

## GENDER-NEUTRAL TRANSLATIONS: THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE TNIV

*Dr. Mike Stallard*  
*Professor of Systematic Theology*  
*Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania*

### INTRODUCTION

The recent release of *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) of the New Testament, an update of the popular *New International Version*, has created a firestorm within the evangelical world that has affected both academic and popular discussions about translations.<sup>1</sup> The immediate controversy is centered on the issue of so-called inclusive language, that is, language in our English translations that at times replaces the male nouns and pronouns (man, brother, he, him, etc.) with expressions that include women (person, he or she, they, etc.). Such an approach to translation is sometimes referred to as "gender-neutral" or "gender-inclusive."<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that at this point no evangelical is questioning whether God himself, especially in passages where he is called Father, should be designated by gender-neutral language such as Parent or He/She. The TNIV uses gender-neutral language only in some cases involving human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Wading into this debate requires quite a bit of careful thought spiced up with a little gumption. Tempers have flared in a way that is not altogether good for the reputation of Bible-believing Christianity:

Both sides, however, have erred in the way this has been handled. As is often the case in such debates, the process has not gone well. Some of those who have complained have done so in tones that do not advance or reflect the complex nature of the discussion at the level of translation theory. I have in mind not those who have honest questions about some of the renderings but some of the media reporting this debate that has unashamedly inflamed the discussion and created an environment in which instant judgment is made and dialogue has become difficult.<sup>4</sup>

One cannot attribute such controversy to simple ignorance. One can find quality scholars by reputation on both sides of the debate. A representative list on the side opposing the TNIV would be Vern Poythress, Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, J. I. Packer, and John Piper. Organizations such as *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (CBMW)<sup>5</sup> and James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* have helped to disseminate complaints about the TNIV. Many of the protagonists in this group worked to establish the Colorado Springs Guidelines (CSG) in 1997 to govern gender-related translation.<sup>6</sup>

On the other side supporting the general principles of the TNIV are men like Mark Strauss, Douglas Moo, Bruce Waltke, Darrell Bock, and D. A. Carson.<sup>7</sup> The *Committee on Bible Translations* (CBT), which

---

<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to provide students and others with an overview of the issues involved. It is not intended as a detailed analysis of various passages, although a few samples will be provided.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Jones, "The TNIV: Gender Accurate or Ideologically Egalitarian," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7 (Fall 2002): 15. Jones's article is one of the more strongly worded ones accusing the pro-TNIV faction of capitulating to the egalitarian ideology. He thanks the TNIV translators, however, for not going to the extreme of making God gender neutral.

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 106.

<sup>5</sup> The CBMW, in order to advance its view, has established the TNIV Resource Center which can be found at its website at <http://www.cbmw.org/tniv/>; Internet; accessed 29 November 2002.

<sup>6</sup> An appendix to this paper has been provided giving the Colorado Springs Guidelines as found at the CBMW website; available from <http://www.cbmw.org/resources/articles/niv/guidelines.html>; Internet; accessed 29 November 2002.

<sup>7</sup> This present writer recently attended the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto (November 20-22, 2002), where Darrell Bock moderated a panel discussion and debate on this issue with Wayne Grudem and John Piper

contracts with the International Bible Society (IBS) to do the translation of the TNIV, has naturally spearheaded some of the discussion supporting the new translation and reacting to the Colorado Springs Guidelines. In general, the CBT has accepted some of the CSG guidelines but not all.<sup>8</sup>

One should be careful not to focus too much on the TNIV in this debate. Other recent translations contain a measure of gender-neutral language as well. Included in this group could be the New Revised Standard Version (1989); New Century Version (1987, 1991); Good News Bible, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1992); Contemporary English Version (1995); God's Word (1995); New International Reader's Version (1995); New Living Translation (1996); and the English Standard Version (2001).<sup>9</sup> The TNIV gets most of the attention probably because it is the update of the most popular modern English translation, the NIV. One must also understand that the differences here may be one of degree and not kind. Many of the translations that would be gender-specific rather than gender-neutral would in a few instances borrow the philosophy of inclusive language for translations. For example, the traditional King James Version occasionally translates the Greek word for *sons* as "children" when the meaning obviously refers to both men and women (e.g., Matt. 5:9 — μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ κληθήσονται / Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God). Consequently, the debate will probably be best understood with respect to a continuum of viewpoints.

### PRELIMINARY ISSUES IN THE DEBATE

As in many other controversies, the debate over the TNIV has many different components. Not all of these relate directly to inclusive language concerns. However, one must have a working knowledge of these issues if he is going to comprehend the full import of the discussions.

