

Why You Can Trust the English Standard Version

By Leland Ryken

Publisher's note

The following article by Leland Ryken is a distillation of the arguments that he develops more fully in his book *The Bible in English* (Crossway, 2002), which is a thorough examination of contemporary translation theory and practice. In the pages that follow, Dr. Ryken addresses the question of what English Bible translation best meets the needs of the church, its members, and its preachers and teachers—for personal reading and devotions and also for public worship and preaching. Dr. Ryken's preference for essentially literal translations in general and the English Standard Version more specifically grows out of his work as literary stylist for the ESV.

With thanks for your consideration of the English Standard Version,
Dr. Lane Dennis, President, Crossway Bibles

My purpose in these pages is to commend the English Standard Bible as the translation that is most worthy of your selection—personally and for your church or Christian organization. The ESV is not just like other translations. It has qualities that make it preferable to both dynamic equivalent translations and other essentially literal translations, as I will explain in this paper.

An Essentially Literal Translation

The first reason you can trust the ESV is that it adheres to the right translation philosophy. Modern Bible translation occurs in a context of two rival theories. An essentially literal translation aims to preserve the very words of the Bible, within the necessary modification that translation requires. By contrast, a dynamic equivalent translation feels free to abandon the words of the original text and instead give a "thought for thought" translation. Prefaces to translations usually signal which theory they embrace. An essentially literal translation will claim, for example, that it aims "to capture the *precise wording* of the original text" (ESV, italics added). By contrast, if a preface claims to give "*the thought* of the biblical writers" (NIV, TNIV, italics added) or to be "*a thought-for-thought* translation" (NLT, italics added), this signals that the translators did not feel obliged to adhere to the actual language of the original.

Two problems immediately surface with dynamic equivalence. First, it is based on a logical impossibility. There *is* no such thing as wordless, disembodied thought or meaning. When one changes the words, one changes the content. Secondly, whenever a dynamic equivalent translation substitutes "thought" for the words of the original, it removes a reader from what the Bible really says. For example, translations that preserve the original words of Psalm 23:5b render it, "You anoint my head with oil." Several dynamic equivalent translations replace what the text *says* with what the translation committees thought the passage *means*: "you welcome me as an honored guest" (GNB); "you welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil" (NLT); "you honor me as your guest" (CEV). These translations do exactly what the dynamic equivalence philosophy of translation prescribes: the translators decided what they thought the text means, and they then dispensed with the words of the original. Such a translation is untrustworthy because it obscures what the original text says and imposes the

interpretation of a translation committee on the text. We cannot adequately know what the text *means* if we do not know what it *says*.

Having introduced the distinction between what a text says and what a text means, I need to take a moment to define these terms. When I use the expression "what the text says," I intend this as a convenient, short expression for "what the text says when literally translated into English." To translate "essentially literally" means to translate the contextually understood sense of each word with its nearest English equivalent, and to express that with ordinary English word order, as far as that is possible without distorting the meaning of the original. When I use the expression "what translation committees thought the passage means," I intend this to denote either (1) the substitution of exegesis or interpretation for what the original says, or (2) the addition of commentary to what the original says. An example of the former would be a translation committee's dispensing with the statement of Psalm 23:5b that "you anoint my head with oil" and making the line read "you honor me as your guest." An example of the second form of interpretation would be a translation committee's making the statement of John 6:27 that God "has set his seal" on Jesus read "has set his seal of approval" or "seal of his authority" on Jesus.

How Dynamic Equivalent Translations Confuse Translation and Interpretation

Translators in the dynamic equivalence camp claim that "all translation is interpretation," but this is untrue in the sense that dynamic equivalent translators claim. At a *linguistic level*, translation is, indeed, interpretation in the sense that translators always make a judgment call regarding what English word best expresses the meaning of a Hebrew or Greek word. But proponents of dynamic equivalence use the motto "all translation is interpretation" to defend their practice of going beyond the words of the original and deciding what they think an entire verse or passage means.

