

THE TNIV: TERRIBLE, NEFARIOUS, INSIDIOUS VERSION?

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When the secular media cover a story about Christianity, it must be a big story. Recently a story about Bible translation made headlines.

Zondervan Publishing Company, publishers of the popular *New International Version* of the Bible (NIV), released in early 2002 a revision of the NIV. Dubbed *Today's New International Version* (TNIV), the new Bible translation received immediate criticism from some Christian circles. Of such conflicts, stories are made.

And questions are raised for the faithful. What is the nature of this new translation of the Bible? Why did the publishers think that it was needed? Why are its critics so upset? Should Christians read it?

The TNIV's Claims

The TNIV appeared in bookstores with plenty of publicity from the publishers. Throughout, the publicity has stressed the same points. I will summarize briefly. Details are available on the Internet at www.tniv.info.

First, the TNIV was produced by a wide committee of scholars of the Old and New Testaments, the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT). Members in the group are expressly committed to the authority of the Bible and have first-rate scholarly credentials.

Second, the revisions in the TNIV are largely a matter of responding to changes in the English language that have occurred recently. Those revisions can be placed in three categories:

- i. Removal of expressions that are no longer part of spoken English, (so that an expression like "with child" becomes "pregnant");
- ii. Replacement of "the Jews" with "the Jewish leaders" where it is clear that the expression refers specifically to Jewish religious leaders;
- iii. the elimination of the generic use of masculine expressions (words like "he," "man" or "sons" when in context they refer to both men and women). On this last point, the TNIV retains masculine expressions that refer to God or Christ and preserves gender-specific expressions that refer to one or the other gender exclusively. For example, 1 Corinthians 14:34 continues to read "Women should remain silent in the churches."

More broadly, the objective of the TNIV remains the same as the NIV: to render the Scriptures in language that is clear, idiomatic, current, and readable by English-speaking people around the world. In keeping with the proliferation of "brands" on the marketplace, the publishers also announced that the NIV would remain in print alongside the newer TNIV. Zondervan is not "replacing" the NIV.

The TNIV's Critics

While endorsements of the TNIV came quickly from many quarters, so did disapproval. In particular, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), an organization committed to preserving a hierarchical understanding of the Bible's teaching on gender roles, objected vociferously to many revisions of gender-specific expressions. Again I will summarize briefly, leaving interested readers to find the details on the Web at www.cbmw.org/resources/tniv/index.html.

The CBMW's objections essentially boil down to this: By altering gender-specific expressions the TNIV either obscures the text's meaning or eliminates specific reference to men where the original had it. For example, in Revelation 3:20, the translation "I will come in and eat with them [instead of "him"], and they [instead of "he"] with me," is said to obscure the emphasis on individual responsibility in the text.

Some TNIV Caveats

So what are we to make of this controversy? First, we need not disparage the Christian commitment of the CBT that produced the TNIV nor of the CBMW that criticizes it. Both groups are made up of individuals who are acting according to sincere devotion to the gospel. Furthermore, even if both groups have sinister hidden agendas, the value of the translation or the significance of its alleged weaknesses have nothing to do with the people involved. Bad people can make good translations, bad people can offer valid criticisms, and vice versa on all points. Translations must be judged on their merits, not on the motives, hidden or unhidden, of the people who produced them.

Neither is it possible to weigh the scholarly or ecclesiastical credentials of the groups and find a significant difference. Both sides have scholars competent in Greek, Hebrew, and theology. Both sides have prominent ministers. "My expert is smarter than your expert" is no way to settle this issue.

But in this case, two points are worth noting. First, the CBT has excellent scholarly credentials. Its members are some of the finest evangelical biblical scholars currently active. Second, the CBT is no hotbed of radical feminism. All its members are committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. The large majority has publicly stated that the Bible reserves certain ministry functions in the church to men and leadership in marriage to men.

Some TNIV Conclusions

So what of the merits of this new translation? First, I am confident that it addresses a very real problem. Many English-speaking people will understand expressions like "man" or "brother" as referring to either male or female, but some will not. If the TNIV makes it easier for such readers to understand that Scripture addresses all people, it is a welcome addition to the ever-growing collection of English Bibles. For those who can read gender-specific expressions and understand their gender-neutral reference, the 1984 edition of the NIV will still be in print, as will many other versions with gender-specific language.

But are the critics right when they argue that the TNIV's gender-neutral language distorts other elements of the biblical text's meaning? I would insist such distortion could only happen if the TNIV were read as a word-for-word translation instead of an idea-for-idea translation.

