.” The NIV 2011 translates authentein as “assume authority.” Wayne thinks this rendering is pernicious, and has criticized it as “unprecedented,” failing to note that it is (in Latin) Calvin’s contribution. Regarding the general charge, I can do no better than quote from the NIV’s Committee on Bible Translation’s reply:

We object very strongly to the accusation that our gender translation decisions were motivated by a desire to avoid causing offense [to Feminists]. Our concern is always, in every decision we make, to represent God’s Word accurately and naturally in modern English – we have no other agenda. In the pursuit of this agenda, CBT [the NIV’s Committee on Bible Translation] used extensive research into the state of modern English as a basis for our decisions about gender translation . . . . Let us say it as emphatically as we can: the NIV translators have never been motivated by a concern to avoid giving offense. We were simply following what wide-ranging, objective research tells us about the state of modern English.

We [also] object to the "guilt-by-association" labeling of some of our translations. The review notes some renderings in the updated NIV that are adopted also by "feminist" interpreters. Yet they fail to note that many of these same renderings are also adopted by complementarian interpreters. (For instance, "assume authority" in 1 Tim. 2:12 is Calvin's rendering.) The fact that egalitarians and complementarians alike adopt many of these translations suggests that, in fact, there is broad scholarly support in favor of these conclusions. It is the scholarship that has influenced the decisions of CBT in these texts – not a modern agenda of any kind. (“A Brief Response from the Committee on Bible Translation to the Review of the updated NIV by the Committee on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood,” June 9, 2011)
While teaching my granddaughter, then age 4, the old Presbyterian Catechism for Younger Children (1840), I soon reached the Q & A, “What is God?”—“God is a Spirit and has not a body like men.” Her immediate response: “I’m a woman.” She meant that this answer left open the question of whether God had a body like a woman. She was sure God didn’t. She’s right. This tiny incident shows just how thoroughly our English has changed since, say, 1970.

Sometimes the ESV recognizes this change. Where the KJV says that “man” or “men” did X, the ESV often says instead that “someone” or “others” did it. ESV fans rarely publicize these renderings, but rail against the NIV 2011 for similar strategies.

**Third,** the issue of gender brings out the related question of “referent.” Take, for example, the Greek word *adelphoi,* the masculine plural form of the noun *adelphos,* usually rendered “brother.” Paul uses this plural often in direct address to his congregations. It appears ten times as direct address in Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* alone. Perhaps the best-known example is Romans 12:1—

> I appeal to you therefore, **brothers,** by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. (ESV)

If this text were read in church with my granddaughter present, what would she think?—That only males have this duty and privilege? That would be false, but why present her with the doubt? Standard English has changed; younger Americans inhabit a different language world than the one of my boyhood. While the basic meaning of *adelphoi* is “brothers,” Paul often uses it *in reference to the whole congregation.* Pretending that “brothers” still serves this same purpose for most English speakers is just foolish. Hence, the NIV 2011 says—

> Therefore, I urge you, **brothers and sisters,** in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. (NIV 2011)

That’s what Paul meant: the whole church. In hearing this text, each person in the congregation understands that they, too, are embraced by its high privilege, including my granddaughter.

So, I appeal to you, my brother PCA elders, on behalf of young and old, wise and not-so-wise, blue-collar folk and techies, poets and pensioners, **choose a Bible translation that is accurate, clear, and fluent,** a Bible that addresses us with God’s clear message in good clear words. There are many mass-market Bibles favored by Evangelical and Reformed Protestants today in the USA. Among these the NIV 2011 is one of the strongest; and the ESV is one of the weakest.

Remember 1 Corinthians 14:8—

> For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?—KJV 1611

> And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?—ESV 2006

> Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?—NIV 2011