

# GOOD NEWS FOR ALL PEOPLE

Catherine Clark Kroeger

One of my seminary students was leading a group of eight-year-olds at Vacation Bible School. The Scripture portion was John 15:5, a text in which the Greek used an indefinite pronoun, “anyone,” although it had been rendered as “man” in the New International Version of the Bible. Thus the children read:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

In the ensuing discussion, a question was raised as to whether this Scripture applied to everyone or only to men. Every single child said the text was directed *expressly* to men and not to women.

Upon hearing my recital of this story, my eight-year-old granddaughter volunteered the information that “man” and “he” meant male in regular school but could mean both genders in Sunday School! Her Sunday School, considered a flagship of Christian education in our denomination, is to be congratulated. But what of the children who do not have the benefit of such a Sunday School? Is the Bible only for those schooled in the niceties of evangelical phraseology? Jesus said, “Let the little ones come unto me, and do not obstruct them (Mt 19:14).”

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE BIBLE

A major biblical theme is the universality of the Gospel. The angels proclaimed “great joy which shall be to all people,” while Jesus told his disciples to bring the Gospel to “all creation” (Mk 16:15). Salvation is to be made known to the ends of the earth. The joyous news is that *whosoever will* may come and that *any* who wish may drink of the waters of life. The Apostle Paul was quite specific that “the man is not without the woman, nor the woman without the man in the Lord” (1 Cor 11:11-12).

From its opening pages, the Bible carefully stipulates the inclusion of women. In Genesis 5:1-2 we read:

When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them “man” [*adam*].

As the NIV Study Bible correctly notes, “Man” [*adam*] clearly denotes both genders in Genesis 3:22-24, as well as in many other places in the Scriptures. Other male terminology often denotes inclusivity, especially in the plural. Even the King James Version renders *banim* (literally “sons”) as the “children” of Israel. *Adelphoi*, the New Testament word for siblings, includes both male and female when used in the plural. In the singular, however, it is necessary to say “brother or sister.” Examples of this may be found in 1 Corinthians 7:15<sup>1</sup> and James 2:15.

## CLARIFYING THE BIBLE'S MESSAGE TO ALL PEOPLE IN TODAY'S WORLD

How distressing to discover that some of those who have taken on the task of rendering the Bible into English wish to limit the universality of the Gospel. There is a move to restrict the inclusivity of the original message, even if appropriate revision may more accurately represent the intention of the biblical author. Some are refusing to use indefinite pronouns (anyone, somebody, people, etc.) even when such indefinite pronouns appear in the *original* texts! Masculine vocabulary such as “man,” “he,” and “brothers” is being used as it was in a bygone era when these words were understood to include persons of both genders. For example, seventeenth-century poet John Donne, in telling of Eden's original couple, speaks of “two men” in the garden. But in the ensuing centuries our language has become more precise about gender, although this has not always been recognized in Christian communities of faith.

In addition, we must bear in mind that many readers do not have English as their first language. Some are immigrants; many more are residents of other lands who are increasingly using our mother tongue in commercial, scientific, technical, diplomatic, cultural and academic situations.

Our Laotian foster son was tremendously puzzled when he first met the Bible by way of the King James Version. A Laotian translation helped correct many of his misconceptions and later opened the way for him to read a simplified English version.

Thus a guideline supplied by a major evangelical translation agency (Wycliffe) to their trainees calls for a translation “in which the message that is communicated is as close as we can get to what we determine is the message that the original writer wanted to convey.”<sup>2</sup> The instructions also include the directive that “the translation should make the message easy to understand. There should be no phrases which are confusing or which could be misunderstood.”

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Founding President of CBE, Dr. Kroeger is Adjunct Professor at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary and author of *I Suffer Not a Woman* (Baker, 1992).

Surely these instructions are in the spirit of the New Testament writers who used the trade language of the Mediterranean world (*koine* or mongrelized Greek) in order to reach as broad an audience as possible.

