Editor’s note: The question of whether to translate the Bible so that its inclusive message is perfectly clear is not new. The article here by Bruce Kilmer was first published in the Winter 1999/2000 issue of Integrity magazine (no longer published); the author’s discussion of inclusive language is more relevant now than ever.

Kilmer has updated his original article to include the publication this past year of Today’s New International Version (TNIV).

“If any man come to me . . .” (Luke 14:26; KJV);
“For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant . . .” (2 Cor. 1:8; KJV);
“That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (Eph. 3:16; KJV);
“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!” (Phil. 3:1; NIV);
“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God . . .” (John 1:12; KJV);
“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14; KJV);
“God of Our Fathers”
“Good Christian Men, Rejoice”

* * *

All Things to All People

Why shouldn’t we accurately translate the Bible so it is clear in contexts that include both men and women?

J. BRUCE KILMER

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO KNOW THE FULL EFFECT ON GIRLS and women of a lifetime of hearing masculine nouns and pronouns in contexts and situations that were supposed to include all people and persons. The best I can do is compare it to situations I have experienced when language used did not apply to me or excluded me—such as in school when I knew I wasn’t included in a certain group, or in a foreign country when I knew I was not included in an invitation; or in a gathering of sectarian church members where I knew I was no longer accepted as one of the “real Christians.”

Language does affect our thinking and our sense of who we are. Because both men and women have been conditioned to accept noninclusive language—even deprecating language—we may be unaware of the effects of a lifetime of such language on our psyche. Noninclusive language can make women feel less responsible so that they may leave things up to the men in areas of leadership, discipleship, or even in spiritual matters altogether.

Noninclusive language and actions can cause a lack of esteem for women, such as when a young girl once asked her mom during Communion, “Why are men better than women?” When the mom asked her daughter what made her think that, the daughter replied: “Because women are translated using the word charity, but today such a translation does not communicate the meaning of this passage about love. Similarly today, when both men and women are being referred to, the words person, human being, he and she, and brothers and sisters communicate better than the words man, he, and brethren.
Scripture distortion or clearer translations?

In translating, the goal is to find the words that convey the meaning, not the form, of the passage being translated. Often a literal translation will not convey the meaning. For example, the Spanish expression Como se llama? may “literally” be translated “how are you called?” but in most contexts it means (in good English), “What is your name?”

Linguistically uninformed pronouncements, scare tactics, and negative campaigns have been used to try to stop people from using recent inclusive translations of the Bible. Articles have been written claiming that inclusive translations are “stealth Bibles” that “tamper with the Word of God.”

A little history

In 1997 the International Bible Society (IBS) and Zondervan Publishing House had plans to publish a gender-inclusive version of the New International Version (NIV) in the United States. Critics of this translation became so alarmed that they put pressure on IBS and Zondervan to cancel their plans to publish the NIV Inclusive-Language Edition (NIvI). These critics used alarmist articles, letters, and threats to boycott IBS and Zondervan if they went through with their plans. IBS succumbed to the pressure and announced, the day before a meeting arranged by James Dobson of Focus on the Family to increase the pressure, that it would forgo its plans to publish the NIVI in the United States. Today the NIVI can be purchased only from England; (it is available from CBE’s Book Service).

The “Dobson meeting,” which included representatives from IBS, the New International Version’s Committee on Bible Translation, Zondervan, World magazine, and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, took place as planned at Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs. This meeting has been called the “Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture.” That group affirmed the IBS decision and drafted a set of guidelines for translating gender-related language in the Bible.

Ironically, Focus on the Family’s own Odyssey Bible had been using the New Century Version, which contains gender-inclusive language. But after the NIVI controversy arose, Focus pulled it from the market.

Mark Strauss of Bethel Seminary in San Diego, a complementarian who believes the Bible affirms distinct roles for men and women in church and home, wrote an article showing how the guidelines issued at the “Dobson meeting” are “linguistically and hermeneutically naive and inaccurate.” Entitled “Linguistic and Hermeneutical Fallacies in the Guidelines Established at the [so-called] Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture,” it is available from CBE.

Christianity Today magazine, in a much more reasoned response than that of World magazine, published a two-part article, one on each side of the issue: “Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture?” (Oct. 27, 1997).

