INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN BIBLE TRANSLATION BY JOHN R. KOHLENBERGER III

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INTRODUCTION

The International Bible Society (IBS), which owns the NIV, has released an update of the NIV called *Today's New International Version (TNIV).* Most of us know that that the NIV has a commitment to stay current. There was already a revision in 1984; there had already been a revision of the New Testament in 1978 when the Bible was completed. It is an ongoing process because language is changing faster than it has ever changed before. For a Bible to communicate clearly, it has to be tweaked in accordance with changes in language.
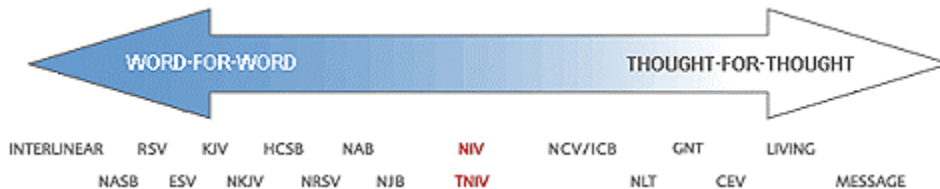
There have been at least 20 new translations and revisions since the 1980s and all of them, except the 1995 revision of the NASB, have used inclusive language to a greater degree than NIV—including the ESV and HCSB. The TNIV is the latest version in a 20-year trend and should not be singled out for its gender language any more than the ESV or HCSB.

THE UNDERLYING ISSUE: TRANSLATION PHILOSOPHY

Word-for-Word and Phrase-for-Phrase Translation
The issue of inclusive language is really about translation style—"word-for-word" translation versus "phrase-for-phrase" translation. Both have been with us since the 14th century. The English Bible originated with the Wycliffe Bible. The first edition (c. 1380-1384) was a slavish, word-for-word rendering of the Latin Vulgate. In 1395 or 1396, Wycliffe's secretary John Purvey updated the Wycliffe Bible using more idiomatic English. As quoted in F. F. Bruce's *History of the Bible in English* (Oxford University Press, 1978), Purvey wrote:

> First, it is to be known that the best translating out of Latin into English is to translate after the sentence [i.e., the meaning] and not only after the words…the words ought to serve to the intent and sentence, or else the words be superfluous or false…

WORD-FOR-WORD							THOUGHT-FOR-THOUGHT		
INTERLINEAR	RSV	KJV	HCSB	NAB		NIV	NCV/ICB	GNT	LIVING
NASB	ESV	NKJV	NRSV	NJB		TNIV		NLT	CEV	MESSAGE

No translation is exclusively one style or the other. For example, the KJV is full of idiomatic renderings, such as "God forbid," which occurs 24 times in the King James (e.g., Rom. 6:2). In none of those twenty-four instances do the words "God" and "forbid" appear in the original. "God forbid" is an idiomatic rendering of one Hebrew word or two Greek words that mean, "this should never happen." In King James English, "God forbid" captured the same meaning, but it was not a word-for-word translation.

How Precisely Should a Word Be Translated?
Another question related to the issue of inclusive language is, "Should a word be translated exactly the same way each time it appears?" What about the assertion, "If it says 'man' in Hebrew, it should say 'man' in English"? For starters, it doesn't say "man" in Hebrew; it says *ish* or *adam*. "Man" is an English translation of these words.

Let's use an English word for an example. A *trunk* can be the back of a car, the front of an elephant, the bottom of a tree, the middle of a person, or all of a suitcase. Which is the literal trunk? In each case *trunk* means something very different depending on what object it refers to. There is no such thing as the "literal" meaning of a word, only contextual meaning. *Trunk* means whatever it means only when it is used in a sentence.

Even the Hebrew word for "God" is not translated the same all the way through the Bible. In the Old Testament, *elohim* (a masculine plural form) sometimes means the true (singular) "God" (Genesis 1:1); sometimes it means plural "gods" (Exodus 20:23); sometimes it means a masculine singular "god" (1 Kings 11:33); sometimes a feminine singular "goddess" (1 Kings 11:5); and even human "judges" (Exodus 22:8-9). It's the same exact Hebrew word, letter for letter, but with very different meanings.

