

Committee for Bible Translation: Report to General Synod Dunnville 2016

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1. Mandate

The Committee for Bible Translation (CBT), appointed by Synod Carman 2013, received the following mandate (*Acts*, Article 97):

4.4.1. To provide a thorough study of the effects of gender inclusive translation philosophy in the NIV2011 and the ESV, comparing also the earlier findings on this subject by the CBT on the NRSV in 1992, to ascertain whether anything is lost from God's revelation in the use of this philosophy and how it has affected each translation;

4.4.2. To provide a thorough study of the ESV with special attention to its readability and to what degree the concerns expressed by previous iterations of the CBT about the RSV remain a concern in relation to the ESV;

4.4.3. To solicit, receive and evaluate comments from the churches on the ESV, to submit worthy translation changes to the ESV editorial committee and monitor the response;

4.4.4. To send the committee's critical remarks and suggestions for improvement on the five texts pertaining to women in office (see Observation 2.10.4) to the CBTNIV and monitor the response;

4.4.5. To serve the next general synod with a report sent to the churches at least six months prior to the next general synod.

2. Committee

The committee members are Revs. P. Aasman (convenor, 2007), D. de Boer (2010), R. Vermeulen (2013). During this mandate two members left, Revs. R. Bredenhof and W. Bredenhof. The report, except for point 7, was produced while these brothers were still members.

3. Effects of the Gender-Inclusive Translation Philosophy in the ESV and NIV2011

The Committee was mandated by Synod Carman to “provide a thorough study of the effects of gender-inclusive translation philosophy in the NIV2011 and the ESV” (see 4.4.1).

Gender-Inclusive Translation Philosophy in the NIV2011

The “NIV Translation Philosophy” notes provided with the NIV2011 explain the philosophy and the wide-ranging choices of the NIV translators regarding inclusive language. It is emphatically stated that “nowhere is there even the remotest hint of any inclusive language for God.” The “gender-inclusive philosophy” of the NIV2011 is concerned with the translation of the Bible’s inclusive-masculine¹ language for males and females. The position of the NIV translators is that the inclusive masculine is increasingly not read as “inclusive” by modern readers. To preserve the inclusive aspect of the Bible’s inclusive-masculine, the translators have made the following choices:

1. Generic “he” was often, though not exclusively, replaced with generic “they”² (e.g., Mark 4:25)
2. The words “man” and “mankind” were occasionally used to describe human beings collectively (e.g., Mark 2:27). However, on other occasions, “people” and “humans” were used to translate Greek and Hebrew masculine forms referring to both men and women
3. “Ancestors” was preferred over “forefathers” (e.g., Judges 2:1)
4. “Brothers and sisters” was frequently used to translate the Greek *adelphoi* in the New Testament, when it was clear that both genders were in view (e.g., Romans 8:29)

Gender-Related Translation Philosophy in the ESV

By contrast with the NIV2011, the Translation Philosophy of the ESV translators was: “in the area of gender language... to render literally what is in the original.” According to the Preface of the ESV, this led the translators to the following translation choices:

1. “Anyone” replaces “any man” where there is no word corresponding to “man” in the original language
2. “People” rather than “men” is regularly used where the original languages refer to both men and women

3. The word “man” is retained when the original language contrasts human beings with God
4. “Brothers” is retained as the translation for the Greek *adelphoi*
5. “Sons” is retained for the Greek *huioi*
6. The generic “he” has been regularly retained because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages

A comparison of various texts in the NIV2011, ESV, and NRSV can be found in the section of this report entitled “On the CBT’s 1992 Evaluation of the NRSV”.

Evaluation – Suitability of the Two Translation Philosophies

The choice of the CBTNIV to make a gender-inclusive translation is consistent with their overall philosophy of translation, which was described in the 1995 CanRC CBT report as “modified-literal” or “idiomatic.”³ For instance, when the intent of the original author was to include the “sisters” in his address to the “brothers,” the translation “brothers and sisters” accurately reflects that intent. This intent can be inferred from the context. Since modern readers are less likely to understand that the term “brothers” includes the “sisters,” the CBTNIV believes that the gender-inclusive translation is a more effective communication of the true meaning of the original author. Our current mandate is not to re-open a discussion about the overall translation philosophy of the CBTNIV. We can only comment that the gender-inclusive language of the NIV2011 fits its philosophy (“modified literal” or “idiomatic”) and meets the criteria of accuracy under this philosophy. If we maintain the recommendations of the 1995 CBT report to Synod Abbotsford, we cannot reject the NIV2011 on the basis of the general accuracy of its translation of such Greek terms as *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”) or *aner* (the generic “they”).