In his part of that 1997 article, Wayne Grudem, then at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (now at Phoenix Seminary, Scottsdale), answered yes to the question posed by the Christianity Today article’s title. He found fault with inclusive-language versions that translate some singulars as plurals as, for example, John 14:23–24, translated: “Those who love me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (italics added). Grudem believes this takes the emphasis off of the individual believer.

Grudem also disagrees with the translation of Genesis 1:27: “So God created mankind in his image” instead of “So God created man in his image.” Grudem says this changes the “male overtones” of the name God gave humans. He counted the number of times father, son, and brothers are used in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) compared to the RSV and finds a problem with the smaller number in the NRSV. While he acknowledges that many references to both men and women are translated as “man,” “he,” “brothers,” and so on in noninclusive translations such as the NIV and the New American Standard Bible, Grudem believes that English has not changed enough to warrant the need for change to inclusive-language translations.

In his part of the article in Christianity Today, Grant R. Osborne, also of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, responded that inclusive-language Bibles do not distort Scripture, but they rather clarify the meaning of the original intent of the Hebrew and Greek text. When man or he is used in Greek or Hebrew to refer to both males and females, he believes a more accurate English translation of the meaning of the text, as opposed to the form, is to use inclusive terms such as person, he and she, or even they. Osborne writes: “Whenever man and he refers to a male individual, the term should be retained; whenever the emphasis is on the individual, the singular should be retained. If there is a collective idea inherent in the singular, good exegesis prefers a plural translation.”

Thus, in John 14:23 (quoted above), the question introducing Jesus’ response indicates that Jesus is referring to all of the disciples. In his article, Osborne points out that one way to capture both the individual and the corporate aspect of this passage is to translate it: “Every person who loves me will obey me. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them.”

Osborne believes that “the inclusive ‘he’ is on its way out in modern language, and a basic principle of all translation theory is to express the ancient text in the thoughts and idioms of the receptor language.” Inclusive-language translations will not only convey the original meaning more clearly, Osborne believes, these translations will not erect unnecessary barriers to the gospel with unbelievers who can be confused or are offended by the generic he.

(A more recent article dealing with the 2002 publication of Today’s New International Version [TNIV], entitled “The TNIV Debate,” was published by Christianity Today, Oct. 7, 2002.)
2002, the two sides taken by Mark Strauss and by Vern Poythress of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia.)

Though use of gender-inclusive language translations can help Christian women and men in their faith and be a help in reaching the unchurched, the issue of whether or not to use inclusive language is one of translation theory and what conveys the meaning of the original text into current language usage.

Strauss demonstrated, in his article, how adherence to the “Guidelines” developed at the “Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture” imposes a particular translation without consideration of context and “smacks of a social agenda beyond accurate interpretation of Scripture.” Furthermore, he has pointed out how “critics like Grudem have tended to find a few examples of poor translation in a particular version (like the NRSV) and to conclude from this that all attempts at inclusive-language are inaccurate and inappropriate.”

The KJV and other examples of inclusive language

Ironically, both the King James Version and the NIV have many instances where masculine nouns and pronouns have been changed to inclusive nouns and pronouns. In the Scriptures quoted at the beginning of this article (John 1:12; Eph. 3:16), the NIV has always rendered the Greek words that are translated “sons” and “inner man” in the KJV as “children” and “inner being.” The NIV has never been characterized as a “stealth Bible” for these gender-inclusive translations.

“Inclusive translation” does not mean “gender neutral.” If the context of a passage indicates that masculine, male, or a man is being referred to, then a masculine word is chosen for the translation. However, if the context indicates that both males and females, or people in general, are being referred to, then an “inclusive translation” will choose a word or words that makes that reference clear.

Inclusive-language NIV (NIVI)

The case for inclusive language

New and revised translations that use inclusive language have become necessary for English-speaking people because English has changed. Only a few years ago the masculine in English could be used for contexts that included both males and females or people in general. But that is no longer the case. Still, some may argue that English has not changed, and they cite current references in print or speeches to show that masculine words are still used to refer to men and women or to people in general. While some speakers and writers do retain this usage, it is continued at the risk of offending many people and making them feel excluded.

