



THE INCLUSIVE NIV SITUATION

REFLECTIONS A YEAR LATER

David M. Scholer

A year ago in this journal I wrote: "We should be thankful for the NIV Inclusive Language Edition.... This translation is... a blessing for and a gift to the Church and its ministry.... 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."¹

I am still thankful—more thankful than I knew—both for the work of the NIV Committee on Translation and for the publication of the NIV Inclusive Language Edition (NIVI) by Hodder & Stoughton in the U.K. The NIVI remains a gift to the Church.

I was so pleased to receive a letter in January 1997, in direct response to my *Priscilla Papers* article, from Lars B. Dunberg, President of the International Bible Society [IBS], which holds the copyright for the NIV and the NIVI. Lars Dunberg said in his letter: "Zondervan and IBS will publish an inclusive version of the NIV in the American market." He went on to say that it was still being debated when to publish this version, but that it would be by the year 2000.² This was indeed good news.

The good news did not last. The tragic story of disappointing events that led to the May 27, 1997 news release from the International Bible Society, which reversed Lars Dunberg's promise and cancelled the planned U.S. publication of the work of the Committee on Bible Translation, is relatively well-known. The IBS, the release stated, "...announced today that it will forego all plans to develop a revised edition of the NIV.... IBS has abandoned all plans for gender-related changes in future editions of the New International Version (NIV)." Although not all the events can be detailed here, it should be noted that the

magazine *World*, beginning with its March 29, 1997 issue, which called the NIVI "the Stealth Bible," led a critique of this translation, calling it "gender neutral." Eventually, there was a meeting of various persons and groups at Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado. This included leaders from *World* magazine, Focus on the Family, and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, among others. This group, made up of persons who, with virtual unanimity, oppose the equal partnership of men and women in all activities and offices of the ministries of the Church and the Gospel, adopted guidelines for the translation of gender-related language in the Bible. It was the pressure generated by *World* and this coalition, largely related to Focus on the Family and the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and their supporters, that pushed Lars Dunberg and the IBS to reverse its own work, plans and promises.³

The discussions and publications of articles, letters and memoranda since May 27 have been legion. Wherever I travel in evangelical circles, this is an issue people want to discuss. For me, for Christians for Biblical Equality, for *Priscilla Papers*, and for countless other evangelical persons and groups with whom I speak and correspond, the "death" of the NIVI and the efforts and events that led to that "death" are a travesty. According to *Christianity Today*, my first article on this matter in *Priscilla Papers* a year ago is what prompted *World* magazine to begin the "campaign" that led to this action.⁴ It is a "credit" neither *Priscilla Papers* nor I cherish; we wanted to celebrate the NIVI and never dreamed—never envisioned the nightmare—of what did eventually happen.

But the many evangelicals who desire a contemporary, powerful and inclusive-language NIV should abandon neither their hope nor their prayers. It is difficult to believe that the greatness of the NIV will be lost and buried by the refusal to continue to do *precisely what the NIV set out to do in the first place in 1978*—produce a genuinely faithful English translation in contemporary, readable and usable English!

David M. Scholer, Professor of New Testament and Associate Dean of the Center for Advanced Theological Studies, School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, is a long time and active member of CBE. He has taught, lectured and published on women in the New Testament for over a quarter century.

As I reflect on what has happened during this year, I would like to offer eight observations, which I trust will contribute even in some small way to the reversal of the unfortunate action of the IBS.

1. THE NATURE OF TRANSLATION

All translation is done with the recognition that lexical and grammatical realities do not necessarily translate one-for-one. That is why completely literal “translations” are not really translations at all. Further, all translation from one language to another involves various degrees of interpretation. Finally, language changes over time; therefore, in the course of time, new translations are required in the “same” language. Thus, in English translations, for example, it was wise and necessary to move from Wycliffe (14th century) to Tyndale (16th century), to the King James Version (17th century), to the American Standard Version and the many other fine twentieth century English translations of the Bible.

