

# What's Wrong

*with Gender-Neutral  
Bible Translations?*

**Wayne Grudem**



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**T**HE PUBLICITY BROCHURE OF THE *NEW REVISED STANDARD Version* sounds so sensible. At last, we are told, misleading, masculine-oriented language has been removed from the Bible. Jesus no longer says, “and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* to myself” (RSV), but instead, “And I...will draw all *people* to myself” (John 12:32, NRSV).

This is an improvement: the word *men* isn't specified by the Greek text, and *all people* is a faithful rendering of the Greek pronoun *pas*. Changes like this use “gender-neutral” language without sacrificing accuracy in translation. In addition, the NRSV has not gone as far as some people wanted, because it still calls God “Father” (not “Parent”), for example, and calls Jesus the “Son of God” (not “Child of God”)—probably in large measure due to the conservative influence of the chairman of the NRSV translation committee, evangelical New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger.

But there are many other changes—literally, thousands—that should cause evangelicals much concern. The translators consistently disregarded precise, grammatically correct English equivalents and resorted to gender-neutral paraphrases. The preface explains that the copyright holder (the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of Churches of Christ) required that “masculine-oriented language should be eliminated as far as this can be done without altering passages that reflect the historical situation of ancient patriarchal culture.” To fulfil this requirement, the translation committee explains that it had to depart from its ordinary principles of making “essentially a literal translation.”

For example, the preface says that they used “periphrastic renderings” to compensate for “the lack of a common gender third person singular pronoun” in English—in other words, they used paraphrase to eliminate “he,” “him,” and “his” where they were used in generic statements to refer to either a man or a woman. It is significant that the NRSV translators do not claim that such gender-neutral translations are more accurate, or even could be carried out within their guiding maxim, “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” Rather, they admit that they had to resort to paraphrase to make the translation gender-neutral. In addition to generic he-him-his, other “masculine-oriented” words such as “father,” “son,” “son of man,” “man,” and “brother” were removed from several hundred verses.

The NRSV in 1989 was the first major “gender neutral” translation, but many of its patterns have been followed by the *New Living Translation* (NLT), the *New Century Version* (NCV), the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV), and (in England only) the *New International Version-Inclusive Language Edition* (NIVI). I have based this analysis on the NRSV as the foundational gender-neutral Bible, but I compare it at several points to the NLT, NCV, CEV, and the NIVI. On the other hand, the current NIV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, and the old RSV are not gender-neutral translations and they are not evaluated here.

In the first part of this article I examine the changes made in order to eliminate thousands of examples of the offensive masculine words “he,” “man,” “father,” “son,” and “brother.” In the second part, I examine English usage today, asking whether the language has changed so much that such gender-neutral translations are necessary today.

### **Changes made to eliminate “he”**

#### *Changing “he” to “they”*

The translators of the NRSV found the little word *he* especially troubling. We can appreciate the difficulty they encountered in a verse such as John 14:23: “Jesus answered him, ‘If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him’” (RSV).

There would be no problem in beginning the sentence, “If anyone loves me...” because the Greek pronoun *tis* does not specify a man. But then how can we finish the sentence? One might think of using “he or she” in some cases, but it would soon become exceptionally awkward. We would end up with this monstrosity of English style:

If anyone loves me, *he or she* will keep my word, and my Father will love *him or her*, and we will come to *him or her* and make our home with *him or her*.

The NRSV translators did not want to do this, so they changed the singulars to plurals instead:

*Those* who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love *them* and we will come to *them* and make our home with *them*.

The problem is that Jesus did not speak with plural pronouns here; he used singulars. Jesus wanted to specify that he and the Father would come and dwell *with an individual believer*. But the NRSV has lost that emphasis, because the plurals “those” and “them” indicate a group of people. “We will come to *them* and make our home with *them*” indicates coming to a group of people, such as a church. The words of Jesus have been unnecessarily changed in translation, and the meaning is different. This is what the NRSV preface says are the “periphrastic renderings” they had to use in dealing with gender-related language, and the preface rightly sets these in contrast to the rest of the NRSV, which is called “essentially a literal translation.”