To observe that *not* all translation is interpretation in the looser sense, all we need to do is compare essentially literal translations with dynamic equivalent translations. For essentially literal translations, translation is translation only. For example, these translations allow John 6:27 to say that God the Father "has set his seal" on Jesus (KJV, NASB, ESV). Dynamic equivalent translators go beyond translation and impose their own preferred interpretation on the text:

- "On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (NIV, TNIV).
- "... for on him God the Father has set the seal of his authority" (REB).
- "... because God the Father has given him the right to do so" (CEV).
- "For God the Father has sent me for that very purpose" (NLT).
- "He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last" (*The Message*).

These translations are untrustworthy in at least two ways. First, they go beyond what the original says. The original only says "set his seal." This *allows for* some of the interpretations in the quoted passages without misleading the reader into thinking that the original says what the translation states. With the second cluster of translations, a reader has no way of knowing where the biblical text leaves off and where the translation committee's interpretation begins. Secondly, the dynamic equivalent translations disagree among themselves, and in the process they have destabilized the biblical text.

I can imagine long-time users of the NIV or prospective users of the TNIV thinking that as long as they stay with the NIV/TNIV, they need not worry about how other dynamic equivalent translations have translated the biblical text. But readers *need* to compare the NIV/TNIV to other translations for at least two reasons. (1) They need to see that the interpretations of the NIV committee are usually only one option among several. Other translation committees, just as expert as the NIV/TNIV committee, frequently believed that passages meant something different. (2) Readers of the NIV/TNIV then need to compare these translations to essentially literal translations to see how much of the text is actually the

translation committee's interpretation of the passage, and not what the text actually says. This discrepancy should be a cause for great concern, since it is impossible for an English reader to know how much of the translation is what the original *says* and how much is what a given translation committee thinks it *means*. Readers should not allow themselves to be misled as to what the Bible actually says, and they should not be at the mercy of a translation committee's preferred interpretation of a passage.

How Dynamic Equivalent Translations Destabilize the Text

Since the destabilizing of the biblical text is one of the most serious results of dynamic equivalence, I want to emphasize the point. Essentially literal translations produce a stable text because there is a control on the process of translations namely, the very words of the original. Here is how two literal translations render a key phrase in Romans 1:5 (I have italicized the key phrase for purposes of comparison):

- "... to bring about *the obedience of faith* among all the Gentiles" (NASB).
- "... to bring about *the obedience of faith* . . . among all the nations" (ESV).

The deviation here is only the normal linguistic deviation that routinely occurs during translation. The biblical text itself remains stable.

Dynamic equivalent translations, however, destabilize the text because they lack controls on the process of translation. If translation committees are free to decide what they think a passage means and then dispense with the actual words of Scripture, they are a law to themselves. Here is how a range of dynamic equivalent translations render the clause from Romans 1:5 (I have italicized the key phrase for purposes of comparison):

- "... among all the Gentiles to *the obedience that comes from faith*" (NIV).
- "... to bring people of all nations *to faith and obedience* . . ." (REB; TNIV similar).
- "... so that people of all nations *would obey and have faith*" (CEV).
- "... so that they *will believe and obey him*" (NLT).

A literal translation, let me say again, is simply "the obedience of faith" (with faith subordinated to obedience, not made coordinate with it). A translation philosophy that produces the second cluster of translations cannot be trusted. At the root of its unreliability is that there are no curbs on the translation process. The curb *should* be set by fidelity to the words of the original. By their own admission, dynamic equivalent translators think that they are bound only by what they think a passage means, but it is obvious that these translations do not agree among themselves. People who have placed their confidence in a dynamic equivalent translation should take the time to compare these translations. Once they do, they will see how unstable and therefore unreliable these translations are among themselves.

If it is possible to translate more accurately by abandoning the words of the original for its ideas, why do dynamic equivalent translations end up in such disagreement with each other. Faced with the range of dynamic equivalent renditions of the same passages, how can a reader have confidence in these translations? Instead of enhancing accuracy, dynamic equivalence subverts our confidence in the reliability of our English Bibles.

