CURRENT ISSUES IN THE GENDER-LANGUAGE DEBATE:
A RESPONSE TO VERN POYTHRESS AND WAYNE GRUDEM[1]

by Mark L. Strauss

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the evangelical community in the United States has been rocked by a sometimes divisive debate over gender-related language in Bible translation.[2] Though discussed in academic circles for some time, the issue erupted onto the evangelical landscape in 1997 with the public outcry associated with the publication in Great Britain of an inclusive-language edition (NIVI) of the popular *New International Version* (NIV).[3] The debate has come to center stage again with the publication of the New Testament of *Today's New International Version* (TNIV), a revision of the NIV which utilizes gender-inclusive language for masculine generic terms in Greek. While all recent Bible translations utilize gender-inclusive language to some degree,[4] the popularity of the NIV among evangelicals has made the TNIV a lightning rod of controversy.

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[1] With gratitude and joy I offer this article in honor of Dr. Ron Youngblood on the occasion of his retirement. Ron has been a wonderful mentor, friend and colleague during my years at Bethel Seminary San Diego.

I am grateful to New Testament scholars Darrell Bock, Dan Wallace, Roy Ciampa and Craig Blomberg, linguists and Bible translators Wayne Leman, Peter Kirk, and Mike Sangrey, and Ben Irwin, associate editor at Zondervan, all of whom read early drafts of this work and offered many helpful suggestions. I come away from this experience convinced that all research in New Testament should be examined and critiqued by linguists and Bible translators, and all research in Bible translation should be examined and critiqued by biblical scholars. As iron sharpens iron, so these disciplines need each other.

[2] No universally accepted terminology has been established in this debate. The terms "gender-inclusive," "gender-accurate" and "gender-neutral" have all been used. While each of these may carry different nuances depending on the context, all three refer to translations which replace masculine generic terms with inclusive (non gender-specific) ones. I will discuss this definition later in this paper.

[3] The debate is chronicled in my book, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 20-22, and in greater detail in D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate. A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 28-38, and in Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy. Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 13-29.

[4] In addition to the NIVI and the TNIV, translations or major revisions which intentionally use inclusive language – to varying degrees – include the *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB; 1985), the *New Century Version* (NCV; 1987), the *New American Bible* (NAB; NT and Psalms revised; 1988, 1990), the *Revised English Bible* (REB; 1989), the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV; 1990), the *Good News Bible* (GNB; revised

Three monographs were published in the wake of the NIVI controversy: my own *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy,* Don Carson's *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism,* and most recently, Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem's *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words.*[5] Carson's work and mine take a similar perspective, generally defending the use of gender-inclusive language in Bible translation. Poythress and Grudem take the other side, generally rejecting the use of such language.

This paper is an attempt to summarize and briefly assess the present state of the debate. On the one hand, there are many more agreements than differences on several basic issues. I will therefore begin with a lengthy list of agreements. On the other hand, there remain critical philosophical and methodological differences. In the second part of the paper, I will examine and critique Poythress and Grudem (henceforth, P&G) in key areas where we differ.

IMPORTANT AREAS OF AGREEMENT

When I first began writing on this issue, it seemed to me the opponents of inclusive language were especially vulnerable to criticism, since they were making seemingly very naïve linguistic errors.[6] They would certainly disagree with this assessment, claiming either that I was misreading them or that they only sounded this way because they were writing to a naïve and uninformed Christian public.[7] In any case, the linguistic naïveté which (it seems to me) characterized the early stages of the debate has undergone significant correction, resulting in a great deal of agreement on the fundamentals of Bible

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1992 [also called *Today's English Version,* TEV]), *The Message* (1993), the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV; 1995), *God's Word* (GW; 1995), the *New Living Translation* (NLT; 1996), and the *New English Translation* (NET; 1996-2001), the *International Standard Version* (ISV; 1998), the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB; 2000), and the *English Standard Version* (ESV; 2001). Among these, the last two arose in the context of opposition to the NIVI and so are more reserved than the others in their use of inclusive language.

[5] See note 3.

[6] See my article "Linguistic and Hermeneutical Fallacies in the Guidelines Established at the 'Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture'," *JETS* 41, no. 2 (June 1998): 239-62. It is available at http://biblepacesetter.org/bibletranslation/files/list.htm. This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the forty-ninth annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Santa Clara, CA, November 20-22, 1997.

translation and the validity of using certain kinds of gender-inclusive language in Bible translation. The advance in the discussion suggests the benefit of serious dialogue, and it is in this spirit that I submit this paper.

AGREEMENTS RELATED TO THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE.

1. First, all parties[8] agree on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. This debate is not one of "liberals" versus "conservatives" since all those involved in this discussion are theological conservatives with a very high view of Scripture.[9]

2. All parties agree that inerrancy relates only to the autographs as written in their original languages. Diversity of manuscripts means that textual criticism must be used to reconstruct as accurately as possible the original text. Furthermore, no translation is inerrant since all are produced by fallible human interpreters (for elaboration, see point 5 in the next section).

AGREEMENTS RELATED TO THE NATURE OF BIBLE TRANSLATION.

1. All agree that the goal of translation is to transfer the *meaning* of a text from the source (or donor) language to the receptor (or target) language. The goal is to reproduce *as much of the meaning as possible.*[10]

2. All agree that no two languages are the same with reference to word meanings, grammar, or idiom, and so a strict literal or "formal equivalent" translation is impossible. The translation of *meaning* must always take precedence over the reproduction of *form.*[11]

3. All agree that since languages differ in these ways, no translation captures precisely all of the meaning of the original.[12] Some nuances of meaning are inevitably

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[7] The latter reason is given by Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 88; the former on p. 89. I will leave it to those who wish to consult the early writings on this debate to judge for themselves whether this was a real or only a perceived naïveté.

[8] When I say "all parties" here and in the following discussion, I am referring to Carson, Poythress, Grudem and myself, though in most cases I believe it would include others who have written on this topic (including Grant Osborne, John Kohlenberger, Andreas Köstenberger, Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, Jon Weatherly, and others).

[9] In light of this agreement, it is somewhat odd that P&G devote an entire chapter (in a very long book) to defend the authority of Scripture.

[10] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 77, 84; Carson, *Debate,* 70; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 70-71.

lost in the translation process. Nevertheless, essential faithfulness in translation is possible because of the flexibility and adaptability of language forms. It must be reiterated, however, that this is never absolute faithfulness.

4. All agree that languages are constantly changing, so that it is necessary to periodically examine and update Bible translations to accurately reflect contemporary usage.[13] All also agree that masculine generics like "man" or "men" have declined in use in recent years, with a corresponding increase in inclusive terms.[14]

5. All agree that translation is an inexact science practiced by fallible human beings.[15] All translations contain errors, imprecise language and ambiguities. (Indeed, all communication contains *some* imprecision and ambiguity.) This does not mean that translation cannot be done accurately and reliably, but only that it cannot be done perfectly. Translation must therefore be a give-and-take process, involving measured compromise and balance. It is an art as well as a science.

6. With reference to lexical semantics, all agree that words (or more precisely, *lexemes*) do not generally carry a single all-encompassing or so-called "literal" meaning, but rather have a range of potential senses (a semantic range).[16] The sense intended by the author must be determined by the context in which the word is used. An accurate translation is one which determines the correct sense of a word or phrase in the source language in each particular context and chooses an appropriate word or phrase in the receptor language to capture that sense. Consistent word-for-word replacement is an unreliable method of translation.