Admittedly, some of us who were raised on King James English still find that version the most beautiful, but it is not the most meaningful for rising generations. As language changes, translations must be revised in order to be comprehensible to new audiences seeking to know God's Word.

For grammar does indeed change. How horrified my old high school English teacher would be at the termination of sentences with a preposition and the splitting of infinitives, even in prestigious journals! But even in the days of King James, certain accommodations had already been made between grammatical structures in the biblical texts and the English translation. Participles, for instance, occur far more frequently in the Greek New Testament than any English reader would imagine. A more accurate understanding of the ancient writer's actual intent is made by rendering many of these participles as indicatives. This is commonplace in translation.

Currently there is real questioning as to whether singulars may be rendered as plurals in order to demonstrate inclusivity. Some involved in the debate refuse to place a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent, i.e. "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation." Nevertheless, the precedent for such a practice in written English reaches back to the sixteenth century!

How can the Bible's message be put into a lucid form of communication for the contemporary reader? Surely not by retaining gender differentiations that were not intended by the biblical author! If the English language has changed, then we must make God's Word available in the new form. If "man," "he," and "his" no longer denote persons of both genders, then we must make sure that the original universality of God's expression is clearly understood. The real consideration is whether the language will enable men and women to understand that the message is addressed to *both*. God's message must be conveyed to *every* living creature.

#### *RENDERING THE BIBLE RELEVANT & ACCESSIBLE*

I have a son who is a Bible translator, a man whose first priority is to get God's message across. He has sometimes lived with his family in arduous conditions—without electricity, running water, refrigeration or communication. His purpose is to make the Scriptures accessible to individuals who have no Bible in their own language. In the countries where he works, the men frequently know enough of the trade language to communicate in the marketplace, but it is the women who will never understand the Gospel unless it is put into their mother tongue. It is for them that so many missionaries

invest years of their lives. Why are aboriginal women given an opportunity that is denied to some women in evangelical American churches?

#### *BIBLICAL PRECEDENT*

Biblical precedent demands that women as well as men be accorded the opportunity not only to hear the Word of God but also to have it made comprehensible to them. One such incident occurred after the return from the Babylonian exile. The captives who had dwelt in a strange land and foreign culture were at last home. Women had joined in the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Neh 3:12) and were a basic part of the faith community. When the groundwork was being laid for the establishment of a renewed society, Scripture records:

Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.... The Levites read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.... Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them (Neh 8:2-12).

There is a debate as to whether the "making clear" supplied by the Levites constituted an explanation of the text or a translation of the Hebrew into the more common Aramaic language of the people. Two things become evident: first, that the population returning from Babylonia needed help in order to understand the centuries-old Hebrew text. Second, a major objective was to provide women with a comprehension of the Scriptures that might be applied to their own hearts. Only when there was a thorough-going understanding of the ancient texts did the people, both men and women, respond with joy and thanksgiving.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit enabled believers to tell the acts of God to each person present in his or her mother tongue. Although they were all devout Jews, they had gathered from many districts, and the message had to be given in tongues other than Hebrew. This was the work of the Holy Spirit, and none can deny the need or validity of communicating the message in a form that makes it accessible. Again the presence and involvement of women is directly specified (Acts 2:17-18). Thus both the re-establishment of a believing society in Israel and the establishment of the Church are introduced with the giving of God's Word to women and men alike, in language that can be readily comprehended by a new generation.

We are often told that the first occurrence of a theme in biblical history is one that has particular importance and

deserves serious consideration. Therefore, one cannot be faithful to the biblical mandate without also acknowledging the right of women to receive and share the Word of God. The female adherents of the great biblical scholar, Jerome, insisted upon and assisted him with the world's most famous and widely used translation of the Bible, the Latin Vulgate. By the Fourth Century, ordinary people (especially women) no longer understood the original biblical languages, thus the necessity for a Bible in the common (vulgar) language. The coterie of Christian women who had showered the poor and needy with countless works of love made sure that the message of love was available in the people's own tongue.