How Dynamic Equivalence Is Actually a Form of Paraphrase

Translations in the dynamic equivalence camp claim not to be paraphrases. Let's see if the claim is true. What do we mean by "paraphrase?" Surely we can use hymn writers' paraphrases of the Bible as a touchstone. Here is part of English poet George Herbert's paraphrase of Psalm 23 (with elements that have been added to or changed from the original italicized to highlight them):

The God *of love* my Shepherd is,
 And he that doth me feed;
While He is mine and I am His,
 What can I want *or need?* . . .

Yea, in death's shady, black *abode*
Well may I walk, not fear,
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
To guide, Thy staff *to bear*.

What do the italicized words and phrases do? They add explanatory or interpretive material, and they amplify beyond the original.

This is exactly what even the "conservative" dynamic equivalent translations do continuously (in the following quotations, I have italicized words added to or changed from the original biblical text to highlight what has been changed from the original):

- ". . . your work *produced by* [literally, "of"] faith, your labor *prompted by* [literally "of"] love, and you endurance *inspired by* [literally "of"] hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3, NIV, TNIV).
- "Those who look to him *for help* will be radiant *with joy*, *no shadow* of shame will *darken* their faces" (Psalm 34:5, NLT).
- "The *boundary* lines have fallen for me in pleasant places" (Psalm 16:6, NIV).
- "My cup overflows *with blessings*" (Psalm 23:5b, NLT).
- "Have the salt *of friendship* among yourselves" (Mark 9:50, GNB).

Let me say again that dynamic equivalent translations do exactly the same thing with the original text that hymn paraphrases do.

These translations are so intent on clarifying and even "correcting" the original text that they impose the translators' preferred interpretation on the text. The problem is not only that this misleads a reader, who has no way of knowing what is translation and what is interpretation. More often than not, this impulse to "fix" the text produces new problems.

1 Timothy 1:16 provides an example. A literal translation of a key phrase in this verse is the one that speaks of God's "perfect patience" (NASB, ESV). It requires some pondering on the part of an English reader (and the original reader, surely) to decide how God's patience is "perfect" or "complete." Because dynamic equivalent translations want everything to be immediately clear to a modern reader, they step in and try to make the concept easier to grasp, speaking of God's "unlimited patience" (NIV) or "endless patience" (CEV) or "inexhaustible

patience" (REB). The problem is that God's patience is *not* unlimited, endless, or inexhaustible, as a host of biblical characters from the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah to Ananias and Sapphira will attest. It is better to stay true to the original and figure out what it means, even in its difficult places, since the original text is what God moved the writers to write. You can trust the ESV to do just that.

There is, of course, a range in how much paraphrase exists in dynamic equivalent translations. The NIV is the most responsible of the dynamic equivalent translations (something that cannot be said of the TNIV, which introduced massive changes to the NIV). The NIV is a good translation within the dynamic equivalent camp. But the point is that it adheres to the wrong translation philosophy. By its own testimony, dynamic equivalent translators feel free to depart from what the original *says* and to tell readers what it *means*. This is a license that we do not allow in everyday life, where we want to hear the actual words of someone as accurately as possible. To say that NIV is a *good* dynamic equivalent translation is to stop far short of saying that it is the *best* modern English translation. The best modern translation can be found only among essentially literal translations.

The Full Richness of the Biblical Text

You can also trust the ESV because as an essentially literal translation it preserves the full richness and interpretive potential of the original text. It does not engage in the kinds of reductionism that characterize dynamic equivalent translations.

For example, where the original uses figurative language, an essentially literal translation preserves the figurative language in a way that allows for the multiple meanings embodied in the original. A major New Testament image for the Christian life is the path or way. In fact, an early name for Christians was followers of the Way (Acts 9:2). Thus when 1 Thessalonians 2:12 encourages believers to "walk in a manner worthy of God" (NASB, ESV), the image of walking down a path is a richly evocative image, embodying the meanings of long-term and continuous activity, a sense of purpose, direction toward a goal, and eventual arrival at a destination. All of these meanings get lost when dynamic equivalent translations drop the metaphor in favor of the abstraction "live," as in the NIV/TNIV rendering "urging you to live lives worthy of God." There is a huge difference between the evocative picture of walking down a path and an abstract (and clichéd) statement about "living a life." When proponents of dynamic equivalence take it upon themselves to decide what is too "difficult" for modern readers to understand, they forget that God is the one who decided that readers can be trusted to grasp what the metaphor "walk" means.