7. Related to this, all agree that the various senses of a Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek lexeme (its semantic range) do not overlap exactly with the various senses of an English

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[11] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 77-86; Carson, *Debate,* chapter 3, esp. 72; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 58-61.

[12] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 28, 78-82, 134, 153; Carson, *Debate,* chapters 3-4, *passim,* esp. 58-60; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 67, 70-71, 189, 342. This point is particularly well developed by Carson.

[13] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 99-100, 145; Carson, *Debate,* 17-18, 72-74, 90, chapter 9; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 89.

[14] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 140-146; Carson, *Debate,* 183-192; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 96, 224.

[15] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 28; Carson, *Debate,* chapter 3; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 70-71.

lexeme. [17] In other words, there is never absolute synonymy between lexemes (either within a language or across languages). For this reason, an English word or expression must be chosen which most accurately represents the meaning of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek *in each particular context.*

8. All agree that words carry connotative as well as denotative meaning and that both kinds of meaning are important for accurate communication in translation.[18]

AGREEMENTS RELATED TO GENDER LANGUAGE.

1. All agree that gender-accurate (gender-inclusive, gender-neutral) translation is *a good thing*, when the use of such language *accurately represents the meaning of the original text.*[19] In many cases the use of an inclusive term improves the accuracy of the translation.[20] An example of this is the translation "person" in contexts where Greek *anthrōpos* is used generically to refer to either a man or a woman. Romans 3:28 (TNIV) accurately reads "For we maintain that *a person* is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

2. All agree that care should be taken *not* to use inclusive language when the original author intended a gender-specific sense. [21] The (biological) gender distinctions of the original text should be respected.

3. All agree that translations should seek not to obscure cultural features, including patriarchal ones, which were part of the original meaning of the text.[22]

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[16] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 94-102; Carson, *Debate,* 52-53, 61-62; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 58-59.

[17] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 94-98; Carson, *Debate,* 48; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 58-59.

[18] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 100-102; Carson, *Debate,* 64; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 169-172.

[19] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* chapters 5-6; Carson, *Debate, passim..* See Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* chapter 5, "Permissible Changes in Translating Gender-Related Terms," where they point out examples of inclusive language that "improve the accuracy of translation" (p. 91). See also pp. 167, 180 n. 23, 295.

[20] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* chapters 5-6, esp. 133-136; Carson, *Debate,* chapters 5-8; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* chapter 5.

[21] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 127-129; Carson, *Debate,* 16-17; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral, passim.*

[22] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 130-132; Carson, *Debate,* 103-105; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral, passim.*

4. All agree that gender-specific terms should be used with reference to historical persons, when males or females are specified in illustrative material, and in parables where characters are male or female.[23]

5. As a possible qualifier to the previous point, all agree that words should be translated according to their *sense* in context, not according to extraneous features associated with their referents. [24] For example, an author may use *anthrōpos* in the sense of "human being," even though the person referred to happens to be a male. James 5:17 is accurately translated "Elijah was a human being (*anthrōpos*) just like we are," because *anthrōpos* in this context means "human being," not "male human being" (the "we" is surely inclusive). Though Elijah was a male, this characteristic is extraneous to the sense of *anthrōpos* in context (cf. Acts 10:26; John 10:33; 1 Tim. 2:5).

6. All agree that there is nothing inherently immoral or evil in masculine generic terms. The goal of translation should not be to abolish male references, but to determine which English words and phrases most accurately and clearly reproduce the meaning of the original text.[25]

7. All agree that grammatical gender is different than natural or biological gender (sex).[26] It is therefore incorrect to demand the reproduction of grammatical gender across languages with different gender systems.

8. All agree that Greek *anthrōpos* is accurately translated "person" or "human being" when the author intended to refer to either a man or a woman.[27]

9. All agree that Greek *anthrōpoi* is accurately translated with inclusive terms like "people" or "human beings" when the author intended to include both men and women.[28]

10. All agree that Hebrew *'îsh* sometimes has an inclusive sense, and in these cases is accurately translated with expressions like "each one" or "each person."[29]

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[23] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 129, 130, 157; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 101-107.

[24] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 134-135; Carson, *Debate,* 75-76, 121; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 267-268.

[25] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?,* 16; Carson, *Debate,* 16-17; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 182.

[26] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 86-88; Carson, *Debate,* chapter 4; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 85, 201, 202, 336.

[27] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 104-112; Carson, *Debate,* 120-128; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 95-96.

[28] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 104-112; Carson, *Debate,* 120-128; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 93-95.

11. All agree that *adelphoi* is accurately translated "brothers and sisters" when the referents include both males and females.[30]

12. All agree that Hebrew *bānîm* is accurately translated "children" when the referents include both males and females.[31] While most would say the same about Greek *huioi,* P&G affirm this only reluctantly and with qualifications.[32]

13. All agree that Greek *pateres* may be translated "parents" instead of "fathers" when the referents include both males and females.[33]

14. Do Greek *pateres* and Hebrew *'ābôt* ever mean "ancestors"? Most commentators would say yes.[34] P&G seem to agree with this in principle, but they reject this translation in practice and do not discuss passages where both males and females are in view (e.g., 1 Sam. 12:6; Heb. 3:9).[35]

15. All agree that the translation "man" for the human race is one of the most difficult issues in gender-related translation and that there are no easy answers. Neither English "man" nor terms like "humanity" or "humankind" can capture all of the word-plays present in the Hebrew *ādām*.[36] Whichever translation is used, footnotes are appropriate to explain the word-plays of the original text.

16. Similarly, all agree that the translation "son of man" for Hebrew *ben ādām* and Greek *huios tou anthrōpou* is another difficult issue without easy answers. While these phrases usually mean "human being," this translation may obscure messianic references in some contexts.[37] Again, explanatory footnotes are sometimes necessary.

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[29] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 104-112; Carson, *Debate,* 120-128; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 247.

[30] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 147-151; Carson, *Debate,* 130-131; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 160, 263-268 (with some qualifications).

[31] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 155-162; Carson, *Debate,* 131-133; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 255.

[32] See especially their discussion on pp. 261-263, esp. 262 n. 37.

[33] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 151-155; Carson, *Debate,* 133; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 107-108.

[34] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 151-155; Carson, *Debate,* 133.

[35] They write, "Both the Greek and Hebrew terms can refer to more distant ancestors as well," but clarify that "it turns out that instances of this kind usually refer to grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and other *male* ancestors" (250-251). Their use of "usually" seems to allow that "ancestors" may at times be an acceptable translation (251 n. 252).

[36] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 188-190; Carson, *Debate,* 166-170; Poythress and Grudem, 234-238.

[37] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 162-163, 188-191; Carson, *Debate,* 170-175; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 242-245.

Other agreements could be added to this list, but these are sufficient to demonstrate common presuppositions and philosophical perspectives.

CRITICAL AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

A QUESTION OF DEFINITION: WHAT IS GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

If all parties agree that gender-accurate (gender-inclusive, gender-neutral) translation is a good thing in principle, why do P&G so vehemently oppose it in practice? One way they avoid this apparent contradiction is by introducing a unique definition of inclusive language. I have elsewhere defined inclusive language as the use of inclusive terms when the author was referring to members of both sexes.[38] An example I have provided is the translation "human being" or "person" for the masculine generic use of *anthrōpos.* P&G are unhappy with this definition and this example. They write:

> Unfortunately, Mark Strauss's book *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy,* uses loose terminology at this point. It says that such a translation of *anthrōpos* uses "inclusive language" (p. 37). It thereby uses the label broadly, to speak about usages that are not in dispute. But the same label, "inclusive language," has a narrow use to designate usages that *are* in dispute.[39]

P&G here wish to define inclusive language with reference to "disputed" examples. This is a very subjective definition. Who decides, after all, which examples are disputed and which are not? Take for example the translation "brothers and sisters" for the masculine generic *adelphoi.* Wayne Grudem once wrote that this was an inaccurate translation since the term meant "brothers."[40] In other words, this was a disputed case (and hence an example of inclusive language?). Now, however, he recognizes that this is an acceptable translation of *adelphoi* in many contexts.[41] It is no longer disputed. Would this mean that it is no longer an example of inclusive language? This, of course, is invalid. Identifying gender-inclusive language only with reference to so-called

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[38] Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 14-15.

