

Why We Use the ESV

Our approach to Bible Translations.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
2 Tim 3:16¹

Where do we begin?

If you walked into almost any bookstore and looked for an English Translation of The Bible, the number of different translation options from which you could choose would likely amaze you. The list of English translations is extensive and seems to be increasing all the time. How does one choose a Bible Translation?

Further, here at The Chapel we made the decision to move from the NIV (New International Version 1984) translation to the ESV (English Standard Version) translation for preaching, teaching and all group studies. The natural question that arises from this decision is, why the ESV and what do we believe about other Bible Translations? The objective of this paper is to provide a brief summary of the approach to Bible Translations and help the reader to understand why The Chapel has chosen the ESV as the translation for our Church.

So where does one begin when discussing the issue of Bible Translations? Well, in order to understand our approach to Bible Translations, we first need to understand what we believe about The Bible?

Beginning with The Bible

The issue of Bible Translation ultimately finds its foundation in what the church believes about Holy Scripture. While there are many elements to a theology of the Bible, for the nature of this paper we want to examine one particular doctrine that our church believes. Here at The Chapel, when it comes to the Bible, we believe in Verbal Plenary Inspiration. Now, this is not a phrase that many of us toss around in our everyday discussions of the Bible, so let's look further into what we mean when we use this phrase.

The Doctrine of Inspiration is the belief that the authors of the sixty-six books that make up the Old and New Testaments were inspired, in their original writings, by the Holy Spirit of God, which rendered their writings the very words of God and therefore as God's word are supreme and final in their authority. To put that more succinctly, we believe the Bible to be God's Word. The terms verbal and plenary are utilized to further clarify our understanding of inspiration. Verbal is used to note that we believe that it is the very words and syntax of Scripture, which are inspired, not simply the ideas themselves. Plenary (meaning complete absolute or complete) conveys the idea that all of Scripture is inspired, not just certain parts of it. Thus, we believe that the original writings of the Bible were God's very words to humankind in order to sufficiently reveal himself and His son Jesus Christ for our salvation and joy.² Once we have understood what we believe about the Bible we can then begin to understand the process of Bible Translations.

From Text to Translation

It is rightly understood that the Doctrine of Inspiration applies not to the translation of the Bible, but to the original

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from English Standard Version® (ESV®)
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² It is not in the purview of this paper to provide a defense of the Doctrine of Inspiration. However, Systematic Theologies such as Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), or Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1998).

writings of the authors.³ These authors did not write in English (or Latin, German, etc.) but in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Thus, God's people have, from its earliest days, worked to translate these sacred writings from their original language into the language of everyday people. Even scribes of the Hebrew Scriptures translated the original writings into Greek in the 3rd century B.C., which is what we commonly know as The Septuagint. The first official Bible Translation came in 382 A.D. when Jerome produced the Latin Vulgate, which was the official translation for the Latin speaking Roman World. Because God's people believe in God's revelation of Himself through His inspiring of the writing of sacred scripture, they have always sought to translate that into other languages so more might know Him.

However, whenever one seeks to translate from one language to another, interpretation always becomes a necessary step of the process. Languages do not directly correlate with one another and when one moves from an original text to a translation one must always take some sort of step of translation. As it has been stated, "every translation is an interpretation." This is no less true of the translation of The Bible. Whenever someone seeks to translate The Bible from its original writings into another language (for instance from Hebrew/Greek to English) one is forced at some point to make interpretive choices in order to best translate the original language into the new language. When this takes place the translator must always seek to maintain the balance between faithfulness to the original language and accessibility within the modern English vernacular.

When it comes to English Translations, two different approaches have been utilized in seeking to maintain this balance. The first approach is known as dynamic equivalency or a thought-for-thought approach to translation. In this approach, translators seek to translate the original idea or thought of the author in a way that connects in an equivalent way with the translator's audience. In this approach the focus comes on the translator as dynamic equivalent translations require a high degree of interpretation. While the result is generally a more accessible translation for the audience, it also tends to be less faithful to the structure and syntax of the original writing. An example of this approach is found in the New International Version (NIV) and New Living Translations (NLT) of The Bible.

A second approach is referred to as formal equivalency, or a word-for-word translation. In this approach the translator seeks to maintain as close a connection to the original authors words, structure, and syntax as is possible. While interpretative choices are made, they are minimalized as much as possible by seeking to remain as close to the original writing as the language will allow. The result of this approach is generally a more "wooden" and less accessible translation but one that seeks to maintain both the original authors ideas, words, and structure. This approach is exemplified in the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and in the ESV as well.

So Why the ESV?

As noted above, we believe not just that the ideas of the Bible are inspired, but the very words of the original writings as well. Thus, when it comes to Bible Translation we believe it to be best to seek to stay as close to the original writings as possible, and believe therefore that a Formal Equivalency (word-for-word) translation is preferred.

However, while we believe formal equivalency translations to be best, we recognize that each translation committee must wrestle with the accessibility side of translation. Some formal equivalency translations are translated so formally that it makes the modern readers ability to understand the text an even greater challenge, especially in preaching and teaching. We believe that the ESV does the best job of maintaining a formal equivalency in translation while also allowing for accessibility for the modern English reader.

It is for these reasons that The Chapel made the transition from the NIV (1984) to the ESV in the summer of 2014. While no translation is perfect, we believe that the ESV develops the best balance in translation while also adhering

³ Although we affirm and believe that translations are able to sufficiently communicate the truth of Holy Scripture that people are able to be saved

to translation procedures that exalt the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture.

What about other Translations?

The Chapel generally endorses formal equivalence translations such as the ESV, NASB, New King James Version (NKJV), or the Revised Standard Version (RSV). While we recognize the value of dynamic equivalence translations, such as the NIV (1984 & 2011), NLT, Holman Christian Standard Bible (HSCB), we believe that they should be used for aid in understanding scripture, but not as the primary text for study. The reason being that we believe that the study and understanding of scripture must begin with observing the text and then moving towards interpretation. In the dynamic equivalence version the step of interpretation is determined by and large by the translation and not by the student. This results in potentially diminishing a deeper study of Scripture and also limits the robust belief and practice of Biblical Inspiration by focusing the reader on the idea and not also the words and structure.

We would encourage any student of the Bible to utilize a formal equivalency Bible, specifically for us the ESV, as their main text for study and teaching, and to allow dynamic equivalence translations to aid in the study of Scripture.

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