The rejection of generic “he, him, his” obscures the personal application of Scripture in many other verses, such as “I will come in to *him* and eat with *him*, and *he* with me” (Rev. 3:20, where three Greek pronouns are masculine singular). The NRSV changes this to, “I will come in to *you* and eat with *you*, and *you* with me,” but “you” in this context would then refer to the whole church, and individual application of a familiar verse is lost. The NIVI, NCV, CEV and NLT change “him” to “them,” which also represents Jesus eating with a whole church, not just an individual. This is a serious loss of the specific individual application that Scripture intended for our benefit.

There is a Messianic prediction in Psalm 34:20: “He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken” (RSV). John’s gospel refers to this (and probably Exod. 12:46) with respect to Jesus’ death: “For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, ‘Not a bone of him shall be broken’” (19:36, RSV). But the NRSV will not allow such a prediction about an individual man in Psalm 34, so the prediction is plural: “He keeps all *their* bones; not one of them will be broken” (NRSV). The individuality of the Messianic prediction, so wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus’ death, is lost to readers of the NRSV. And the NCV, NLT, and NIVI all have “their bones” as well, even though the statement is singular (“his bones”) in Hebrew.

Other passages in the NRSV suffer the same fate: John 15:5 becomes, “I am the vine, you are the branches. *Those* who abide in me and I in *them* bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jesus no longer says he will abide in an individual believer.) John 14:21 now says, “*They* who have my commandments and keep them are *those* who love me; and *those* who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love *them* and reveal myself to *them*.” (Jesus no longer specifies that he will love and reveal himself to an individual person.) The singular pronouns that Jesus frequently used are all changed to plurals. Many verses that specify a relationship between God and the individual believer have been obscured or removed from Scripture.

In response to this, someone might object that other verses in the Bible, and even other verses in these contexts, use plurals to speak to us. I agree that other verses have plurals, but that is not the point: *these* verses have singulars, and they should not be changed to plurals in translation.

Another objection might be that Jesus used generic “he” because he mostly spoke to men. Was this the reason? Certainly not. Many women also followed him (see Luke

8:3, where “many others” is feminine). And even when talking to an individual woman he used generic “he,” telling the woman at the well, “Whoever drinks the water that I shall give *him* will never thirst” (John 4:14). Jesus considered the third person masculine singular pronoun (Greek *autos*, “he, him”) to be *inclusive* when used in general sentences like this, even when speaking to one woman alone.

Consider James 5:14-15 in the RSV: “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him... and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up...”

Now there would be no objection to changing “the sick man” to “the sick person” (there is no word specifying “man” in the Greek text), but the NRSV has gone much further: all the singulars are changed to plurals, to avoid the forbidden word “him”: “Are any among you sick? *They* should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over *them*, anointing *them* with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise *them* up...” The situation that comes to mind is entirely different; James wrote about a private home with one person sick, but now it looks like a hospital ward! The meaning has been changed. This is not accurately translating the Bible; it is rewriting the Bible.

How often are singulars changed to plurals? The words “they, them, their, those” occur 1,732 more times in the NRSV than in the RSV. In many other places, “he” has been changed to “you” or “we.” Why? There have been no new archaeological discoveries, no changes in our knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, no ancient texts discovered that make us put plural pronouns instead of singular in these places, or first or second person in place of third person. The changes have been made because the NRSV translators were required by a division of the National Council of Churches to remove “masculine oriented language” from the Bible.

This is not a small difference in the meaning of a few verses. This systematic change from singulars to plurals is a substantial alteration in the flavor and tone of the entire Bible, with a significant loss in the Bible’s emphasis on God relating directly to a specific, individual person.

Most readers of these gender-neutral Bibles will think the plurals were in the original, and they will interpret and teach these passages accordingly. But these plurals were not what God’s Word itself said. Since “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16), and “every word of God proves true” (Prov. 30:5), we must conclude that God caused singular pronouns to be used in each of these places for his own purposes, and, if there is any way to translate them as singulars in legitimate English today, we are not at liberty to change them to plurals in translation.