[39] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 94.

[40] Wayne Grudem, "NIV Controversy: Participants Sign Landmark Agreement," *CBMW News* 2, no. 3 (June 1997): 5.

"disputed" examples is imprecise and highly subjective. Remarkably, P&G accuse me of using "loose terminology" when I define inclusive language (objectively) as translating masculine generics with inclusive terms.[42]

By defining inclusive language with reference only to "disputed" examples, P&G are attempting to isolate and downplay the many examples of inclusive language which actually enhance or provide more accuracy to a translation. This is a very effective (if not a very fair) way to win an argument. You choose the examples you wish to discuss while ruling out your opponents' examples. This purpose comes out when P&G argue that:

> By using the label "inclusive language" in a broad way as well as the narrower way, Strauss bundles the uncontroversial usages into the same collection with the controversial ones – it is all "inclusive language." One thereby gets the false impression that since the old (undisputed) practices of the KJV and the NIV were all right, so are the new disputed usages.[43]

But in fact, these *are* all examples of inclusive language. And the earlier so-called undisputed examples in the NIV and the KJV *do* confirm that there is nothing inherently inaccurate or wrong with using inclusive language for masculine generic terms in Hebrew and Greek. As P&G themselves acknowledge in many examples, the use of inclusive or neutral terms is helpful and effective *when the author intended to include both men and women*.

To be fair to P&G, this attempt to redefine terms represents a relatively small part of their argument (though it surfaces again on pages 115-116 and 159-160 of their book). They focus more on the loss of nuances of meaning which they claim characterizes gender-inclusive translation. It is to this point we now turn.

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[41] Wayne Grudem, "What's Wrong with 'Gender Neutral' Bible Translations?" (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1997), 17; Poythress and Grudem, 263-268.

[42] At this point P&G are confusing the category of what may be labeled "gender-inclusive Bible versions" (a version which intentionally and systematically utilizes inclusive terms for masculine generic ones) with "gender-inclusive language" (the use of inclusive terms for masculine generics). When discussing particular examples of translation (as in their quote above) we are obviously dealing with the latter. P&G are objecting to the wholesale and uncritical use of inclusive language which results in significant loss of meaning. But everyone would agree on this. Both Don Carson and I (not to mention many other conservative evangelicals) have always argued for a careful case-by-case exegesis to determine when inclusive language is and is not acceptable.

THE LOSS OF SUBTLE "NUANCES" OF MEANING

From the large number of agreements noted above, one might gain the impression that the two sides are not very far apart. Unfortunately, this is not the case. This is because P&G consider most "permissible" inclusive language to be *unusual exceptions* to the general need to retain masculine generics in Bible translation. These masculine terms, they argue, contain subtle and important *nuances* of meaning which are lost in inclusive translation. (Phrases like "subtle nuance," "slightly different," and "not identical" appear throughout the book.)

The basis for this approach is developed in an excursus, where P&G attempt to analyze linguistic complexity by identifying various levels at which people approach translation.[44] Their stated goal here is to move beyond the form-versus-meaning dichotomy which has characterized much of the discussion on this topic. Their first level, "the naïve approach" which is often taken by the general public, assumes that languages are all the same and that translation can be done with simple word-for-word replacement. P&G admit that this is simply wrong. The second level, "the theoretically informed approach," moves beyond naïveté to a basic understanding of linguistics with reference to form and function. For example, in Ezekiel 37 the same Hebrew word *rûaḥ* (one form) is used with three different senses, breath (37:5), wind (37:9) and Spirit (37:14). It is primarily at this theoretical level, they suggest, that the gender-inclusive language debate has taken place and at which their opponents are operating. The third level they call "the discerning approach: using native speakers' intuitive sense of subtleties." At this level people recognize that the basic theoretical formulations at level two are only summaries, and that "the phenomena of language and human communication vastly surpass it in complexity."[45] For example, a native speaker, while recognizing the different senses of *rûaḥ* in Ezekiel 37, would also intuitively perceive certain interplays of meaning between these senses. At the fourth and highest level, "the reflective approach," translators attempt to analyze and make explicit the subtleties and complexities which may be

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[43] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 94.

[44] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 82-90.

[45] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 83.

sensed by native speakers at the third level. Here an interpreter might seek to show how Ezekiel 37 can achieve its effect by playing on more than one sense of the same word *rûaḥ*.[46]

Some of the points made in this section are very helpful. Meaning expressed through language is indeed extraordinarily complex and intuitively perceived, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. But what P&G fail to make clear is that for the most part their so-called levels 3 and 4 are impossible to attain in a basic translation. Since every language is different, when you gain one thing with a particular translation, you lose something else. For example, by consistently translating a particular Hebrew word (like *rûaḥ*) with a single English word (say, "spirit"), you would retain the verbal parallels in the Hebrew, but you would miss the best sense of the word in each particular context. Or, with reference to the present debate, by seeking to retain a masculine nuance you might lose (or suppress) an inclusive one.

The great anomaly of P&G's work is that they first set out a basically sound linguistic theory, and then spend much of the rest of the book contradicting it in practice.[47] They affirm that translation is an inexact science and art which involves give-and-take and compromise. While the goal is to preserve as much of the meaning as possible, all translation inevitably loses something. Meaning functions on many levels and in many dimensions simultaneously. The rest of P&G's book then involves often hair-splitting criticism of the subtle and nuanced loss of meaning in gender-inclusive translation, mostly ignoring the fact that this is inherent in *all translation.* Somewhere along the way, P&G begin referring to these subtle and slight changes as "distortions" of God's Word, even challenging the scholarly integrity of the translators who produce them.[48]

Please do not misunderstand me. I am in no way advocating a cavalier approach to Bible translation. No one serious about careful translation is interested in reproducing only the "main idea" or the "basic meaning" with little regard for details. (Yet this is the

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[46] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 87.

[47] Craig Blomberg expresses a similar perspective in a review of P&G: "Unfortunately, this book is such a complex combination of important observations, misleading half-truths, and linguistic naivete that it will only stir up emotions once again, further clouding what is really at stake (and what is not) in this debate" (Craig Blomberg, "Review of *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words," Denver Journal,* vol. 4, 2001; available online at http://www.gospelcom.net/densem/dj/articles01/0200/0204.html).

charge P&G repeatedly make against their opponents.[49]) But the simple fact is that it is *impossible* to capture all of the nuances of meaning. Translators must constantly make hard decisions and compromises. The questions in each case are *What nuances are present? Which should be retained and how do we retain them? Which must be sacrificed because of the inexactitude of the language?* The goals, of course, are accuracy and balance, seeking to retain enough of one nuance without unduly or excessively compromising others. It is also necessary to give priority to the more important nuances.

The impression one gets while reading P&G is that it is the *male-oriented* nuances which must be preserved at all cost. But what about the subtle loss of inclusive meaning which using "he" or "man" creates? This, it seems, is of little importance.