An even more common way by which dynamic equivalent translations reduce the text from its full richness is to conduct preemptive interpretive strikes, so that only one of multiple legitimate interpretations is presented to the reader. Romans 1:17 provides a litmus test. Essentially literal translations agree on their translation of the clause "the righteousness of God is revealed" (NASB, NKJV, ESV). Theologians do not agree among themselves whether the phrase "righteousness of God" means that righteousness is an attribute of God's character, or whether it is God's gift of righteousness conferred on those who believe to salvation, or both. A literal translations leaves the interpretive options open. Dynamic equivalent translations make up readers' minds *for* them, and readers have no way of knowing that this has happened: "a righteousness *from* God (NIV; italics mine); "how *God makes us right* in his sight" (NLT; italics mine); "how *God accepts* everyone who has faith" (CEV; italics mine). Dynamic equivalent translations regularly impose an interpretation on the text, and readers erroneously think that this is what the Bible says.

Preserving Theological Precision

The eventual result of the dynamic equivalent translation practices that I have noted is to diminish the theological precision of those translations. Essentially literal translations preserve the theological vocabulary of the original, even when it is difficult. After all, there is no reason to doubt that the technical theological vocabulary of the Bible was any less difficult for the original audience. We might note that the early translator William Tyndale actually enriched the English language by coining such words as *atonement* and *intercession* in order to express the theological content of the Bible.

In an effort to make their translations immediately understandable to modern readers, dynamic equivalent translations tend to simplify (and in some cases eliminate) theological vocabulary. The theologically charged "grace and truth" of John 1:14 becomes watered down to "unfailing love and faithfulness" (NLT), "kindness . . . and truth" (CEV), and "generous inside and out, true from start to finish" (*The Message*). Translations that want to avoid the theological term *justification* reduce its range of meanings by rendering it "make us right with God" (NLT) or "put us right with God" (GNB) or "made acceptable to God" (CEV), none of which conveys the theological precision of the word *justification* (a word that, ironically, is very much part of current usage).

A touchstone for translations is the word *propitiation*, which occurs four times in the New Testament (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 1 John 4:10). The word *propitiate* means "to appease anger through the offering of a sacrifice." *Propitiation* is, without doubt, a big word, but retaining it, as the essentially literal translations do (NASB, NKJV, ESV), has an indisputable theological advantage: it gives readers and interpreters the right material with which to work. Readers can learn the technical meaning "to appease wrath by means of a

sacrifice."

Dynamic equivalent translations lose this advantage. By substituting something else for the right theological term, they prevent a reader from getting the right theological content: "sacrifice of atonement" (NIV), "sacrifice" (CEV), "sacrificial death" (GNB). None of these translations is accurate. To get the right meaning from these translations would take as much as explaining as it would take to explain the word *propitiation*.

We cannot build an adequate theology without theological vocabulary. Consider how different the theology will be that is based on each of the following translations of Romans 3:24:

- "[We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (ESV).
- "But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free" (GNB).
- "Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins" (NLT).
- "But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us from our sins" (CEV).

To talk about the doctrines of justification and redemption, we need to use the vocabulary of justification and redemption. If we value theological precision for ourselves and the church, we need translations that preserve the right theological vocabulary.

A Preacher Should Not Need to Correct the Translation from which He Is Preaching

I recently heard a sermon on Psalm 24 in which the preacher three times invoked the formula, "Now what the original actually says is . . ." If the preacher had used the ESV or another literal translation, he would not have needed to correct the translation in the pew at all. One of the three passages is the concluding statement, "The Lord of hosts, / he is the King of glory" (ESV). The "hosts" are either heavenly armies or angels or saints in heaven (some interpreters allow an eschatological interpretation of the end of Psalm 24). The NIV and NLT remove the literal reference to heavenly hosts and replace it with the phrase "The Lord Almighty." A preacher who wants to take his congregation to the actual text has no alternative but to correct the NIV or NLT.

