

English Standard Version (ESV)

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'Transparent' translation quietly gaining ground

By Jim Coggins

A BIBLE translation overseen by a widely respected Canadian author and scholar is making serious inroads in the international Christian marketplace.

The [English Standard Version](#) (ESV), released in 2001 with very little fanfare, has quietly been gaining readers. Sales quadrupled in 2003 - 2005 over sales the first two years, and quadrupled again in 2005 - 2007. In June 2007 the ESV was in third place in sales in the US, behind only the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV).

More than four million copies have now been distributed. Ninety percent of sales have been in North America, but overseas distribution is growing rapidly through partnerships with more than 130 Bible societies around the world.

James I. Packer of Regent College in Vancouver served as general editor and chair of the 12-member Translation Oversight Committee. He recently told CC.com the translation grew out of discontent with other modern translations -- which, he asserted, tend to "deviate from what was said in several thousand places," in the interests of lucidity or easy readability.

In particular, he said, there was discontent with translations such as the [New Revised Standard Version](#) (NRSV) and [Today's New International Version](#) (TNIV) which make such deviations to achieve gender-neutral renderings.

Packer said these translations may have presented "what was meant but not what was said. The reader should know what Paul or Isaiah said."

Packer said some other translations are particularly frustrating for expositors who, in explaining what the text means, have to pause and first explain that what was translated is not actually what the text originally said.

In contrast, said Packer, the ESV tries to be a "transparent" translation -- in that the reader can see through it to what was originally written. Another word Packer used repeatedly was "precision." He said: "We think we have produced a version more precise than any of the alternatives."

The ESV is a word-for-word rather than a 'thought-for-thought' translation. The [ESV website](#) states that the latter translations are "of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture."

Packer said the ESV is also in a 500-year tradition of Bible translation -- from William Tyndale's Bible through the KJV to the Revised Standard Version.

The translation was carried out by 60 scholars who were expert in individual books, often having written commentaries on them. They started with the Revised Standard Version and were told to make the revisions they thought necessary and give reasons for the changes. The changes then went through another editing process to standardize them -- and finally to the oversight committee for final decisions.

There was also a 60-member advisory committee made up of pastors and other ministry leaders. Packer said this collaborative approach, also used by many other translations, is "the only rational way to do it."

Packer said all of those involved were also "evangelicals, Bible believers. . . . A Bible translator needs to be a believing Christian and draw on the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a spiritual side to Bible translation." Most were from the U.S.; some were from Britain and elsewhere.

Packer said the leading of the Holy Spirit was evident in the way "the good Lord brought us to a real consensus" on almost every point.

Packer said the intent was to produce a "general purpose" Bible, suitable for preaching and exposition, reading in churches, memorization, lay Bible study, and personal Bible reading by people of all ages. A deliberate attempt was made to use simple words when possible, and to make the text "dance along," or read easily.

Packer said the producers were very careful to not make extravagant claims or get into a competition with other translations. The ESV was not launched with the "trumpets and drums" of some other translations launched about the same time, he said.

Rather, the ESV was released quietly and soberly and allowed to "find its own level." ESV's natural audience is "serious evangelicals who want a translation they can trust to be transparent to the original."

Packer said this appears to be what is behind the growing sales. Pastors are examining the translation, finding they can trust it and then recommending it to their congregations -- and in some cases "retooling" their churches by using ESV as a pew Bible.

The ESV is published by Crossway Books of Wheaton, Illinois. ESV sales have now reached the point that Crossway has had to set up a separate Crossway Bibles division. An entity called the Standard Bible Society has also been established to promote use of the ESV and to use it in ministry.