Examples illustrating this can be found throughout the book. In a section on generic "he," they compare Proverbs 16:9 in the RSV and in four versions which use inclusive language in order to show (and to poke fun at) the variety of ways generic "he" is avoided:

> RSV: A man's mind plans *his* way, but the Lord directs *his* steps.
> NCV: *People* may make plans in *their* minds, but the Lord decides what *they* will do.
> NIVI: In *your* heart *you* may plan *your* course, but the Lord determines *your* steps.
> NLT: *We* can make *our* plans, but the Lord determines *our* steps.
> NRSV: The human mind plans *the* way, but the Lord directs *the* steps.

P&G criticize the four versions which use inclusive language because "All of the changes involve *some* change in meaning."[50] This is certainly true. But it is also true that *every translation* involves "*some* change in meaning," since every word is changed from the source language to the receptor language, and since no two languages are the same with reference to word meanings or idiom. For the next few pages P&G show in detail how subtle nuances of meaning are lost in these other versions. There is no mention, however, of the subtle loss of meaning in the RSV, which they identify as the

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[48] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 117, 127-128.
[49] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 65, 70, 73, 189-191, 193, 340, etc.

"literal" (and presumably the accurate) translation. But we must remember that the so-called "literal" RSV is also an interpretation of the Hebrew. Hebrew *ādām* has been interpreted and translated as "man" (it could have been translated "person" or in various other ways); Hebrew *lēb* has been interpreted and translated as "mind" (it could have been accurately translated "heart" or in various other ways); Hebrew *yākîn* has been interpreted and translated as "directs" (it could have been translated "determines" or various other ways). We could go on and on. It becomes even more complicated and difficult as we move from words to phrases and clauses. There is, in fact, no such thing as a "literal" translation (i.e., single, uniform, corresponding exactly with the Hebrew), since every Hebrew word or phrase in this verse (and in virtually any verse) could be translated in a variety of ways. Every translation constantly involves interpretive decisions, all of which change the words (from Hebrew or Greek to English), and all of which inevitably change subtle nuances of meaning. By translating Hebrew *ādām* as "man" instead of "person" and by using the masculine pronouns "his," the RSV certainly loses *something* with reference to the inclusive sense of the original Hebrew. Yet P&G do not point out the meaning deficiencies and ambiguities of the RSV or other traditional versions, only those of these more inclusive versions.[51]

P&G also spend a great deal of space trying to show that generic *he* is understandable even to those who consider it exclusive-sounding. It is "servicable," they say.[52] Chapter 11 is entitled, "Ordinary People Can Understand Generic 'He'." While this may be true, it sounds suspiciously like the "only-the-main-idea-but-miss-the-nuances" argument they level against their critics. Should we not seek the most accurate expression, rather than settling for one which, while understandable, gives the perception of exclusion for many readers?

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[50] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 126.

[51] P&G seem to be functioning from the perspective that masculine generic "he" retains *all* of the meaning, while other generic expressions change subtle nuances (though elsewhere they admit that there is no absolute identity between languages). With reference to various inclusive translations they write, "The differences due to starting point may be subtle, but they are there – differences in nuance in the total meaning-impact, not merely differences in phrasing with *no* meaning difference." (114). Again: "two radically different wordings are typically *not completely identical in meaning."* (67). Again: "Speech and writing operate in too many dimensions for a rough paraphrase to get everything right." (78). But this goal of complete identity of meaning or getting "everything right" is never attained by any translation – and certainly not by retaining the formally equivalent "he." See more on this below.

[52] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 215.

Ironically, P&G inadvertently demonstrate the potential confusion of using masculine terms when *they themselves* misunderstand masculine generic "man" to be gender specific (i.e., male). In their discussion of Greek *anēr,* they argue that the Greek lexicons do not recognize the sense "human being." To prove this they cite various lexicons, including the Liddell-Scott *Greek-English Lexicon*. The first two entries for *anēr* in Liddell-Scott are (1) *man,* opposed to *woman,* and (2) *man,* opposed to *god.* P&G use this data to deny that the term ever loses its distinctively male sense.[53] But what is the sense of "*man,* opposed to *god*"? The first sense, "*man,* opposed to *woman*," is clearly "male human being," but the second is clearly "human being." P&G have read the generic use of "man" in this second entry, and have misunderstood it to be gender-specific (i.e., male). In this way they illustrate the potential for misunderstanding "man" for contemporary English readers!

Now of course I am not saying that *avoiding* masculine generic "he" or "man" is the perfect solution either, or that these other, more inclusive versions necessarily get it "right" in the example above. The avoidance of masculine generic "he" can create problems as well as solving them.[54] The point is *all translation* involves subtle loss of meaning. I could take any verse in the RSV or any other version and point out the subtle loss of meaning produced in almost every word because of the move from Hebrew or Greek to English.[55] Those translations which avoid masculine generic "he" are trying to compensate in one direction. Those which use it are compensating in another. There is no perfect solution because some meaning will be lost either way. Balance and discernment are therefore needed. Translators must make hard choices on a case-by-case basis, examining a wide range of factors arising from both the source language and the receptor language, the original author and the contemporary readers.

In light of the complexity of translation and the necessity for careful discernment and balance, it is remarkable that in their "practical application" section (Chapter 14), P&G

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[53] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 325.

[54] Examples of this may be found in the NRSV which I believe went overboard in its attempt to capture all of the inclusive nuances. I have elsewhere criticized the NRSV and other versions in this regard (see Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 153, 154, 214, etc.).

[55] Indeed, P&G sound almost like philosophical deconstructionists (J. Derrida, etc.) as they page after page seek to show the loss of meaning in translations which use inclusive language. What they (and the

warn readers only to use "reliable" versions in their Bible study and reading. Among these they list the NKJV, NASB, RSV and NIV.[56] The unreliable ones would be all the inclusive versions (NRSV, NLT, NCV, GW, NIVI, CEV, TNIV, NET, etc.). But what about the unreliability of the Greek text behind the NKJV (which follows the Textus Receptus throughout)? Should not readers be warned about that? Or what about the so-called "liberal bias" claimed by many evangelicals concerning the RSV? Should not readers be warned about this? Or what about the obscurity and consequent distortion of meaning which so often results from the wooden literalness and linguistic naïveté of the NASB and the NKJV?

This same question of reliability arises with reference to gender language. What about the hundreds of times that these traditional versions do not use the so-called "permissible" inclusive language which P&G admit *improves the accuracy* of the translation?[57] Are not these versions "unreliable" since they certainly miss many "nuances" of inclusive meaning? For example, the four so-called reliable versions all translate *anthrōpos* in Romans 3:28 and elsewhere as "man": "For we maintain that a *man* is justified by faith…" (NASB, NIV; cf. NKJV, RSV). P&G strongly affirm that *anthrōpos* here means "person." In fact, they call this an "undisputed" passage and even criticize me for using it as an example of "inclusive language" (claiming it is so obvious nobody would dispute it). [58] Yet the NKJV, NASB, RSV and NIV all missed this "obvious" meaning and translated "man." Where is the criticism of this loss of meaning? Another example is the translation *adelphoi* as "brothers" even when it means "brothers and sisters" – a significant loss of meaning. P&G go so far as to admit that the whole book of Romans may be better translated in the NIVI than the NIV.[59] Yet they still consider the NIV to be reliable and the NIVI to be unreliable. It seems the meaning

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deconstructionists) do not acknowledge is that while any sentence can be "deconstructed" to show ambiguities and imprecision, the essential meaning can be preserved and communicated.

[56] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 295.

