

Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture?

He Said, They Said

Grant R. Osborne: NO

Whether or not to use inclusive language in Bible translation is not a gender issue but a matter of translation theory. Those of us who believe in the use of inclusive language are not trying to force a feminist agenda on evangelicalism. Many who use inclusive language, in fact, are affiliated with the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). We must be careful about attributing motives to actions.

The true question is whether formal equivalence or functional equivalence, as Bible translation theories, produces the best translation for our day. Formal equivalence (sometimes called "literal translation") believes that the original wording, grammar, and syntax should be retained so long as the resulting translation is understandable (KJV, NASB, and RSV are examples). Functional equivalence (also called "dynamic translation") believes that the text should have the same impact on the modern reader that the original had on the ancient reader. According to this approach, it is not the original terms but the meaning of the whole that is important, asking the question, "How would Isaiah or Paul say this today to get his meaning across?" (the Good News Bible and NLT are examples; NIV and NRSV are sometimes literal, sometimes dynamic). The first is a "word-for-word" translation and the second a "thought- for-thought" translation.

For instance, Matthew 5:3 in the New American Standard Bible reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," but the New Living Translation reads, "God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the kingdom of heaven is given to them." Functional equivalence tries to communicate the meaning of blessed and poor in spirit rather than simply to translate the words themselves. It does not ignore the words but rather translates the ideas behind the words.

In fact, a purely literal translation is impossible. The King James Version and the NASB do not keep every nuance of the original intact, nor can they. Every translator has to decide the best way to translate the words of one language into another, and that means changing not only words but also idioms and grammatical structures. Translation by slide rule cannot be done, and decisions have to be made.

MAKING SCRIPTURE CLEAR

The use of inclusive pronouns in translations falls within the realm of dynamic translation theory. In the ancient world it was common to say "man" or "he" when speaking of all people. The influence of the KJV has made it common until recent years to do the same. Within the last two decades, however, this is practiced less and less, and those who have not grown up in the church can misunderstand such male-oriented language. (You do hear it now and then in newscasts, but normally by older commentators who grew up with the idiom.) Even if the inclusive he is retained in some stylebooks, it is impossible to deny that its occurrence is becoming rarer or that ultimately it is on its way out in modern language. A basic principle of all translation theory is to express the ancient text in the thoughts and idioms of the receptor language.

While it is true that the "feminist" agenda launched the protest against the inclusive he, the issue has gone beyond ideological boundaries. The public as a whole, whether sympathetic or not to the feminist cause, is reluctant to use he or man when referring to all people. In the public schools, he has not been used for years to speak of both men and women, and most young people under 30 have not grown up with its use. As Jerold Apps says in *Improving Your Writing Skills*, "People are often confused when words like he and man are used to mean sometimes men and sometimes both sexes." Therefore, biblical scholars more and more are translating male pronouns, when they refer to men and women, with a plural.

Both formal and functional techniques have the same goals--accuracy, clarity, and rhetorical power. Literal translations prize word-for-word accuracy, and dynamic translations seek both accuracy and clarity in communicating the meaning of the text. However, it is a very real question whether the retention of an inclusive he is really more accurate.

If the biblical author is referring to both men and women, it is more accurate to state such in the translated text. If man and he refer to all people in the original text, then the principle of accuracy favors rendering them as person or they in the translation.

There is room for both literal and dynamic translations. For those who do not know the biblical languages, literal translations are a necessity for serious Bible study. For those who want to understand the message of the text clearly, a dynamic translation is indispensable. There is room for both the retention and the replacement of male pronouns and terms in various versions. Neither is wrong; both have distinctive purposes. One lets the reader know exactly how the ancient author worded his message; the other tells the reader exactly what he meant.

Let us remember Paul's principle in 1 Corinthians 9:22--"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (NIVI). This has become an important missiological mandate. It means that, in any receptor culture that does not oppose the gospel, the missionary/Christian must adapt to make the gospel proclamation accessible to the people. The task is to be culturally relevant without being culture bound. Whenever a detail within a culture is not inimical to biblical Christianity, the church should adapt its proclamation to that practice. Replacing man with people or he with they does not contradict the meaning of the biblical text, while retaining them can be, at worst, offensive and, at best, misleading to many modern people.