#### Communication of God's Word

It must be stated at the outset that all of the evangelicals involved in this debate have a high view of Scripture (inspiration and inerrancy) and have a desire to communicate the Word of God to the present culture. Contrary to popular opinion, the recent proliferation of Bible translations is not just about money (although one has the right to wonder about overkill in light of the sheer numbers).<sup>10</sup> When God confounded the languages at Babel, he providentially set in motion the need for periodic updates in translation. In short, languages were not only confounded at that moment, but for all time. They in essence became a moving target. A simple example will suffice. In the King James Version (1611), the expression "to let" means "to hinder." In 2002 English, the expression has come to mean the exact opposite, "to allow." This dynamic or fluid nature of language mandates the periodic update of Bible translations.

#### Formal Versus Functional Equivalence

In light of the confusion that exists between languages, one must consider the fact that there is no such thing as a one-to-one correspondence between any two languages. The destination language may not have adequate terms to express a certain word or words in the source language. It may, in fact, take a full paragraph in the destination language to give the full meaning of a word from the source language.<sup>11</sup> However,

---

representing the view opposing the TNIV and Mark Strauss with Douglas Moo defending the TNIV. Hall Harris, who works on the Net Bible, generally considered a gender-specific translation, was also included on the panel.

<sup>8</sup> "Peter Bradley and the Truth About the NIV: An Interview with the President of International Bible Society," in *Shedding Light on the TNIV* (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 2002), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Excluding the ESV, this list is taken from the Abbreviations Page in Wayne A. Grudem and Vern S. Poythress, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), xxvii. Of special interest is the authors' chapter entitled "The Rise of Gender-Neutral Bible Translations," 9-36. Grudem and Poythress label translations that normally do not follow the gender-neutral translation philosophy as "gender-specific" translations.

<sup>10</sup> This writer once had the privilege of having breakfast with the man who headed up the Bible division of one of the major evangelical publishers. Far from the business stereotype that some have seen, his love for God's Word and communicating it came through as well as his overall dedication to Jesus Christ.

<sup>11</sup> One classic example here is the often-mentioned *hesed* from the Hebrew, which is variously translated as loyalty, loving-kindness, love, mercy, steadfast love, etc.

one cannot naturally translate a single word with a paragraph of explanation everywhere it occurs in the destination language. Consequently, one must opt for the best choice within the target language, which provides minimal loss of detail.<sup>12</sup> This is another way of saying that there is no such thing as a perfect translation. This is also the reason that all church leaders should treasure knowledge of the original biblical languages. In a sermon, the pastor may give the paragraph explanation that is required while a translation does not have the luxury of doing so. But the pastor must have adequate knowledge of the original languages to be able to do this important and necessary task.<sup>13</sup>

Such a lack of correspondence between languages has forced modern translation theory to consider and refine the idea of *functional equivalence*. Originally called *dynamic equivalence*, this concept arose primarily as a response to the need for translating the Bible into many non-English and non-European languages throughout the world. It has come to be used, however, in translation theory for most translations of the Bible into any and all languages. Its basic principle is that the main element to be translated is meaning, not form. It is often set over against *formal equivalence*, which attempts to retain more of the form or structure of the wording of the original text as well as the meaning. Hence, those translations that attempt to be word-for-word literal (as it is sometimes described) tend toward formal equivalence, although no translation can be perfect in this attempt.

Those who more strongly prefer functional equivalence sometimes point out that formal equivalence can actually obscure meaning in some cases usually by downplaying clarity. For example, one can examine the divine name “I am” that is used by Christ for himself in John 8:58 (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί).<sup>14</sup> However, one cannot argue that the strict formal equivalence of the translation is what makes the connection to the “I AM” of Exodus. In other words, “I am he” might be an acceptable translation for the Greek expression under consideration. This can be demonstrated from the appearance of the same phrase in John 9:9. But there it is stated by the man born blind, whom Christ had healed, and has no divine connotations (ἄλλοι ἔλεγον ὅτι οὗτος ἐστίν, ἄλλοι ἔλεγον· οὐχί, ἀλλὰ ὅμοιος αὐτῷ ἐστίν. ἐκεῖνος ἔλεγε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμί). The NIV appropriately translates the expression in John 9:9 as “I am the man.” Thus, it is the context and not the formal equivalence of the translation that yields the theological conclusion in John 8:58. It would be foolish to think otherwise.

