

Joint Council Meeting

February 17, AD 2012

Barrhead CanRC
Emmanuel URC of Neerlandia
Neerlandia CanRC

Why is the 2011 NIV a problem for our churches?

The 1984 NIV, which has been used widely in both the URC and the CanRC, is no longer available. It has been replaced by the 2011 NIV. The 2011 NIV is extremely problematic because it employs extensive gender neutral language and creates ambiguity regarding gender roles in the church.

Various examples of the changes to the 2011 NIV text are provided in the Translation Notes found in the Bible:

- the gender-neutral “they” (instead of “he”) is regularly employed to refer back to singular antecedents;
- “people” and “humans” often render the Greek and Hebrews words referring to both men and women;
- “ancestors” is regularly preferred to “forefathers”;
- “brothers and sisters” is frequently used to translate Greek *adelphoi* (brothers);
- “person” or “people” is sometimes used to translate Greek *aner* (*man*).

Gender neutral language is nothing new. It was employed by Wycliffe in the first English Bible and is found in the 1611 King James Version. In the KJV (and many modern translations) the Hebrew phrase “bene Israel” which literally means “sons of Israel” is often translated “children of Israel.” The translation “sons of Israel” is generally used in contexts where the 12 sons of Jacob are being referred to, but the translation “children of Israel” is used where the many generations of decedents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are being referred to. There is no feminist agenda in the use of the word “children” rather than “sons” and we should not object to this kind of gender neutral language which seeks to convey the meaning of the original text.

However, there is another reason for gender neutral language that is objectionable. When gender neutral language is used to promote contemporary cultural values that are in conflict with Biblical values, we must object to such language. No one can deny that our culture is under pressure from a radical feminism that seeks to achieve total equality between the sexes and eliminate all gender based distinctions and roles. Gender neutral language has, to a great extent, become a tool to prod our culture into rejecting those gender distinctions and roles which God has ordained. Such use of language should be firmly rejected.

The 2011 NIV introduces a host of gender neutral changes that reflect contemporary usage and values which are not needed to make known the original intent. In addition to this, the 2011 NIV also appears to attempt to create ambiguity regarding the exclusion of women from the offices of the church.

A concordance survey (done electronically) reveals that the word “man” appears 929 times less in the 2011 NIV over against the 1984 NIV. The word “father” appears 198 fewer times. The phrase “brothers and sisters” is found three times in the 1984 NIV. It is found 127 times in the 2011 NIV.

Some specific changes of note:

Romans 16:1

- 1984: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea."
- 2011: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae."

Philippians 1:14

- 1984: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."
- 2011: "And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

1 Timothy 2:12

- 1984: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."
- 2011: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet."

2 Timothy 2:2

- 1984: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."
- 2011: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."

James 3:1

- 1984: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."
- 2011: "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

Christ and Messiah

The word "Messiah" is used two times in the 1984 NIV New Testament. In the 2011 NIV the word "Messiah" is used 74 times. The rationale given by the 2011 NIV committee is that it appears to them that in many instances of the Greek word "Christos" the author is referring to the Old Testament Jewish hope of a Messiah to come. They therefore feel justified in translating "Christos" as "Messiah" rather than "Christ." However, New Testament authors knew the difference between the two words and distinguished them, as in John 1:41, *He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ),* and John 4:25, *The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things."*

Saints

The word "saints" has been removed from the 2011 NIV because it was felt that the word is misunderstood by our culture. People think a saint is someone who is perfect. But this misunderstanding is not new and there are many words in the Bible that are misunderstood by our culture. The solution is to explain and teach those terms, not eliminate theological terms that are rich in meaning.

Conclusion

Because the 2011 NIV uses hundreds of gender neutral terms which were not found in the 1984 NIV and are not needed for clarity, and because key texts regarding the teaching and ruling offices of the church create ambiguity regarding the exclusion of women from those offices, the use of the 2011 NIV will condition the churches for change in these matters. Our churches are increasingly under pressure from our culture and from other Reformed and evangelical churches regarding gender roles. The use of the 2011 NIV will only create confusion in our churches and undermine the clear teaching of Scripture on gender roles.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The URC has never approved any Bible translation for use in the churches. Every church is free to exercise its own judgment in this matter. Most URC congregations either use the 1984 NIV, the English Standard Version (ESV) or the New King James Version (NKJV).