On the other hand, the ESV translators chose to uphold an “essentially literal” translation. The gender-related translation philosophy of the ESV reflects the overall philosophy of the entire translation. The English terms “man,” “brothers” and “sons” are literally accurate translations of the corresponding Greek and Hebrew terms. If literal correspondence to the original language is the measure of a translation’s accuracy, then the ESV has accurately conveyed the meaning of the original text in regard to the use of the inclusive-masculine.

As one instance of these translation philosophies in practice, we may consider Romans 12:1. Paul addresses himself in this verse to the “brothers” (*adelphoi*). In translating this term, attention can be given to the fact that the Greek of the New Testament reflects the broader social context and language usage of the first century Greco-Roman world. The first century evidence cited in Greek dictionaries such as BDAG indicates that *adelphoi* was used in some instances to be inclusive of both men and women when they were in close affinity, such as through the sharing of beliefs.⁴ A determination of the word’s specific reference must of course be made from the context. In the case of Romans 12, it is indeed clear that the apostle’s instructions are not limited in application to only the men in the congregation of Rome; interpreters and preachers correctly apply Paul’s teachings to male and female believers alike. Since modern readers are increasingly likely to misunderstand the inclusiveness of “brothers,” some manner of explanation is required. The ESV has chosen to do this with a recurring footnote to these texts, explaining that the term

“brothers” was often used in the Greek language to refer to both men and women. The NIV2011 has chosen to help the reader by translating some instances of *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters.”

We conclude that both the NIV2011 and the ESV are based on a translation philosophy that enables the meaning of the original text to be accurately conveyed.

Evaluation – The NIV2011, ESV, and Male Headship

Concerns have been raised whether gender-inclusive language undermines the principle of male headship. For example, Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem have published their reservations about gender-neutral Bible translation in a volume with the subtitle “Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words.”⁵ Does gender-inclusive language in translation hinder our appreciation for the divinely appointed roles for men and women that we find taught in the Scriptures?

We make the following observations:

1. The inclusive-masculine is consistent with the Biblical view of male headship and a complementarian⁶ view of gender roles. However, there are no convincing arguments that the inclusive-masculine or generic “he” are *necessary* for the establishing and maintaining of a biblical and complementarian view of gender roles.
2. The shift to gender-inclusive language is consistent with a feminist agenda to promote an egalitarian⁷ view of male and female roles. However, there is no proof that gender-inclusive terminology *necessarily* leads to a feminist egalitarian view of gender roles.
3. The Biblical model of male headship in family, church and society is known independently of the inclusive-masculine language of the Scriptural text. This model is explicitly taught in such passages as Genesis 1-2, Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-7.
4. The modern climate of egalitarianism requires a strong determination to hold onto the Biblical teachings about men and women. As noted above, we do not believe that a translation of *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters,” for example, is necessarily a contradiction of the biblical view of men and women. The question then becomes whether such translations shape our thinking more subtly. The committee is left with the difficulty of how we would measure the effect of gender-inclusive language on the thinking of the people who read it. What, if anything, is lost of a Biblical view of men and women when an inclusive-masculine term like “mankind” is instead translated as “humans” or “people”? We do not know how to measure whether this language structure carries as much meaning as is sometimes alleged. We recognize that there can be a variety of reasons behind the move to change language structures and usage, of which some reasons are certainly related to the promotion of a feminist ideology. But given that the Bible teaches clearly and explicitly about

the roles of men and women, there is no need to rely on language structure alone to convey that men are entrusted with headship and authority.

5. The inclusive-masculine language that has traditionally characterized English translations of the Bible requires explanation of its meaning, especially in our current culture. On the other hand, the gender-inclusive language of some recent translations also requires an explanation as to how this language relates to the original Hebrew or Greek text. Neither philosophy of translation produces a translation that has no need for further explanation. The CBT does not believe that the NIV2011's philosophy of gender-inclusive language is sufficient to make this translation untrustworthy or inaccurate; rather, as pointed out in the CBT Interim Report (2011), the difficulty resides in the application of this philosophy in some instances. We are also confident that the ESV approach does justice to the original text and renders it accurately readable to the modern audience.