Those who hold more strongly to formal equivalence return the favor with examples of how functional equivalence has led to the loss of too much meaning in an effort at clarity. For example, the NIV, in an effort to bring clearness via functional equivalence, often breaks up long sentences (such as those obtuse ones written by the Apostle Paul!) into several shorter ones. Sometimes, as in the case of Ephesians 5:18-21, this is done by turning a string of participles into finite verbs with their own sentences. In that particular example, several participles modify the main verb “be filled” in the command to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18). In the NIV, it is not readily apparent that the main verbs in verses 19-21 (the participles) actually relate in a direct way to the verb in verse 18. While the wording of the text is easier for an English reader, it is impossible for him to readily capture the connection between all the verbal forms. The KJV and NASB, because they retain the structure of the passage to a larger extent, allow the English reader via formal equivalence to see more quickly how the various verb forms relate.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the proponents of formal equivalence

---

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson is probably correct when he asserts, “Because no two languages share exactly the same structure and vocabulary (and a lot of other things), it is impossible not to lose something when you translate an extended text from one language to another” (*Inclusive Language Debate*, 58). Such thinking is also acknowledged by those on the other side of the debate. See Grudem and Poythress, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 58-62.

<sup>13</sup> This should not be taken to disparage the vast majority of pastors in two thousand years of church history who did not have knowledge of the biblical languages. God uses men, even apart from knowledge of the biblical languages, to do great things for him. However, since Christ teaches “to whom much is given, much is required” (see Luke 12:48), those who have access to knowledge of the biblical languages would be amiss in refusing to use that great gift that God has given to them.

<sup>14</sup> This example is cited by D. A. Carson in *Inclusive Language Debate*, 58-60.

<sup>15</sup> Compare the translations of Ephesians 5:18-21. In the NIV, we see “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Notice that the words “giving thanks” appear in English to be related to “sing and make music” when in Greek they most likely go back to the verb “filled” in verse 18. Notice how the NASB handles the same text: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name

sometimes argue for accuracy above clarity and see the zeal for clarity in functional equivalence as sometimes downgrading the richness of the Bible for the intended audience.<sup>16</sup>

In reality, there is a continuum and not simply two views with black and white differences. One must not oversimplify the definition of either formal or functional equivalence. Meaning is partly tied up with the form of the original text and cannot be ignored. Yet, in translation strict adherence to form sometimes leads one astray. Grudem and Poythress aptly describe the tension:

No one simple recipe will always work. “Preserve the form” will not always work because it sometimes obscures the meaning. “Preserve the meaning while ignoring the form” will not work either, because form and meaning are not neatly separable, and the form often affects the meaning. Speech and writing operate in too many dimensions for a rough paraphrase to get everything right.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, one must be careful not to generalize in this area of the debate. However, it does seem that those who reject the direction of gender-neutral translations emphasize the formal equivalence side of the continuum while those who favor them are on the functional equivalence side of the continuum in the way that the debate is expressed.

### Translations and Political Agendas: Complementarians and Egalitarians

The controversy over the TNIV cannot simplistically be relegated to a debate between complementarians, those who see divinely established distinctions in gender roles for family and church, and egalitarians (evangelical feminists) who see no distinctions. Virtually all of those on both sides of this debate are complementarians or conservatives on the role of women in the church.<sup>18</sup> As D. A. Carson has noted, “Whatever my errors and blind spots, I cannot fairly be accused of adopting the stances I do in translation because I am driven by some feminist agenda.”<sup>19</sup> On this point, most scholars on both sides agree. What is not accepted by both sides, however, is the extent to which the TNIV (and its translation philosophy) has succumbed, perhaps inadvertently, to the egalitarian spirit of the times:

The elimination of any significant role difference between males and females represents the essence of evangelical egalitarianism. No one in the evangelical camp would deny that the Bible is all-inclusive. However, the Bible, since its inception, in spite of male-generic language, has successfully managed to include all—men and women, boys and girls. It is this biblical notion of inclusion through differentiation, enshrined in male-generic biblical language everywhere, that the TNIV eliminates. Though claiming that the removal is “gender accurate,” there is reason to wonder whether the TNIV committee has imposed onto the inspired text, wittingly or unwittingly, an essential egalitarian principle, without debate or discussion. Future readers of this Bible will never be faced with the issue, because the Bible—that is, this Bible—by its omission, tells me so. In this subtle way, a theological opinion about the inappropriateness of male representation in language (or at least the theological conviction of its unimportance) is given the status of “biblical” authority.<sup>20</sup>

---

of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject one to another in the fear of Christ.” The KJV further rejects the finite nature of the translation of the final verb “be subject” (NASB) with the words “submitting yourselves.”

