

Committee for Bible Translation: Final Report

August 2012

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1. Mandate

The Committee for Bible Translation (CBT), appointed by Synod Burlington 2010, received the following mandate (*Acts*, Article 72, p. 99-100):

- 4.2.1 To thoroughly evaluate the updated NIV translation when it is released in 2011 and to produce and send a report to the churches within nine months of the release date.
- 4.2.2 To investigate the feasibility of obtaining access to the printing rights of the 1984 edition of the NIV.
- 4.2.3 To investigate further whether the ESV or the NKJV or the NASB could become the recommended translation for the churches.
- 4.2.4 To investigate the possibility and feasibility of publishing an ecclesiastically-produced and owned Bible translation with the cooperation of English-speaking churches which are members of NAPARC and/or ICRC.

2. Evaluation of the 2011 NIV

As can be observed above, Synod mandated this committee to thoroughly evaluate the updated NIV and to produce and send a report directly to the churches concerning the same (4.2.1). This was sent to the churches in December 2011. The present report concerns the other matters of our mandate (4.2.2-4).

3. Printing Rights for the 1984 NIV

Because of the anticipated commercial unavailability of the 1984 NIV, Synod 2010 mandated our committee to investigate whether the printing rights of this translation could be obtained

so that the churches could enjoy continuity of translation. In the spring of 2012 we contacted Biblica (the publisher who holds the rights to the 1984 NIV), expressing our committee's concern with the 2011 NIV as well as inquiring about the possibility of obtaining access to the printing rights for the old NIV. This request has also been made by others, but we were told that it is impossible to be granted. The Biblica spokesperson informed us that this would violate the NIV charter, which stipulates that the current one is the only NIV translation. Thus this avenue of reprinting the 1984 NIV is closed to us.

4. A Recommended Translation for the Churches

The possibility that the 2011 NIV would not be able to be recommended led Synod to mandate our committee to investigate also whether other translations might be able to be used in the churches. As was already pointed out in our interim report, "In the NASB, NKJV, and ESV, all previously approved by General Synods, the churches have trustworthy—and also readily available—translations for use." This is in line with what Synod 2007 decided, that it be left "in the freedom of the churches should they feel compelled to use other translations that have received favourable reviews in the reports of the CBT, namely, the NKJV, the NASB or the ESV."¹

In proceeding further with this aspect of its mandate, the committee decided to summarize and review what had been previously said by the CBT and past Synods about each of these translations. We did not see the need for or merit in undertaking a new and thorough evaluation of each of the NASB, NKJV, and ESV. Thus, we present the salient points of past evaluations and recommendations, while also noting anything that may have changed because of updated editions (e.g., the NASB was revised in 1995, and the ESV has undergone two revisions, the latest of which was in 2011). After examining each translation in this fashion, we will draw some conclusions and make a recommendation.

4.1 Glossary

The following terms appear below in the discussion of the various Bible translations. In the interest of aiding the reader, we provide a brief glossary of important terms.

- *eclectic text*: the result of selecting what is likely the best original reading from a diversity of New Testament Greek manuscripts. The practice is based on the principle that the more independent transmission histories are, the less likely they will be to reproduce the same copyist emendations and errors. This approach allows conclusions to be drawn about the original text based on the contrasts between various textual witnesses.
- *Masoretic Text*: the authoritative Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The Masoretic Text was primarily copied, edited and distributed by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the 7th and 10th centuries AD.
- *Textus Receptus*: the name given to a succession of printed Greek texts of the New Testament. It originated in 1516 with the first printed Greek New Testament, made on

the basis of about six manuscripts of varying degrees of reliability. The Textus Receptus constituted the translation base for the German Luther Bible, Tyndale's English New Testament, the King James Version, and most other Reformation-era New Testament translations. Because of its narrow manuscript basis, the Textus Receptus is of limited value in determining the best original reading.