#### *Changing the third person to the second person*

In Galatians 6:7, Paul wrote, “Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap” (RSV). Changing “man” to “person” would have been fine, since the Greek is not gender-specific. But to avoid “he,” the NRSV says, “*You* reap whatever *you* sow.”

Readers will now wrongly think that Paul is speaking only of something that is true of Christians, the “you” to whom he is writing. This would be properly interpreting the English of the NRSV. But in fact, Paul is making a much more general statement about human conduct and about people generally. The NRSV changes “he” to “you,” but that is not what Paul wrote. This kind of change has happened repeatedly. Once again, this is not translating the Bible; it is rewriting the Bible and giving the verse a different sense. (The NLT and CEV also have “you”; the NCV and NIVI change to plural, “people.”)

#### *Removing direct quotations*

In Psalm 41, David tells of his enemies speaking against him: “My enemies say of me in malice, ‘When will he die, and his name perish?’” (Ps. 41:5). But in the NRSV the words “he” and “his” had to be removed, and in this case the speech of the enemies is turned into thoughts in their minds: “My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish” (NRSV). But the Hebrew text does not say they simply *wondered*; it says they *spoke* (*amar*). An accurate translation should tell us that. (The CEV changes “he” to “you,” but the NCV, NLT, AND NIVI accurately retain “he.”)

Why does the NRSV try so hard to avoid using “he” in a generic sense? The preface explains that they used paraphrase “chiefly to compensate for a deficiency in the English language—the lack of a common gender third person singular pronoun.” What is surprising is that they say the problem is with English while they fail to mention that Hebrew and Greek also lack “a common gender third person singular pronoun,” and both languages use a third person singular masculine pronoun (“he”) in singular generic statements. Therefore there is no problem with English at all if we want it to translate the generic statements in the Bible—it precisely and accurately translates the common generic use of “he” in Hebrew and Greek.

#### *Errors in God’s ordinances*

Turning the Bible’s singulars to plurals can give meanings the translators did not expect. In Psalm 19, a familiar verse says, “But who can discern his errors?” (19:12, RSV). The NRSV changed this to, “But who can detect *their* errors?” Readers will rightly look at the preceding context to see who “their” refers to—and find this sequence:

“The ordinances of the Lord are true...

More to be desired are they than gold...

in keeping them there is great reward.

But who can detect *their* errors?” (verses 9-12)

The NIVI similarly has, “Who can discern *their* errors?” On a normal reading, the proper way to understand these English statements is that God’s ordinances have errors, but they are difficult to detect. (The CEV, NCV, and NLT avoid the problem by rewording the verse in different ways: “their own,” “our,” and “my.”)

**Anything but third person singular**

God's providential guidance of an individual person's life is quite clear in the RSV: "A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9). It would not be wrong to translate "A *person's* mind plans his way, but the LORD directs *his* steps," for the Hebrew is not male-specific, and the individual application would be preserved. The word "his" would also accurately translate the 3rd person singular (masculine) Hebrew pronoun.

But the offensive word "his" had to go. A comparison of other gender-neutral versions shows how translators have tried almost every possible way to avoid literally translating the Hebrew pronoun as "his":

RSV: [literal translation, preserving 3rd person singular:]

A man's mind plans *his* way,  
but the LORD directs his steps.

(The current NIV, along with the NASB, KJV, and NKJV all have the literal translation "his" as well).

NCV: [change 3rd person singular to 3rd person plural:]

People may make plans in *their* minds,  
but the LORD decides what *they* will do.

NIVI: [change 3rd person singular to 2nd person singular:]

In *your* heart you may plan *your* course,  
but the LORD determines *your* steps.

NLT: [change 3rd person singular to 1st person plural:]

We can make our plans,  
but the Lord determines *our* steps. (CEV is similar.)