<sup>16</sup> Notice the opinion of Grudem and Poythress in this matter: “A translator needs to respect this rich wisdom. Of course a translator needs to present the basic message, but in dealing with the Bible in all its richness and wisdom, no translator should be content with a minimum. Translators of the Bible should present as much as possible of the full richness of meanings, instructions, exhortations, and examples found in the Bible in the original languages” (*Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 73).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78. It is interesting that at the recent ETS meeting mentioned in an earlier note, there was some debate over the actual information in the lexicons. Both sides interpreted the lexical information in the various lexicons differently. There also appeared to be some later changes in the lexicons that came up in the debate. The presentation was analogous to a courtroom scene where both the defense and the prosecutor marshaled psychiatric experts to affirm and deny the sanity of the defendant! It might also be a fascinating study to see if any modern cultural influence with regard to gender-neutral language has impacted the lexicographers. This present writer does not have enough information to validate or invalidate cultural influences in this way.

<sup>18</sup> There are no doubt evangelical and non-evangelical feminists on the other side of the debate about Bible translation. However, the current debate within evangelicalism appears to be mostly within the complementarian camp.

<sup>19</sup> D. A. Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Jones, “The TNIV,” 16.

The subtitle to the Grudem-Poythress book, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, summarizes this position quite well when it appears to accuse gender-neutral translations like the TNIV of “muting the masculinity of God’s words.”

The testimony of the proponents of the TNIV that they do not have any personal motives aligned with egalitarianism and gender-neutral translations must be taken seriously. Those who oppose the TNIV must speak in a way that honors and respects this claim. However, there are a couple of factors that make the charge that the TNIV proponents have been unduly influenced by current culture one to be considered thoughtfully. The first is the nature of discussions about Bible translation that come from outside of evangelicalism and form at least part of the milieu of biblical studies at the present time. Grudem and Poythress assess this with respect to the gender-neutral changes made to the New Revised Standard Version (1989), the first major translation to incorporate gender-neutral language:

Why make these changes? There have been no new archaeological discoveries, no changes in our knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, no ancient texts discovered that would suggest that we put plural pronouns instead of singular in these places, or first and second person in place of third person. There have been no linguistic discoveries showing that the words previously translated “father,” “son,” and “brother” (singular) have lost their distinctive male meanings. No, the changes have been made in the NRSV because the NRSV translators were required by a division of the National Council of Churches of Christ to remove “masculine oriented language” from the Bible. And similar changes were made in the NIV, CEV, NCV, and NLT because of policy decisions to eliminate much male-oriented language in the Bible.<sup>21</sup>

Grudem and Poythress are claiming that the liberals behind the NRSV had a politically correct agenda driving their translation rather than legitimate translation theory. Notice the statement on this issue from the preface of the New Revised Standard Version:

During the almost half a century since the publication of the RSV, many in the churches have become sensitive to the danger of linguistic sexism arising from the inherent bias of the English language towards the masculine gender, a bias that in the case of the Bible has often restricted or obscured the meaning of the original text.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Grudem and Poythress seem to be saying that the liberals started the ball rolling and now evangelicals are playing catch up, not necessarily by deliberately opting for the methodology, but by breathing the cultural air of the times. At the very least, the timing of the translations, the TNIV coming later in time on the heels of the NRSV, can be construed or misconstrued as a suspicious shadow.

The second factor that forces one to consider the claim that the TNIV has capitulated to an egalitarian mindset, albeit inadvertently, is the systematic nature of the changes that have been made. They are not isolated, but appear to be quite numerous. Various numbers have been given. Grudem has cataloged around 700 such changes<sup>23</sup> while others have cited around 900 changes or inaccuracies in the TNIV in these areas.<sup>24</sup> One interesting list by Grudem shows that the King James Version has only three gender-neutral translations when compared to the list of almost 700 changes made in the NIV to produce the TNIV.<sup>25</sup>

On the other side, to be fair, the pro-TNIV faction has also accused the anti-TNIV group of having a political agenda.<sup>26</sup> After all, it is just as wrong to stand in the way of changes if the changes are linguistically

<sup>21</sup> Grudem and Poythress, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 278. See also 150-52.

<sup>22</sup> Preface to the NRSV (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), x. Grudem and Poythress interact with this statement (*ibid.*, 151).

