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Spirituality in a Cyber World Is the English Standard Version (ESV) Accurate?

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With many others I am astonished and saddened that the bishops of England, Wales and Scotland have decided to remove the more prayerful, poetic, and rhetorically effective Jerusalem Bible translation from the lectionary and replace it with the prosaic, allegedly more accurate, and blatantly *non-inclusive* English Standard Version (ESV).

While no one claims that the ESV is prayerful, poetic, and rhetorically effective, it has been touted above all as being more accurate than other available alternatives: for instance, the New Revised Standard Version that the Canadian bishops opted to use some years ago. Let us take up take six examples from the New Testament and check the accuracy of the ESV.

In particular, is the ESV more accurate than the NRSV precisely because it refuses to adopt inclusive language? Or does such a policy, in fact, mislead readers about the meaning of the original, Greek text?

Firstly, Jesus promises Peter, Andrew, and the two sons of Zebedee that he will make them 'fishers of people' (Matthew 4:19), or, in the words of the NRSV, he will make them 'fish for people'. But the ESV insists on 'fishers of men', thereby ignoring the fact that the non-exclusive Greek noun used here (*anthrōpoi*) normally does not mean male persons (as would *andres*) but rather human beings in general. Are the apostles to preach only to male persons, as the ESV seems to suggest?

Second, the NRSV remains faithful to the meaning conveyed by the original text when it replaces the Greek singular with an English plural and reports Jesus as saying of those who want to follow him: 'let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:24–25). The ESV *wrongly* implies that Jesus envisages only men and not women as followers when it translates this passage: 'if anyone

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would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'

Third, when we reach the Letter to the Romans and Paul's account of the justification of sinful human beings, the apostle writes of God 'putting forward' Christ as 'a sacrifice of atonement (*hilastērion*) by his blood' (3:25; NRSV). Here I would prefer to join many scholars and render *hilastērion* as 'means/place of expiation'. But the difference between 'atonement' and 'expiation' is a minor matter. The ESV wrongly says 'propitiation': 'God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood'. This translation helps perpetuate the penal substitution view of John Calvin, shared by Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Louis Bourdaloue, and many classical Catholic preachers, that Jesus literally took upon himself the guilt of human sin, suffered as our substitute on the cross, placated the anger of God, and made justification available for us. Such an horrendous view of Jesus propitiating an angry God should not be encouraged by out-of-date scholarship.¹

Fourth, the NRSV renders the tragic predicament of the entire human race: 'so death spread to all' (*pantas anthrōpous*; Romans 5:12). The ESV, by translating the passage as 'so death came to all *men*', once again misconstrues the meaning of *anthrōpoi*. Here it astonishingly implies that women were the lucky ones. Are we meant to think that sin and death did not spread to them?

Fifth, the NRSV does not emerge well when we come to Hebrews 12:2: 'looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of *our* faith'. A footnote observes that the Greek original has no word corresponding to 'our'. If so, why insert it? The ESV gives a similar, *misleading* impression that the faith in question is the faith which Jesus' followers should exercise. It speaks of 'the founder and perfecter of *our* faith'. A dogmatic reluctance to attribute faith to the earthly Jesus, who began and concluded perfectly a life of faith, has led to a mistranslation that adds a key word and so ignores what the major commentators on Hebrews almost unanimously hold – the perfect faith in question is that of Jesus himself.²

Sixth, in the Letter of James, the NRSV renders accurately the meaning by prescribing for the sick: 'they should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up' (5:14–15). The ESV translation

1 On theories of redemption as propitiation and the historical misuse of Scripture to support them, see my *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 133–60.

2 On the faith of the earthly Jesus, see my *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2009), 262–80.

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sounds, however, as if only male members of the community, when they fall seriously ill, have access to the anointing: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.' Did St James envisage the anointing of the sick as a sacrament for men only?

I have selected six passages from the New Testament and shown how the NRSV provides a correct translation in the case of five. (When carefully scrutinized, none of the modern versions are completely free of mistaken or misleading translations.) The ESV, however, is wrong in its rendering of all six passages. In *four* of them, it is precisely by insisting on exclusive language, that the ESV has become inaccurate.

The translators of the ESV shut their eyes and ears to a shift in usage about 'man' and 'men'. In its entry on 'man', the 2010 *Oxford English Dictionary* sums up contemporary usage: 'in the second half of the twentieth century the generic use of "man" to refer to human beings in general became problematic; the use is now often regarded as sexist or at best old-fashioned.' Any translation that systematically refuses to be inclusive cannot be judged accurate, and stands self-condemned for using non-contemporary and offensively sexist language.

Is it conceivable that the bishops of Scotland, England, and Wales might revisit their unfortunate decision and opt instead for one of the two inclusive and normally accurate translations that have served well other English-speaking Catholic communities? I think of the NRSV in Canada and the 1970 *New American Bible Revised Edition* (NABRE) in the USA, which was competently revised in 1986 and 2011.