In addition to the 1984 NIV, the CanRC has judged as acceptable for use in the churches (at Synod Smithers 2007) the ESV, the NKJV and the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The Committee for Bible Translation (CBT) for the CanRC, in its Interim Report of December 2011 does not recommend that the 2011 NIV be used in the churches. (This recommendation will go to the synod of 2013.) The CBT does not yet have a recommendation regarding the ESV, NKJV or the NASB other than to note that they have all been judged acceptable by a previous synod for use in the churches. However, they do note the “wide spread use of the ESV and NKJV in our English speaking sister churches.” That comment implies (correctly, I believe) that the NASB has not found widespread acceptance for use in the churches. The NASB is a very wooden or literal translation, appropriate for the study of Scripture, but it is not considered a good readable English translation.

If the NIV is no longer an appropriate option, then at present, for both the URC and the CanRC, there are basically only two translations worth considering for use in our churches and schools, the ESV and the NKJV. Following is a brief description of both, followed by an evaluation and recommendation.

The New Kings James Version (NKJV)

The NKJV was first published in 1979 and then revised in 1982. It is the 1982 edition that is now available.

The purpose of the publishers of the NKJV was to provide those who love the KJV with a modern version that sounded like the beloved KJV but which used a more modern vocabulary. The 1611 KJV was revised numerous times, in 1629, 1638, 1762 and 1769. It is the 1769 Cambridge edition that is now known as the KJV (except for a few more recent changes in spelling and punctuation). In 1881/85 a major revision was attempted that proved unpopular. Again in 1901, another revision was attempted, the American Standard Version (ASV) which gained some popularity. However, in 1949/52/71 another revision of the KJV was attempted called the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Finally, in 1963/71 another revision of the KJV appeared, The New American Standard Bible (NASB). Despite all these revisions, by the late 1970's, the 1611/1769 KJV remained very popular. In the November 2, 1979 issue of *Christianity Today*, Walter A. Elwell wrote that about 35% of American homes still used the KJV as their primary Bible (page 48).

There were basically two reasons why all the revisions, beginning in 1881, never became as popular as the 1611/1769 KJV. The first was that all the newer revisions made use of some ancient Greek texts of the New Testament that were not available in 1611. The 1611 KJV was based on only a few Greek manuscripts that were no older than the 12th century. But in the 19th century, much older texts, from AD 100 to AD 600, became available to scholars and it was believed the older texts were more accurate (had fewer copyist errors). Beginning in 1881, all the revisions of the KJV gave preference to the readings from the older manuscripts where there were differences between them. Although these changes were all relatively minor and did not affect any doctrine, yet it made some verses different. Also, Mark 16:9-20, John 7:53-8:11 and parts of 1 John 5:7-8 are missing in the earlier manuscripts. A second reason why the revisions beginning in 1881 were not as popular as the older KJV was that they not only updated the vocabulary, they also updated the word order and sentence structure (grammar and syntax) to conform to modern forms of speech. Although there were echoes of KJV in the newer revisions, for the most part, they did not have the majestic or “sacred” sound of the beloved KJV.

To deal with these apparent shortcomings of the modern revisions of the KJV since 1881, the creators of the NKJV set out to preserve the old KJV by giving preference to the same Greek New Testament manuscripts used in 1611 (but including the textual variants discovered since 1611 in marginal notes) and preserving the syntax of the KJV, only substituting 20th century vocabulary in that much older style of speech. A promotional brochure for the NKJV stated “a reader of this addition may follow without confusion a reading of the original [1611] edition from the pulpit.”

The executive editor of the NKJV, Arthur Farstad, wrote in his book, *The New King James Version: In the Great Tradition*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, pp. 33, 34) “The purpose of this project is to produce an updated English version that follows the sentence structure of the 1611 Authorized Version as closely as possible. . . . The intention is not to take from or alter the basic communication of the 1611 edition but to transfer the Elizabethan word forms into twentieth century English.” He also said, “Words that have changed their meaning since 1611 should be replaced by their modern equivalents” and they attempted “to keep King James word order.” They also changed all second person pronouns (“thee,” “thou” and “thy”) to their modern equivalent (“you” and “your”) but capitalized pronouns they thought referred to a divine person (something not done in 1611 and for which there is no basis in the Greek or Hebrew texts which do not distinguish, in any way, pronouns used for God). They also dropped the archaic verb endings.