[57] For examples of the hundreds of times the TNIV improves the gender language of the NIV, even when following the Colorado Springs Guidelines, see my article, "Examples of Improvement in Accuracy of the TNIV over the NIV, When following the Colorado Springs Guidelines," available on the web at http://biblepacesetter.org/bibletranslation/files/list.htm; and at www.reformationrevival.com/WeeklyE-News/Semper%20Archive/TNIVStrauss2.html. For other examples of improvements in accuracy in the TNIV over the NIV see the TNIV website: www.tniv.info.

[58] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 94-96.

[59] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 180 n. 23.

losses in these four traditional versions do not matter so much since they lose *inclusive nuances* instead of masculine ones. Is a social agenda at work here?

The Christian public deserves more than such simplistic categories as "reliable" and "unreliable," especially with reference to the major scholarly achievements of the NRSV, TNIV, NLT, TEV, NIVI, NCV, GW, CEV, NET, NJB, and others. Believers should be encouraged to use and study a variety of Bible versions, and should be educated as to their various strengths and weaknesses. They should be taught that language always involves a measure of ambiguity and imprecision, and that every Bible version makes difficult interpretive decisions. They should be taught that there is no perfect translation, but that the multiplicity of English versions available means that different nuances of meaning and different interpretations of individual passages can be examined carefully and then explored in greater detail through the many excellent commentaries. They should be taught that the more functional equivalent[60] versions tend to capture the sense or meaning of the original text more accurately, while the more formal equivalent versions can reveal structural features, verbal allusions, and word-plays which are often lost in functional equivalence. Most of all, they should be taught that despite the inevitable ambiguities and uncertainties, God's Word can be accurately understood and appropriately applied to our lives. This is not a condescension to some "only-the-basic-meaning-but-miss-the-nuances" fallacy, as P&G claim, but is a fundamental fact about the nature of language and translation.

While formal equivalent versions are helpful tools to allow students of the Word to explore verbal connections and structural features of the original languages, this is by no means the same as retaining the (so-called) levels 3 and 4 meaning. To begin to attain this kind of precision in meaning-transfer one would need much more than a simple translation. One would need a full explanatory commentary, exploring in-depth questions of genre, style, lexical semantic ranges, cultural connotations, implication, word-plays, register, sentence structure, paragraph structure, discourse structure, social relationships and many more factors. All of these features and more were part of the intended meaning of the author. This kind of meaning retention simply cannot be

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[60] "Functional equivalence," previously called "dynamic equivalence," refers to the meaning-based translation theories developed by Eugene Nida and others.

attained in a translation – whether that translation seeks formal or functional equivalence.[61]

The implication which runs through P&G's book is that formal equivalence, and more particularly the retention of masculine terms, capture these nuances more precisely than functional equivalence. But there is little evidence to support this. In fact, a freer translation has the potential of capturing *more* of the meaning, since it has the freedom to add explanatory words or phrases. Take a passage like Matthew 9:10, where Jesus calls Matthew and then attends a banquet at his home:

"as he was reclining in the house" (closest formal equivalent)
"as He was reclining *at the table* in the house" (NASB)
"as Jesus sat at the table in the house" (NKJV)
"While Jesus was having a meal in Matthew's house" (TEV)
"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house" (NIV)
"That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests" (NLT)

Which translation is most accurate? The closest formal equivalent, "reclining in the house," leaves out much of the meaning. It does not explain that Jesus was reclining around a low table or that this posture indicates a more formal banquet or dinner party. Nor does it express the nature of first-century meals as rituals of social status. Someone might argue that these ideas are better left to a commentary, but in fact they are all critical parts of the *original meaning* which the author intended and which a first century reader would have immediately recognized. None of them would be evident to a modern English reader. Here the translation goal of transferring "as much of the meaning as possible" runs directly counter to the goal of producing a word-for-word or even a phrase-for-phrase translation.

All of these translations must therefore make compromises and trade-offs. The NASB tries to capture the cultural posture by describing Jesus as "reclining at table," but does not mention the meal. The NKJV introduces the modern idea of *sitting* at a table, and fails to identify the nature of the meal. The TEV identifies this as a meal and the

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[61] The English translation which comes closest to this goal is the NET Bible, which uses extensive footnotes to explore alternate interpretations and various nuances of meaning (see it at www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm).

NIV speaks more formally of a "dinner," but neither mentions the reclining position. The NLT suggests a formal dinner with invitations and guests, but again fails to mention the posture of the guests. All of these translations lose important "nuances" of meaning.

The simple fact is that the many differences in word meanings, idioms and cultural background make the attainment of so-called "levels 3 and 4" equivalence impossible in a standard translation. Yet we should not despair. Even with its imprecision, human language is a marvelous means of communication. Though translation is never an exact science, English speakers are blessed (some would say "spoiled") with dozens of excellent Bible versions which *together* provide greater insight into the meaning of the text. Furthermore, we are doubly blessed by the many excellent reference tools and commentaries which shed even greater light on the meaning of the text in its literary and historical context.

Considering the complexity of meaning and translation, it would be prudent not to use such generalizing labels as "reliable" and "unreliable" in this debate.

WHEN IS A GENERIC NOT A GENERIC? THE ISSUE OF MALE REPRESENTATION.

Central to the claim of loss of meaning for P&G are passages which use the resumptive masculine pronoun "he" (e.g. "God will give to each person according to what *he* has done," Rom. 2:6).[62] P&G mount a two-pronged attack against the use of inclusive language in these passages. First, as noted above, they claim that the methods used (such as using plurals for singulars, second person for third, passive constructions, singular "they," etc.) all result in subtle loss of meaning. I have already responded to this claim, pointing out that all translation inevitably loses something, and that the use of masculine terms in English is just as likely to alter the meaning of the original as changes in person or number.[63] Second, P&G claim that these passages are not in fact true generics, but rather portray a male representative as an example for a generic application.

We must therefore distinguish two kinds of expressions: (1) true generics, which refer to people in general (e.g. "a person is justified by faith"), and (2) male representative

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[62] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender Neutral,* 111, point out in their chapter on generic "he" that, "From now on we are talking only about backward-referring generic 'he'."

[63] For a discussion of these alternatives to masculine generic "he" see Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 117-127.

generics, which use a male as an illustration for a general principle. P&G claim that masculine pronouns like *autos* are not true generics, but rather indicate male representation, where a male figure stands for both men and women.[64] They write, "'He' includes both men and women, but does so using a male example as a pictorial starting point."[65] Masculine terms should therefore be retained to transfer as much of the meaning as possible.

There are serious linguistic problems with this conclusion. For one thing, in the vast majority of cases it is impossible to determine whether an author intended a passage to be a true generic or a male representative. P&G give no guidelines in this regard, yet strongly criticize versions which assume a true generic over a male representative.

Without such guidelines, P&G are inconsistent in their translation of masculine terms. For example, they affirm that the Greek masculine pronoun *autos* should be translated "he" because it indicates a male representative. Yet they concede that terms like *anthrō-pos* and *ādām* (also masculine terms) are often true generics, meaning not "a man" but "a person." But what happens in the multitude of cases where *anthrōpos* or other masculine generics are followed by a resumptive masculine pronoun? For example, the English Standard Version (ESV) appropriately translates 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person (*anthrōpos*) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God…." *Anthrōpos* is understood here to be a true generic, meaning "person." But the sentence continues "… for they are folly to *him* (*autos*)." Do the (supposed) male nuances associated with *autos* now turn the whole passage into one of male representation? If so, we should go back and translate *anthrōpos* as "a man" whenever it is followed by a masculine pronoun, but may keep it as "person" when there is no resumptive pronoun. This is obviously absurd. Grammatically, pronouns *follow* their antecedents; they do not govern them. If *anthrōpos* is a true generic meaning "person," then the resumptive pronouns which follow are also true generics (meaning "him or her"). P&G have the tail (the pronoun) wagging the dog (the antecedent). In beginning Greek we teach our students that a pronoun replaces a noun (its antecedent), and gets its meaning from that noun – not vice versa!