The Greek word *lampros* occurs only nine times in the New Testament, but the King James Version uses six different words to translate it into English-including two different words in back-to-back verses in James 2 (highlighted below):

> For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in **goodly** apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the **gay** clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool. (James 2:2-3, KJV)

(This example also illustrates what happens as languages change. What might the phrase "him that weareth the gay clothing" communicate today? The modern connotations are not the same as they were in 1611.)
In the original preface to the KJV, the translators make one extremely important statement that relates to the word-for-word vs. phrase-for-phrase debate: "We have not tied ourselves to a uniformity of phrasing or to an identity of words as some peradventure would wish that we had done."

CHANGES IN LANGUAGE

The KJV cannot be heard today the way it was heard in 1611. It has men wearing "girdles," men in "gay clothing," and a God who is "terrible." As language changes, you go to the original texts and reshape the translation so that people don't mishear. This is what gender inclusive language is about, and this is what it was about 2,200 years ago.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN TRANSLATION

Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and English all use gender differently. When we (in English) use gender in reference to something, we invest that thing with personality. But if something

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doesn't have a personality—if something isn't human, for example—we don't like to say "him" or "her." Instead we use "it."

In many languages, every noun and pronoun has gender, as well as adjectives and verbs associated them. For example, the Hebrew word for "spirit," *ruach,* is grammatically feminine. A truly literal translation of the Old Testament would refer to the Spirit of God—the Holy Spirit—as "she." The Greek word for "spirit," *pneuma,* is grammatically neuter. A truly literal translation would refer to the Holy Spirit as "it." But in English, "it" would imply that the Holy Spirit doesn't have personality.

Concerning the "uncircumcised man child," Genesis 17:14 (KJV) says, "**that soul** shall be cut off from **his** people; he hath broken my covenant." The Hebrew word for "soul" is feminine, but we do not translate, "That soul shall be cut off from **her** people."

In Luke 1:35, the KJV refers to Jesus as "**that holy thing**" because in Greek, the gender of this phrase is neuter. But in English, the word *thing*—though it captures the *form* of the original—usually indicates an object, not a person. Most translations, including the RSV, NASB, NIV and NKJV use terms such as "holy child" or "holy one"—in keeping with our understanding of the personality of the unborn Savior.

Translation of the Words for "Son"
The Old Testament word *ben* (plural banim) and the New Testament word *huios* (plural *huioi)*, though they are masculine terms, can refer to physical descendents of any age, generation and gender. All the standard Hebrew and Greek resources agree about this. These words are even used idiomatically to characterize members of a group having no physical relationship at all. The "sons of God" in Job are angels. The "sons of God" in John are believers—men and women.

Note the following historically accepted gender-inclusive translations:

- In 2 Cor. 6:14-18, Paul reminds his audience of God's promises for Christians who separate themselves from the world. One of those promises is found in 2 Samuel 7:14a, which reads, "I will be a Father to him, and he will be a son to me." Paul quoted this passage ("As God has said," 2 Cor. 6:16a), applying it to the church: "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me." Paul changed the Old Testament's "him" (singular masculine) to "you" (masculine plural, because in Greek and Hebrew you refer to groups in the masculine plural, since there is no neuter plural for that purpose). "Son" became "sons and daughters." Paul's listeners would have been very familiar with 2 Samuel 7:14a, so he wanted to make its significance clear as he applied it to the Christian church.
- William Tyndale's translation of Matthew 5:9 reads, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the **children** *[huioi]* of God," not "the **sons** of God" (Matthew 5:9). Every Bible translation of the 16th and 17th centuries, including the KJV, retained Tyndale's translation. It wasn't until the more grammatically exacting translations like the 1901 ASV that "children" was replaced with "sons."
- The KJV translated the Hebrew word *ben/banim* as "son" or "sons" 2,893 times. But it translates it as "child" or "children" 1,570 times. Does that mean that 35% of the KJV is inaccurate?

Translation of the Words for "Man"
The Hebrew words *adam* and *ish* and the Greek words *anthropos* and *aner* can refer to human beings of either gender as well as to males in particular. All the standard Hebrew and Greek resources agree about this.