It is in this context of the nature of translation that inclusive language issues should be understood. When, for example, the Apostle Paul addressed believers in one of his churches as *adelphoi* (literally, “brothers”), both male and female believers were meant to be included. How to represent that reality in a late twentieth-century English translation is, to be sure, a discussable issue, but it is hardly a matter of wooden or naive literalism. A decision to translate *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters” is a faithful translation decision—faithful both to the original language and its historical-social context and to contemporary English.⁵

2. THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF THE NIV

The character of the NIV from the beginning was an attempt to combine accuracy and faithfulness to the original languages with idiomatic and contemporary English. Perhaps something of this could be illustrated by what I assume to be a text that creates no special controversies. In Galatians 5:2, Paul wants to make a forceful statement about his argument against the practice of circumcision. It is introduced with the term *ide* (literally, “behold”; so the KJV). The New Revised Standard Version translates this term “Listen!” But, the NIV, more graphically and expansively than other major translations, renders it “Mark my words!”

The methodological commitments and the actual translation practices that produced the original 1978 NIV were what is often called “dynamic equivalence” translation. This is the attempt to state the original biblical expression *both* faithfully *and* in powerful, understandable contemporary English; in such an approach a literal

translation may work, but has no privileged place. Another hallmark of the NIV is its use of contemporary English sentence structure; it does not necessarily adhere to the Hebrew or Greek sentence structures. I believe that these are major reasons why the NIV has been recognized as such an excellent translation and why it has become so broadly loved by so many Christian readers of the Bible.⁶

It should not be at all surprising, then, that it was the International Bible Society’s own NIV Committee on Translation that produced the Inclusive Language Edition of the NIV. The 1978 Preface to the NIV had acknowledged that the work of translation is never done. This is because the quest for accuracy is always a matter of interpretation and because the translation (or receptor) language changes. The transition to inclusive language, as well as other changes that were believed to be better and/or more accurate renderings, were natural outcomes of the very history, philosophy, commitments and genius of the NIV and its very own “gatekeepers,” the Committee on Translation.

3. THE MOTIVATIONS FOR MOVING TO INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

The charge has often been made in this past year that the NIVI was motivated by and a capitulation to a secular, sometimes radical and “anti-Christian” feminist movement that began just prior to the mid-1960s in the U.S. This charge is absurd and would be almost laughable, were it not for the persistence and vehemence with which it is made. The charge is usually made within the rhetorical context of proclaiming faithful adherence to biblical authority (perceived as over against the so-called pernicious influences of modern feminism).

It strikes me as ludicrous to think of the IBS NIV Committee on Translation (as a group, primarily conservative evangelical men) as being covert “secular feminists” or as persons who “sold out” to such a perspective, either consciously or unconsciously.

No, the Committee on Bible Translation was motivated by the interpretive and translational struggle inherent in the transition from a faithful understanding of biblical texts *in their own contexts* to the actual and changing character of late twentieth century American (and other forms of) English.⁷ Thus, translations such as “brother and sister” (previously “brother” in the NIV), the use of “person” (previously “man”) and the use of plurals for singulars (e.g., 1 Cor 11:28) and second person for third person pronouns (e.g., 2 Cor 9:7) are *not* capitulations to any secular agenda; rather *they are attempts to provide faithful, accurate translations that respect both the authority and historical reality of the biblical texts and the need to communicate in meaningful, contemporary English.* These are the standard commitments of good

translation philosophy in the “dynamic equivalent” tradition and are completely consistent with the history of the NIV and its Committee on Translation.

4. THE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “GENDER NEUTRAL” AND “INCLUSIVE” LANGUAGE

The opponents of the NIVI are quite persistent, irresponsibly so, in labeling the language of this NIV edition as “gender neutral.” Such labeling allows them to charge that this language change leads inevitably to the elimination of gender (by which is meant elimination of distinct male and female sexual identity). This perverse interpretation then allows them to understand the language shift as catering to a “secular feminist agenda.”