<sup>23</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Are the Criticisms of the TNIV Bible Really Justified?” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7 (Fall 2002): 33. Grudem cites here 686 examples. At the recent ETS meeting he cited over 700 examples. As more study is done, more refinement in the numbers will be made. However, there will always be some examples where there will no agreement over the fact of gender-neutral translations.

<sup>24</sup> “Translation Inaccuracies in the TNIV: A Categorized List of 901 Examples,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7 (Fall 2002): 9-14. No author is cited for this article. Some passages in the list appear to be unrelated to gender questions. For example, the change of translation of “the Jews” to “Jewish leaders” or “they,” or omitted altogether, is viewed here as a politically correct translation in the same spirit of the gender-based changes.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Criticisms of the TNIV Bible,” 33.

<sup>26</sup> Both Mark Strauss and Douglas Moo made this charge at the recent ETS convention. Much of the discussion here has been taken from the notes of this present writer who was in attendance. Hall Harris also contributed to the discussion.

valid if one's only reason for doing so is to preserve a view of male leadership in the home and family. Such a theological view should not be read into any of the passages any more than egalitarian feminism. A case in point is the translation of "brothers" in James 3:1—(Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness / Μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου, εἰδότες ὅτι μείζον κρίμα λημψόμεθα). Grudem objects to the TNIV's use of the phrase "brothers and sisters" rather than simply "brothers" here largely because of his view that women should not have leadership roles in the church. However, all other occurrences of the term ἀδελφοί in the book of James appear to be generic. That is, they include women as well as men based upon the context. So, due to a theological conviction, Grudem has objected here contrary to what the context might tell him. By the way, even if the translation should properly be "brothers and sisters," church leadership for women is not necessarily in view. Women can be teachers under the complementarian view, just not pastors or doctrinal teachers of men. Grudem, in his zeal for his theological position, may have overstepped in his criticism on this point.

### Where is the English Language Going?

Another component of the gender-neutral translation debate involves the direction that the English language is developing. Those who favor more inclusive language often affirm that the English language is becoming more gender-inclusive rather than gender-specific. For example, they assert that the male pronoun *he* is being used less and less as representative for all human beings including women. To be sure, academic publications often appear, on the surface at least, to support that claim. What seminary student has not read a journal article or book where the scholar uses either "he or she" or "she" in a representative way for all human beings? In the past one usually saw the male representative use of "he."

However, those opposed to gender-inclusive translations argue that English has not really changed that much and that what changes have been making their mark in this area are driven by politically-correct pressure from modern feminism. A representative opinion comes from Peter Jones: "Language usage is not so much changing as being purposely and calculatedly changed! What are we changing, I ask, for what reason, and on what basis? Who defines what constitutes 'mistakes'? Who is doing the changing? The answers to these questions are merely assumed by assuming the correctness of today's academic agenda."<sup>27</sup> Grudem and Poythress track the development of feminism's attempt to advance its agenda by changing the English language:

Some feminist writers are explicit in stating their goal of engineering a change in the English language in order to bring about desired changes in society: Ann Pauwels advocates feminist language reform (LR) and language planning (LP) through pressure on governmental agencies, educators, publishers of educational materials, journalists, editors, legislative bodies, labor unions, and professional societies, and tells us that much of this kind of pressure has already succeeded.<sup>28</sup>

Jones notes that "I do not believe I am exaggerating when I say that we are witnessing a social revolution that is determined to erase from the cultural memory of the 'Christian' West both the normativity of heterosexual gender and role distinctions and the patriarchal God of the Bible. Essential to the revolution is the control and manipulation of language."<sup>29</sup> One is reminded of the famous statement attributed to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar." Jones then concludes:

We evangelicals are not translating the Bible in a cultural vacuum or in any old, "normal" time frame. We do it in the white heat of ideological and spiritual warfare. Thus, while it is absolutely paramount to let the word of God say everything it wants to say, including gender inclusive language if that is what the Bible has to say, it would be a pity—

---

<sup>27</sup> Jones, "The TNIV," 17.

<sup>28</sup> Grudem and Poythress, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 136, n. 4. The writers cite Ann Pauwels's work *Women Changing Language* (London and New York: Longman, 1988) through a secondary source, E. Ray Clendenen's paper at ETS in 1998 entitled "Inclusive Language in Bible Translation: A Reply to Mark Strauss." This present writer was unable to secure Pauwels prior to writing this article.