4.2 NASB

Background

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) was first published as a complete translation in 1971. Synod 1971 appointed "A Committee on the Revised Standard Version." As is clear from the name, its mandate did not include any investigation into the NASB. However, in their report to Synod 1974, this committee did recommend the following: "As churches we should keep our options open as to an official and positive endorsement of a translation besides the King James Version. We therefore recommend that either the present RSV committee, or another synodically appointed committee, be given the mandate by synod to study another (or other) modern translation(s), with view to possible usage in our churches."

The committee also noted the existence of the NASB and NIV translations and concluded: "These translations appear to be worthwhile to be looked into." However, Synod 1974 did not act on these recommendations and the committee continued to have the mandate only to review the RSV.

The report of the Committee on the RSV to Synod 1977 made no mention of the NASB. However, some of the churches submitted proposals to examine other translations, including the NASB. Synod gave a new mandate and new name to the Committee on the RSV. It became the Committee on Bible Translations and its mandate now included making "a comparative study of the NASB and the NIV with the RSV and the KJV, in order to determine which one translation can be positively recommended for use by the churches."

Synod 1980

The report of the Committee on Bible Translations to Synod 1980 made the following observations about the NASB in its comparative study with the RSV and NIV:

- In Isaiah 1 and 2 it gives a "much more literal translation, but is sometimes stilted."
- In Hebrews 1 and 2, the committee concluded "the NASB on these chapters is acceptable but not so good as the other two *qua* translation."
- In Philippians, "the NASB is very accurate and follows the Greek almost slovenly [*sic*] but it tends to cloud the meaning sometimes by its literalness."
- In Genesis 40 and 41, "The NASB offers a valuable translation." Yet it is "too stilted" in some places.
- In Micah 7, the NASB was praised and found to be on the same level as RSV and NIV.

- With Hebrews 13, “the NASB leans heavily on the RSV and, where it does not do so, is, in many instances not a smooth translation.”
- In Judges 5, the committee was inclined “to give preference to the rendering of the NASB,” though also noting it is a difficult chapter.
- The NASB was found to have a “certain stiltedness” in Luke 24.
- The NASB was close to the RSV in Jeremiah 7-9:7.
- On Joel 1 and 2, “Although no basic objections are brought forward against the various translations, the RSV is preferred to the NASB and the NIV.”
- More generally, the NASB misses the appeal that the KJV once had with beauty of language, style, and clarity of expression.
- In sum, “the NASB, though close to the RSV in acknowledging modern research, is not to be preferred above the RSV. The translation of the NASB is often too literal to be lucid and clear and it does not render itself suitable for liturgical use.”

The committee recommended the RSV, but also recommended to leave the use of the NASB in the freedom of the churches. Synod 1980 adopted the recommendations of the CBT. The mandate for the CBT from this Synod did not include anything with regard to the NASB. Their mandate from this point until 1992 only included making recommendations regarding changes to the RSV.

Synod 1992

The CBT report to Synod 1992 featured a comparative study between the RSV and NRSV. No mention was made of the NASB. All of the churches that submitted letters regarding Bible translations requested the committee be reappointed with the mandate to do a comparative study between the NIV, NASB, and NKJV. Synod 1992 agreed and the CBT was given that mandate with the criteria of “faithfulness to the original text and linguistic character of the translation.”

Synod 1995

The CBT report to Synod 1995 noted the results of their comparison of the NASB with the NIV and NKJV. The following points are noteworthy from the report:

- Like the NIV (and unlike NKJV), the NASB follows an eclectic text of the NT.
- In theory, the NASB follows the philosophy of literal translation.
- In practice, “it cannot be doubted that the NASB is an accurate, reliable translation.” However, the literal approach has not been followed consistently. There are instances where the NASB is “surprisingly free and less accurate.” However, it is especially in the area of clarity and readability “that the NASB is too often found wanting. The translation is simply too stiff, not lucid enough, and fails to use words the way they are used today. Proper sentence structure is often lacking.”

