

# The Importance of Gender-Inclusive Language

*People are sometimes unable to grasp fully the message of Christ's love when we use language that doesn't communicate.*

JULIA ALFORD AND DAVID MOSTOL

**W**E AS CHRISTIANS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO DO OUR utmost to reach the world for Christ. This mission must be fulfilled through communication, and much of our communication is surely accomplished through language. That is the central issue of the gender-inclusive translation debate. What language is most effective in communicating the true meaning of Scripture? It is the language of the people with whom we want to communicate. We are at a point today where traditional Bible translations, with their male-oriented language, seem to many to be outdated.

It is apparent that our contemporary English-speaking culture has changed to the extent that many words no longer mean what they used to. The word *man*, for example, is no longer always understood as a generic term for both male and female. According to Dr. Herbert Wolf of the Bible and Theology Department at Wheaton College and a member of the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) of the NIV, the definition of gender-inclusive language is that if "a term is generic in its intent, it should be translated in a generic way." When a term such as *man* was used in Scripture to mean both men and women, it is generic. Yet, because of the way in which the language is changing, words such as *men* are no longer understood by the common public in the same generic sense. So, in order to maintain their generic form, these words need to be translated as *men and women*, *people*, *brothers and sisters*, and so on.

It should be noted that the CBT has no intention of interpreting any depictions of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit in a generic sense. In other words, God will not be called "mother," and Christ will not be called "daughter."

**Julia's personal experience:** Despite the argument that our language is constantly changing, many would claim that the word *man* and other similar words are sufficiently generic terms for Bible translation. My own experience refutes this, however. I recall many times from my childhood when I read through Scripture in tears of anger and frustration, finding all of the verses that seemed to claim that Paul wrote only to men. It was impossible for me to avoid the frequency of the mention of God's love to men, while women appeared to me to be nowhere in sight. Because of this, I began to think there was no place for the daughters of God—or at least, we were less important. After all, by comparison, we were hardly ever mentioned. I had to tell myself constantly that God *did* really love me as much as he loves men

**David's experience:** Julia's experience affected me as a man in a formative way. Before I spoke with her I had expended little thought on the matter of gender-inclusive language. I read *man* and *men* as applying to me and my life. I had little difficulty doing so because the nouns were in my gender. But as I listened to Julia relate her frustration in reading the Scriptures and finding them to be empty for herself, I was struck by the injustice that the simple misuse of outdated language had provoked in her life. I felt that if Julia's life had been so negatively affected, surely other women's lives had been as well.

I also began to develop a distaste for the thought of how many Christian, and even non-Christian women, would understand the Bible. And I began to wonder about my sisters and missed their fellowship on the pages of Scripture as I read the Bible as I thought Julia might. The Bible is a book of amazing power and love, but it is impossible to read it in its fullness if the sense of the language no longer means what it once did. It could too easily be perceived as a sexist book written about men and for men if the present language is left unchanged. That is not the Bible I read. I was horrified that the Scriptures I loved so much could be so abused by outdated language. So I determined that I should help this woman who had given me the insight to communicate this to others. I felt that if an article was written in a reasonable and loving way people (especially men) would be sensitive to the injustice



that I perceived.

**U**nfortunately, Julia's experience is not unique. "I have talked with and heard of many women who have had the same struggles," she says. "We constantly ask ourselves, and we also challenge men with this question: How can the word *man* also mean *woman*, when the word *woman* could never mean *man*?"

The experience of one woman, then, is an argument that supports the idea that Scripture, if not properly translated, can be destructive to Christianity. When gender-inclusive language is used in translation with an educated and faithful basis in Scripture, however, it becomes a positive force for evangelism.

First of all, gender-inclusive translations use English pronouns such as *you*, *they*, *those*, and so on in place of masculine pronouns. Some feel that using plural forms may take away or obscure the individuality of Christ's love. However, according to Dr. Wolf, the accuracy of translation does not suffer; in some cases, the accuracy is actually

enhanced and improved because it gives a more honest reflection of the original text.

During a debate between Wayne Grudem and Kenneth Barker concerning the translation of John 14:23 ("Jesus answered him, 'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'" [RSV]), Barker said, "[T]he singular in John 14:23 is clearly generic; therefore, faithful, accurate translation demands that we use the plural form." He goes on to say that some readers would be repulsed by a translation that uses a masculine pronoun because they will find it to be exclusive.<sup>1</sup> The gender-inclusive translation is more clearly understood by its audience, therefore, without sacrificing the true meaning of the text. In fact, plural forms of pronouns are often understood elsewhere in Scripture to have individual as well as plural connotations. We should not limit ourselves by thinking people will be unable to grasp the individuality of Christ's love by the use of plural, rather than singular, pronouns

**T**he second point about translation is the most crucial. Those who oppose gender-inclusive language insist that changing—contemporizing—a Bible translation must not be taken lightly. They fear that, in changing the translation, some basic doctrines may be impaired. This is a just and reasonable fear, and we should always approach translation with apprehension and reverence for God's

1. Carson, D.A., *The Inclusive Language Debate*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998, 38.

word in our hearts. Fear, however, is itself dangerous when we idolize the false god of language over and above what is truly important: reaching the lost for Christ.

In other words, people both within and outside the church are sometimes unable to understand our Scriptures and will not fully grasp the message of Christ's love. By placing our current language translations above the original text and what it is trying to say to us, we are making it into a god. This is the same difficulty that translators have faced for hundreds of years. When the Bible was translated from Latin to the vernacular of the day, it struck fear in people's hearts—because it meant change. Was this change bad? Obviously not; it was an important piece in the ongoing expansion of Christ's kingdom.

If, then, we are to reach all cultures for Christ, we must be able to communicate with those cultures. Men and women are both created in the image of God; he loves them equally, and Christ died for them equally. We have a right as God's children to know this without a doubt. The culture that we are evangelizing must know, understand, and believe this. ■



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## Books Mentioned in This Issue

These may be purchased through CBE's Book Service  
or online Book Store  
(Web address: [www.CBEInternational.org](http://www.CBEInternational.org))

- ◆ Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*. Baker Books, 1997.
- ◆ *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism*, 1994, reprinted Wipf & Stock (see pp. 8, 9).
- ◆ Carson, D. A., *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism*. Baker Books, 1998 (see p. 20).
- ◆ Deen, Edith, *All of the Women of the Bible*. Harper and Bros., 1955 (see p. 17).
- ◆ Spencer, Aida Besançon, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called*

- to Ministry*. Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1985 (see p. 17).
- ◆ Keener, Craig S., *Paul, Women and Wives*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1992 (see p. 17).

### Other Books by Authors in This Issue:

- ◆ Groothuis, Rebecca M., *The Feminist Bogeywoman: Questions and Answers About Evangelical Feminism*. Baker Books, 1995.
- ◆ Groothuis, Rebecca M., *Spirituality, Sexuality, and Feminist Religion*.