Professor Jack Collins of Covenant Theological Seminary began his ministerial career as a preacher. Surely he speaks for many preachers when he recalls becoming increasingly uneasy about the discrepancy between what his parishioners' translations said and what he knew the original said. The more he corrected their translations, the more he suspected that his parishioners would come to distrust the reliability of the Bible.

After half a century of the dominance of dynamic equivalence, there is good news. Preachers and congregations do not need to settle for a translation that repeatedly departs from the words of the original. Correspondingly, preachers do not need to use translations that they habitually need to correct. Even on occasions when we might conclude that the NIV or NLT *interpreted* a statement correctly, that does not mean that it *translated* it correctly.

What about Readability?

With dynamic equivalence, readability has been elevated beyond what it deserves. Some of the prefaces to English translations make it clear that a given translation has been slanted toward the assumed reading abilities of the target audience. Most of these prefaces sketch out what has been assumed about the target audience—readers with a grade school reading ability, who must be shielded from theological language and who need figurative language interpreted for them right in the translation.

Since the argument that everything in the Bible should be immediately understandable to modern readers with minimal reading ability has a surface appeal, let me explain how the argument breaks down if we consider it carefully. The original text of the Bible is *not* a

uniformly easy text to read. And incidentally, when Jesus explained why he spoke in parables (Matthew 13:11 ff.), he made it clear that he did *not* expect all of his hearers to grasp his meaning at once. While there are, indeed, passages in the Bible that are straightforward and easy to grasp, most passages in the Bible require pondering before we know exactly what they mean. Here is a randomly chosen prophetic passage from Isaiah: "like a weaver I have rolled up my life; / he [God] cuts me off from the loom" (Isaiah 38:12b, ESV). How can a person roll up his or her own life like a weaver? How can God cut a person off from a loom? Most passages in the Bible require more than a grade school level of education to understand in their fullness. To bring translations down to a grade school level results in a Bible that is emphatically not the Bible that God originally gave.

Another type of difficulty that some passages in the Bible possess is weightiness of theological content. In Romans 1:16 we read, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (ESV). There are some big words and big ideas here: *wrath, revealed, ungodliness, unrighteousness, suppress the truth*. The whole dynamic equivalence experiment is based on a misunderstanding of the Bible, which is *not* the immediately understandable book that dynamic equivalent translators attempt to make it.

The ESV does not patronize its readers or condescend to them. In fact, the starting point of the ESV translation committee was always fidelity to the words of the original, and it made no assumptions about the abilities of a target audience. For the ESV translators, the authors of the Bible, and not modern readers, determine how the text should read. If we stop to think about the matter, it is frivolous to assume a grade school reading level for readers of the Bible, for the simple reason that most readers of the English Bible are *not* grade schoolers. Paul's admonition "do not be children in your thinking" (1 Corinthians 14:20) surely applies to Bible translation as well as other areas of the Christian life.

There are situations where "easy reading" translations serve a good purpose. Such translations are good for children, for people unfamiliar with the Bible, for evangelistic purposes, and when reading huge sections of the Bible. But these are exceptional cases. They should not be allowed to be the norm for the church at large, and they should not be allowed to rob Christians who are serious about knowing what the original text of the Bible really said from having the Bible they need.

The practice of dynamic equivalence to elevate readability to the touchstone of what makes a good translation should be met with the most vigorous resistance possible. Bluntly stated, what good is readability if a translation has not expressed the exact meaning of the original text? Within the parameters of accuracy to the original text, an English translation should be as comprehensible and readable as possible. The ESV meets this standard: its English is what high school and college teachers of composition call formal standard English—English that meets the criteria of clarity and currency for English that is on its best behavior.

Doesn't a Translation Have an Obligation to Interpret All Potential Difficulties?

Dynamic equivalent translations begin with the premises that (a) translators have access to a repository of privileged information and insight that can be trusted to produce the right translation, and (b) translators therefore have an obligation to impose their allegedly superior insights onto the actual translation. Both of these premises are faulty. The second assumption, as already noted, is based on an elementary confusion of the tasks of translation and interpretation. Dynamic equivalence produces hybrid Bibles—what the original *says* plus what the translation committee thinks it *means*.