4. On the CBT's 1992 Evaluation of the NRSV

Another aspect of our mandate was to consider the gender inclusive translation philosophy in the NIV2011 and in the ESV, doing so through a comparison with past findings on this subject by the CBT (see 4.4.1). By way of background, the CBT report to General Synod 1992 dealt with this matter in particular through its analysis of the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version). The underlying question was whether the previous findings of the CBT would be of assistance in helping us to make a further determination on the legitimacy of gender inclusive language.

To set the context of the 1992 report, we should note that the NRSV was of interest to our churches because it was an updated version of the RSV, which was widely used in the federation at the time. After carrying out their investigation, the committee recommended—and Synod 1992 agreed—rejecting the NRSV, a decision that was based primarily on the policy of inclusive language that its translators had adopted. The 1992 report detailed numerous examples where “precision of translation is sacrificed for the policy of inclusive language.”⁸

Examples of Texts in the NRSV, Compared to NIV2011 and ESV

An initial exercise that may assist our evaluation of gender inclusive language in the NIV2011 and in the ESV is to compare a selection of texts that were originally flagged in the 1992 report on the NRSV as being unjustified translations of the original Hebrew or Greek, and to see how the more recent translations have rendered these texts.

Text	NRSV	NIV2011	ESV
Matt 23:8 (<i>sic</i> ; should be Matt 25:40)	“members of my family”	“brothers and sisters of mine”	“my brothers”

Luke 17:3	“another disciple”	“brother and sister”	“brother”
Acts 7:37	“people”	“people”	“brothers”
Rom 12:1 (and elsewhere in the NT epistles)	“brothers and sisters”	“brothers and sisters” (with a recurring note that the Greek <i>adelphoi</i> refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God’s family)	“brothers” (with a recurring note to indicate that the term “brothers” [<i>adelphoi</i>] was often used in Greek to refer to both men and women)
Acts 3:17	“friends”	“fellow Israelites”	“brothers”
Gal 4:28	“friends”	“brothers and sisters”	“brothers”
2 Cor 11:9	“friends”	“brothers”	“brothers”
3 John 10	“friends”	“believers”	“brothers”
Gal 2:4	“false believers”	“false believers”	“false brothers”
Gal 1:2	“members of God’s family”	“brothers and sisters”	“brothers”
Eph 6:23	“the whole community”	“brothers and sisters”	“brothers”
1 Pet 2:17 (x 2)	“everyone” “family of believers”	“everyone” “family of believers”	“everyone” “brotherhood”
Rom 8:14,16-17 (x 3)	“children of God”	“children of God”	“sons of God” “children of God”
Gal 4:5	“adoption as children”	“adoption to sonship”	“adoption as sons”
Dan 7:13	“one like a human being”	“one like a son of man”	“one like a son of man”

In its 1992 report, the CBT gave further attention to a few texts in the NRSV that pertained to gender-inclusive language as this language relates to ecclesiastical office; namely, Philippians 1:14, 1 Timothy 3:11, and Romans 16:1.

With respect to Philippians 1:14, it was observed that “most of the brothers” in the RSV had become “most of the brothers and sisters” in the NRSV. This verse was taken by the CBT to imply that both men and women were involved in the official proclamation of the Word. This verse was also discussed by the most recent CBT in their Interim Report (2011) in connection with NIV2011, where in Philippians 1:4 *adelphoi* has been translated as “brothers and sisters.” The CBT noted this as a misleading translation, as it does not do justice to the text’s terminology of proclamation, and it undermines the proper understanding of who is eligible to serve as minister in the church. In the ESV, the term in question in Philippians 1:14 is translated as “the brothers.”

With respect to 1 Timothy 3:11 in the NRSV, the CBT suggested that this text demonstrated the NRSV’s bias in favour of women in office. The NRSV translation begins, “Women

likewise..." while the text note says, "Or 'their wives' or 'women deacons.'" In the CBT Interim Report (2011), the NIV2011's translation of 1 Timothy 3:11 ("the women") was deemed to be an acceptable rendering of the original Greek *gune*. Additionally, the NIV2011 footnote to this text ("Possibly deacons' wives or women who are deacons") was considered by the CBT to be an improvement on the NIV1984, which had suggested "deaconesses" as an alternative translation for "their wives." In the ESV, 1 Timothy 3:11 is translated similarly to the NIV1984: "their wives." The ESV also includes a footnote that does not suggest any connection of the women to the aforementioned deacons, "Wives, likewise, must,' or 'Women, likewise, must'".