<sup>29</sup> Jones, "The TNIV," 18.

no, a disaster—to translate the Bible according to the very contemporary “norms” that have as their goal the ultimate silencing of the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

Grudem and others have pointed out that various English style books and much popular literature such as newspapers and magazines prove that the use of generic “he” and such masculine representative language is still widely used in spite of the feminist attempt to change culture. The application is then made that modern English readers will normally not misunderstand gender-specific translations and so there is no need to remove such language from our English translations of the Bible.

Of course, those who favor gender-inclusive translations marshal their own arguments, including the reference to various sources on English style.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, their strongest arguments, in the judgment of this writer, have come in the form of powerful, personal anecdotes. For example, John Kohlenberger tells of an encounter he had with his daughter:

“Daddy, why does God only like boys?” Caught off guard by this startling question, I didn’t know how to answer my eight-year-old daughter. “Where did you get that idea?” I asked. “From the Bible,” she replied. “When we memorize verses in Sunday School or for AWANA or at school, they always say ‘Blessed is the man’ and ‘How can a young man keep his way pure’ and ‘I will make you fishers of men.’ Why isn’t there anything about girls being blessed or girls getting saved?”<sup>32</sup>

There are certainly problems with such anecdotes. Even granting the young girl’s dilemma as real, one would have to rewrite the entire Bible to eliminate its patriarchal flavor. The retranslation of Matthew 4:19 in the TNIV, “Come, follow me... and I will send you out to catch people,” will simply not be enough. Of course, there are examples of women being saved which the little girl had not yet seen (e.g., Lydia in Acts 16), but certainly the plot line of the Bible is top-heavy with male examples whose names cannot fairly be feminized. Nonetheless, such anecdotes show that where gender-neutral language makes sense, it may be appropriate to translate the Bible in terms that may better communicate specific passages.

In addition, D. A. Carson, a TNIV advocate, reminds us “regardless of the source of the pressure for linguistic change, it is important to recognize that alternative grammatical gender systems are not intrinsically evil.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the fact of the matter is that discussions about the use of more gender-inclusive English pre-date the rise of the modern feminist movement, although the intensity of the discussions has increased dramatically since that rise.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Carson correctly warns against an unwise “monocausal analyses of the changes taking place.”<sup>35</sup> There are many pressures upon the development of the English language, including but not limited to modern feminism. One must take into account all such influences in understanding where we are today in the English language. Carson does, however, show some sensitivity to the concerns of the other side when he notes, “We cannot deny, I think, that some of the pressure for change springs from a profound abandonment of the Bible’s worldview, the Bible’s culture, the Bible’s story line, as that has been mediated to us by various English Bibles. I mourn the loss.”<sup>36</sup>

### Viewings the Issues on a Continuum

The above discussions have shown that there are solid evangelical scholars on both sides of the debate over gender-neutral translations like the TNIV.<sup>37</sup> It has also shown that the issues are not black and white.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The debate over formal reference works on English style was part of the recent ETS discussion group mentioned earlier.

<sup>32</sup> John R. Kohlenberger III, “Why Translations Need to Change,” in *Shedding Light on the TNIV*, 30. For a second example, see Phil Ginsburg, “Great Cities, Great Moments in Church History,” in *Shedding Light on the TNIV*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> D. A. Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*, 187.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 185-87.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 186-187. Grudem and Poythress interact briefly with Carson’s statement in *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 166, n. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>37</sup> One other preliminary issue that could be discussed but which is beyond the scope of this article is the charge that the TNIV gives translations that are too applicatory or theological in nature. Of course, such charges are not new with respect to

There is a continuum of beliefs that represents many, if not all, of the issues involved. Both sides will recognize the validity of gender-neutral translations in certain passages and the rejection of gender-neutral translations in others. The difference is the matter of frequency and emphasis. In the end, each passage must be handled on a case-by-case basis. A few sample texts will now be supplied to give a taste of how that study would go.

### Textual Examples<sup>38</sup>

#### Pluralizing<sup>39</sup>

(Turning third-person singulars to third-person plurals)

##### *Revelation 2:26-28*

NIV: To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star.

TNIV: To those who are victorious and do my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—they ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give them the morning star.

Comment: The plurals of the TNIV give a similar meaning and certainly do not damage the idea that everyone who is victorious will participate in the wonderful promises of this verse. However, the TNIV may have removed an individualistic emphasis in the passage. It is possible but not necessary to take the TNIV wording as corporate when the original passage in Greek does not appear to have that in mind. Notice the singular “scepter” and “morning star.” Does each believer get his own scepter and star or do all believers share one scepter and one star?<sup>40</sup>

#### Change from third person (he) to second person (you)

##### *Matthew 16:26*

NIV: What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

TNIV: What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?