In Christianity Today (1999), John Stackhouse muses:

Frankly, when it seems evident that Jesus himself used an Aramaic phrase of the Old Testament; when evangelicals enthusiastically support missionary Bible translations all over the world whose versions—because rendered by few people with relatively few linguistic tools at hand—are always much less accurate than the English translations we are privileged to enjoy; and when hundreds of thousands of conservative evangelicals are buying and using such dynamic translations as the New Living Translation and such paraphrases as The Message—well, it’s difficult to believe that all this sound and fury truly centers on the integrity of Bible translation.

Both Mark Strauss and Donald Carson, another expert in translation who is personally committed to traditional views regarding gender relations, have published books that defend gender-inclusive translations—Strauss’s Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translations and Gender Accuracy (InterVarsity, 1998) and Carson’s The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism (Baker, 1998).

Church outreach and inclusive language

Not only is inclusive language more accurate, its use will help the outreach of the church to a world offended by outdated, insensitive, exclusive language. Why should the church take the chance of hurting or excluding those we are trying to reach? Do you think Paul would? Remember his words to the Corinthian church:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

—1 Corinthians 9:19–23 (NRSV)

To be good news, the gospel must be accepted by an individual in order for that person to be part of the community of the church. If we can accurately translate the Bible so that it is clear in contexts that include both men and women or people in general, if we can choose songs or change words so that all feel included in the references, if
we can speak so as to reach all people—why shouldn’t we?

Today’s New International Version

Since this article was first published, the International Bible Society and Zondervan have released the Today’s New International Version (TNIV). This version is built on the NIV while incorporating the latest biblical scholarship and contemporary English usage. The IBS and Zondervan will continue to publish the NIV without changes or update, while the TNIV will be updated as biblical scholarship advances and as the English language continues to change. At this time, only the New Testament is available, with the full Bible expected to be released in 2005.

Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, the critics who stopped the United States release of the earlier NIV have again raised their voices in alarm over the TNIV. However, they have been unable to stop this translation. Many biblical scholars, including those with traditional or complementarian views on male/female roles, have supported and endorsed the TNIV.

The refusal of critics to give up an outmoded English is not just an eccentric foible. It hinders the spread of the gospel. Those hanging on to translations that employ an outdated language will not only find their attempts at communication hindered, they will gradually lose their relevancy and influence with a culture that accepts the equality of being of males and females and believes that people should be placed in roles based on gifts and abilities, rather than gender.

In my original article I asked why we shouldn’t present the good news in a way that is understandable, inviting to both men and women, and accurate?

Mark Strauss, in writing about the TNIV’s release, has answered a similar question:

The reader may still ask at this point, “Why bother?” Why should we condescend to the changes in language produced by our heathen culture? But we might just as well ask why the apostle Paul preached in Greek instead of Hebrew (the language of God’s original revelation!). Or why on Mars Hill he preached about an “unknown” God (Acts 17) instead of giving his traditional message to Jews in the synagogue (Acts 13). The answer, of course, is that Paul sought to present the Gospel as clearly and accurately for the audience to which he was preaching. At the same time, he never compromised the truth of the message. Gender-accurate translations like the TNIV seek to accurately convey the sense of the Hebrew or Greek original, while utilizing the language people speak today. This is the best possible goal for Bible translation.

It is a goal that will help the church deliver the good news to twenty-first-century audiences in language that is both accurate and inclusive.

Bruce Kilmer is a lawyer and regional court administrator for the Michigan Supreme Court. For more than a decade, he has served his home congregation, the Mt. Pleasant Community Church, Mt. Pleasant, MI, as an elder, teacher, worship planner, and drama ministry leader. Kilmer has been an outspoken advocate for the full inclusion of women in church life for 35 years.

Notes
3. In a news release of May 14, 1999, the International Bible Society [IBS] reaffirmed its prior commitment “to continue to publish the 1984 New International Version (NIV) with no changes whatsoever . . .” The board of the IBS went on to state, “at the same time, the IBS continues to explore its options with respect to additional Bible publishing in the English language.” According to an FAQ sheet distributed with this news release the IBS stated that this possible future translation would be true to the intent of the original Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic texts in rendering gender; i.e., if both genders were intended in the original language, then the English will say “someone,” “everyone,” “people,” or “they.”
5. Strauss, 2 and 16.
7. TNIV Web site: www.tniv.info/resources/StraussArticle.php

Books Mentioned in This Issue
These may be purchased through CBE’s Book Service or online Book Store (www.cbeinternational.org)

- Mark Strauss, Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998)