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The American Heritage Book of English Usage states, "It is undeniable that large numbers of men and women are uncomfortable using constructions that have been criticized for being sexist. Since there is little to be gained by offending people in your audience, it makes sense . . . to try to accommodate at least some of these concerns." It is likely that Paul today would not use such unnecessarily offensive language as man or he when it refers to men and women. (For instance, see Psalm 32:1, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven," which Paul quotes in Romans 4:7 as "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven," NIV.) This is not capitulating to a feminist agenda but exercising evangelistic sensitivity toward those (including many evangelicals!) who can be offended by such.

POINTS OF AGREEMENT

Let us now turn to specific issues. In many areas I agree with those who oppose certain changes mandated by radical feminists. For instance, I would not change the names of God. God should be "Father" and Christ "Son of Man" and "Son of God." Moreover, when the context indicates men are clearly being addressed, we should retain male language. For instance, in the parable of the tenant farmers in Luke 20:9-18, the farmers are clearly men, so we retain the male pronouns (NLT: "A man planted a vineyard . . . he sent one of his servants," 20:9, 10).

The difficulty comes when men are being addressed in the ancient setting, but men and women would be addressed in the modern setting. In many of those instances, communication is better served by changing the pronouns lest the modern reader mistakenly think only males are being addressed.

For instance, in the discipleship sayings of Luke 14:25-35, Jesus addresses crowds. In the ancient setting, most of them were males, and the original text uses he and him throughout (NIV on 14:27: "Anyone who

does not carry his cross . . . cannot be my disciple"). But in the modern setting, men and women are assumed to be numbered among those called to be disciples, so we prefer you (NLT: "And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross") or they (NIVI: "And those who do not carry their cross . . . cannot be my disciple"). In short, a moderate use of inclusive language is best.

I agree that Son of Man should be retained in the Gospels as a title for Christ. The most difficult passage, of course, is Daniel 7:13-14, where "one like a son of man" comes "with the clouds of heaven." Jesus clearly alludes to this passage in Matthew 26:64 and 28:18, so a good argument can be made for retaining "son of man" in Daniel 7:13. However, the Semitic term *bar enosh* (literally "son of man") in this verse means "in human likeness," paralleling Daniel 7:4-6 ("like a lion," "like a bear," "like a leopard"). Therefore, it is better to translate this "like a man" and footnote it, "literally, 'like a son of man.'" That is closer to the meaning in Daniel. The NLT retains man because the context indicates a male person. (It is viable to translate it with the NRSV, "like a human being," though I would not because of the parallels in vv. 4-6.) The best argument for retaining son of man is the canonical parallel with Jesus as Son of Man. However, that is best indicated in a footnote.

THE RETENTION OF MAN

The CBMW translation criteria that emerged out of the NIVI controversy (see CT, July 14, 1997, p. 62) of which my colleague Wayne Grudem was a key participant, state that " 'man' should be used to designate the human race or human beings in general." Therefore, Genesis 1:26-27 should read, "Let us make man in our image. . . . So God created man . . . , in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise indicated). Genesis 5:1-2 should read, "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them 'man.' "

However, in word studies, one first checks the number of meanings a term can have (its semantic range) and then chooses the best translation on the basis of context. 'Adam can mean "mankind" as well as "man" when referring to the human race as a whole. The article by Fritz Maas in the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament states, "Frequently this word occurs as a collective singular designating a class . . . and therefore can be translated by 'mankind.'" That is the connotation in Genesis 1 and 5, especially since 'adam is called "them" rather than "him" in 1:27 and 5:2, clearly speaking of male and female. In this sense it is perfectly valid and more accurate to clear up ambiguity by rendering it as "people" or "human-" or "mankind."

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The key is a careful exegesis of the passage in its immediate context and the larger context of the book. Translation should not be done on the basis of individual words but on the basis of how the words are used in their context. No translation keeps every word in one language intact when communicating the meaning to another linguistic group. Rather, you seek the best way to communicate the larger meaning. Consider Psalm 1:1: "Blessed is the man [Hebrew 'ish] who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked." Grudem states that this psalm belongs to a genre utilizing the individual righteous man. However, many disagree that the psalmist has only men in view and conversely believe the psalm was intended for all people. Righteous men and women are praised here. Thus the Old Testament scholars on the NLT Bible Translation Committee translate it, "Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked." The translation depends on one's interpretation of the genre and intent behind the psalm. Which interpretive option best explains the language and whole context of the psalm? We believe the generic quality of the righteous addressed here favors an inclusive translation.