- There were also concerns in matters of style with the NASB: “Thee and Thou” were still in use (note: this was eliminated in a later edition of NASB), use of italics for words not in the original languages, red letter editions, and the use of paragraphs.
- It was noted that the Bible Translation Committee of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia found “the NASB useful for study purposes, [but] it was not suitable for worship and other general purposes.” A subsequent iteration of this committee recommended that the NASB be omitted from further consideration for use in public worship, and they opted for the NKJV. The CanRC CBT objected and opined that the NASB is more readable than the NKJV.
- The CanRC CBT report in 1995 concluded that the NASB is too literal for liturgical use, but is still helpful for study purposes and could be recommended to the churches as such.

Synod 1995 decided to follow the recommendation of the CBT to adopt the NIV. Synod made no mention of the NASB in the decisions section of Article 72. Instead, it was simply stated, “To leave it in the freedom of the churches if they feel compelled to use another translation.” The mandate of the next iteration of the CBT did not mention the NASB.

To Today

The NASB is not mentioned again by any CBTs or Synods until Synod 2007, when Synod Smithers decided “to continue to recommend the NIV for use within the churches but to leave it in the freedom of the churches should they feel compelled to use other translations that have received favourable reviews in the reports of the CBT, namely, the NKJV, the NASB or the ESV.”

4.3 NKJV

Background

The complete New King James Version (NKJV) was published in 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Synod 1980 received a request for the CBT to study the NKJV (the New Testament was published in 1979) but this request was denied because no proper grounds for such a study were given by the church. As already noted, Synod 1992 mandated the committee “to do a comparative study of the NASB, NIV and NKJV, making use of past studies, in order to determine which one translation can be positively recommended for use by the churches, whereby the criteria are: faithfulness to the original text and linguistic character of the translation.”

Synod 1995

The report of the CBT to Synod 1995 made the following observations about the NKJV from their comparative study of the NASB, NIV and NKJV:

- The NKJV claims the translation has adhered “faithfully to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts.”

- The NKJV uses virtually the same textual basis in the Old Testament as the other translations.
- The NKJV is based on the Textus Receptus in the New Testament while the other translations follow an eclectic text; it corrected all departures from the Textus Receptus. The committee notes its reservations about the use of the Textus Receptus.
- The NKJV attempts to be literal and faithful to Scriptures but in terms of clarity and readability it falls short.
- In their limited studies of the NKJV, the CBT encountered sentences that were simply “bad” English. Also, the translation “has attempted to maintain expressions that are barely understood today and almost antiquated.”
- “The NKJV is expressly intended to satisfy the needs of those who cling to the KJV.” It is noted that none of the four revisions of the KJV since 1769 adhered as closely to the KJV as does the NKJV.
- Whatever strengths the NKJV has are more than adequately shared by the NASB, so there is no compelling reason to recommend the NKJV.
- As already noted, the CBT opined that the NASB is more readable than the NKJV. But like the NASB, the NKJV is too literal for use in the worship services.
- It is impossible to turn a 350 year old translation (i.e., the KJV) into an adequate translation for our time without destroying its unique characteristics. The attempt to maintain as much of the original translation of 1611 effectively limited the range of revision possibilities so that the NKJV rarely gives evidence of a fresh grappling with the problems of interpretation.
- Since the NKJV is not a fresh translation but a revision, the consequence is that the NKJV on occasion will follow the KJV rather than the original text.
- The NKJV has no executive committee with which the committee can correspond, as the NKJV is considered a completed project. For the committee this was another reason to not recommend the NKJV.

Some submissions from churches or individuals commended the NKJV for the consideration of this Synod. Synod 1995 decided to follow the recommendation of the CBT to adopt the NIV. Synod made no mention of the NKJV in the decisions section of Article 72. Instead, it was simply stated, “To leave it in the freedom of the churches if they feel compelled to use another translation.” The mandate of the next iteration of the CBT did not mention the NKJV.