If you went into any church today and said, "I'd like all the men to stand up," most, if not all, of the women would stay seated. The adult males would stand up, and all of the teenage males would wonder, "Am I old enough? Do I get to stand up?" Most people today hear the word *man* as an adult male, not as referring to any person.

Now, let's look at some phrases that have historically been rendered inclusively. For example, look at Exodus 18:16.

> When they have a matter, they come unto me; and I judge between **one and another**, and I do make them know the statutes of God, and his laws. (Ex 18:16, KJV)

The English translation "one and another" is literally "a man and his neighbor" in Hebrew.

1 Peter 3:1-6 (KJV) commands wives to concern themselves not so much with their outward adornment as with "the **hidden man** of the heart." Now I don't want my wife to have a "hidden man of the heart"! Even literal translations like the RSV, the NKJV and the NASB talk about "the hidden **person** of the heart." In the NIV and the NRSV, it is translated as "the inner self."

There has always been gender inclusive language in Bible translation. The question is: Are you representing the intent of the original? You are not doing so when you call an uncircumcised man a "she." You are also not representing the intent of the original when you refer to Jesus or the Holy Spirit as "it." And you are also not representing the intent of the original when you say that only *men* get blessed or that anyone who obeys God is his son—that is, when both genders are included in the meaning of the original but can be misheard when rendered with masculine language.

"He" and "Man" as Inclusive Terms
We have been wrestling for years in English with how to represent general references to people in the singular because we do not have a neuter singular pronoun that refers to people. As early as the 16th century—even back to Chaucer—people have started sentences in the singular and finished them with the plural: "If *anyone* wants to do this, *they* should do it this way."

But in the mid-1800s, grammarians decided, "Don't do that anymore. We're telling you now, the masculine pronoun he is gender inclusive." So for 150 years we've used "he" in a generic sense, just like we've used "man" in a generic sense. That worked for more than a century, but as language has developed—especially in the latter half of this century—people hear "he" as exclusively masculine; they hear "man" as exclusively masculine. As a result, they can misunderstand Bible texts if they're not translated in a gender-appropriate way.

As language has developed, some translations have resorted to the plural because the plural is not exclusively masculine. Thus, the TNIV translates Luke 8:8 as follows: " 'Whoever has ears to hear, let **them** hear.' " While this may seem far removed from the *form* of the original, it is the clearest way to accurately communicate the gender inclusive *meaning* of the original.

What is fascinating is that the Psalms and Proverbs often change (in the Hebrew) between singular and plural. For example, look at Psalm 34:18-20 (KJV). I have labeled the singulars (s) and the plurals (pl):

> 18 The LORD is nigh unto them (pl) that are of a broken heart (s);
> and saveth such (pl) as be of a contrite spirit (s).
> 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous (s): [LXX = pl]
> but the LORD delivereth him (s) out of them all. [LXX = pl, "them"]
> 20 He keepeth all his (s) bones: [LXX = pl, "their"]
> not one of them is broken.

This psalm talks about the "righteous" in the singular and in the plural; it talks about "the wicked" in the singular and in the plural. In verses 19 and 20, the Septuagint (LXX)—the ancient Greek translation used by the New Testament writers—made it plural all the way through. The Septuagint gives a pluralizing, gender inclusive translation in Psalm 34.

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Now look at verse 20. This is a Messianic text, fulfilled in John 19:36. But does the fact that this text relates specifically to Jesus in the New Testament mean that it can't relate to righteous people in the Old Testament? It can be plural in the Old Testament and still apply absolutely well to Jesus. Notice that throughout Psalm 34, the plural is used far more than the singular is. Also remember that the New Testament frequently takes Old Testament passages that in their immediate context applied to Israel and uses them to compare Jesus to Israel. They show a typological fulfillment rather than a direct prediction. Psalm 34:20 is not necessarily a prediction of the crucifixion, but it is in keeping with the crucifixion. In the larger context of Psalm 34, verse 20 says that the Lord will protect those who trust in him. In relationship to Jesus, it took a much higher application as John related it to none of Jesus' bones being broken.

Translation of adelphos ("brother")

The Greek word *adelphos* has the concrete meaning of a blood relative like a brother, but it also has the figurative meaning of a spiritual relative-another Christian. All the standard Greek resources agree about this.