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[64] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* chs. 7-11, pp. 111-232, 277-78; esp. 142ff.
[65] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 143.

One problem seems to be that P&G are imposing English meanings onto Greek words. They are assuming *autos* means "he," and since "he" sounds so male-oriented to English ears, it should be translated with masculine terms. But the Greek text does not say "he," it says *autos,* which is a different lexeme in a different language with a different semantic range. Its gender functions grammatically, not biologically. We should not impose the male connotations of "he" onto *autos* unless we are sure they are there. And in most generic contexts, there is no evidence that they are there. Indeed, when *autos* is preceded by a true generic term, we must assume it too is a true generic. It does not mean "he"; it means "that person" to which I just referred. Again, pronouns follow their antecedents; they do not govern them.

This imposition of English meanings onto Greek words is evident elsewhere in their discussion. For example, they find it perfectly acceptable to translate pronouns like *oudeis* ("no one"), substantival adjectives like *pas* ("everyone"), and substantival participles like *ho pisteuōn* ("the one who believes") with inclusive terms.[66] But in fact these are all *masculine* generics, just like *autos.* If the masculine gender of *autos* indicates a male nuance or male representation, why not these others? Should not *ho pisteuōn* be translated "the man who believes"? But as P&G admit, these terms are functioning as true generics and so may be translated with inclusive terms. Does it not follow that in similar contexts *autos* may also be translated with inclusive terms?

In an earlier article, Wayne Grudem defends this idea of male representation. He writes that when the original audience of Revelation 3:20 read "… if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him (*autos*) ...." they would have envisioned a male representative standing for the whole group. He explains:

> They surely did not envision a group, for the Greek expressions are all singular.
> Nor did they envision a sexless gender-neutral person, for all human beings that
> they knew were either male or female, not gender-neutral. Nor is it true that they
> were so used to grammatical gender in all nouns and pronouns that they would
> have envisioned a sexless person, for pronouns applied to (adult) persons were
> either masculine or feminine, and these pronouns did specify the sex of the person

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[66] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 92, 98.

referred to. They would almost certainly have envisioned an individual male representative for the group of people....[67]

This argument is dubious. Grudem assumes that because the grammatical gender of *autos* is masculine, the reader must necessarily "envision" a male representative. But this again confuses biological and grammatical gender. Grudem is here applying an English (biological) gender system to Greek grammatical gender. If *autos* is a true generic, then it *does not carry* biological gender distinction. In Spanish the term for "person," *la persona,* is feminine. If my Spanish-speaking colleague said about me that *La persona que enseña griego está aquí* ("the person who teaches Greek is here"), a Spanish speaker would *not* by necessity "envision" a female person. They would recognize the feminine gender as a purely grammatical category.

Grudem's claim that no one envisions a "sexless" person is also dubious. The word "person" itself is "sexless" (= non-gender-specific). Does this mean that this term has no semantic value? Readers need not "envision" a gender-specific individual for the term to carry semantic value. If what Grudem says were true, no true generics would exist in any language.

Nor can it be said that *pronouns* always evoke a certain sexual identity. *Autos* can refer to a person without specifying the sex of that person. It is significant that Grudem qualifies "adult" persons in his statement since he knows that *tekna* ("children") is neuter, and that it may be followed by neuter pronouns. Ephesians 6:4 reads "Fathers, do not exasperate your children (*tekna;* neut. pl.*)*; instead, bring them (*auta;* neut. pl.) up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Does the neuter gender of *auta* mean that children (and even adults, who are often called *tekna* in the New Testament) were viewed as neutered or sexless? Of course not. No Greek reader would impose biological gender on the basis of a word's grammatical gender. Again, English categories related to sex are being artificially imposed on a very different Greek gender system. Grudem cannot imagine a Greek speaker using *autos* without envisioning a male. But that is because Grudem is thinking in English rather than in Greek.

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[67]Grudem, "A Response," 273-274. See the same basic argument in Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 142ff.

Of course the assumption that masculine terms by necessity carry some sexual connotations also has the potential for great abuse. The Hebrew term for spirit is feminine (*rûaḥ*); the Greek term is neuter (*pneuma*) and is often followed by neuter pronouns. Would the original readers have envisioned the Spirit as a "she" in the Old Testament and as an impersonal "it" in the New Testament? Of course not. Hebrew and Greek pronouns follow their antecedent's gender without any necessary sexual connotations.[68]

This is not the case in English, since most nouns do not carry grammatical gender. The masculine pronoun "he" almost always carries *some* male nuances because it is used almost exclusively of persons. This renders it an imprecise and somewhat ambiguous pronoun for true generic contexts. Does this make it "wrong"? Not wrong, but imprecise – a shortcoming in the English language which produces a measure of ambiguity in translation. But to argue, as P&G do, that "he" is the *correct* translation while other renderings (such as plurals for singulars, second person for third, singular "they" for singular "he," or passive constructions) are "distortions" of the text is simplistic and naïve.

What some English speakers have trouble comprehending is that since Greek pronouns like *autos* were used for *all* masculine nouns, whether animate or inanimate, in many contexts this pronoun sounded exactly like "it" sounds to English ears. Matthew 5:15 reads "Neither do people light a lamp (*lychnos*) and put it (*autos*) under a bowl." The Greek noun *lychnos* is masculine, so it is followed by the masculine pronoun *autos*. Matthew 16:25 reads "For whoever wants to save his life (*psychē*) will lose it (*autē*)." *Psychē* is feminine and so is followed by the feminine pronoun *autē*. No one would argue that *autos* should be translated "him" and *autē* "her." In such contexts the gender of *autos* is purely grammatical, with no sexual connotations whatsoever.

Similarly, it would be perfectly natural for a Greek speaker to hear *autos* as fully inclusive when following an inclusive noun like *anthrōpos,* referring to a person. In this case it does not mean "he," but rather "that person just mentioned."

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[68] Of course the Spirit is not a "he" either, but rather a person. Ideally, English would have a singular pronoun that did not indicate sexual identity, but only personhood. Better yet (like some languages around the world), English would have pronouns that were used only for deity. Like all languages, English again falls short of perfection, and so for now, linguistically, "we see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV).

But what about the suggestion that these examples are in fact "male representative" passages? Even if we assume for the sake of argument that this category is present in the Bible, it is still nearly impossible to determine whether the original author had a male representative or a true generic in mind. How should we translate in such cases? *Which meaning gets the benefit of the doubt?* Some would say that since the biblical revelation is for all people, doubtful passages should be translated inclusively. If it is *representative,* then who is represented? Only males or all people? In most cases, it is the latter, so an inclusive rendering would be more accurate.

P&G, on the contrary, would argue that masculine terms should be used to preserve "male nuances." This is because they believe that God intentionally designed masculine generics in Greek and Hebrew to reflect the God-ordained priority of the male. It is to this questionable premise that we now turn.

WERE MASCULINE GENERICS ORDAINED BY GOD TO AFFIRM MALE PRIORITY?