With respect to Romans 16:1 in the NRSV, rendered "Phoebe, a deacon...", the CBT drew attention to the text note which says, "or minister." Also in the NIV2011, Phoebe is described as a "deacon," and there are two footnotes attached to this word. The first reads, "Or 'servant'." The second reads, "The word 'deacon' here refers to a Christian designated to serve with the overseers/elders of the church in a variety of ways; similarly in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8,12." Again, the previous CBT in its Interim Report (2011) evaluated the NIV2011 translation of this text, and the two footnotes. The CBT maintained that "servant" is the preferable translation of the Greek *diakonos* in Romans 16:1, though "deaconess" could be acceptable here if it is understood as a woman assisting others in the church. The CBT also warned that by placing "deacon" in the text, relegating "servant" to the footnote, and also adding the second footnote, there exists in the NIV2011 a detrimental potential for identification between what is said about Phoebe and what is said about deacons in 1 Timothy 3. In the ESV of Romans 16:1, Phoebe is described as a "servant," with the text note indicating "or 'deaconess'".

Based on the above table (NRSV-NIV2011-ESV), and the comparison of the three additional texts pertaining to ecclesiastical office, we can make a few brief observations.

- 1) In a few instances the NIV2011 incorporated gender-inclusive language in ways that were similar or identical to those changes in the NRSV (i.e., "brothers and sisters," "people"), while in other instances the NIV2011 did not adopt the entirely gender-neutral language of the NRSV (i.e., maintaining reference to "sonship," "son of man").
- 2) A few of the NRSV texts that were deemed to be problematic by the CBT in its 1992 report were considered to be acceptable by the CBT in its 2011 report (i.e., the translation of *adelphoi* in several places in the epistles; the translation of "women" in 1 Timothy 3:11).
- 3) In almost all instances it can be seen that the ESV has opted for what can be considered a less gender inclusive translation (e.g., consistent use of "brothers" to translate *adelphoi*).

Conclusions on the CBT's Past Analysis of the NRSV

In its 1992 report, after citing numerous examples of what it described as the unjustified gender inclusive translations in the NRSV, the CBT speculated on the influence of the feminist agenda on the movement toward inclusive language in the NRSV: "The translation

is no longer determined by what the text says, but by what certain people like to hear. Apparently feminists no longer want to listen to language that they perceive as male dominated and so the Word has to be purged from what is considered a male bias.”⁹ This pointed observation was also quoted in the CBT’s Interim Report (2011) to the churches on the NIV2011.

In our judgment this remains a valid and cautionary observation, and one that should be duly considered. We should be cognizant of the political and social agendas that are at play in matters of language and language usage. As has been well said, “Language not only reflects culture but creates culture. The feminist push for inclusive language is not intended simply to mirror the current state of the English language but to transform the language.”¹⁰ However, even if there is an influence from feminist ideology on English usage, this does not mean that all gender inclusive language is thereby to be rejected. If a gender inclusive rendering of a passage more accurately conveys the author’s intended meaning to the reader of Scripture (e.g., if a passage is clearly meant to apply to both men and women, to both “brothers and sisters”), then it is our view that such a rendering should be welcomed.

The preceding review and consideration of the CBT report to Synod 1992 regarding the NRSV, while interesting, has not provided any compelling justification to reject a translation philosophy of Scripture which makes allowances for gender-inclusive language. Indeed, no English translation of Scripture can avoid the issue of how to translate texts that are meant to be general in reference. We would argue that the way in which different translations are gender-inclusive is a matter of degree, with some degrees being unacceptable in our judgment.

Finally, it should be noted that language usage has continued to undergo change in the twenty-plus years since the CBT issued its report on the NRSV. No language that is in current and widespread usage exists in a static state—and English is certainly no exception. It can be granted that in North American or Western culture, masculine terms previously understandable as generic in reference are no longer always understood as such. This disconnect in understanding is something that requires attention when texts from Scripture are taught or preached to a 21st century audience.

5. The ESV in Relation to the RSV

Because the ESV is a revision of the RSV, Synod also directed our committee to investigate “to what degree the concerns expressed by previous iterations of the CBT about the RSV remain a concern in relation to the ESV” (see 4.4.2).