Throughout the Acts and the epistles, hearers of sermons and readers of letters are addressed as "brothers." Yet there are specific references to some of these "brothers" who are wives, younger women, and older women. They're referred to by the Greek word *adelphos* or its plural *adelphoi.* The TNIV uses "brothers and sisters" to make explicit that women are included. It's not just men who are to be good wives and good mothers.

Note that this same translation technique can be found in the original, 1973 NIV: "In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)" (Acts 1:15). Here "believers" translates *adelphoi* with gender appropriate language, since the group included both men and women.

Translating Passages Regarding Roles of Men and Women

If you want to check out a gender inclusive translation to find out if it is actually tampering with role relationships, following is a list of the key husband / wife passages and the key church office passages in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 7 and 11, 1 Timothy 3, Ephesians 5:22-23, Colossians 3:18-19, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 3:1-7. A lot of the criticisms of these modern versions imply that the motivation for use of inclusive language is to promote the ordination of women to pastoral ministries. But look at how they actually translate passages like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The masculine pronoun "he" is used throughout. The original Greek can be read as allowing both male and female *deacons*, but so do many conservative Baptist churches. The key issue is the bishop, the overseer, and the leader of the church. Look in the TNIV, the NCV and ICB, the NLT, GW, and the NRSV and you still have male bishops or overseers in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. None of these translations gives you assistance here if you want to ordain women into pastoral leadership.

Translating Terms Referring to God

Gender inclusive translations like the TNIV do not dabble with God language. When God describes himself as a Father or a husband—or even compares himself to a comforting mother in Isaiah 66—these images are retained. He does not become "parent"; he does not become "spouse." The masculine-specific images stay masculine-specific.

The same is true with references to Jesus and to the Spirit. In the Incarnation Jesus became a male human being—and none of these modern versions dabble with that. In the few places where Jesus and *anthropos* are used in the same sentence, these versions are very conservative in their approach. The point is not so much that Jesus is a *male* when you are talking about the nature of salvation as that he was genuinely a *human being*. Probably the most prominent passage in this regard is 1 Timothy 2:5 (TNIV): "For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human." Jesus' humanity is the point of 1 Timothy 2:5. Because Jesus became a human being, he alone can be the mediator between God and human beings. The same word is used for "human beings" and for

Jesus in 1 Timothy 2:5. Yes, Jesus is a male human being—and none of the mainstream gender inclusive versions apologize for that.

SUMMARY

1. "Word-for-word" and "thought-for-thought" translation styles have been with us since the beginning of Bible translation. From the Greek Septuagint of the second century BC to the English versions of the fourteenth, sixteenth and twentieth centuries, there has always been a balance of thought-for-thought and word-for-word translation. No English version is absolutely or consistently one style or the other.

2. It's not possible to use only one word to accurately translate every occurrence of a word that is used frequently in the Bible. For example, the Greek name for Jesus has to be translated "Joshua" a couple of times in the New Testament. No translation of the Bible has ever done a one-to-one translation that way—not even interlinear Bibles. It is impossible to use the same word every time. There are "trunks" in Hebrew just like there are in English.

3. The use of gender-inclusive language in modern translation follows patterns established in the Greek Septuagint, the Greek New Testament, and historic English versions. It is nothing new—it's simply a matter of degree. The use of inclusive language in modern translation is prompted by changes in English, not political agendas. The early versions were certainly not driven by a feminist agenda, and it's not necessary to conclude that modern versions are.

4. Mainstream inclusive versions do not change gender-specific references relating to male and female roles in the home or in the church.

5. Mainstream inclusive versions do not change gender references to God, except that they refer to the Spirit as "he" instead of "she" in the Old Testament or "it" in the New Testament.

6. We may not like changes in our language, but people in their 20s and 30s don't hear things the way previous generations have heard them. Remember the "gay clothing" in James 2:3 (KJV)? Today, "gay" commonly means "homosexual." But as English continues to change, "gay" has also come to be used by young people as a negative term, meaning "uncool" or "undesirable." For example, "gay clothing" would refer to clothing that is out of style, having nothing directly to do with homosexuality. The point is this: As language changes, we must respond, or we will unintentionally miscommunicate God's word to today's generation.