



WHICH TRANSLATION IS BEST?

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We live in a world today full of variety and choice. If you want to buy a new car, you can become easily overwhelmed choosing paint colors, wheel and rim size, leather or cloth seats, power or manual windows, automatic or manual – and the list goes on and on! Comparatively, Bible translations are the same way today. At your average Christian bookstore, one has the option of choosing from at least 10 different Bible translations: King James (KJV), New King James (NKJV), The Message, The Living Letters, English Standard Version (ESV), New International Version (NIV), New American Standard (NASB), Revised Standard Version (RSV); the list seems to never end!

So how do we know which translation to use, especially when there are over 50 circulating today? What would we say “the best” or “most accurate” translation is? Take a few minutes to read over this pamphlet. New Covenant Presbyterian is in the process of updating our Sanctuary Bibles and we want you to have a better idea of why New Covenant is switching to use both ESV (English Standard Version) and HCSB (Holman Christian Standard Bible):

Consideration # 1: *The ESV and Holman Christian Standard (HCSB) both employ an “essentially literal” translation philosophy:*

- The **NIV Preface** in all Bibles states: “The first concern of the translators has been the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the *thought* of the biblical writers...they have striven for *more than a word-for-word translation*...faithful communication of the meaning of the writers of the Bible demands *frequent modifications* in sentence structure and constant regard for the contextual meaning of words.”
- The **ESV Preface** states that the ESV is an “*essentially literal*” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each biblical writer...thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.
- The **HCSB Introduction** states that the goals for its translation is to equip serious Bible students with an accurate translation for personal study, private devotions, memorization, and to affirm the authority of Scripture as God’s Word and to champion its absolute truth against social or cultural agendas that would compromise its accuracy.

The ESV and HCSB both strive to be as accurate to the original Hebrew and Greek languages as possible. Here at New Covenant, we believe in what’s called “*organic divine inspiration*”. WHOA! We just threw some big terms out there! Don’t worry, this means: First, we believe that God’s Word is infallible and without error. God gave us His Word through his Spirit to human authors who transcribed what was being said. They didn’t write down Scripture in a mechanical, robotic-like way, but wrote down the overall message of what was being said, yet in their own style and personality – all while staying true to the original message God wanted them to translate. Second, our Bibles are sufficient and without error, yet sometimes a passage can remain ambiguous or mysterious – **and that’s ok. God wants us to think about His Word and His translations.**

For example, take a look at **Romans 1:5** below:

NIV: “Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith...”

ESV: “Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations...”

HCSB: “We have received grace and apostleship through Him to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations, on behalf of his name...”

In the original Greek of the New Testament translation of Romans 1:5, the “*obedience of faith*” phrase may mean that obedience comes from faith, or that faith is obedience, or some combination of both. The NIV has removed the ambiguity and renders the phrase “*obedience that comes from faith*”, thus making the choice FOR US.

The NIV also adds many words unnecessarily (as well as other translations) to sound more affluent or sophisticated, when really God’s word needs to remain simple and concise:

NIV: “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on earth”

ESV: “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land”

HCSB: “that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land”

At first glance you may be thinking, “Ok, they all sound the same, so what?” The Greek word translated as “live” is *eimi*. It means “to be” or “to live” and that’s all it has ever meant. So why would the NIV here translate it as “to enjoy”? Additions or changes like this add up over time to the overall original message of God’s Word.

Consideration # 2: *The ESV and HCSB both strive to stay true to the original titles of God’s names throughout Scripture.*

Throughout the ESV and HCSB, particularly in the Old Testament, we see the title “*Lord of hosts*”. The NIV has changed this phrase to “Lord Almighty/God Almighty” because as another section of the Preface states, “for most readers today the phrases ‘the LORD of hosts’ and ‘God of hosts’ have little meaning.” As Kevin DeYoung states: “It may be the case that “LORD of hosts” is not in many people’s vocabularies, but shouldn’t it be – at least for Christians?”¹ Why does the NIV make that choice for us to

delete a title of God that seems to be outdated? It’s still relevant and is still one we should worship God with each and every day!