NRSV: [change 3rd person singular to no person:]

The human mind plans *the* way,  
but the Lord directs *the* steps.

Such variation is almost humorous to see. It seems that any translation is acceptable except a clear, simple, literal "his."

All of the changes involve some change in meaning. The NCV with "they" loses emphasis on the individual person. The NIVI restricts the sentence to the readers ("you") rather than keeping it universal in application. The NLT and CEV restrict it to the speaker and hearers ("we") rather than keeping it universal in application. The NRSV makes the statement impersonal: "The human mind plans *the* way, but the Lord directs *the* steps." What way? Whose steps? We cannot tell. Personal application is lost. But "masculine language" and "patriarchalism" had to be eliminated, even when it most accurately represented the Hebrew or Greek text.

**Can you trust any pronouns in gender-neutral Bibles?**

Another serious consequence is the erosion of readers' trust in *every pronoun* in the Bible. Think about it for a moment: Imagine that you have a translation that regularly

changes "he, him, his" to "you" or "we" or "they." Now you want to make a point in a sermon (or contribute something in a Bible study) based on one of those pronouns. How do you know you can depend on it? Maybe it is accurate, but then again maybe it is one of those "substitutes" that replaced "patriarchal" language. How do you know the "we" or "you" or "they" is really what God's Word said? Unless you can check the Greek or Hebrew text yourself, you simply won't be able to trust any of those pronouns anywhere in that Bible.

For the NRSV, "we, us, our" occurs 4,500 times; "you, your, yours" occurs 21,704 times; "they, them, their" occurs 17,102 times. That is a total of 43,306 words. Even if half occur in narrative contexts where no change would be made, that still leaves over 20,000 words in the NRSV about which you can have no confidence that they faithfully represent the original text. Such erosion of trust in our English Bibles is a high price to pay for gender-neutral translations.

**Changes made to eliminate "man"****Renaming "man"**

The creation narratives tell us that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27, RSV). This name "man" is even more explicit in Genesis 5:2: "Male and female he created them, and he blessed them *and named them Man* when they were created" (RSV).

The name "man" is placed on both male and female, as together they constitute the human race. The translation "man" is accurate, because the Hebrew word *'ādām* is also used to refer to Adam in particular, and it is sometimes used to refer to man in distinction from woman (see Gen 2:25, "the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed"). The English word "man" most accurately translates *'ādām* because it is the only word we have that has those same two meanings (the human race, or a male human being). We can conclude from this usage of *'ādām* that it is not wrong, insensitive, or discourteous to use the same word to refer to male human beings in particular and to name the human race. God himself does this in his Word.

But in the NRSV the name "man" has disappeared: "so God created *humankind* in his image" (Gen. 1:27). And God is suddenly found to give a different name to the race: "Male and female he created them, and he...named them *'Humankind'* when they were created" (Gen. 5:2, NRSV). (The NCV, CEV, and NIVI have "human beings" here, and the NLT has "human.") The word "humankind" occurs 34 more times in the NRSV, replacing the word "man" with a new name for the human race.

The problem is that "humankind," "human beings," and "human" are not names that can also refer to man in distinction from woman, and thus they are a less accurate translations of *'ādām* than the word "man." The male overtones of the Hebrew word are lost.

The name given to a person or a thing has great significance in the Bible. The names of God tell us much about his nature (such as "I Am Who I Am," or "the LORD

of Hosts"). The names of God's people are often changed (such as Abram to Abraham) to signify a different status or character. Similarly, the name that God gives to the human race is significant. The word "man" for the whole human race suggests some male headship in the race. God did not name the race with a Hebrew term that corresponds to our word "woman," nor did he choose (or devise) some "gender-neutral" term without male overtones. He named the race with a Hebrew term that most closely corresponds to our English word "man."