Synod Chatham 2004 mandated CBT “to do a preliminary investigation of the ESV, and provide Synod 2007 with a report on the ESV translation, using also the input solicited from the churches.” In seeking to fulfill this part of its mandate the CBT noted the following in its 2007 report to General Synod Smithers, “The ESV is a revision of the RSV and sees itself as ‘carrying forward this legacy [of the RSV] for a new century.’” The committee, therefore, compared the ESV with the RSV, making use of the data and criteria found in the

1995 Report of the CBT. This report relies on two earlier evaluations of the RSV, the 1974 and 1977 CBT Reports.”¹¹

In Appendix A of the 2007 CBT report, the committee reached this conclusion about the 1974 report on the RSV and how the earlier concerns had been addressed: “In the sections considered, the ESV has in the main demonstrated a careful reconsideration of the RSV. It generally has a much better respect for the Masoretic Text than the RSV.¹² It also shows a greater respect for the personhood of the Holy Spirit as well as the divine nature of Christ. With regards to the unity of Scripture, in four of the five comparisons of OT texts and their NT quotations, the ESV is a marked improvement over the RSV. In one instance, however, it is actually worse than the RSV and demonstrates a certain carelessness with the Masoretic Text of the OT. Still, overall the ESV proves more faithful in preserving the unity of the Scriptures by translating the passages in question more consistently than the RSV.”¹³

In the same appendix of the 2007 report, the committee came to a number of conclusions when it compared the ESV to the RSV. The committee noted that the ESV is stronger in two key areas: overall theology and principles of translation. It also concluded that the ESV displayed weaknesses in two key areas: problems inherited from the RSV and quality of translation.

In its 2007 report the CBT noted the following when comparing the ESV to the RSV. It noted that the ESV:

- establishes “the authentic Word of God more clearly to the reader”
- “recognizes the personhood of the Holy Spirit where the RSV did not”
- “has a much greater respect for Masoretic Text than does the RSV”
- “has a greater respect for the unity of Scripture” (note: this is highlighted with many texts in Appendix A - Preliminary Study of ESV)
- “does not use ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ and thus avoids both unnecessary archaic terminology and issues surrounding the divinity of Christ”
- “shows a greater support for the divinity of our Lord”
- “is conscious of unscriptural, liberal influence in the RSV and in various places has removed it”
- “has removed confusing footnotes in the RSV”

The 2007 committee report concluded: “The ESV seems to show a much greater respect for the Bible as the Word of God than the RSV.”¹⁴

Further, it should be noted that the previous CBT’s Final Report to Synod 2013 included the results of its investigation into whether “any further CBT suggestions had been incorporated into the latest edition [2011] of the ESV.”¹⁵ Only a few slight improvements to past editions of the ESV were noted in the 2011 ESV:

- 1 Samuel 13:1 – still considered to be a confusing rendering, but the text footnote is more helpful

- 2 Chronicles 21:2 – the 2011 ESV has improved on the RSV by preserving the Masoretic Text
- Hebrews 2:11 – considered to be a slight improvement

Based on all of the above it would seem that previous iterations of the CBT, including the most recent, have done the work Synod Carman 2013 requested us to do as it relates to this part of our mandate. The areas of concern noted by previous iterations of the committee in relation to the RSV have been evaluated and the committee has concluded that “on balance, the ESV is the translation that is to be recommended to the churches.”¹⁶ This was the recommendation that was adopted by Synod Carman.

6. Readability of the ESV

Objectively Evaluating Readability

In light of our mandate to provide a thorough study of the ESV with special attention to its readability (4.4.2), we discussed at some length how to evaluate the readability of a Bible translation. To some extent this is a subjective matter. Among other things, it depends on the education level of the one evaluating the translation, how much regular reading the evaluator does, and what kind of reading. What might be challenging for one reader might be relatively easy for another.