Comment: The TNIV again gives the basic idea with no problem. However, the TNIV has inserted an applicatory translation here. It may be a valid application, but it is not at all certain that the passage is any

---

translations including the NIV. In this debate, however, they are associated with gender-neutral language. For example, note Peter Jones’s theological complaint that the TNIV translation of 1 Corinthians 15:21 (For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a human being) undermines the male covenantal headship ideas inherent in the passage (Jones, “The TNIV,” 16). At least the context identifies the two human beings in this verse as men (Adam and Jesus). Why the need to be gender-neutral? It is interesting that the TNIV is not consistent on this point since it does not use gender-neutral translations in Romans 5:12ff, which teaches the same point. In a similar vein, John Piper, at the recent ETS convention, criticized both the NIV and the TNIV for using translation wording to make application. In Piper’s understanding this removed the pastor’s and church member’s ability to wrestle with the text for themselves.

<sup>38</sup> Most of the present discussion involves the New Testament since the TNIV Old Testament has not been released. Here only New Testament examples will be considered although the reader must be aware that for other gender-neutral translations (e.g., NRSV), similar debate has raged over the Old Testament as well. For some sample Old Testament passages in the debate, see Grudem and Poythress, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 281-89.

<sup>39</sup> Many of the categories and examples here come from the various sources written by Grudem and Poythress cited in this paper. See especially Vern Poythress, “Avoiding Generic ‘He’ in the TNIV,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7 (Fall 2002): 21-30.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

clearer because of it. An aversion to male-specific language is the most likely way to account for the translation.

### Change from third person (he) to first person (we)

*1 John 4:20*

NIV: If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

TNIV: If we say we love God yet hate a fellow believer, we are liars. For if we do not love a brother or sister whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen.

Comment: There is a danger in the TNIV of missing the individualistic intention of the passage by converting to the plural “we” throughout. While doing so makes it sound like other parts of 1 John (e.g., 1:8-10, 2:3), the Greek is different and similar to other parts of 1 John (e.g., 2:4, 15). The translation of “fellow believer” instead of “brother” may be adequate in this context. However, antagonists of the TNIV often suggest that the singular “brother” should never be translated by “brothers and sisters,” although most on both sides allow for “brothers” to mean “brothers and sisters” in some contexts. Here the TNIV avoids that contentious move, but may leave itself open to the charge of an unwarranted applicatory translation. However, the meaning appears clear for this word.

### Change from “man” to “human being”

*1 Corinthians 15:21*

NIV: For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

TNIV: For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a human being.

Comment: Here the change from “man” to “human being” is problematic. It is technically correct in one respect since men are human beings. However, the two people who are in view here are mentioned in the next verse, Adam and Christ. Both of them are males. Why not simply acknowledge that historical fact? The TNIV is not consistent here since in passages like Romans 5:12, 15, 16, 17, 19 the word “man” is retained in a similar theological context. Thus, the TNIV translation in 1 Corinthians 15:21 seems somewhat arbitrary.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> See earlier note on this passage.

### **Change from singular antecedent “he” to third person plural “them”**

*John 14:23*

NIV: If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

TNIV: Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

Comment: Grammatically there is no problem with dropping out the first “he” in the verse. However, the conversion to “they” instead of the singular “him” in spite of a singular antecedent may be problematic. Both sides admit that in English the “they” with singular antecedent has some usage. However, here there may be a question as to the content of the antecedent. Who makes up the “them”? Will the English reader look in the context for a plural antecedent and get confused? Or will the reader naturally make the connection?

### **Change from male wording to generic wording**

*1 Corinthians 3:12*

NIV: If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw

TNIV: If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw

Comment: There is no need to reject the TNIV rendering of the Greek word  $\tau\iota\varsigma$  or other similar terms. The change from the masculine-specific translation in this case appears to be justified.

Note: These sparse examples only serve to whet the appetite for more study of the individual passages involved and are not designed to lead to final conclusions across the board.

## **FINAL CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The debate over gender-inclusive language in Bible translations like the TNIV will continue during the next several years. It is doubtful that the strident tone of the controversy will be changed any time soon. In the meantime, several concerns and recommendations can be made that will hopefully guide the Bible student as he encounters this discussion.

