…But Words Can Never Hurt Me

By John R. Kohlenberger III

"Daddy, why does God only like boys?"

My eight-year-old daughter surprised me with her theological question. We attended a conservative, evangelical church and she was in third grade in a Christian grade school—what were they teaching her?

"What do you mean, honey? God loves girls just as much as he loves boys!"

"That's not what the Bible says," she shot back. "We memorize verses about how God 'wants all *men* to be saved' and about 'fishers of *men*' and about 'blessed be the *man*.' We don't learn any verses about girls being blessed or girls being saved."

Donning my professor's hat, I started to explain, "Well, Sarah, you have to understand that in English, when we say 'men' we also mean.…"—but I couldn't finish the sentence. Why should the reader have to decide when "men" means "boys" and when "men" means "people"?

It had never occurred to me that this traditional practice of using masculine-gender nouns in gender-inclusive contexts could actually result in confusing and excluding readers. After all, these contexts always included me—an adult male.

That was nearly twenty years ago. My daughter has become a more sophisticated reader (her first degree is in English), and I have become a more sensitive communicator. From that day on, whenever I read the Bible publicly in church or classroom, I make sure the language is gender accurate. I want to be sure that every reader—male or female, young or old, seeker or believer—knows whether or not the text applies to them.

If we were in Psalm 1:1, I would read, "Blessed is *anyone*," even though the NIV reads, "Blessed is the man." In Matthew 4:19, I would make clear that believers were to fish for *people*, not just adult males. In 1 Timothy 2:4, I would emphasize that God wants "all *people* to be saved." These translations are not for the sake of "political correctness"; these renderings are absolutely true to the original text—and are matters of life and death.

"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

We teach this nursery rhyme to our children when they come crying into our arms, devastated by the mean words of playmates. Of course, we all know the rhyme is a lie; words *can* do incredible harm. If we are nick-named by our weight or height or color or body odor, that can damage our self-image for years to come.

Think about the word "dumb." This Old English adjective means "having no power of speech; mute." It is commonly used in our English Bibles

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up to the 1980s to describe people who cannot speak (e.g., Matt. 9:32–33 KJV). But "dumb" can also mean "stupid."

Sometime in the last third of the twentieth century, at least in America, the concept of "stupid" became dominant, so that many Bible translations (like the NIV in 1973 and 1978) avoided the word altogether. It is clearly wrong to state that everyone who cannot speak is stupid, so it is clearly wrong to call them "dumb," as this word can do harm.

It is the same with masculine-gender words intended for inclusive meaning. Since the 1980s, Bible translations have begun to replace these easily misunderstood terms with gender-accurate words, such as:

man, men	person, people
father(s)	parent(s), ancestor(s)
sons(s)	child, children
brother(s)	brothers and sisters, friends, Christians

Every Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek lexicon and word study resource published in English in the last 160 years acknowledges that these kinds of words can be both gender specific and gender inclusive.

Gender-accurate translation ensures that gender-specific words are used in gender-specific contexts and that gender-inclusive words are used in gender-inclusive contexts. You can check this in any translation of 1 Timothy 2: verses 1–6 are gender-inclusive, verse 8 refers to men (males) and verses 9–15 to women.

Though there has been a lot of controversy over this practice, especially involving *Today's New International Version* (TNIV, 2002, 2005), this is nothing new. In 1526, William Tyndale translated Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shal be called the chyldren of God." Every translation of the sixteenth century, culminating in the King James Version of 1611, followed Tyndale in using the phrase "children of God."

Although the original Greek word *uioi* is masculine, the gender-inclusive translation "children" is more gender-accurate than the mechanical masculine translation, "sons," since peacemakers can

Portrait of William Tyndale. Courtesy of Hertford College, Oxford. William Tyndale completed the first translation of the Bible into English. The text from the Beatitudes in Matt. 5 behind the title of this article and at the bottom of this page comes from the first printed English New Testament, translated by William Tyndale in 1525.

be male or female. But following the more mechanically literalistic Revised Version of 1881–84, most versions of the twentieth century used "sons of God" in Matthew 5:9.

While this may seem more accurate on a mechanical level, it is less accurate on a meaning level. It is an unnecessary departure from the earliest English versions and it can do great harm in contemporary settings.

Bible translation is beginning to catch up with this shift in contemporary English usage. Since the 1980s, at least nineteen revisions and new translations of the Bible or New Testament have appeared in English. And, with the exception of the 1995 revision of the New American Standard Bible, *all* of these translations have used gender-accurate language to a greater degree than versions published between 1881 and 1980.

Many of the most strident critics of the TNIV have been involved with or have endorsed translations that use gender-accurate language. In another decade, I believe the evangelical church will wonder what all this fuss was about.

"The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.
(Proverbs 15:4, TNIV)

Sticks and stones *can* break bones and words *can* do great harm. At Christians for Biblical Equality, we work to accept those who have been marginalized and excluded, to empower those who have been powerless, and to bring healing to those who have been battered and hurt. I pray that in word and in deed our tree of life will continue to bear sweet and delicious fruit.

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