NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION: INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EDITION

AN IMPORTANT BUT MYSTERIOUS EVENT

David M. Scholer

We live in a time in the USA when American English has changed and is changing "right before our eyes." One of the major changes involves the use of inclusive language with reference to men and women. Dramatic evidence for this change can be seen, for example, in the long entries for "he" and "man" in the new third edition of The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Another witness to the change in American English is Chapter 1 on "Usage" in The New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage, which discusses in detail nonsexist language under the heading of bias-free usage.

In the present article, my usage of "inclusive language" refers to so-called horizontal language concerning men and women; it does not refer to issues of male/female language for God.

For Christians committed to biblical equality the matter of inclusive language is, of course, not simply an issue of contemporary changes in American English. Inclusive language is a theologically and biblically important recognition of the equal worth, dignity and responsibility of all persons created in God's image and called into the one body in Christ Jesus.

In this context, an event of extraordinary importance occurred in 1995: the publication of an Inclusive Language Edition of the enormously popular and valuable New International Version New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. This publication is the work of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation, which had decided in 1992 that the NIV should be made available in an inclusive language edition (Preface, page ix). This achievement needs to be celebrated and described.

At the same time, however, a mystery is introduced. This new edition of the NIV has been published only by Hodder and Stoughton in London, England. There is in the United States a "deafening silence" about this new edition of the NIV from both Zondervan Publishing House and also the copyright holder, the International Bible Society. Why?

Part of what makes the Inclusive Language Edition of the NIV such an important and celebrative event is the conjoining of what is certainly one of the most popular Bible translations among Evangelicals with the contemporary concern for nonsexist inclusive language, an issue which has not, sadly, been warmly engaged by all Evangelicals. In this context, one might even call the work of the NIV Committee on Translation "daring" or avant garde. But why publish it only in London? One would think that the Committee on Translation would be especially eager to share the results of their hard and good work with the Bible-reading public in the U.S. What could possibly be the reasons for not publishing or delaying publication of this new edition of the NIV in the U.S.? The reasons, of course, may well be substantial, but it is the "silence" that remains a mystery.

The dust jacket of the Hodder and Stoughton edition is a festival of celebration for the Inclusive Language Edition of the NIV. There is a long statement of support from John Stott, including the words: "I welcome this inclusive language edition. . . . People of my generation tend to be conservative, but it would be misguided to resist this change." There are also warm and strong testimonials from Joyce Baldwin, R. T. France, John Goldingay and Elaine Storkey. All of these are distinguished voices—and all British.

Of course, this edition of the NIV is not the first inclusive language translation in our time. The major initiation into this phase of contemporary Bible translation came in 1989 with the Revised English Bible, the revised edition of the 1971 New English Bible, and with the 1989 New Revised Standard Version, the revision of earlier editions of the Revised Standard Version. The success of these two translations alone undoubtedly put pressure on the NIV

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Committee on Translation to undertake the appropriate revisions of the NIV.

The inclusive language concern continues to be a reality of many recent translations. Eugene H. Peterson's very popular translation, The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English, uses inclusive language without even commenting on it in his Introduction. The American Bible Society's Contemporary English Version (CEV) uses inclusive language as well. The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version, prepared by a group of six scholars, utilizes inclusive language on a very broad scale of concerns even beyond sexist language. And now, the 1996 New Living Translation, the revision of the immensely popular and Evangelical Living Bible, has also adopted inclusive language. (Its rationale is provided in the Introduction, pages xliii-xlvi.)

Thus, the Inclusive Language Edition of the NIV is not a pioneer work; rather, it joins a contemporary chorus of reality with respect to the intersection of biblical inclusiveness and the nature of current English.

How does the NIV Inclusive Language Edition handle translations related to the inclusion of men and women? In the Preface (pages ix-x), the Committee on Translation states that, in those cases in which translations traditionally use “man” for what in the original text clearly meant to include both men and women, “it has become increasingly necessary to have a translation that makes it clear that women and men are both included” (page ix). The Committee on Translation makes it clear that gender-specific language for God, angels and demons is not changed. Further, it was decided to keep the feminine gender for cities, states and nations. Finally, texts whose point depended on gender specificity would remain unchanged. However, all expressions in the male gender in the former NIV which refer, in fact, to both men and women (such as “brother,” “man,” “he,” and the like) would now be rendered in an inclusive way. There would be every attempt to avoid awkward phrasing (e.g., humankind), and in some cases “...the plural might be substituted for the singular and the second person for the third person” (page ix). However, singular subjects (e.g., whoever) only rarely would be followed by plural pronouns.

Thus, in a way similar to many of the other contemporary versions, “brother(s)” is usually rendered “brother(s) and sisther(s).” Interestingly, in Acts 15:1, in which “brothers” may well be gender-specific (so left in the REB and the NRSV), the Inclusive NIV translates “believers.”

Other examples of inclusive translation, which illustrate the types of changes made, include:

I will make you fishers of men and women. (Matthew 4:19)

The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

Blessed are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked... (Psalm 1:1)

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

We ought to examine ourselves before we eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1 Corinthians 11:28)

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give... (2 Corinthians 9:7)

One of the most significant changes made, in my judgment, from the original NIV in the Inclusive NIV is the rendering of "Junia" in Romans 16:7 (instead of "Junias" in the NIV). Junias is a male name, but completely unattested in the Greco-Roman world. Junia is a female name, and it is certainly the correct rendering for this text. The name is Junia also in the REB, the NRSV, the New Living Translation and others. With that correction, Romans 16:7 attests to a woman who was an apostle, which is a very significant item in the contemporary discussion about the empowerment of women for authoritative ministry.

We should be thankful for the NIV Inclusive Language Edition: it is a great advantage to have a highly respected and widely used NIV translation (of the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs) now available in inclusive-language English. This translation is, in short, a blessing for and a gift to the Church and its ministry; we should use it often. We should also pray and lend our support for the appearance and ready availability of this edition of the NIV in the U.S. as soon as possible.

3 Here I could call attention to the just published second volume of Paul Jowett's theology (edited, completed and with sermons by Margarette Shuster), Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human: A Neo-Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1996). Chapter IV "The Image and Sexual Polarity: 'Male and Female He Created Them'" is a very helpful and important statement from a theologian long involved in the cause of biblical equality for men and women.
4 Located at 1820 Jet Stream Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80921.
9 Victor Roland Gold; Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr.; Sharon H. Ringe; Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite; Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr.; and Barbara A. Withers.
10 Wheaton: Tyndale House.