

## WHY WE PREACH FROM THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION (ESV) THE ELDERS OF THE POINT COMMUNITY CHURCH

The elders at The Point Community Church have decided that we should primarily use the English Standard Version (ESV) as our primary preaching and teaching translation. This paper is our pastoral attempt to give a brief overview of the theological and practical issues associated with Bible translations in general and the ESV in particular.

This is important because the Scriptures exist for many reasons, and chief among them is the revelation of the person and work of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that He was in fact the very thread that wove all of Scripture together:

- **Matthew 5:17** *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*
- **Luke 24:27** *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*
- **Luke 24:44–45** *Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures . . .*
- **John 5:39** *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me . . .”*

Therefore, having the best possible translation of Scripture is important because it helps us to hear God most clearly and therefore know Jesus most intimately.

In translating the Bible into English, four general categories of translation are most common: word-for-word, thought-for-thought, paraphrases, and corruptions. The same four options are also used in the translation of other ancient books into English.

### The ESV is Word-for-Word translation

Word-for-word translations (also known as literal translations) make a special effort to carefully interpret each word from their original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic into English. Word-for-word translations emphasize God, the divine author of Scripture, over the human reader of Scripture. The result is a striving for the precision of what the Bible says, much like one would expect in other important communications, such as legal documents, marriage vows, or contracts. Word-for-word translations are generally a high school reading level.

Word-for-word translations tend to be the best for studying because of their accuracy, though they sometimes lose the poetic nuances of the original languages. Probably the best word-for-word translations are the English Standard Version (ESV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New King James Version (NKJV). The King James Version (KJV) is also a word-for-word translation, but because of its use of old English, it is very difficult for some people to read. The NASB was widely regarded as the most scholarly word-for-word translation until the arrival of the ESV. It did not become widely popular, however, because of its tight copyright and sometimes stiff translation of poetry that lost some of the beauty of the original writings. Thankfully, the ESV has preserved the degree of accuracy present in the NASB while also doing a better job of translating the poetic parts of Scripture in a more fluid manner.

## Why is the English Standard Version best for preaching?

There are two lines of reasoning that have led the elders of The Point Community Church to decide that the ESV is the best translation for our preaching/teaching ministry. First, there are important theological reasons why we believe the ESV is the best translation for us. Second, there are practical pastoral reasons why we prefer the ESV to other translations.

### **Theological reasons we are preaching from the ESV**

1. The ESV upholds the truth that Scripture is the very words of God, not just the thoughts of God.

We believe and teach that God the Holy Spirit inspired not just the thoughts of Scripture but the very words and details. This is significant because the Bible repeatedly declares that the very words of God are important, not just the thoughts they convey. Therefore, a word-for-word translation is the most accurate and reliable.

2. The ESV upholds that what is said must be known before what is meant can be determined.

Before we can interpret the meaning of Scripture, we must first accurately understand the message of Scripture. Or, to put it another way, only *after* knowing what Scripture says can we understand what it means. Practically, this requires that Bible translations be separate from and prior to Bible commentaries.

3. The ESV upholds the truth that words carry meaning.

Some scholars will argue that thought-for-thought and paraphrase translations do not change the meaning of Scripture but just the words of Scripture in an effort to clarify the meaning of Scripture. But this reasoning is weak because meaning is carried in words. Therefore, when we change the words of Scripture we are changing the meaning of Scripture. For this reason, when we handle other important documents we do not take the liberty to change their words. For example, an attorney is not free to change the words of a signed contract, a husband is not free to rewrite his vows after his wedding. In this way, word-for-word translations like the ESV are following the directives of 1 Corinthians 4:6, which admonishes us “not to go beyond what is written,” and Proverbs 30:5–6, which warns, “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.”

4. The ESV upholds the theological nomenclature of Scripture.

One of the more popular arguments for thought-for-thought translations and paraphrases is that people do not understand the theological nomenclature that Scripture uses to express doctrinal concepts. The reasoning follows that words like “justification” and “propitiation,” which the original text of Scripture used, should be replaced with more modern vernacular that people can understand.

Because we love the people God entrusts to our care, we who preach and teach Scripture should strive to explain the words that they do not understand so that they can fully appreciate what God is saying to them through Scripture.

5. The ESV upholds the truth that while Scripture is meant for all people, it cannot be communicated in such a way that all people receive it.

Scripture teaches us that God loves the whole world (John 3:16) and that we should seek to reach as many people as possible (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Subsequently, the desire to make the Bible understandable so that more people can learn about Jesus is something that every Christian should wholeheartedly agree to.

However, we must remember that we cannot change the words of Scripture because God has called us to not only communicate widely, but also communicate truthfully. We must accept that not all Scripture is easy to understand for many reasons. First of all, we are sinners. Consequently, we sometimes suppress the truth we do receive because we disagree with Scripture and are unwilling to repent. The problem is a hard heart and not just a difficult translation (Romans 1:28). Second, God’s thoughts are much higher than our own (Isaiah 55:9). Third, God has secrets that He has not revealed to us (Deuteronomy 29:29). Fourth, we sometimes see the truth dimly and know it in part (1 Corinthians 13:12).