The difference between these two approaches is crucial. Some English versions attempt to produce a word-for-word correspondence between the original-language text and the English translation. The *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), for example, translates wherever possible with single words or distinct phrases that correspond to the words in the Hebrew or Greek original. In so doing, it generally retains something of the flavor of the original's emphasis. But sometimes it does so at the expense of clarity. This approach is called formal equivalence.

The contrasting approach is called functional equivalence. This is the approach of the NIV and the TNIV. Translators employing this approach translate so that the idea of the original is clear, even if the words are different. It puts higher stock on clarity of concepts than on direct translation of words.

No translation can be entirely a formal equivalent or a functional equivalent. Anyone who has ever tried to read the English portions of a Hebrew or Greek interlinear text knows that word-for-word literalness in translation is unintelligible to someone who does not know the original



languages. So verbal equivalent translations often resort to translating idea-for-idea, and dynamic equivalent translations often retain word-for-word renderings.

Even the NASB does not follow word-for-word literal translation to the extreme. For example, the NASB regularly translates the Greek word *splanchna* as "heart" (as does nearly every modern English translation), even though *splanchna* literally means "intestines." However, used as a metaphor, it suggested to Greek readers the place of deep feelings for others. "Guts of compassion" would be literal in Colossians 3:12, but the NASB concedes to functional equivalence and renders "heart of compassion" instead.

The TNIV's critics speak as if only formal equivalence were proper, ignoring the legitimate goals of functional equivalence. Gender-neutral renderings of generic male expressions may obscure a text's secondary emphasis. But functional-equivalent translations do not attempt to retain secondary emphases. Rather, they attempt to offer a readable and clear representation of the primary idea of the text.

The fact is that no English translation can represent every point of emphasis in the original Hebrew or Greek text. Even the most literal translations cannot convey the precise nuance of every Hebrew or Greek sentence. This fact cautions all readers of the Bible against making too much of the details of any English Bible translation. It takes informed, direct reference to the original languages to understand the nuances of the text's details.

In the end, opinions about the TNIV will largely depend on two approaches to the church's teaching ministry. On one side are those whose concern is to remove obstacles that would impede some people's heeding the biblical message. On the other side are those whose concern is to avoid creating misunderstanding of the biblical message. TNIV proponents belong to the first group. Their aim is to allow the message of Scripture to be heard by people for whom gender-specific language is an obstacle. TNIV opponents are part of the second group. They want to ensure that no one is misled by a translation that might obscure minor but legitimate elements of the biblical text.

As for me, I will stand with the first group. The fact remains that all translations are capable of misunderstanding. So is the original-language text, for that matter. Potential misunderstandings should be avoided, but they cannot be altogether avoided.

Oddly enough, the opponents of the TNIV seem to insist that its predecessor, the NIV, is preferable. Yet the NIV's consistent dynamic-equivalence translation of some expressions has a more obvious potential to mislead than any of the newer expressions in the TNIV. For example, in Paul's letters the NIV repeatedly translates the Greek word *sarx* as "sinful nature" instead of its more literal meaning "flesh." In so doing, the translators are attempting to avoid leaving the impression that Paul regarded the physical body as evil. Such a concern is legitimate. But many readers have certainly understood "sinful nature" to refer to something equally far from Paul's meaning, namely, total depravity inherited by all people from Adam. Yet the TNIV's critics are apparently content to let such major moves of dynamic equivalence stand while objecting to the relatively minor shift from "he" to "they."

In the end, the commercial marketplace will make the decision on the survival of the TNIV. Bible translation is big business. Publishers will only market versions that the Bible-reading public will purchase. The TNIV joins other "gender-neutral" or "gender-accurate" versions like the [New Living Translation](#) and the *New Revised Standard Version*. But its publisher will keep the [1984 NIV](#) in print indefinitely. It continues to stand with other versions, including the [NASB](#) and the *English Standard Version*, that retain gender-specific expressions even when they refer to people of both genders. Bible readers can vote with their wallets on the issue of gender in Bible translation. Those votes will be carefully counted by the publisher.

Even when they come from respected leaders, exaggerated alarms about the effects of a translation obscure the real issues of translational philosophy. The TNIV is merely the



extension of one time-tested approach to a recent concern. If people read it along with other English versions, the sky will not fall. In fact, some might listen to what they would not otherwise. •

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