Then came the efforts of Wycliffe, Tyndale, and others to make the Bible intelligible even to plowboys. Frequently the translators paid for their efforts with their own lives.

The Pilgrims refused to use the so-called Coverdale Bible because its use was forbidden to "servants, laborers and housewives." Only a translation that was for all people was acceptable to them. Yet, ironically, Anne Hutchison drew the ire of the Pilgrim Fathers by insisting on the right of women to read and study the Scriptures.

Another woman, Helen Barrett Montgomery, produced one of the very earliest New Testaments in modern speech.

As each of these time-honored versions became antiquated, new ones had to keep pace with our ever-changing language. The need continues for constant revisions, and these should not be blocked, nor can they be blocked, any more than the works of God's saints in ages past.

#### FAITHFULNESS TO THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE

We cannot uphold a basic tenet of the Gospel if we do not insist that the language of Scripture be consistent with the universality of the Gospel message. The objective of multitudes of Bible translators has been to render the message of Scripture in a form that will be most accessible to readers and also as faithful as possible to the original text. Evangelicals feel that the authority lies within the text; thus the need is to know what Scriptures actually say rather than what we would like them to say. Popular pressure is therefore a very poor criterion on which to make decisions about Bible translations. Scripture speaks of "those who suppress the truth in injustice" (Rom 1:18) and also of "handling the Word of God deceitfully" (2 Cor 4:2). Since we believe the Bible is inspired by God, it is incumbent on all Christians to seek an understanding of the text that lies closest to the expression and intent of the original author who wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Each translator will render any given passage a little differently, yet a conscientious scholar will take care never to make women feel excluded in a way that was never intended by the writers of Scripture. An honest rendering must convey the good news that both men *and* women are included and *both* are objects of God's love and grace.

#### THE WOMEN BESIDE THE ROAD

As our Saviour carried his cross to Calvary, a great crowd of women lined his path and lamented the fate that was to be his. In the face of his own death, Jesus paused to address these faithful female followers and to express concern for what they would experience. He spoke of those who must flee during pregnancy, or with a nursing child in their arms. The coming destruction of Jerusalem would render them its most vulnerable victims. Jesus understood their vulnerability and displayed an intense empathy for the plight of women.

It seems to me that today some well-intentioned followers of the Master have ignored this vulnerability of women who still stand beside the road. The manner of handling the NIV controversy cannot fail to make faithful women feel even more side-lined, marginalized, and disenfranchised. Unfortunately, ill-advised terms and a rhetoric have been employed that can only wound, depress and alienate.

An adversary of the NIVI wrote an article entitled "Bible Translation as Battleground."<sup>3</sup> Yes, our Saviour warned women of a coming battle and expressed profound compassion for the wounds and perils they would suffer. The military analogy of this title leads women to feel that they are indeed under attack, and they cannot fail to feel the hostility. Another opponent declared, "You don't compromise Scripture *just to make women feel included.*"<sup>4</sup> How can such language fail to make them feel excluded? Women do not ask for compromise but for faithfulness to the words of a Saviour who called them to his side, who chose them to be the first witnesses of his resurrection. Women still are hungry to know that the Bible belongs to them and is relevant to their needs and experiences.

Christians have often left women standing on the side of the road, and many have been driven away by the callous treatment they received. Others bear deep wounds and bitter resentment. Do opponents of *biblically-faithful* inclusive language care about the further spiritual, emotional and psychological damage inflicted in the wake of this sorry episode? Where is the grace that was demonstrated by the Man of Calvary to those women who lined his way?

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1 In the first case, even though the Greek uses the masculine and feminine forms of "brother," the NIV renders it "a believing man or woman."

2 John Beekman, Questions and Answers On: The Wycliffe Approach to Translations, p. 3.

3 John Piper, "Bible Translation as Battleground: Problems in Gender Changes from the New International Version to the New International Version Inclusive Language Edition." Touchstone 10.3, Summer 1997, pp. 40-41.

4 Yonat Shimron, Raleigh News and Observer, Saturday, May 21, 1997.