Some assert that 'ish always refers to a male whenever it appears in the Old Testament, but there are two problems with this. First, it assumes that translation focuses on the individual word. That is never the case. No word always means the same thing in every context. One must examine the whole context to decide a translation, even if a term means one thing a thousand times and another thing only a few times. Second, the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament says that 'ish can mean "man" (the most frequent use), "mankind" (cf. Judges 9:49 "all the people . . . men and women"), or "human." Therefore, the presence of 'ish in Psalm 1:1 is an insufficient reason in and of itself to demand the translation "man."

Let us now turn to *aner* in the New Testament. Whenever it refers to males, it should be translated "men" or "husbands" (since that is a common use of the term). However, the Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament says that *aner* often refers in general to human beings rather than specifically to men. This is supported by the New Testament itself. For instance, in Acts 20:30 Paul warns the Ephesian elders, "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth." However, Revelation 2:20 reveals that the leader of the cult movement in Thyatira (a church planted from Ephesus) was a woman, the self-styled prophetess Jezebel. So Paul's warning was fulfilled in women as well as men. Thus the NIVI translates Acts 20:30, "Even from your own number some will arise and distort the truth."

In 1 Corinthians 13:11 Paul says, "When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." However, the contrast lies with "a child," so the NIVI more accurately translates, "When I became an adult." This is not an attempt to remove male language but rather to capture the true contrast with clarity.

In Ephesians 4:13 even the NIV translates "mature man" (*aner*) simply as "mature" because it refers to the whole church and not just to men. No one doubts that the word often refers to more than just males.

In other words, it is correct to translate the Hebrew and Greek words for "man" with male-specific terms when the context warrants (as in 1 Cor. 15:21, "As death came into the world through a man, Adam . . .," NLT). In fact, the Bible Translation Committee of the NLT last June made two revisions that changed generic terms into masculine ones because the biblical context indicates only males were present: Acts 1:21, "So now we must choose another man [previously 'someone else'] to take Judas's place"; and Acts 8:2, "Some godly men [previously 'people'] came and buried Stephen with loud weeping."

PROPHETIC PASSAGES

There are some prophetic passages that seem to point forward to Christ, and so some argue that the male language must be retained. For example, Psalm 8:4-6 is quoted in Hebrews 2:6-8, especially verse 4: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" Many versions, however (including the NRSV, NLT, NIVI), believe that the psalm stresses humanity as a whole rather than an individual man. These translate the verse (with variations), "What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" Critics state this understanding ignores Hebrews 2:6, where son of man in the psalm may be fulfilled in Christ. However, many believe (and I would agree) that son of man in Hebrews 2:6 refers to mankind and not to Christ, who is not referenced until verse 9. Therefore, human beings is the more accurate translation in Psalm 8:4.

Another debated passage is Psalm 34:20, "He protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken." Grudem argues that this verse is behind John 19:36, "Not one of his bones will be broken." However, verse 17 of the psalm refers to "the righteous" as a group, so it is valid to translate it "he protects all their bones." Moreover, many Johannine scholars believe the paschal lamb passage of Exodus 12:46--"Do not break any of the bones" (also Num. 9:12)--is actually closer to the meaning of John 19:36 and so argue that Psalm 34:20 is not a prophecy looking forward to Christ, so the more accurate and more clear translation is "their bones."

PLURALS AND SECOND PERSON

The CBMW guidelines for translation state, "Person and number should be retained in translation so that singulars are not changed to plurals and third-person statements are not changed to second-person or first-person statements, with only rare exceptions required in unusual cases." Any such changes are seen as a

distortion of the Word of God. Marvin Olasky, editor of World magazine, calls this "misquoting God" and "changing God's words . . . an activity that the Bible itself condemns" (CT, Aug. 11, 1997, p. 58). Grudem in his article above speaks of an "erosion of trust in our English Bibles" because we can no longer trust the accuracy of the pronouns.

This is strong language, but is it true? If every word in the original Hebrew and Greek were kept intact, would anyone dare translate "bowels" by any other term (see Phil. 2:1 in the KJV)? Such a woodenly literal translation is hardly mandated by the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration. In fact, the Bible translates itself in dynamic fashion. A perusal of Ephesians 4:8 (compare Ps. 68:18) or Hebrews 1:7 (compare Ps. 104:4) shows how freely the New Testament writers translated the Old Testament.

The question remains whether changing he to you or they distorts the intended meaning of the biblical text. I do not believe that it does, either in a literal or a dynamic translation. As stated above, there is more potential for misunderstanding when man or he is used where the text refers to both men and women. In that situation, you or they is more accurate, especially for those in our society who are not used to the generic masculine singular. For instance, Mark 8:36 says, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" The intention is obviously broader than just males, so NIVI says, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?"