The English Standard Version (ESV)

The English Standard Version appeared in 2001. Like the NKJV, the ESV is not a new translation but a revision of an older version, namely the 1971 RSV. The RSV had won high praise for its revision of KJV because its vocabulary and syntax retained much of the beauty and dignity of the KJV but was yet a very readable and understandable modern English Bible. However the RSV was “spoiled” by the fact that it reflected a liberal bias in a number of passages. Although the RSV experienced some initial success, it faded in popularity and Crossways Bibles (a division of Good News Publishers) obtained the copyright for the 1971 RSV and employed a large team of conservative scholars (under General Editor J. I. Packer) to go over every word of the RSV, comparing each word to the Hebrew and Greek original and make appropriate revisions. About 5%–10% of the RSV text was changed in the ESV. Many changes were made to satisfy the objections of conservative Protestants, for example, changing the Hebrew *almah* from “young woman” (in the RSV) to “virgin” (in the ESV) in Isaiah 7:14. The pronouns were changed from “thee and thou” to their modern equivalents and archaic words were modernized (e.g., “jug” for “cruse”). Although the ESV generally follows the older Greek texts, it still includes the end of Mark’s Gospel and John 7:52-8:11 in the text of the Bible and most other significant variants in the margins.

Evaluations and Recommendation

Although the NKJV is a good Bible, I believe the ESV is the better choice for our churches and schools.

Concerns regarding the NKJV

1. The NKJV was written for those who have a special attachment to the KJV but most of our churches (both URC and CanRC) have not used the KJV for 30 years or longer. The NKJV was written for those churches and individuals that want to continue to use the KJV but recognize the need for a limited update of the vocabulary.
2. The extent of the revision of the KJV was too limited. The respect for the 1611 version limited the range of possible revisions for fear that if too many changes were made, it would suffer the same fate as all the other revisions since 1881. Rev. G. H. Visscher wrote, "A common complaint about the NKJV is that it did not go far enough; it maintained antiquated terms which the translators and editors would surely have removed or changed if it had not been for their devotion to the KJV." ("For Whom Is The New King James Version?" *The Clarion*, April 8, 1995, Vol. 44, No. 8, p. 186). Not only did it maintain antiquated terms, the style of language remains strongly reminiscent of the Jacobean English of the 1600's. This especially detracts from the public reading of the Bible (and especially the Pauline epistles), making it hard for the listener to follow the train of thought.
3. Although valid arguments can be made for superiority of the "Received Text" (the Greek text upon which the KJV and NKJV are based), nevertheless, the debate over which textual tradition is best is far from over. Until greater clarity and consensus are achieved, we can content ourselves with the fact that all textual traditions are generally reliable. All significant variants can be found in marginal notes in most English Bibles. No doctrine of the faith is dependent on a single text and no textual variant undermines any doctrine of the faith. Therefore, readability in English is a more significant consideration than which family of Greek texts is used.
4. The NKJV also shows a bias towards Dispensationalism. In the June 1992 issue of *Diakonia* (Vol. V, No. 4, p. 88) there is a report addressed to the 1989 synod of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia which states,

The NKJV translators have spoiled their work and betray an apparent allegiance to dispensationalism and its related chiliasm in the translation. To substantiate this we point to instances in which the NKJV uses the word "dispensation" rather than other words demanded by the Greek of the original text. We refer here to Eph. 1:10;3:2;Col. 1:25, while the same word in I Cor. 9:17 is translated (correctly) as "stewardship." Further, Ga. 6:16 is translated "peace and mercy be upon them, AND upon the Israel of God" (emphasis ours) leading to the belief that two different groups of people are indicated, as dispensationalists would have us believe. In II Tim. 2:15, instead of rendering "rightly HANDLING (or: who correctly HANDLES) the word of the truth," the NKJV has "rightly DIVIDING the word of truth" (emphasis ours), a choice which cannot be justified and a favored expression in dispensational circles. Further some headings above passages in the Book of Revelations could also be interpreted as favouring dispensational thinking.

It could be added that the capitalization of the word "He" twice in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 seeks to enshrine a Dispensational interpretation of that passage.

5. In early printings of the NKJV, the second commandment read "You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything . . ." Later (and current) printings read, "You shall not make for yourself any carved image – any likeness of anything . . ." The word "or" has been

removed from the second commandment. The removal of the word “or” supports the idea that only carved images are forbidden, leaving open the idea that pictures of Jesus may be legitimate.

6. The decision to capitalize pronouns referring to divine persons is a negative mark against the NKJV. Not only is there no basis for it in the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, but in some instances, the decision to capitalize is problematic. It is supposed to show respect, but when the enemies of Jesus addressed him, they certainly did not intend to show him any respect, yet John 10:33 reads, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make yourself God.” Whether to capitalize a pronoun in a Messianic Psalm that might refer to Jesus becomes a guessing game for the NKJV. Such is a matter of interpretation, not translation. Although the motive of showing respect for God is commendable, we must be aware that man made rules of piety have no real power to promote godliness. Paul warned against such in Colossians 2:23, *Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*

Concerns regarding the ESV

Here I will quote the pros and cons enumerated by the CanRC CBT regarding the ESV as summarized in the minutes of Synod Smithers 2007. However, keep in mind that they are attempting to support their recommendation (at that time – which they no longer make) to continue using the NIV. The following is found on pages 85-87 of the *Acts of General Synod Smithers 2007*.