We should make every effort to have the Bible translated in words that as many people as possible can understand. But we must also be careful not to cross a line where we change God's words in hopes that more people will be willing to accept them. Apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit working in us, there is no way we can gladly receive the truth. Even with the Holy Spirit, some parts of Scripture remain for us "hard to understand," as they were even for Peter, who was trained by Jesus and himself penned Scripture.

Therefore, the pursuit of all Bible translation and teaching must be both accessibility to the reader *and* accuracy to God the Holy Spirit who inspired the writings of Scripture.

#### 6. The ESV upholds the complementarian nature of gender in Scripture.

There is a great debate raging in academic circles about the language of gender and how it relates to biblical translation. The argument is commonly made that in generations past people used the word "man" or "mankind" to refer to humanity in general as an all-encompassing term that included both men and women. But, it is said, the understanding of these words has changed so that in the minds of the average person today it refers only to males and excludes females.

However, it is still common for people to understand words like "man" and "mankind" as a reference to both males and females. Furthermore, it is God who called the human race "man" in Genesis 5:1 (ESV, NIV, NASB, TAB, KJV, NKJV, HCSB) and not the "human race" (TM) or "human beings" (TNIV, NLT, CEV).

It must be pointed out that, in its more dangerous forms, the push for gender-neutral language is in fact a clear push against Scripture. For example, Scripture states that God made us "male and female" (for example, Genesis 1:27). Consequently, in God's created order, there is both equality between men and women (because both are His image-bearers) and distinction (because men and women have differing roles). This position is called *complementarianism* and teaches that men and women, though equal, are also different in some ways and therefore function best together in a complementary way, like a right hand and left hand (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22–33; Colossians 3:18–19; 1 Timothy 2:8–3:13). But those with a particular agenda are seeking to eradicate the created distinction between males and females so as to validate new alternative lifestyles that are not acceptable according to Scripture.

Even more dangerous is the effort by some to feminize God. Perhaps the worst example of this is a recent translation released by a group of fifty-two biblical "scholars" called *The Bible in a More Just Language*. In an effort to remove what the group sees as unjust treatment of women and homosexuals, God the Father is now "our Mother and Father" and Jesus is no longer the Son of God but rather the "child" of God. Satan, of course, is still referred to as male.

Theologically speaking, God does not have a biological gender because God is Spirit, without physical anatomy (John 4:24), and is therefore not a man (Numbers 23:19). In using the word "He," the Bible is not saying that God is merely a man, but rather that God is a unique person who reveals Himself with terms such as "Father" when speaking about Himself. Jesus said "Our Father" when he gave us our model of how to pray. Therefore, referring to God as Father is not an antiquated oppression from a patriarchal culture, but an echo of the prayer life of Jesus. It is the predominant way in which God has chosen to reveal Himself to us.

God created mankind "male and female" (Genesis 1:27; 5:2). We must not bend to the pressures of a culture that would oppose His created order and refer to men and women as anything less than simply "man," as God does (Genesis 5:1). We must likewise not bend to the pressure to recognize God as someone other than "our Father" because that is the primary means He has chosen to reveal Himself to us. Simply, God the Father commands all who disagree with Him on this point to repent of their nonsense rather than revise His name.

### **Practical reasons we are preaching from the ESV**

In addition to the above theological reasons why the elders of The Point Community Church have concluded that the ESV is the best translation for our preaching, there are also numerous practical reasons why we are transitioning to the ESV.

1. Our pulpit is theologically oriented. We value biblical doctrine and we teach that biblical living can only flow out of correct biblical doctrine. Subsequently, preaching doctrine requires the best word-for-word translation in an effort to provide theological accuracy.
2. Our pulpit exists to teach people. God has called pastors to be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Practically, this means that people do not merely need a good Bible translation, but they also need a good church with good teaching from good pastors. As pastors, we do not fear handing our people a word-for-word translation that may have some theological terms and such that they do not immediately understand.
3. Our pulpit must strengthen and not weaken the trustworthiness of Scripture. As preachers, we need to be able to read the English translation to our people and tell them with confidence that they are hearing what God, through the original author, actually said. For this to occur we need to preach from a translation that is accurate and does not need us to clarify it in order to accurately teach.
4. Our pulpit is precedent-setting for the life and doctrine of our people. As pastors who preach and teach, James 3:1 is a constant reminder that we face greater judgment than the ‘non-pastor’ Christian. As a result, it is imperative for pastors to be careful with our teaching. A good word-for-word translation is a gift that helps us to be as effective in our teaching as possible, benefiting both ourselves and those who call us pastor.
5. Our pulpit is plugged in. Our sermons are posted on the internet for access free of charge. We understand that sermons from The Point are accessible in places across the globe. This results in a much broader sphere of influence and a corresponding broader sphere of criticism. What we preach can and will live on indefinitely in various media forms. Subsequently, because the impact of our preaching can be far larger and longer-lasting than at any time in history, it is all the more imperative that we are preaching from the best possible translation of the Bible.

