



With the arrival of the new English Standard Version (ESV), Christians are once again debating the merits of different Bible translations.

In particular, the question which the ESV has raised in many people's minds is...



What's wrong with the NIV?

- Even if the ESV is an improvement in some areas on the NIV, is it worth all the pain of changing over?
- Is there really that much wrong with the NIV?
- This presentation aims to answer that question.



Philosophically, the NIV is committed to:

- A 'functional or dynamic equivalent' approach to translating*
- An emphasis on simplicity and readability
- A desire to translate the original text faithfully and accurately

* See background paper "The ESV, the NIV and the theology of Bible translating"
([click here to view on web site](#))



The trade-off

Unfortunately, the first two of these goals are often in tension with the third. The more free-flowing and simple the English translation is, the more it tends to stray from what the original language text actually says.

In fact, English translations can be charted on a spectrum, with accuracy (or literalness) at one end, and extreme simplicity at the other.



Accuracy v. Simplicity

very literal;
stilted but
accurate

very free;
simple but
inaccurate

RV NASB

ESV

NIV/TNIV

CEV TEV

LB

Revised
Version
1881

New
American
Standard
Bible

English
Standard
Version

New
International
Version

(and recent
update: Today's
New
International
Version)

Contemporary
English Version

Today's
English
Version (or
Good
News)

The Living
Bible



Four things are lost in the NIV

The NIV tries hard to hold this tension together, but in important ways it fails to do so. In particular, four vital things are lost in the NIV's drive for simplicity and dynamism:

1. The logic of sentences
2. The ambiguity of sentences
3. Consistency of word use
4. Concrete metaphors

Let us look at each of these in turn, with examples.



1. The logic of sentences

- In the interests of simplicity, the NIV often chops up the longer Greek sentences into short, easy-to-read English sentences.
- However, in doing so, the logic of the sentences is often destroyed.
- Sometimes this happens because the small but important connective words between the ideas are often removed (words like 'for', 'because', 'and', 'but').
- At other points, the problem is the elimination of relative clauses (starting with 'who' or 'which'), or of participles (verbal adjectives like 'having' or 'running' which introduce a related idea to the main verb).
- Ironically, in seeking to make the text 'simpler' than it is, the NIV actually makes it harder to understand what is being argued.
- Here are some examples...



1. The logic of sentences (cont).

The Greek word 'gar' (= 'for' or 'because') occurs 8 times in Romans 1. The NIV only translates 4 of these. To take one example, removing the 'for' in Rom 1:18 destroys the logical link Paul is making between the revelation of God's righteousness in v. 17 and the revelation of his wrath in v. 18.

NIV

1:17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

1:18 ¶ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men

ESV

1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

1:18 **For** the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

1. The logic of sentences (cont).

Removing the participles in Eph 5:19-21 destroys the logic of Paul's sentence. The participles, through their connection with the main verb ('be filled') show what being 'filled' looks like in practice. In the NIV they appear as separate unrelated commands. Verse 21 is even a new paragraph.

NIV

5:18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

5:19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,

5:20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

5:21 ¶ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

ESV

5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

5:19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart,

5:20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

5:21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.



2. The ambiguity of sentences

- In the interests of simplicity, the NIV frequently irons out any ambiguity that might exist in the original language.
- This might seem like a good thing, but it has two harmful consequences:
 - a. It means that the translator's judgement determines what the Scripture says at this point, and he may be wrong.
 - b. It means that the reader is prevented from making that judgement for himself. Possibilities for reading and better understanding God's word are removed.
- In other words, the translator does the reading and understanding for the reader. This generates simplicity, but is dangerous.
- Here is an example...



2. The ambiguity of sentences (cont).

The phrase 'the righteousness of God' in Rom 1:17 could mean God's own righteousness (his character) or the righteousness that comes from God as a gift. Rather than leave the reader to decide which of these Paul means, or indeed whether he wants us to think of both aspects, the NIV makes the decision for the reader, and translates it "a righteousness from God".

NIV

1:17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

ESV

1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."



3. Consistency of word use

- In seeking to have a more stylish and readable English text, the NIV follows the modern English practice of avoiding using the same word again in the same sentence or paragraph.
- Sometimes the same Greek word **should** be translated by different English words, when it is being used in a different sense.
- But when the sense is much the same, using a different English word masks the connections between words and ideas.
- The reader in English can thus be quite oblivious to important links between sentences, paragraphs and even chapters.
- Here is an example...

3. Consistency of word use (cont).

The Greek word *sarx* (meaning 'flesh') occurs 18 times in Galatians. The NIV translates it 8 different ways ('man', 'body', 'human effort', 'illness', 'ordinary way', 'sinful nature', 'outward impression', and 'flesh'). This makes it very difficult (if not impossible) for the English reader to understand how Paul was using this word in his argument.

NIV

3:3 Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by **human effort**?

4:23 His son by the slave woman was born in **the ordinary way**; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

4:29 At that time the son born **in the ordinary way** persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.

5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the **sinful nature**; rather, serve one another in love.

ESV

3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the **flesh**?

4:23 But the son of the slave was born according to the **flesh**, the son of the free woman was born through promise.

4:29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the **flesh** persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.

5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the **flesh**, but through love serve one another.



4. Concrete metaphors

- Following the fashion of modern English, the NIV steers away from concrete metaphors. Thus, instead of 'walk in love' it has 'live a life of love'; instead of 'flesh', 'sinful nature'.
- Metaphors (such as using 'walking' as an image of our journey through life) are powerful tools of communication. They make us stop and think; they convey an image to our mind.
- By removing them, the NIV not only makes the text less powerful, it also falls into the 'consistent word use' problem (our last point). Metaphors (like 'walking') run right through the Bible, and call up a host of associations for the reader.
- Here is an example...



4. Concrete metaphors (cont).

The translation of 'walk' in the NIV provides an example not only of inconsistency of word use, but of the removal of concrete metaphors. In John 8, the NIV rightly retains the 'walk' as Jesus says: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Note how the translation of 'walk' in Galatians and Ephesians not only obscures the connection to Jesus' saying, but is less striking and memorable.

NIV

Gal. 5:16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Gal. 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Eph. 5:8 ¶ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light

Eph. 5:15 Be very careful, then, how you live -- not as unwise but as wise,

ESV

Gal. 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Gal. 5:25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

Eph. 5:8 for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light

Eph. 5:15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,



In summary:

Four vital things are lost in the NIV's drive for simplicity and dynamism:

1. The logic of sentences
2. The ambiguity of sentences
3. Consistency of word use
4. Concrete metaphors



It's time for a change...



Is the ESV the one?

- Up till now, there has been no good alternative to the NIV.
- The ESV fills that gap.
- In all four of the above areas, it avoids the problems of the NIV.
- This is because it is a more literal or word-for-word translation, and stays closer to the original text.
- Yet the ESV still reads extremely well in flowing, modern English.



To find out more:

- Visit the Matthias Media website at <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au> or the ESV publisher's website at <http://goodnews.gospelcom.net>
- Phone Matthias Media on 1800 814 360 (in Sydney 9663 1478).
- To place an order for an ESV (Black letter) Bible click [here](#)

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