At certain points in their discussion, P&G come very close to the *divine language fallacy,* which claims that Hebrew and Greek are perfect and precise languages created especially for divine communication. In answering the argument that masculine generic terms were simply part of the grammatical structure of the biblical languages, they claim that *all* of the connotations and associations of the language are divinely established and controlled:

> In a broader sense these passages are all the more meaningful because of the fact that God in his sovereign control of history *did* choose that just these resources would be available to biblical writers. What is not a "choice" from the standpoint of a human author [i.e., the presence of masculine generic terms]…is still a choice from the standpoint of the divine author *who controls language,* culture, and history and uses it as he wills.[69]   [bracketed text and second italics are mine]

In other words, P&G are arguing that God intentionally established and ordained masculine generic terms in Hebrew and Greek in order to express male nuances and connotations. They continue:

> Everything the Bible says, and even the manner in which it says it, involves subtle moral implications, because the Bible is, among other things, a definitive example of morally pure speech.[70]

I am not sure what P&G mean by "morally pure speech," but I suspect they are avoiding unqualified phrases like "pure speech" or "perfect language" since all language contains ambiguity and imprecision. But the assertion that God sovereignly "controls language" sounds very close to the fallacy that God created Greek and Hebrew as perfect languages for revelation. While it remains a divine mystery how an imperfect vehicle (language) can communicate inerrant truth, this mystery cannot be resolved by naïvely assuming that Hebrew and Greek are precise and perfect vehicles for divine communication. As all linguists and translators would agree, no language can bear such a burden. (Nor does God require it – as the appearance of grammatical infelicities in Scripture show.[71])

Nor will it do to argue that since God is absolutely sovereign, he controls the development of all languages. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant to the discussion, since all languages remain imperfect instruments of communication. Gender systems around the world differ dramatically, making it impossible to reproduce the formal gender distinctions of Hebrew and Greek.[72] Recently I was speaking with a Bible translator who informed me that in the language of the Isan people of Northeast Thailand personal pronouns do not have any gender distinctions. Think of the loss of masculine nuances there!

If we suppose that the formal characteristics of the biblical languages are God-ordained, we open an impossible Pandora's box for translators. Greek, for example, does not have a present progressive form. Does this mean we should never introduce a present

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[69] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 192-93.

[70] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 193.

[71] I am grateful to Darrell Bock for this insight.

[72] See especially Carson, *Inclusive Language,* chapter 4. P&G celebrate that English still has the ability to express supposedly God-ordained masculine generics. But what about those languages that do not use masculine generics, or whose pronouns have no gender distinctions? Will they have to muddle along with inferior and unreliable translations, incapable of communicating the male nuances which God built into Hebrew and Greek? Should we engineer masculine generics for these language so they can more accurately express God's Word? Of course not. The beauty of God's Word is that its meaning can be translated with accuracy into any language in the world, whatever the gender system.

progressive in English translation so as to accurately reflect God's revelation? Of course not. The ultimate goal of translation is to reproduce meaning, not form.

This brings us back to some fundamental issues of linguistics and Bible translation philosophy. I have discussed these issues at greater length in earlier works, and will not repeat all of my arguments here.[73] Instead I will summarize some basic linguistic errors which (it seems to me) characterize P&G's work.

OTHER LINGUISTIC ERRORS

ILLEGITIMATE TOTALITY TRANSFER

One linguistic fallacy which permeates P&G's discussion is "illegitimate totality transfer," or the all-encompassing meaning fallacy. [74] This fallacy assumes that the various senses of a particular lexeme necessarily impose their meaning on each other. While words may have various senses depending on the context and their various collocations, they do not carry all of these senses into any one context. For example, when I speak of a *fresh* water lake*,* there is no sense of "clean" or "brisk"; nor is there any sense of "non-saline" in *fresh* air. Two different senses of a lexeme do not necessarily force their meanings on each other. This does not mean that there cannot be interplay between various senses, but only that this interplay is not universal or necessary. The claim that *autos* always or necessarily carries male connotations when it refers to persons is an example of this fallacy. *Autos* can function as a masculine personal pronoun (with a male antecedent) or as a generic pronoun (with a generic antecedent). But it is illegitimate totality transfer to claim that *autos* necessarily carries male connotations into its generic contexts.

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[73] See my article "Linguistic and Hermeneutical Fallacies," (note 6 above) and *Distorting Scripture?, passim,* especially chapter 4.

[74] I am grateful to Ben Irwin, associate editor at Zondervan, for making this point. For discussion of this fallacy see James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218; M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 25-27; D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 60-61.

FORM AND MEANING CONFUSION

P&G repeatedly insist that they are not confusing form and meaning, and that their opponents are misrepresenting them in this area.[75] Yet this fallacy persists as they frequently assume that the retention of form is somehow *necessary* for the retention of meaning. We have already noted examples of this: (1) the assumption that so-called "level 3" meaning may be attained through the reproduction of grammatical forms;[76] (2) the claim that the masculine grammatical gender of *autos* (a formal characteristic) necessarily carries male connotations (a semantic feature); (3) the continued insistence that the retention of formal characteristics like person and number necessarily results in closer equivalence of meaning; (4) the frequent assumption that semantic distinctions in Greek mirror those in English. For example, they argue that in passages like Romans 8:14-22, *tekna* should be translated as "children" and *huioi* as "sons" since the Greek uses two different terms which have two different meanings.[77] While it may be true that *huioi* and *tekna* have different nuances of meaning in Romans 8 (there is seldom if ever exact synonymy between lexemes), it does not necessarily follow that *huioi* means "sons." In this context, both *tekna* and *huioi* are probably closer in meaning to the English gloss "children" than to "sons." The fact that we have two words in English and two words in Greek does not mean that the semantic values are parallel.

How should we then translate in this case? As usual, there is no perfect solution. If we do detect a significant male component in *huioi,* then alternating between "sons" (for *(huioi*) and "children" (for *tekna*) is probably best. If the meaning of *huioi* is closer to "children," however, then either using "children" for both, or alternating between another term like "offspring" is probably best. But when P&G claim that "children" for *huioi* is inaccurate because it "is not identical to the original" and because "a nuance has changed,"[78] they are setting an impossible standard. No translation is identical to the original, and nuances *always* change. As often in New Testament contexts, the nearest

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[75] See especially Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 190-191.

[76] See Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 191 n. 3.

[77] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 257-258. This distinction should be maintained, they argue, since "It is God's business to decide what meaning components are important to include in the Bible, not ours!" But of course it is we, with the help of the Spirit, who must determine which meaning God intended.

[78] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 257.

English equivalent to *huioi* in Romans 8 is probably "children," regardless of what *tekna* means (cf. Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:35; Rom. 9:26; Gal. 3:26; Heb. 2:10; 12:7-8).[79]

LITERAL (OR ROOT) MEANING FALLACY

While P&G affirm that words have a range of potential senses rather than a single all-encompassing meaning, at times they fall into the literal meaning fallacy which assumes that one sense of a lexeme is the "base" or "core" one which controls all others. While one may appropriately speak of a *primary* sense of a word, this is very different from a *literal* meaning. A primary sense refers to the most common meaning, and may serve a pragmatic function in translation: *try this first to see if it works*. To call a primary sense the literal meaning, however, assumes the lexical fallacy that one sense of a lexeme governs or controls all others. For example, to say that "flesh" is the literal meaning of the Greek term *sarx* is to assume that this sense somehow imposes its meaning on other senses of *sarx* ("life," "human being," "sinful nature," etc.). This is a fallacy. Rather, context alone determines which sense of a lexeme is intended within its semantic range.