The identification of these English language changes in the NIVI as “gender neutral” is unfair, irresponsible, even bordering on a “cheap shot” or outright distortion. In fact, the language of “brother and sister” or the use of “they” or “you” (to avoid exclusive uses of “he” and “him”) is *explicitly* designed to include *both* male *and* female, which is the very opposite of neutralizing gender or sexual identity! The use of *inclusive* language is the attempt to render in contemporary English the historical reality of both men and women as the explicit and intended referents in various biblical texts.

Simply put, the title of the revised NIV is explicitly accurate: Inclusive Language Edition. The attempt to identify this enterprise as an example of “gender neutral” language is dishonest and becomes a means of subverting the whole debate, and confuses the understanding of good Christian people. Sadly, these tactics are being employed by evangelical scholars who ought to know better.

5. THE DEEPER AND ACTUAL ISSUE BEHIND THE NIV LANGUAGE DEBATE

My comments here constitute my own hypothesis, but the circumstantial evidence of the last year—and a much longer acquaintance with many of the persons involved—points strongly in one direction. It is not accidental that virtually all of those who have led the “charge” against the NIVI are persons who are known for their opposition to the *full* participation of women in all forms of church ministry (generally this involves excluding women from ordination, from certain offices [e.g., elder] and from authoritative teaching of men).

Although I think those who oppose the use of inclusive language in Bible translations have serious intellectual and theological commitments that undergird this opposition, the issue which provides the enormous energy, relentless zeal and political pressure of their “movement” is far deeper. It is rooted in a common understanding of the Bible and

the world that, for all its affirmations of the spiritual equality of men and women, does—in fact—exclude women, just because they *are* women, from full participation in the Church and all of its ministries. Their opposition reflects what I (not they) see as an actual fear of sexual equality.

I am reminded of a statement made by John Woodhouse of Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia, in a debate we had in 1985. John Woodhouse (not a participant in the current NIV debate to my knowledge) said: “Dr. Scholer, if you are correct [referring to equal participation of men and women in ministry] in twenty years the world will have returned to barbarism.”⁸ Perhaps no one in the current movement that put to death the NIVI would want to claim directly John Woodhouse’s statement, but his remark illustrates clearly what I perceive, hear and feel constantly from those who oppose and speak out against the NIV Inclusive Language Edition. I think such fear is rooted in the perceived personal threat for some men of sharing power with women as colleagues.

6. THE ALLEGED ISSUE OF TRUST

To me, one of the more disturbing aspects of the travesty of the “death” of the revised NIV is the oft-made charge that one cannot trust this version (or other inclusive language Bible translations, such as the New Living Translation, the New Revised Standard Version or the Contemporary English Version).

A strong example of this misguided trust issue is found in the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’s two-page advertisement in the October 27, 1997 issue of *Christianity Today* (pp. 14-15). The largest print in the ad runs across the top of the two pages and says: “Can I Still Trust My Bible?” The opening text of the ad continues: “In recent controversies over so-called ‘gender-neutral’ [that unfair term again] Bibles, Christians have begun to wonder which Bibles they can trust to translate gender-related language accurately.” Later the ad reads: “If you want to know what Bible translations you can trust....” This is followed by advising people to ask their Christian bookstores and pastors, and then gives a (partial) list of translations one can purportedly trust (NIV, NASB, RSV, KJV, NKJV).

Part of what is disturbing in this ad is the blurring of specific trust on issues of gender-related language and the use of general trust language about the Bible. This blurring feeds off the fear mentioned in the previous section. It raises questions that Christians had not previously found disturbing—until someone insinuated that Bibles using inclusive language should not be trusted. Plant the seed of doubt leading to the specter of an “untrustworthy Bible”, and it is not difficult to arouse fear and opposition in many Christian circles.