- 2.4 On the positive side, the CBT notes the following:
 - 2.4.1 The ESV has moved words which had been inappropriately footnoted in the RSV to the main text, thus establishing the authentic Word of God more clearly to the reader.
 - 2.4.2 The ESV recognizes the personhood of the Holy Spirit where the RSV did not.
 - 2.4.3 The ESV has a much greater respect for the Masoretic Text than does the RSV.
 - 2.4.4 The ESV has a greater respect for the unity of Scripture than does the RSV.
 - 2.4.5 The ESV avoids the use of archaic terms such as “thee” and “thou” and thus avoids issues surrounding the deity of Christ (the RSV not always uses these pronouns in respect to the Lord Jesus).
 - 2.4.6 The ESV is aware of unscriptural influences in the RSV and in various places has taken away this influence, e.g., in regard to false ideas about the history of man and biblical authorship and certain biblical terms (e.g., the RSV replaced “expiation” with “propitiation” but the ESV goes back to the latter term).
 - 2.4.7 In summary, the CBT states that the ESV seems to “show a much greater respect for the Bible as the Word of God than the RSV.”
- 2.5 On the negative side, the CBT notes the following:
 - 2.5.1 Where the ESV changes the RSV it can be excessively literalistic and its wording is sometimes muddled and confusing (e.g., Ex 20:21-22).
 - 2.5.2 At times the ESV seems unaware of weaknesses in the RSV and has adopted the RSV reading without any change (e.g., 1 Sam 13:1) where the ESV, like the RSV, leaves a “hole” in the text. [The RSV and ESV leaves blank the age of Saul when he became King and length of his reign since the numbers are not found in any currently available Hebrew text and only a few texts of the Greek OT. RAP]
 - 2.5.3 Out of the 26 suggestions given by the 1977 CBT for changes in the OT text of the RSV, only 12 have been followed by the ESV. Out of the eleven suggestions for changes to the NT text of the RSV, seven were followed. This raises the question of just how thorough the ESV’s revision of the RSV really is.

2.5.4 The ESV 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.” In light of the ESV’s stated goals and claims, the underlying RSV seems to be a “soft underbelly.”

2.9 The CBT believes that the ESV is, in many respects, a considerable improvement over the RSV, especially in key matters of theology and text. “A full investigation,” states the CBT, “may reveal further strengths and also weaknesses of this translation.

The above indicates that the ESV is not without some criticism, although the criticisms were written in 2007 to justify staying with the 1984 NIV. Whether the committee, now having judged the NIV no longer acceptable, will give greater weight to the positive aspects of the ESV remains to be seen. It is interesting to note that in 2.5.1 above, the ESV is criticized for sometimes being too literal and in 2.5.4 it is seemingly faulted for not being as literal as it claims to be. No translation will ever be perfect in this broken world, and God has seen fit to deny us the original manuscripts, leaving us only imperfect copies. Despite these facts, we do have God’s Word in written form and almost all honest translations have been used by God to build Christ’s Church.

Conclusion

It would be nice if the English language did not change and evolve. But it always has and, presumably, always will until Christ returns. Every few generations will have to get used to a new translation or revision. When that happens, we may not think only of our own likes based on what we are used to. Instead, we must practice self denial and consider others better than ourselves, sacrificing our personal preferences for the wellbeing of coming generations, so that they too can hear God’s Word in their own language.

The criticisms of both the NKJV and ESV do not rise to the level of forbidding their use in our churches (and both have been found acceptable for use in the Canadian Reformed Churches by Synod Smithers 2007), yet after extensive use of both NKJV and the ESV for a decade, (and despite the fact that I still sometimes quote the verses I memorized as a child in pure KJV wording) I much prefer the ESV. I prefer the ESV for the following reasons.

1. Its beauty and dignity
2. Its clarity and easy readability
3. Its superiority over the NKJV for public reading
4. Its faithfulness to the original Hebrew and Greek texts

It can also be noted the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church have all selected the ESV as the version to be used in their youth and adult education materials. Ligonier Ministries has also made available an ESV Reformation Study Bible for which R. C. Sproul served as General Editor.

Respectfully submitted,
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