P&G subtly fall into this fallacy at various points in their book. While discussing the Greek term *adelphoi,* for example, they write:

> To be exact, the masculine plural form *adelphoi* does not literally mean "brothers and sisters," but something like "brothers, and maybe sisters as well (look at the context to see)."[80]

While correctly noting that context determines the sense of *adelphoi,* the fallacy persists that *adelphoi* literally means "brothers, and maybe sisters." This gives the false impression that "brothers" is the controlling or literal meaning, and sisters may sometimes be tacked on. But in fact, context alone determines whether *adelphoi* means "physical brothers," "physical brothers and sisters," "figurative brothers," or "figurative brothers and sisters."[81] None of these four is the literal meaning (unless you mean by

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[79] For more on these terms see Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 155-166.

[80] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 264.

[81] We should remind the reader that, technically speaking, these English phrases are not the actual *senses* of the Greek term, but rather English *glosses* meant to represent, as closely as possible, its various senses.

literal "non-figurative," in which case the first two are both literal). All of them are rather potential senses within the semantic range of *adelphoi*.[82]

While it is legitimate to speak of a primary (most common) sense of *adelphoi,* this meaning must always give way to the sense of the word in each context. (Ironically, "brothers and sisters" [figurative] is the primary sense of *adelphoi* in the New Testament Epistles.)

This distinction between literal and primary may seem like a small thing, but it has far-reaching implications, since the literal fallacy gives the false impression that the grammatical gender of words like *adelphoi* in some sense controls their meaning. This inappropriately opens the door for talking about supposed "nuances" of male meaning that must always be preserved in translation.

THE EXAMPLE OF SINGULAR ADELPHOS

Several of the fallacies we have discussed above appear together in P&G's discussion of the singular *adelphos*. While acknowledging that the plural *adelphoi* can mean "brothers and sisters," they reject the translation "brother or sister" for the singular. They write:

> … the plural is used to cover mixed groups, but the singular always covers only one person. That one can be either male or female. If the one is male, *adelphos* is the appropriate term. If the one is female, *adelphē*.[83]

The statement "the singular always covers only one person" is a confusion of form and meaning, since generic uses of a word do not refer to only one person, but to people or classes of people (e.g., "man shall not live on bread alone"). It is also a literal meaning fallacy since it fails to recognize that *adelphos* can function either with an individual referent (e.g., "he is my brother") or as a generic term ("a brother should not hurt a brother"). Just as the English generic "a person" can mean "a man or a woman," and the

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[82]The fact that *adelphoi* is not used for sisters alone does not change this fundamental lexical point. While it is true that "only sisters" is not within the semantic range of *adelphoi,* this does not push its meaning closer to the idea of "brothers" in any particular context, since context alone determines which sense within the semantic range is intended.

[83] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 269.

Greek *anthrōpos* (masculine!) can mean "a man or a woman," so *adelphos* can mean "a brother or a sister."

P&G recognize that *adelphos* can be used in generic contexts, but they still reject the translation "brother or sister." This is because they claim these are male representative passages.

> But what happens when one uses *adelphos* in an example like Matthew 5:22, which is intended to express a general truth? The effect is somewhat like what we have seen with generic "he." The masculine form of *adelphos* leads the listener to picture in his mind a male example. But the male example illustrates a general truth.[84]

The assumption that these are male representative passages is again a confusion of form and meaning – that a grammatically masculine form necessarily carries male connotations. P&G also repeat the fallacy that a masculine term requires the reader to envision a man. This would mean, as we have seen, that the Spanish *la persona* would force the hearer to envision a woman. This is linguistic nonsense.

Furthermore, there is little evidence in these contexts that *adelphos* is a male representative rather than a true generic. Consider these examples from 1 John 2:9-11:

> Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his *adelphos* is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his *adelphos* lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his *adelphos* is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; … 1 John 2:9-11 (cf. 1 John 3:10, 15)

This passage is clearly about hating or loving a fellow believer, whether male or female. Nothing in the passage suggests a male is standing as a representative for a group. If the Greek term here were *anthrōpos,* P&G would surely not object to the translation "Anyone who hates *a person…"* instead of "Anyone who hates a *man…*," since they admit *anthrōpos* is fully generic in similar contexts. But there is little if any difference between the masculine generic function of *anthrōpos* and the masculine generic function of *adelphos.* Just as *anthrōpos* can mean "a person" (= "a man or a woman"), so *adelphos* can mean "a sibling" (= "a brother or a sister").

We could add to these linguistic arguments the lexical evidence. Contrary to the claims of P&G,[85] the Greek lexicons affirm this sense of *adelphos.* Louw and Nida identify one meaning of *adelphos* as "a fellow believer," noting that the masculine form "may include both men and women."[86] Bauer, *et al.,* say that *adelphos* is used of "everyone who is devoted to [Jesus]," and of "Christians in their relations w. each other."[87] Liddell and Scott note one sense of *adelphos* as "a fellow Christian."[88]

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND THE GENDER LANGUAGE DEBATE

In conclusion, a word should be said about the political and social motivations which are present in this debate. Throughout their book P&G repeatedly warn of the politically correct agenda of radical feminism that is driving gender language changes. These are legitimate concerns. I, too, am a conservative evangelical who has concerns about feminist agendas. But we must not let our theological agendas cloud our judgment concerning sound hermeneutical and linguistic principles. We must rather set out clearly the goals, methods and philosophy of Bible translation, and then draw conclusions based on these, rather than on our abhorrence for certain cultural tendencies.

We must also be cautious since the claim of political correctness can cut both ways. To be politically correct in most conservative evangelical contexts is to strongly oppose any hint of feminism. Many conservative and evangelical leaders are anti-feminist, and have come out strongly against any inclusive language changes. I know of professors at conservative institutions who would endorse the TNIV if not for fear that they would lose their teaching positions.

The first response among many evangelicals when they hear of a "gender-neutral" Bible is to react with indignation and disgust. Witness for example the near hysteria

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[84] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 269.

[85] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 269 n. 47; 276 n. 52.

[86] J. P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies), 1:125; 2:4.

[87] W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 2nd ed.; eds. W. F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 16.

[88] H. J. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement,* 9th rev. ed.; eds. S. Liddell, P. G. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

against the NIVI provoked by a series of articles in *World* magazine several years ago.[89]
P&G suggest that this reaction was in fact a response based on level 3 linguistics – the
intuitive reflexes of native speakers of the language.[90] But nothing I read in *World*
magazine and other popular sources reflected anything but level 1 naiveté: major
confusion of form and meaning provoked by a ideologically-motivated suspicion of
feminism. In fact, the strongest reactions occurred *before* people had even seen or read
the NIVI or the TNIV. How could they intuitively perceive that these changes were
wrong before they even knew their nature? Witness also the fact that many people had
been happily reading a dozen or so inclusive language versions (NLT, NCV, CEV, TEV,
NRSV, etc.[91]) without any negative reaction – until they were informed that these were
"gender-neutral" versions![92] Only then did the "Bible rage" begin.[93]

In short, let us all watch our agendas. The great challenge we face as biblical scholars
and translators is to reproduce the meaning of God's Word in the most accurate and
reliable way we can. The decision to use or not to use inclusive language in each case
should be based on this goal alone.

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[89] See Susan Olasky, "The Stealth Bible: The Popular *New International Version* is quietly going "gender-neutral," *World,* March 29, 1997: 12-15; *idem,* "The Battle for the Bible," *World*, April 19, 1997: 14-18.

[90] Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral,* 88.

[91] See note 4 above.

[92] See Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* 22.

[93] For this designation see Carson, *Debate,* 15-16.