Another common argument against making singulars into plurals is that this destroys the emphasis on the individual in Scripture. However, there is another danger that, given the privatization of religion in American culture and the rugged individualism inherent in our society, many often read far more individual intent into singulars than was intended by the biblical writers, who lived in the more communal culture of the biblical world. Obviously, this must be decided passage by passage, but in many cases, the context warrants the plural.

For instance, John 6:44--"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him"--is changed in the NLT to a plural--"For people can't come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me." The Greek itself suggests a collective sense, as reflected in the collective singulars of 6:37, 39: "All that the Father gives me will come. . . . I shall lose none of all that he has given me." Therefore, the plural is an accurate translation. Moreover, this rendering does not obviate belief in individual election since "people" can easily connote "each person."

In the same way, John 14:23 reads in the NIV, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." The NIVI translates this, "Those who love me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." Does the context demand an individual emphasis? I do not think so. The question introducing this response posed by Judas (not Iscariot) asks, "Why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?" Jesus' use of "he" in his response is collective, referring to all the disciples. One way to capture both the individual and the corporate aspect of this passage is to translate, "Every person who loves me will obey me. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them."

FATHER, SON, AND BROTHERS

Then there is the debate about the use of father, son, and brothers. Should we always retain these terms when they are used inclusively for all believers? I do not think so for the same reasons given above. Too many modern readers will fail to understand the wider nuances. For instance, NLT translates Matthew 7:9, "You parents [literally, 'which among you']--if your children [literally, 'his son'] ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead?" Proverbs 15:20 reads, "Sensible children [literally, 'a wise son'] bring joy to their father; foolish children [literally, 'a foolish man'] despise their mother." In each instance, the switch broadens the sphere in keeping with the meaning of the text. We feel this is more accurate and is not a distortion of the meaning as some critics suggest.

The same is true of brothers. One should only retain the term when the context indicates that the verse is restricted to men. For instance, the NIVI renders 1 Thessalonians 2:1, "You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not a failure," because obviously the whole church is being addressed. Likewise, 1 John 2:9 is translated by NIVI, "Those who claim to be in the light but hate a brother and sister are still in

the darkness." To retain the inclusive brother would misinform many modern readers who might read it as exclusively male.

NOT A HERESY HUNT

It seems that we may have entered a period similar to the late 1920s and '30s when a united movement of conservative churches stopped working together to stave the tide of liberalism and began to fight within itself over many different unresolvable issues. Especially after the Scopes trial, conservatives retreated from the public arena, and much of the energy spent fighting liberalism turned inward. Denominations and individual churches split over issues such as mode of baptism, Arminianism versus Calvinism, and other concerns that were theologically important but not cardinal doctrines.

The tendency to fight over the wrong issues has begun again. In recent years we have seen a number of Christian leaders sign a declaration stating that Anabaptists, Pentecostals, Arminians, and seeker-sensitive Christians are not true evangelicals because they do not accept Reformed theology. Others have condemned many Christian psychologists as "psycho-heretics" because they use psychological theory to supplement the Bible in their practices. It is not that these are unimportant issues, but rather that differences over these points do not constitute heresy. My point is this: concern over inclusive language in translating the Bible is degenerating into a heresy hunt. We are all evangelicals and need dialogue rather than divisive denunciation to guide us on this issue.

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There is an important place for gender-specific language in Bible translations, as Grudem asserts, namely, in a highly literal translation (like the NASB) that is used for Bible study by those without knowledge of the biblical languages. However, translations that are intended for public and general reading ought to reflect inclusiveness, for clarity and accuracy, in passages that refer to men and women together. Moreover, the biblical writers themselves would most likely render them as such on the principle of becoming "all things to all people," since many in our culture could be confused or offended by masculine language and, thus, the gospel could be hindered.

Translating the inclusive he as they is not surrendering to a feminist agenda. Rather, it is embracing a basic translation philosophy--namely, the desire to communicate clearly and accurately the meaning (and not just the words) of the biblical text. Some scholars are driven by a feminist agenda, but it is unfair to accuse all who prefer inclusive language of such. The use of male terms to refer to all people is disappearing from modern speech. Therefore, it is best to translate man and he, whenever they refer to women, too, with appropriate language so that all readers can understand them.

Grant R. Osborne is professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.