### **What about using other translations at The Point?**

At The Point Community Church, we have never divided over the issue of Bible translations. We have always maintained that various translations have various strengths and weaknesses and that the student of Scripture benefits from enjoying multiple translations. We praise God for every good English translation and trust God the Holy Spirit to use them to transform our lives.

We do not discourage our people from enjoying multiple good English translations of Scripture. We do use the ESV as our primary teaching/preaching translation and we encourage our people to use the English Standard Version or another good world-for-word translation as their primary study tool while also using other translations as secondary resources for their studies. We are not saying that the ESV is good and that other translations are bad. Rather, we are saying that for the purposes of theological accuracy and preaching/teaching, we believe the ESV is the best while other translations are also helpful and good for such purposes.

## Appendix

### Translations

**CEV** – Contemporary English Version  
**ESV** – English Standard Version  
**GNB** – Good News Bible  
**HCSB** – Holman Christian Standard Bible  
**KJV** – King James Version  
**NASB** – New American Standard Bible  
**NCV** – New Century Version  
**NIV** – New International Version  
**NLT** – New Living Translation  
**NKJV** – New King James Version  
**NRSV** – New Revised Standard Version  
**NTME** – New Testament in Modern English (Phillips)  
**REB** – Revised English Bible  
**RSV** – Revised Standard Version  
**TAB** – The Amplified Bible  
**TLB** – The Living Bible  
**TM** – The Message  
**TNIV** – Today’s New International Version  
**TSB** – The Street Bible

### Word-for-Word Translations

ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV, RSV

### Thought-for-Thought Translations

NCV, NIV, TNIV, NLT, CEV, GNB, REB

### Paraphrases

NTME, TAB, TLB, TM, TSB

### Corruptions

New World Translation

### For Further Reading on Bible Translations

*The Indestructible Book* by Ken Connolly

*The Word of God in English* by Leland Ryken

*Choosing a Bible* by Leland Ryken

*The Bible in Translation* by Bruce Metzger

*How We Got the Bible* by John Sailhamer

*A General Introduction to the Bible* by Norman Geisler

### Translators and Endorsers of the ESV

Some of the scholars who helped to translate the ESV include:

**Dr. Clinton E. Arnold** — *Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, Talbot School of Theology*

**Dr. Craig L. Blomberg** — *Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary*

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock** — *Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary*

**Dr. Wayne A. Grudem** — *Professor and Chairman, Department of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

**Dr. Paul R. House** — *Professor of Old Testament Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry*

**Dr. Andreas J. Köstenberger** — *Associate Professor of New Testament, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*

**Dr. Leon Morris** — *Former Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia*

**Dr. Raymond Ortlund, Jr.** — *Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia*

**Dr. J. I. Packer** — *ESV General Editor, Board of Governors and Professor of Theology Regent College, Vancouver, BC*

**Dr. Vern Sheridan Poythress** — *Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary*

**Dr. Leland Ryken** — *Professor of English, Wheaton College*

**Dr. Gordon Wenham** — *Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, The College of St. Paul and St. Mary, Cheltenham, England*

Some of the people who have endorsed the ESV include:

**Jerry Bridges** — *Author*

**Dr. Bryan Chapell** — *President, Covenant Theological Seminary*

**Roy Christians** — *National Director, Campus Crusade for Christ Russia*

**Edmund P. Clowney** — *Resident Theologian, Trinity Presbyterian Church*

**Dr. Jack Cottrell** — *Professor of Theology, Cincinnati Bible Seminary*

**Nancy Leigh DeMoss** — *Author, Host of Revive Our Hearts radio*

**Ajith Fernando** — *National Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka; Bible Teacher and Author*

**Susan Hunt** — *Author and Teacher*

**Dr. Kenneth S. Kantzer** — *Dean Emeritus, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

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**Max Lucado** — *Minister, Oak Hills Church of Christ*

**Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer** — *Pastor, Moody Church, Chicago, Illinois*

**Mrs. Susan Schaeffer Macaulay** — *L'Abri Fellowship*

**James MacDonald** — *Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel, Rolling Meadows, Illinois*

**Carolyn Mahaney** — *Author and Speaker, Covenant Life Church*

**Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.** — *President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*

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**Dorothy Kelley Patterson** — *Author and Professor*

**Dr. Paige Patterson** — *President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*

**Dr. John Piper** — *Preaching Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

**Dr. Philip Graham Ryken** — *Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

**Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner** — *Professor of New Testament, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*

**Dr. R. C. Sproul** — *Chairman, Ligonier Ministries*

**Dr. Joseph M. Stowell** — *Former President, Moody Bible Institute*

**Joni Eareckson Tada** — *Founder and President, Joni and Friends*

**Dr. John F. Walvoord** — *Chancellor, Dallas Theological Seminary*

**Dr. Ravi Zacharias** — *Author and Speaker*

#### **Sources:**

*"Pastoral Reflections on Bible Translations"* by Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church

*"Translating Truth"* by Wayne Grudem

*"Good English With Minimal Translation: Why Bethlehem Uses the ESV"* by John Piper

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