Our committee did some research into whether or not there are any useful objective standards for readability. It turns out that there are at least seven widely-used readability formulas:

1. The Flesch Reading Ease Formula
2. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Formula
3. The Fog Scale (Gunning Fog Formula)
4. The SMOG Index
5. The Coleman Liau Index
6. Automated Readability Index
7. Linsear Write Formula

These can be used to determine the grade, difficulty, and age level of English prose texts. There is a website where one can input a text and an algorithm determines the consensus of these seven formulas. The website is www.readabilityformulas.com. Our committee used this website to compare the ESV and 2011NIV on several texts. We chose 14 random prose texts from the Old Testament and New Testament from a variety of genres. It is important to note that these are only **prose** texts. The readability formulas cannot be used to analyze poetry. Besides the random texts, we also analyzed Ephesians 1:3-14, a passage with notoriously difficult grammar. The results of our study are below:

1. Genesis 22:1-8

ESV – Grade level 5, easy to read, 8-9 years old
NIV – Grade level 5, easy to read, 8-9 years old

2. Leviticus 14:1-9

ESV – Grade level 8, easy to read, 12-14 years old
NIV – Grade level 9, fairly easy to read, 13-15 years old

3. Joshua 4:1-7

ESV – Grade level 8, fairly easy to read, 12-14 years old
NIV – Grade level 9, fairly easy to read, 13-15 years old

4. 1 Samuel 31:1-7

ESV – Grade level 8, fairly easy to read, 12-14 years old
NIV – Grade level 9, fairly easy to read, 13-15 years old

5. Esther 9:1-5

ESV – Grade level 11, standard/average, 15-17 years old
NIV – Grade level 10, standard/average, 14-15 years old

6. Ecclesiastes 9:1-6

ESV – Grade level 8, easy to read, 12-14 years old
NIV – Grade level 9, fairly easy to read, 13-15 years old

7. Ezekiel 33:1-8

ESV – Grade level 11, fairly easy to read, 15-17 years old
NIV – Grade level 12, fairly easy to read, 17-18 years old

8. Matthew 6:25-33

ESV – Grade level 6, easy to read, 10-11 years old
NIV – Grade level 5, easy to read, 8-9 years old

9. Mark 12:1-9

ESV – Grade level 5, easy to read, 8-9 years old
NIV – Grade level 5, easy to read, 8-9 years old

10. John 15:1-11

ESV – Grade level 5, easy to read, 8-9 years old
NIV – Grade level 5, very easy to read, 8-9 years old

11. Acts 3:1-10

ESV – Grade level 7, fairly easy to read, 11-13 years old
NIV – Grade level 6, easy to read, 10-11 years old

12. Romans 7:1-6

ESV – Grade level 9, fairly easy to read, 13-15 years old
NIV – Grade level 10, fairly easy to read, 14-15 years old

13. Ephesians 1:3-14

ESV – Grade level 18, difficult to read, college graduate
NIV – Grade level 13, fairly difficult to read, 18-19 years old (college level entry)

14. Hebrews 8:1-7

ESV – Grade level 11, standard/average, 15-17 years old
NIV – Grade level 11, standard/average, 15-17 years old

15. Revelation 10:1-7

ESV – Grade level 10, fairly easy to read, 14-15 years old
NIV – Grade level 7, easy to read, 11-13 years old

Summary and Conclusion on Survey

- ESV average grade level – 8.67
- NIV average grade level – 8.33

We note that the ESV and NIV scored equally on four passages. NIV scored a higher reading level than ESV on six passages. ESV scored a higher reading level than NIV on five passages. If we take Ephesians 1:3-14 out of the results, the two translations are actually equal in terms of grade level:

- ESV average grade level – 8.00
- NIV average grade level – 8.00

We were initially surprised by this result. The impression many seem to have is that the ESV is significantly less readable than the NIV. However, our research above does not bear this out. Furthermore, we discovered a chart published by Zondervan (the publisher of the NIV) which confirmed our findings.¹⁷ According to Zondervan, the NIV is at a grade 7.8 reading level, while the ESV is at 7.4. They are close, but the ESV is marginally easier.

It has been noted before that the ESV is essentially a light overhaul of the RSV. In 1995 when a previous CBT recommended the 1984 NIV to the churches, it was noted that “the NIV is in many respects very close to the RSV.”¹⁸ The same report quoted Robert G. Bratcher, “The NIV is closer in style and form to the RSV than to any other English version....The principles that guided it in textual, exegetical, linguistic and stylistic matters are hardly distinguishable from those which guided the RSV.”¹⁹ Our research shows that, in terms of readability, what was true of the RSV vis-à-vis the NIV, remains true of the ESV.

Some Specific Passages with Readability Issues

While the overall picture of the readability of the ESV is good, some scholars have identified particular problem areas. There are specific passages where the ESV has room for improvement in terms of readability. In this section we will identify some of those passages and provide proposals for how these might be improved. Some of these passages have been identified as being problematic by Mark Strauss in an article entitled “Why the English Standard Version Should Become the Standard English Version.”²⁰ Other passages were noted by Allan Chapple in a 2003 article in *Reformed Theological Review*, “The English Standard Version: A Review Article.”²¹ Other passages come from our own reading and study of the ESV.