The trust issue is an unfair and dishonest one. The major inclusive-language Bibles previously mentioned can certainly be trusted as genuine and useful attempts to render faithfully and powerfully the written Word of God into readable and usable contemporary English. To suggest (it is never said directly) that such Bibles are untrustworthy is a form of name-calling and “guilt by association.” This tactic breeds unwarranted suspicion and distrust, and erodes confidence in the wholesome character of most English Bible translations and their ministries to the Church and the broader public. Recalling what was said in the first section on the nature of translation, it should be recognized that contemporary English translations which adopt inclusive language are seeking to address a genuine issue of communication and faithful interpretation. Using inclusive language to recognize both men and women in biblical texts, and certainly in the NIV Inclusive Language Edition, in no way threatens any commitment to the infallibility and authority of the Bible.

7. MISLEADING ANALOGIES AND FALSE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST INCLUSIVE-LANGUAGE BIBLES

I find the last paragraph of Wayne Grudem’s article in the October 27, 1997 Christianity Today especially disturbing.⁹ He notes that “the words of Scripture are not ours to tamper with as we please,” which is certainly an unwarranted insinuation against inclusive-language Bibles. But, he then likens the inclusive-language translations to two well-known historical examples of biblical distortion: the second-century “heretic” Marcion and the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ own translation of the Bible.

These comparisons are so unfair and insidious that I hardly know what to say. It is historically and theologically inaccurate and misleading to a very significant degree to liken contemporary inclusive-language Bible translations to the massive distortions of Marcion (who rejected the Old Testament, some of the Gospels and even parts of Paul) and also to the clearly theologically-influenced translations in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ version of the Bible. These comparisons are simply irresponsible—and they come from a learned seminary professor and leader in various evangelical organizations.

It is perhaps in this context that I could comment on the (mis)use of my Priscilla Papers article of a year ago on the Web site for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (of which Wayne Grudem is President).¹⁰ First, the two pages of the article appear, but approximately one-half of the article is blocked out, so that it cannot be read. This borders on a type of misrepresentation and control. Second, at one point the CBMW Web page “editor” has added a side-bar which reads: “Note Scholer’s description of the NIV Committee on Translation’s work

on the Inclusive Language Edition as ‘daring’ or ‘avant garde’.” This takes my words out of context. What I said was that for evangelicals who have not engaged the issue of nonsexist inclusive language, “one might even call” the inclusive NIV daring or avant garde. It is, of course, a small point. But the misrepresentation is, I fear, part of a pattern among those who oppose the inclusive edition of the NIV.

8. MY FINAL APPEAL AND THE FUTURE OF THE NIV

First, I am concerned about the NIV and its future life and use in the Church. It is not the only choice we have; I currently use the New Revised Standard Version as my public teaching and preaching English Bible. But the NIV is an excellent translation; it deserves a long life throughout the entire Church. The “shelving” of the inclusive language edition of the NIV by the IBS is a tragedy and a great loss.

It is quite peculiar and puzzling, further, that the energies of World magazine, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and Focus on the Family were directed so particularly at the inclusive language NIV. Although persons such as Wayne Grudem are now noting other translations, nevertheless major publications such as the New Revised Standard Version, the Contemporary English Version and the New Living Translation—all committed to the use of inclusive language—have enjoyed relative immunity from the type of intense criticism directed at the NIV.

I hope and pray that the IBS will return to its original commitment (i.e., the work *already done by its own Committee on Translation*) and go forward with a new version of the NIV for the U.S. that includes the inclusive language changes already in place and whatever other changes the Committee on Translation deems wise. (In my earlier article I pointed out that one such correction had already been made: the use of Junia [a female name] in Romans 16:7). Persons like myself and journals like Priscilla Papers are not going to attempt to call a “summit” meeting in Colorado Springs or elsewhere. We appeal, however, to all those within various evangelical communities and traditions who support an inclusive-language NIV to make their calm voices of care and support known to the IBS (and to Zondervan Publishing House, the publisher of the NIV).

Second, the Church, entrusted with the powerful Gospel of Jesus Christ in whom “there is not male and female” (Gal 3:28), simply cannot afford to spend its precious resources on a misguided, ill-informed and divisive debate about a relatively small feature of faithful, late twentieth-century English translations of the Bible. The Church has far more important and difficult tasks that require the best minds, energies and commitments it has to offer to God and the world God loves.