*First, it is prudent to make sure that Bible translation policies do not lead the way in promoting language changes.* They must truly reflect the overwhelming norms of the English language that prevail in the culture at any given time. Translations should not reflect any political agendas of any kind. A few observations are important in relation to this understanding. It has only been three or four decades since the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the rise of the modern feminist movement which has impacted male-female understandings including language usage. It is not at all clear that such a short time is adequate to justify sweeping changes in gender-specific language. Furthermore, there has been a tremendous volume of study in the area of translation and language theory during that same time that is unrelated to gender questions directly. It is also not clear that there has been enough time, in this writer’s judgment, for such studies to “settle down” and provide firm footing for real progress. It may be that the dizzying proliferation of English translations in the 1990s is proof of such “unsettledness.” Caution is urged. We should not move ahead quickly. Moreover, the rise of modern feminism and the coincident development of language theory overlap the rise of postmodernism. It is the tendency toward language deconstruction in that philosophical backdrop that lurks as a danger for every translator. We live in an age when a presidential candidate during a national debate can refer to the U. S. Constitution as a living, breathing document that changes meaning over time. Many in our present culture treat the Bible the same way. Consequently, we must bend over backwards to ensure that our translation changes do not, in fact, change the meaning of a historical document that God gave in space and time. This may mean that, if we err, we should do so on the side of a conservative approach to functional equivalence.

*Second, we must ensure that our translation changes do not tamper with the historicity of the Bible.* The earlier discussions of this article show that translation is a tricky business with a continuum on almost all sides of all issues. What is being argued for here is not a simplistic “stick to the past” approach to translation. However, “how” Jesus said things is often important as well as “what” he said. The form-meaning dichotomy should not be forced to artificial levels. Language theory is not necessarily a theologically neu-

tral enterprise. We should not smuggle into our modern translations current ways of looking at issues that in the end do not match how God gave his Word in the originals. Furthermore, we should not apologize for the fact that the Bible is a patriarchal document. God raised up a patriarchal society (Israel) through which he gave his Word and his Messiah to the world. Male leadership of the home and the church is still taught in the Bible for the present dispensation. God has even chosen to describe himself in male-dominated language. Such historical elements should be maintained throughout the legitimate exercise of translation. The tendencies to treat God as our holy Parent instead of Father should be resisted as unworthy of consideration.<sup>42</sup>

*Third, related to both points above to some extent, we must double our efforts to resist the world spirit of the present hour, which is attempting to feminize the culture, the church, and its Bible.* It is no exaggeration that this writer found, upon attending the Society of Biblical Literature, 70% of the books on display by non-evangelical publishers dealt with feminist issues. This is the cultural air we all breathe. This concern is at the heart of the matter for those that oppose gender-neutral translations. It is a valid concern overall, even if we disagree with some of the scholars in the particulars in various passages of the Bible.

*Fourth, it is more important than ever that evangelicals develop a complete biblical anthropology.* The discussions about gender-inclusive language versus gender-specific language point us to the fact that we need to be solid in this area so that the TNIV and other gender-neutral translations produced by evangelicals will not be on the slippery slope on the way to the politically correct translations of those on the liberal side of the spectrum. Such translations are being driven by an unbiblical view of men and women. Such thinking must not be allowed to creep into our own translations.

In spite of all of these concerns and recommendations, it must be pointed out that the goals of all translation are accuracy (the strength of formal equivalence) and clarity (the strength of functional equivalence). To the extent that the translators of the TNIV are attempting to meet these goals for the present culture, their efforts must be respected, even if their conclusions many times are not accepted. In spite of such respect, however, this author cannot recommend the TNIV for use for personal Bible study or public ministry. It seems to step into the fray in a way that helps foster the support of a feminist approach to language. Furthermore, this places it in the context of being led by the world spirit and not by Scripture itself. As such the door is open, although no one may have passed through as yet, to a watered down view of biblical anthropology, thereby compounding the confusion between the roles of men and women. In addition, it probably wanders too much from formal equivalence thereby diminishing the significance of “how” God’s words have been said. Caution is always urged when the handling of God’s Word, the most important factor in the Christian life, is at stake.

---

<sup>42</sup> We should be balanced and applaud the translators of the TNIV for apparently, at this point, resisting such dramatic and anti-historical changes in God’s Word. However, one translation that has apparently gone to this extreme is the *Inclusive Version* published by Oxford University Press (1995). For example, its version of Romans 8:15 is “We cry, Abba! Father-Mother.” See Jones, “The TNIV,” 19.