This would be less objectionable if the first premise were true—that biblical scholars have access to an agreed-upon reservoir of special insight that unlocks the correct meaning of the original text. No such repository exists. If it did, dynamic equivalent translations would not keep multiplying contradictory interpretations of the same passage. Instead of producing a

reliable translation, dynamic equivalence has undermined our confidence in the reliability of English Bibles. Dynamic equivalent translators have made false claims about certainty based on an appeal to privileged information and insights based on it. 1 Corinthians 4:9a furnishes an example. Essentially literal translations give us a stable text:

- "For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death . . ." (NASB).
- "For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death ..." (NKJV).
- "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death ..." (ESV).

Dynamic equivalent translators operate on the premise that they have superior information that they should impose on the translation:

- "For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena" (NIV; TNIV nearly identical).
- "For it seems to me God has made us apostles the last act in the show, like men condemned to death in the arena" (REB).
- "It seems to me that God has put us apostles in the worst possible place. We are like prisoners on their way to death" (CEV).
- "But sometimes I think God has put us apostles on display, like prisoners of war at the end of a victor's parade, condemned to die" (NLT).

We should note first that the original says nothing about a procession, the last act in a show, the "worst possible place," a victor's parade, or an arena. There translations are based on interpretations of the passage that are currently in vogue among Bible scholars. Whether these interpretations are right is irrelevant to my point, which is this: if these translators have access to privileged information that can produce just the right translation, why can't they agree among themselves as to what that privileged information is? Dynamic equivalent translations set out to give English Bible readers the most reliable text ever, but they have done the opposite—they have introduced such variability into the biblical text that Bible readers no longer know what the Bible says. After half a century of dynamic equivalence, we are farther from a reliable English translation than ever before in the history of the English Bible. Essentially literal translations try to be transparent to the original text, while dynamic equivalent translations keep intruding the translators' interpretations between the reader and the original text, in the process creating a bewildering set of contradictions among themselves.

Preserving the Literary Qualities of the Bible

Much of the Bible is literary in form. A good translation preserves as much of this literary quality as translation allows. The tendency of dynamic equivalent translations is to diminish the literary qualities of the Bible, especially in the poetic parts.

At this point we can learn a lot from literary scholarship. It is simply the case that when we read authors in their native language, we do not tolerate a publisher's tampering with the text. If Milton wrote, "When I consider how my light is spent," editors do not change this to read, "When I consider that my eyesight is gone." If Shakespeare wrote, "To be, or not to be—that is the question," we would regard the following rendition as a corrupted text: "I have to make a decision whether or not to commit suicide." We do not take seriously a text that has changed the opening of John Donne's famous sonnet on immortality—"Death, be not proud, though some have called / Thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so"—to read, "Death, don't be proud. You're not as great as many think you are."

Yet these are exactly the kinds of changes that dynamic equivalent translations make continuously. They interpret figurative language and render the exaltation of the original text in colloquial, everyday prose. Psalm 78:33 makes the statement that God "made their days vanish like a breath" (KJV, ESV). Dynamic equivalent translations remove the simile and

replace it with an abstraction—not "like a breath" but "in futility" (NIV), "in emptiness" (REB), "in failure" (NLT). We need to ask as this point who chose the simile "like a breath" in the first place. The author could have made it read as the dynamic equivalent translations render it, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he chose a concrete image. What proponents of dynamic equivalence overlook when they imply that essentially literal translations are unnecessarily difficult is that their objection is actually against the original authors, who produced what they did under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who ultimately produced the figurative language that dynamic equivalent translations remove from sight.

Psalm 73 paints an extended portrait of the prosperous wicked that highlights both the robustness of their physical body and its simultaneous repulsiveness. One of the details (verse 7a) is that "their eyes swell out through fatness" (ESV) or "their eye bulges from fatness" (NASB) or "their eyes stand out with fatness" (KJV). Dynamic equivalent translations assume that modern readers cannot get the point that in subsistence economies fatness is a desired sign of affluence, so they render it as an abstraction: "from their callous hearts comes iniquity" (NIV); "these fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for" (NLT). You can trust an essentially literal translation to preserve the literary language of the original; you have no such assurance with a dynamic equivalent translation.