4.4 ESV

Background

By way of some recent synodical history, Synod 2004 mandated the Committee for Bible Translation “to do a preliminary investigation of the ESV, and provide Synod 2007 with a report on the ESV translation.”

Synod 2007

It should be remembered that the English Standard Version (ESV) is a revision of the Revised Standard Version; in the ESV, approximately 6% of the RSV has been changed. Relying on the data and criteria of the 1995 CBT report (where the RSV was compared with other translations: NASB, NIV, and NKJV), and on two earlier evaluations of the RSV (i.e., in the 1974 and 1977 CBT reports), the 2007 CBT report to Synod noted some positive aspects of the ESV:

- It has moved inappropriately footnoted words in the RSV to the main text.
- It recognizes the personhood of Holy Spirit where the RSV did not.
- It has a greater respect for the Masoretic Text than the RSV.
- It has a greater respect for the unity of Scripture.
- It does not use archaic terminology such as “thee” and “thou.”
- It shows a greater respect for the divinity of Christ than the RSV.
- It has improved various verses in RSV that were tainted by liberal theology (e.g., “expiation” in the RSV of Rom 3:25 has been replaced by “propitiation”).
- It has removed confusing footnotes in the RSV (e.g., Gen 1:1).

On the negative side of the evaluation, the CBT noted about the ESV:

- It is excessively literal at times and muddled in its wording (e.g., Ex 21:22).
- It has sometimes adopted the RSV without change, seemingly unaware of the weaknesses of the RSV (e.g., 1 Sam 13:1).
- It has followed only 12 of the 26 changes (suggested by the CanRC CBT) to the RSV in the OT, and 7 out of 11 in NT; additionally, from a sampling of 5 recommended changes for Philippians, none were adopted, and from a set of 5 recommendations for Hebrews, just two were incorporated.
- It does not seem to fit with its own principles of translation. “On the one hand, the preface to the ESV states that the ESV is an ‘essentially literal translation’; on the other hand, the ESV uses the RSV as its starting point and the RSV cannot be described as an ‘essentially literal translation.’”

The 2007 CBT report concluded that while the ESV has made improvements to some of the mistranslations and infelicities of the RSV, it has not gone far enough. Synod 2007, quoting from the Committee Report, stated, “In light of the ESV’s stated goals and claims, the underlying RSV seems to be a ‘soft underbelly.’”

A Recent Review of the ESV

One of the principles behind the ESV is the commitment to regular revision (every five years). As such, since its initial release the ESV has undergone two minor revisions, the most recent being in 2011. In light of these revisions our committee took a second look at the previously recommended changes to the RSV, to see if any further CBT suggestions had been incorporated into the latest edition of the ESV. A few slight improvements were noted:

- a) Both the RSV and earlier editions of the ESV had a “hole in the text” in 1 Samuel 13:1, as pointed out in the 2007 CBT report. In the latest version of the ESV, the hole has been filled, though the content is mystifying: “Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel...” The following footnote has also been added to this verse: “Hebrew *Saul was one year old when he became king, and he reigned two years over Israel* (see 1 Samuel 10:6); some Greek manuscripts give Saul’s age when he began to reign as thirty years”.

The CBT’s previous recommendation was “to leave the verse out with an explanation in the footnote or to insert an estimated number of years with a footnote to explain the estimate so that the verse can be read.” In our judgment, while the actual text in the present ESV is still not very clear, the explanatory footnote is helpful.

- b) In 2 Chronicles 21:2, the latest ESV has now improved on the RSV by preserving the Masoretic Text (“king of Israel”), while adding a footnote, “That is, Judah.” This is in agreement with a previous CBT recommendation.
- c) The 2007 CBT Report highlighted that as in the RSV, Hebrews 2:11 in the ESV is problematic, “For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin.” The concern here is the intimation “that Christ has an origin.” In the latest version of the ESV, Hebrews 2:11 is translated as follows, “For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.” A footnote has also been added: “Greek *all are of one*”. In our judgment, “source” is marginally better than “origin,” and the footnote is cryptic but somewhat helpful.