We should state at the outset that a degree of subjectivity cannot be avoided here either, especially when the passages under consideration are poetic in nature. Poetry is an elevated form of writing and poets often use words and phrases that might not otherwise be used in normal discourse. We see this even in the latest edition of our *Book of Praise* and its psalms and hymns. Moreover, there are other places in Scripture where an elevated form of writing found in the original would be expected to be reflected in a translation. We think, for example, of the polished Greek used by Luke in parts of his gospel and Acts. To ask (as Strauss does) whether a contemporary English speaker would use this or that phrase is to miss the distinct literary character of much of the Bible. With these caveats in mind, we cannot expect all readers of this report to agree with our evaluation of every passage identified as being problematic, and likely other readers would want more passages added.

Unclear Passages or Potential for Misunderstanding

Joshua 6:26

Joshua laid an oath on them at that time, saying, “Cursed before the LORD be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho.”

The Hebrew means to impose a curse. “To lay an oath” on someone is not clear in English. We propose: “Joshua pronounced a curse at that time...”

Proverbs 30:25,26

*...the ants are **a people not strong**,
yet they provide their food in summer
The rock badgers are **a people not mighty**,
yet they make their homes in the cliffs;*

The problem here should be self-evident. It is odd to describe ants and badgers as “people.” We propose: “species” in the place of “people” in these verses.

2 Kings 7:3

Now there were four men who were lepers at the entrance to the gate. And they said to one another, “Why are we sitting here until we die?”

Were they only lepers at the entrance to the gate? This could be clearer. We propose: “Now there were four leprous men at the entrance to the gate...”

1 Chronicles 28:19

“All this he made clear to me in writing from the hand of the LORD, all the work to be done according to the plan.”

Newer editions of the ESV have added quotation marks with this verse to indicate that someone is saying this, but it is still not immediately clear who is saying it. While this translation is faithful to the Hebrew text, we propose that readers would be served by adding at the verse’s beginning, “David said.”

Romans 14:22

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

Are Christians to keep their faith to themselves and not share it? The Greek word translated as “faith” has a broader range of meaning that includes “conviction.” We propose: “The conviction that you have...”

Galatians 6:12

*It is those who want **to make a good showing in the flesh** who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.*

The expression in bold here is not clear. The idea here is that that the Judaizers are all about impressing others with outward appearances. We propose: “It is those who want to make an external show...”

Psalms 94:9

***He who planted the ear**, does he not hear?
He who formed the eye, does he not see?*

This is an overly literal translation of the Hebrew. This word can also be used metaphorically to describe the creation of something. We propose: “He who shaped the ear...”

Idiom Problems

Joshua 10:6

*And the men of Gibeon sent to Joshua at the camp in Gilgal, saying, “**Do not relax your hand from** your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us and help us, for all the kings of the Amorites who dwell in the hill country are gathered against us.”*

What the men of Gibeon mean is “do not abandon us.” Our English translation should reflect the meaning of this idiom. We propose: “Do not abandon your servants...”

Judges 15:8

*And he struck them **hip and thigh** with a great blow, and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.*

Compare NIV, “He attacked them viciously...” and even NASB, “And he struck them ruthlessly...” It is true that the idiom used here is not entirely clear. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* states, “To ‘smite hip and thigh’ is a particularly vigorous form of attack...” (500). Commentator Daniel I. Block (*The New American Commentary*) notes that it is “a wrestling idiom for total victory.” We propose: “And he struck them viciously...”

Psalm 22:7

*All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;*

In English, we make faces at people. The Hebrew idiom is close, but our translation should be clearer. The idea is that of a contemptuous gesture with the mouth. We propose: “they sneer at me...”

Psalm 10:4

***In the pride of his face** the wicked does not seek him;
all his thoughts are, “There is no God.”*

While the meaning might be worked out with some thought, it is not immediately obvious. We propose: “In his pride the wicked does not seek him...” With this verse we note that the ESV offers an alternative translation of the word “face” in the footnotes. It is true that this word can be translated as “anger.” We therefore also propose an alternative reading for the footnotes: “In his angry pride the wicked does not seek him...”