IN BRIEF

Jeffrey Drew Prey

- 1 David M. Scholer, "New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition: An Important but Mysterious Event," Priscilla Papers 10:4 (Fall 1996), 1-2.
- 2 The full text of the letter was published, with Lars Dunberg's explicit permission, in Priscilla Papers 11:1 (Winter 1997), 33. The date was accidentally omitted; his letter was dated January 9, 1997.
- 3 The official Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood report on the May 27 meeting and adopted guidelines can be found in the CBMW News 2:3 (June 1997). Lars Dunberg's "Open Letter" (addressed to Friends and Readers), published as an advertisement in Christianity Today (July 14, 1997), gives his interpretation of events. See also the very useful report by Doug LeBlanc entitled "Hands Off My NIV!" in Christianity Today (June 16, 1997; pages 52-55).
- 4 Christianity Today (June 16, 1997; page 55).
- 5 For a much more detailed discussion of such issues in the context of this particular controversy, see Grant R. Osborne, "Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture? No," Christianity Today (October 27, 1997), 33-38. In the same issue Wayne Grudem writes the "Yes" article (pages 27-32); each also responds to the other (page 39).
- 6 See my review of the NIV New Testament (1973) in the Journal of Biblical Literature 93 (1974), 591-94.
- 7 The examples of the continuation of some uses of the so-called "generic male" expressions, cited by Wayne Grudem (in the Christianity Today and the CBMW News noted above) are relatively inconsequential and certainly do not contradict the reality of the massive gender inclusive changes taking place in American English. See also my Priscilla Papers article of a year ago.
- 8 See my article "Participation in the Issues of Women and Ministry in the New Testament," Perspectives in Religious Studies 15 (1988), 101-08, for a longer discussion of what I perceive to be the deeper issues (the so-called bottom line). I there give the documentation for the John Woodhouse quotation (page 107).
- 9 See note 5. The last paragraph is on page 32.
- 10 www.cbmw.org. I am referring here to what I downloaded on September 22, 1997. I do not know when and for how long this was on the CBMW website.

Perhaps you've heard people say: "If the King James was good enough for St. Paul, then it's good enough for us." Perhaps they didn't know that the King James Version, published in 1611, was not available to St. Paul, who ministered roughly in the time period 35-65 AD!

Unfortunately, many people do not realize that "there is no such thing as translating a book into another language once and for all, for language is a changing thing." As C.S. Lewis argues: "If your son is to have clothes, it is no good buying him a suit once and for all—he will grow out of it and have to be reclothed."

The reason we need to have periodic retranlations of the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts is that language is a living thing, part and parcel of the life and history of a people. Words are full of shades of meaning and associations—which makes it incumbent upon us to engage in periodic retranslation because those shades of meaning and associations are ever-changing. Such retranslation can make it difficult for some of us to give up what has become familiar, even if the familiar is incomprehensible to many of our contemporaries.

This matter of English translation was quite vitriolic when it first surfaced in the Church over 500 years ago. Prior to that, the Scriptures were in Latin and access was effectively limited to the clergy. It was thought that the Scriptures were "too sacred" to be read by the laity. Battles were fought and people were even burned at the stake for their efforts to render the Bible in the vernacular.

The Reformation did much to bring about change, eventually resulting in the King James Version. Various revisions of that version have been offered over the centuries, as well as a profusion of new English translations and paraphrases. Discovery of more reliable ancient documents led to some of these revisions; naturally occurring changes of common speech led to others. The result for us is at times a bewildering selection of translations, versions, and choices. All of them, to a certain extent, bear the theological impulse of the person or group that produced them. All of them have value in that they seek to make God's word available and accessible.

The history of the translation of the Bible is a fascinating one. Let us be grateful that we have the freedom to choose and the Word at hand.

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at 122 West Franklin Avenue, Suite 218, Minneapolis, MN 55404.

A graduate of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (D.Min.), Dr. Prey is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Oyster Bay, New York.