Exaltation, Dignity and Beauty

The King James Version is preeminent in the exaltation and beauty of its expression, including its rhythms. Essentially literal translations preserve as much of the King James dignity as accuracy and current English usage allows. Dynamic equivalent translations want to sound just like everyday speech, which in its general tendency results in a colloquial Bible, stripped of much of the affective power and literary beauty of the King James tradition.

Examples appear on virtually every page of a dynamic equivalent translation. The exalted "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20, KJV, NASB, ESV) is reduced to the everyday level of ordinary discourse:

- "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock" (NIV, TNIV).
- "Here I stand knocking at the door" (REB).
- "Listen! I am standing and knocking at your door" (CEV).

The King James tradition gives us the awe-inspiring statement, "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 5:19, KJV) or, "Truly, truly, I say to you" (ESV). The exaltation is lost in the prosaic renderings, "I tell you the truth" (NIV) or "I tell you for certain" (CEV) or "I assure you" (NLT) or "very truly I tell you" (TNIV).

In the King James tradition, love poetry *sounds* like love poetry: "Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful" (Song of Solomon 1:16a, ESV). The heightened effect of love poetry like this is lost in the NIV rendering "How handsome you are, my lover, Oh, how charming" (and we can note additionally that the normal meaning of the word *lover* in today's context is that of an unmarried sexual partner). In colloquial modern translations, we in effect listen to the couple next door: "My darling, you are lovely, so very lovely" (CEV). You can trust the ESV to maintain the dignity and exaltation of the original text and resist the trend of modern colloquial translations to reduce the Bible to an everyday level of informality. In the ESV, the evocative "ivory palaces" remain (Psalm 45:8 KJV, NASB, ESV) and have not been scaled down to "palaces adorned with ivory" (NIV) or "palaces panelled with ivory" (REB) or "palaces decorated with ivory" (GNB, NLT).

The Heart of the Matter

A hallmark of evangelical views of the Bible has been the doctrines of verbal inspiration and plenary ("full, complete") inspiration of Scripture. These doctrines uphold the teaching of the Bible itself that the very words of Scripture, and not just its thoughts, are inspired by God.

Throughout the Bible, Scripture is referred to as *the word(s)* of God, not the thought(s) of God. Jesus himself said that "*the words* that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63, ESV; italics added), leading Luther to note that "Christ did not say of His thoughts, but of His words, that they are spirit and life."

Proponents of dynamic equivalence are quite open in their view that the task of the translator is to express the thoughts of the original rather than its words. The words of the original are dispensable in dynamic equivalent translation, but not in essentially literal translations. Many evangelicals who theoretically espouse the doctrine of verbal or plenary inspiration have been betrayed by their choice of dynamic equivalence translations into a position that they theoretically disclaim. You can trust an essentially literal translation to remain true to the doctrine that the very words of the Bible are inspired and should therefore not be removed from sight in the translation process.

The Bottom Line

What kind of English translation do the church and its members need? They need a translation that does the following:

- ❑ remains faithful to the words of the original, allowing those words to serve as the control on the process of translation;
- ❑ is limited to translation and avoids confusedly mingling interpretation with translation;
- ❑ preserves the full richness of the original text and thereby maintains the full exegetical (interpretive) potential of the text;
- ❑ uses the same degree of theological precision as the original text possesses;
- ❑ is as readable as accuracy of translation allows;
- ❑ avoids making preemptive interpretive strikes for the reader and then concealing them from the reader;
- ❑ preserves the literary qualities of the Bible;
- ❑ retains the dignity and memorability of the King James tradition.

Only an essentially literal translation meets these criteria. Within the family of essentially literal translations, the superiority of the ESV can be demonstrated: it is the most current; it uses the best original texts and manuscripts; it is based on current linguistic consensus; and it best preserves the literary qualities of the Bible, including the rhythmic excellence that makes itself heard at once when it is read orally.