*Lexical Issues*Matthew 2:23

*And he went and lived in **a city called Nazareth**, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.*

The Greek word translated as “city” here can also be translated as “town” or “village.” At the time of Jesus’ birth, Nazareth was certainly not what we commonly think of as a city. We propose: “And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth...”

Word Order Issues

Luke 22:29

...and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom,...

The word order in this translation follows the original Greek closely. However, the English word order could definitely use some improvement. The ESV could take a hint here not only from translations like the NIV, but also the KJV and NASB. We propose: “And I assign to you a kingdom, just as my Father assigned one to me...”

Conclusion

From the foregoing it is clear that that the ESV still needs improvement in some areas related to readability. In keeping with 4.4.3 of our mandate, we have forwarded the results of this study to the ESV Translation Oversight Committee. Since the committee has stated that it is open to receiving critical feedback, we hope that it will take our comments to heart and incorporate our proposed changes in a future revision of the ESV.

7. Feedback from the Churches

Our committee was mandated to solicit, receive and evaluate comments from the churches on the ESV, to submit worthy translation changes to the ESV editorial committee and to monitor the response (see 4.4.3). In early 2015 we wrote a letter to all the churches inviting feedback on the use of the ESV. The committee has received correspondence from two churches. Both churches complained about the readability of the ESV while advocating for the use of the NIV2011. Regarding the readability of the ESV these churches were referred to the contents of this report. The churches were also informed that further consideration of the NIV2011 is beyond our current mandate.

8. Interaction with the CBTNIV

Synod directed our committee to correspond with the CBTNIV (see 4.4.4). We were to send the critical remarks and suggestions for improvement on the five texts that pertained to women in office, as these texts were discussed in our Interim report (December 2011). Anticipating this aspect of the mandate, our committee sent the Interim Report in its entirety to the CBTNIV in April of 2012. To date, no interaction from the CBTNIV has been received.

9. Recommendations

The committee recommends that General Synod 2016 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,

P. Aasman (convenor)
D. de Boer
R. Vermeulen

¹ "Inclusive-masculine" is a term for words such as "man" or "mankind" when they are used for a group that includes males and females.

² The word "he" is sometimes used in the English language for situations that might apply to either a man or a woman. Example, "when someone crosses the street, *he* should look both ways."

³ *Acts of Synod Abbotsford 1995*, Appendix III, Section 2.4.2.v., "The NIV undoubtedly has dynamic equivalent elements within it, as do other translations (cf. Appendix 3, section 2.1 and 2.3), but again this does not make it a dynamic equivalent translation. Rather than belong in Beekman and Callow's category of unacceptable types (unduly free), the NIV really has to be placed in the category of the acceptable types (modified literal or idiomatic)."

⁴ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3d ed., rev. and tr. Frederick William Danker; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

⁵ W.A. Grudem and V.S. Poythress, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Word*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000. A shorter summary of the concerns raised in *The Gender- Neutral Bible Controversy* can be found under the title "An Evaluation of Gender Language in the 2011 Edition of the NIV Bible" on the website www.waynegrudem.com

⁶ "Complementarian" is a term widely used to summarize the view that God created man and women equal but with different gifts suitable to the complementary but different tasks assigned to them.

⁷ "Egalitarian" is a term widely used to describe the view that God created men and women to be equal in every way. In effect, this means that the duties of leadership and authority in the family and the church are not exclusively assigned to men.

⁸ *Acts Synod Lincoln 1992*, 251.

⁹ *Acts 1992*, 251.

¹⁰ Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 203.

¹¹ Reports to General Synod Smithers 2007, vol. 2, 216.

¹² The term *Masoretic Text* refers to 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.

¹³ Reports to General Synod Smithers 2007, vol. 2, 231.

¹⁴ This material was summarized in the CBT's Final Report to General Synod Carman 2013.

¹⁵ Reports to General Synod Carman 2013, vol. 2, 163.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁷ This chart is available online here: <http://www.canrc.org/?document=8224>

¹⁸ *CBT Report to General Synod Abbotsford 1995*, 33.

¹⁹ *CBT Report to General Synod Abbotsford 1995*, 41.

²⁰ This article can be found online here (as of October 2014):
<http://zondervan.typepad.com/files/improvingesv2.pdf>

²¹ This article can be found online here (as of October 2014): <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/wp-content/uploads/2004/03/306-chapple-esv.pdf>