From the above points, it can be seen that most of the other past recommendations by the CBT (from 1974 and 1977) have still not been followed in the latest edition of the ESV. As the CBT aptly noted in its 2007 report, “This raises the question of just how thorough is the ESV’s revision of the RSV.”

The shortcomings of the ESV’s revisions, also with respect to English style, have been noted by others. See for example, the article by Mark L. Strauss of Bethel Seminary in San Diego, “*Why the English Standard Version (ESV) Should Not Become the Standard English Version*,” which can be read at <http://zondervan.typepad.com/files/improvingesv2.pdf>. He notes eleven broad categories of problems in the ESV, many of them having to do with readability.

On the matter of the ESV’s continuing revision, the CBT discussed whether this would be a concern in recommending the ESV to the churches. In the past the CBT has appreciated the openness of translation committees to consider suggested changes to the text. However, our recent experience with the 1984 NIV being replaced by the 2011 edition instructs us that we cannot be absolutely certain of the future of any Bible translation. In the case of the ESV, its

recent history would seem to indicate that any revisions would not be of a dramatic and sweeping nature, affecting the character of the translation (as was the case for the 1984 NIV), but would be of a much more limited scope. In this respect, the committee is hopeful that any recommended changes can be (re)submitted to the ESV editorial team for evaluation and eventual incorporation.

4.5 Conclusions and Recommendation

As mentioned above, our committee sought to fulfill point 4.2.3 of our mandate chiefly by considering and comparing the previous work of the CBT on these three translations, the NASB, the NKJV, and the ESV. The foregoing has made abundantly clear that no Bible translation is without some shortcomings and areas of concern.

Nevertheless, we are persuaded that on balance, the ESV is the translation that is to be recommended to the churches. We note that it is the most up-to-date translation of the three translations considered. We appreciate that the ESV is a translation that is not “closed” but can be revised, should the ESV’s editorial committee be convinced of the need to make a change. It may also be observed that the ESV has found a wide degree of acceptance in our sister churches and churches of NAPARC. While we have pointed out that readability is a concern for the ESV, in our judgment this is less of an issue than for the NKJV and the NASB; though the ESV is not as readable as the 1984 NIV, it is certainly the most readable of the three translations that are considered in this report.

Considering our recommendation of the ESV, the churches may wonder to what degree the practice of translating with gender-neutral language is evident in the ESV, in light of some of the concerns that were raised in this connection through our study of the 2011 NIV. As part of our discussion of the translation trend of making “generic” references in Scripture truly generic (with gender-neutral nouns and pronouns), we noted on page 4 of the Interim Report that some 700 occurrences of the word “man” or “men” found in the RSV have been replaced with more inclusive terms in the ESV. However, a brief survey of the numerous texts cited in our Interim Report under “Changes in Texts on Gender and Gender-Roles” reveals that unlike the 2011 NIV, the ESV maintains an accurate perspective on who is eligible for the special offices of the church. The preface to the ESV outlines their translation practice in this regard,

In the area of gender language, the goal of the ESV is to render literally what is in the original. For example, “anyone” replaces “any man” where there is no word corresponding to “man” in the original languages, and “people” rather than “men” is regularly used where the original languages refer to both men and women. But the words “man” and “men” are retained where a male meaning component is part of the original Greek or Hebrew. Likewise, the word “man” has been retained where the original text intends to convey a clear contrast between “God” on the one hand and “man” on the other hand, with “man” being used in the collective sense of the whole human race (see Luke 2:52). Similarly, the English word “brothers” (translating the Greek word *adelphoi*) is retained as an important familial form of address between

