I was with a group of fourth and fifth graders in a Sunday School class some years ago talking about the importance of the Bible when Kelli piped up, “The Bible is just a book about men, for men.” How does a ten-year-old girl come to such a troubling conclusion? As we explored this perception more, I realized that whenever Kelli heard or read a male pronoun in our 1984 NIV translation, she was understanding it as excluding women, even when it was meant to be used generically.

While male pronouns were once understood as sometimes referring to both men and women, that is no longer the case. When we use an English translation of the Bible that ignores this, the gospel message is distorted, pushing women to the margins. All those “man” words Kelli heard in her ten short years of church life had caused her to internalize the message that men are the main audience of the Bible and that women are not as important to God.

For several hundred years, English translators inserted masculine pronouns that aren’t present in the original text, for the purpose of making the meaning clearer to the intended audience. Jeff Miller, editor of *Priscilla Papers*, notes that the King James Version and the pre-2011 New International Versions include more than 1,000 instances of “man” and “men” which are not found in the Greek New Testament.¹ Nearly all contemporary Bible translations (NRSV, NIV2011, CEB, for example) now use gender-accurate language when scholars agree that both men and women would have been present in the original setting. (A gender-accurate translation does not add or take anything away from the Bible, it simply clarifies where generic terms for people were used in the original biblical manuscripts.)

While this was once controversial, today most biblical scholars and translation experts support the use of gender-accurate language when it is consistent with the original biblical manuscripts.² Notably, this includes prominent complementarians like Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Don Carson, Douglas Moo, Bill Mounce, and Mark Strauss.

Yet there continues to be resistance in some Christian circles. It is often suggested that using a gender-accurate translation is giving in to political correctness or feminism. Sometimes the resistance is based simply on personal preference, as in the case of the pastor who told me he was “too attached” to his Bible translation to make the change. Whatever the reason, we need to realize that our language choices have consequences.

---


If you are still on the fence about giving up your ESV or NIV1984 for a gender-accurate translation, here are some reasons to make the switch.

1. To communicate clearly in the language of our culture

Whether we like it or not, the way gendered pronouns are used in the English language has changed. The most comprehensive study of gendered terms in English to date, the Collins Report, found that between 1990 and 2000 the use of masculine pronouns as generics for both men and women had fallen from 22% to 8%. The goal of any Bible translation is to provide people with an accurate, clear translation in their own language. As conventions in the target language change, translations need to reflect those changes so the original meaning is not lost. For example, the Greek word “anthropos” most often means “person,” not “man,” as used in older translations. Since to contemporary readers “man” is usually understood to refer just to men, it is more accurate to use a gender-neutral term. This is different than replacing distinctly masculine terms with inclusive language just for the sake of inclusion. As Gordon Fee points out,

“The goal is not to eliminate gender distinctions in Scripture, but to clarify them. Passages that refer exclusively to males should remain masculine, and references to females should remain feminine.

But when the context indicates that both males and females are in view, inclusive terms like “person”, “brothers and sisters”, “children”, and “ancestors” are more precise and so more accurate. This is simply good translation policy. If we are going to communicate the good news of the gospel effectively, we need to use language that will be clearly understood in our cultural contexts.

2. To facilitate spiritual growth and development in both women and men

There is a growing body of research showing that many people no longer understand masculine forms to refer to both genders equally; they interpret them in a male-centric way. Women have to take the extra step of “decoding” what applies to them and what doesn’t. For example, there are no masculine pronouns in the original Greek text of Romans 12:6–8, and yet the NIV (1984) translation reads “We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve, if it is teaching, let him teach” and so on. The impression is given that it is men who receive spiritual gifts. The NRSV translation more accurately reads “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to use; prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching…”

When women get the impression that they aren’t included in biblical instruction, they may not be challenged to take as much responsibility for their spiritual growth as men do. Not recognizing themselves in the texts, women often self-select out of leadership, defaulting to men.

When this happens, men can develop a false sense of entitlement and privilege that devalues women. They may end up in leadership roles they are not gifted for and carry burdens they were not meant to carry, impacting their own spiritual development. Using a gender-accurate translation encourages women to “step into” discipleship and leadership, and reminds men to “stand down” so that women can be equal contributors in the mission of the church.

3. To ensure good theology

It is often said that your translation is your first commentary, because the language choices that translators make shape our theology, including our ideas about women and men. As Mimi Haddad notes,

“When people hear only male metaphors for God, or masculine language in the church, or Bible translations that always render Greek words such as anthropos as...
A refusal to use gender-accurate language communicates to women that you would rather exclude and offend them than change the way you speak about them; that their sense of identity as a child of God is not important to you, and that your personal sense of comfort is more important than communicating the Bible accurately.

Translations that continue to use male terms as generics for people give the impression that women are somehow “less than” men, and support a bias of inferiority that can become ingrained in our theology and church culture. This subtle bias becomes a distorted lens through which scripture is interpreted, resulting in a theology that mistakenly promotes gender hierarchy as God’s original design.

4. To help fulfill the Great Commission

We are long past the point in history where we can assume that the women in our churches will know they are included when they hear gender-exclusive language. A refusal to use gender-accurate language communicates to women that you would rather exclude and offend them than change the way you speak about them; that their sense of identity as a child of God is not important to you, and that your personal sense of comfort is more important than communicating the Bible accurately. While you may not intend to send these messages, the impact is the same.

Adopting a gender-accurate translation does not mean we are adding or taking away anything from the Bible. It means we are taking seriously our responsibility to accurately reflect the nature and intent of God, who communicates primarily with us through Scripture. Using a gender-accurate translation is a way to make sure everyone is able to see themselves at the center of God’s redemptive story rather than in the margins.

Recently I had the opportunity to view a Bible exhibition on the campus of Azusa Pacific University. As I walked around the display I looked at a Coverdale Bible from 1539, a Tyndale New Testament from 1552, a King James Bible from 1613, and other influential works, like Martin Luther’s commentary on the Psalms. Although these texts were written in English, they were nearly impossible to read, because conventions like grammar, spelling, and word usage have changed over the centuries since they were written.

God’s Word is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but the words we use to communicate that message change from generation to generation. Let’s not hold on to obsolete language forms that are no longer useful in communicating the gospel. As “people of the Book,” let’s give our best efforts to present the truth of the Bible accurately and clearly.

Gail Wallace, PhD, is co-founder of the Junia Project, an adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University, and an adult education consultant. A former MK from Japan, she lives in southern California with her husband of 41 years, and enjoys spending time with her family, especially her five grandkids!

---

6. Ibid.