Consideration # 3: *The ESV and HCSB do a wonderful job at retaining more of the literary qualities of the Bible.*

The Holy Spirit is a beautiful author, so why not have a Bible translation that stays true to that? For example, in **Psalm 35:10**, check this out:

NIV: “My whole being will exclaim, ‘Who is like you, O LORD?’”

ESV: “All my bones shall say, “O LORD, who is like you?”

HCSB: “My very bones will say, “LORD, who is like you?”

The key word in verse 10 is “bones”. The Hebrew word “*etzem*” is always translated literally as “bones”, the bones that hold together our flesh and organs! *Etzem* is never translated as being. Here in Psalm 35, translating the word as “being” takes away the beautiful imagery that David is trying to convey. When the text loses the word “bones”, the vivid poetic metaphor is lost for simply an “abstract thought.”

The same applies for the book of Proverbs in **Proverbs 27:6**, which reads:

NIV: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

ESV: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

HCSB: “The wounds of a friend are trustworthy, but the kisses of an enemy are excessive.”

Proverbs are supposed to be that and only that: a proverb. They are supposed to sound different from every day speech. Both the ESV and HCSB retain more of the concrete, vivid language of the original languages instead of trading it or making the decision for us to have it sound more like every day speech.

These are just a few of the many examples of why you should strongly consider switching to ESV or HCSB. As I take on the privilege and honor of being your pastor, these are the only two translations that I will preach and teach from every week. It may seem that I do not like the NIV at all, but I do! I grew up on the NIV and didn't switch over to ESV until college and didn't use HCSB until last year. The way of salvation is **still clear** in all Bible translations: through faith in Jesus Christ, for He is "the way, the truth, and the life – no one comes to the Father except through Him" **John 14:6** – so I am NOT saying that any translation besides ESV and HCSB are rubbish! NOT AT ALL! I'm not "Seth the NIV hater" – NOT TRUE – but, what I am pushing for is that we stay true to the original languages of the Bible. Translations should not make choices for us or add/subtract wording and phrasing because it sounds "prettier on the tongue" in every day speech.

The ESV came out in 2001. The HCSB came out with a New Testament translation in 1999 and then completed the entire Bible in 2004. Both of these translations are fairly new and young, but they strive to stay true and original to God's holy and inspired Word more than any other translation of the Bible.

I would love to see New Covenant experience unity and harmony by using the ESV or HCSB each Sunday morning as we study God's Word together and enjoy His presence forever.



Primary Source:

- **DeYoung, Kevin.** *Why Our Church Switched to the ESV.* Bklt ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. My main source and inspiration for this pamphlet came from Kevin Deyoung's informational pamphlet "Why Our Church Switched to the ESV". All rights are reserved to him.

Other recommended reading for Bible translations:

- "About Bible Translations." Webpage at ChristianBook.com providing a useful overview of different translations, featuring a spectrum from extreme word-for-word versions (e.g., NASB) to extreme thought-for-thought versions (e.g., The Message).
- **Fee, Gordon D., and Mark L. Strauss.** *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007. Defends the translation philosophy behind the TNIV (thought-for-thought, inclusive-language).
- **Grudem, Wayne, Leland Ryken, C. John Collins, Vern S. Poythress, and Bruce Winter.** *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005. Rejects inclusive-language and thought-for-thought approaches.
- **Rhodes, Ron.** *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009. Popular-level overview of English versions and advice on how to choose one.
- **Ryken, Leland.** *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002. Argues largely on literary grounds that translations should follow something closer to a word-for-word approach. A 32-page excerpt, *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Bible Translation Differences* (2005), is currently available free online.
- **Wallace, Daniel B.** "Choosing a Bible Translation." *Bible Study Magazine* 1, 1 (Nov./Dec. 2008): 23-26. This article, available free online as a PDF document, is an excellent introduction to the issue by a respected evangelical New Testament scholar.