fellow-Jews and fellow-Christians in the first century. A recurring note is included to indicate that the term “brothers” (*adelphoi*) was often used in Greek to refer to both men and women, and to indicate the specific instances in the text where this is the case. In addition, the English word “sons” (translating the Greek word *huioi*) is retained in specific instances because the underlying Greek term usually includes a male meaning component and it was used as a legal term in the adoption and inheritance laws of first-century Rome. As used by the apostle Paul, this term refers to the status of all Christians, both men and women, who, having been adopted into God’s family, now enjoy all the privileges, obligations, and inheritance rights of God’s children. The inclusive use of the generic “he” has also regularly been retained, because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and because an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it.

This “literal” approach of the ESV to gender-related language, while our committee does not feel is completely necessitated (see the discussion in 4.2 and 4.3 of the CBT Interim Report, “The Legitimacy of a Gender-Inclusive Translation,” and “The Desirability of a Gender-Inclusive Translation”), does reassure us of the ESV’s general reliability in this matter.

In sum, the committee recommends the ESV to the churches as the translation to replace the 1984 NIV.

5. An Ecclesiastically-Produced and Owned Bible Translation

Synod also directed the committee to investigate the possibility and feasibility of undertaking an “ecclesiastical translation,” a translation of Scripture that had been produced by our churches (or together with sister churches).

We considered that the idea of an ecclesiastical translation would have at least a couple of aspects to commend it. First, such a translation would be one over which the churches could maintain full control, and therefore it would not be revised or altered in ways that we might deem problematic. Secondly, such a translation would also be the “legal property” of the churches and would not be subject to the marketing decisions of the major Bible publishers, but could be printed according to the wishes of the churches.

However, the committee also considered that an ecclesiastical translation would be inadvisable for a few reasons. First, an ecclesiastical translation would isolate us from the rest of the Christian community in an important (and undesirable) way. We do not want the Bible to become a confessional document or even to be perceived in that way.² Related to this concern, a “distinctive” translation could put an unnecessary stumbling block in the way of evangelism. Secondly, such a translation is not feasible given the vast amount of work and effort that would be needed to make a credible translation.³ Surely the time and energies of those who would be competent to be involved in such work can be better employed in other projects. And thirdly, the committee does not consider an ecclesiastical translation to be necessary because there are available translations which are faithful and can serve the churches well.⁴

Our concerns about pursuing an ecclesiastical translation notwithstanding, the concept of such a translation was presented to a NAPARC meeting in November 2011 at our request by delegates of the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA). There was no interest expressed in this idea by any of the member churches.

6. Recommendations

Further to the conclusion in 4.5, your committee recommends General Synod 2013 to reappoint the Committee for Bible Translation, and to mandate the CBT:

- 1) to solicit, receive and evaluate comments from the churches on the ESV;
- 2) to submit worthy translation changes to the ESV editorial committee;
- 3) to prepare and distribute a report to the churches in advance of the next Synod.

In Christ's service,

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¹ *Acts Synod Smithers 2007*, Article 134, Recommendation 4.1.

² See interview with Prof. Jakob Van Bruggen by Reina Wiskerke, "Een 'vrijgemaakte' bijbelvertaling is voor mij een schrikbeeld", *Nederlands Dagblad* Nov 30, 1991. Cautionary examples of groups that have a distinctive Bible are the Jehovah Witnesses with their New World translation and the Seventh Day Adventists with the Clear Word Version.

³ See e.g., John Stek, "The New International Version: How It Came To Be" in Glen G. Scorgie *et al* (eds.), *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 235-63.

⁴ We note that the matter of an ecclesiastical translation has been previously discussed by the CBT. In its report to Synod 1992, we find the following at I.3.a, "In answer to correspondence from the Deputies for Bible Translations of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (September 29, 1990) we expressed our doubts about the feasibility of the churches themselves undertaking the task of translating the Bible. Furthermore, our synods have never called for a translation from within our own churches."