Then why not translate it "man"? Apparently such a precise English equivalent was thought "patriarchal." The "Preface" to the NIVI explains that "it was often appropriate to mute the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers through gender-inclusive language when this could be done without compromising the message of the Spirit" (p. vii). The sentence implies that there is some "patriarchalism" in the text that is not part of the "message of the Spirit." These "patriarchal" elements can be "muted" and the message of the Spirit, apparently, is not harmed. But what if these very same "patriarchal" elements in the text of Scripture are part of what the Holy Spirit intended to be there? If we hold to the absolute divine authority of every word of Scripture, then we should not seek to "mute" any content that the Holy Spirit caused to be there!

#### *Using "mortal" instead of "man"*

The NRSV commonly substitutes the word "mortal" where the RSV and other versions have the word *man*. For example, when Cornelius fell down and began to worship Peter, Peter lifted him up and said, "Stand up; I too am a *man*" (Acts 10:26, RSV). But in the NRSV Peter says, "Stand up; I am only a *mortal*."

This matters because the emphasis is different, for the word *mortal* shifts the emphasis from one's humanity to one's mortality (that is, one's liability to death). Peter does not refuse worship because he is "mortal" or one who is subject to death (in fact, he will live forever). He refuses worship because he is a creature made by God; he is not God, but a man. That is what the Greek text says. And that is what the English translation ought to say, if it is accurate. There is a perfectly good Greek adjective which means "mortal, subject to death" (*phthartos*), but that is not the word Peter uses. (The CEV, NCV, NLT, and NIVI all have "human" here.)

In fact, in its efforts to avoid the word "man" the NRSV sounds almost humorous as it anachronistically projects modern concerns for politically correct speech back into the mouth of first century speakers. For example, the NRSV makes the citizens of Tyre shout to King Agrippa, "The voice of a god and not of a *mortal!*" (Acts 12:22)—as if even those first century speakers were afraid to use the word "man" when referring to a human being in distinction from a god. (The CEV and NLT rightly retain "man" here, but the NCV avoids "man" with "a human," and the NIVI has "mere mortal.")

These changes often produce English that is truly strange. When God speaks to Ezekiel, he no longer says, "*Son of man*, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you" (Ezek. 2:1, RSV), but now says, "*O mortal*, stand up on your feet, and I will speak

with you" (NRSV). The NCV has God calling Ezekiel by the name "Human": "He said to me, '*Human*, stand up on your feet'" (2:1), and "*Human*, go to the people of Israel and speak my words to them" (3:4). This may be "politically correct" terminology today, but it is terribly unnatural English.

We readers even find ourselves addressed by the name "mortal": "He has told you, *O mortal*, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). And the famous chapter on love now begins. "If I speak in the tongues of *mortals* and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1, NRSV). This is not ordinary English usage today. It is artificially contrived English for the purpose of politically correct speech. (In Micah 6:8, all these versions avoid the term "man," using instead "you human" (NCV), "you, O people" (NIVI), "you" (NLT), or "us" (CEV). In 1 Cor. 13:1, the versions speak of languages of "humans" (CEV, NIVI), or of "people" (NCV), or "in any language in heaven or on earth" (NLT).)

These changes also affect much of the Bible. The words "mortal" and "mortals" occur 205 more times in the NRSV than in the RSV, in most cases giving a nuance of mortality which the authors did not intend.

#### *Neutering specific men*

The Greek word *anēr* is used when an author wants to specify a man or men in distinction from a woman (or women). The word is a specifically male term that can mean "man" or "husband," depending on the context. Surprisingly, the NRSV several times avoids translating even this word as "man" or "men." For example, though the Greek text explicitly says that Judas Barsabbas and Silas were "leading *men*" sent from the Jerusalem Council, the NRSV changes this to "leaders" (Acts 15:22).

Similarly, we know that only men were elders at Ephesus, so it made sense that Paul warned, "from among your own selves will arise *men* speaking perverse things," but the NRSV neuters these men, calling them simply "some" (Acts 20:30). And Paul himself no longer says, "When I became a *man* (*anēr*), I gave up childish ways," but "when I became an *adult*" (1 Cor. 13:11). (The NLT, CEV, and NIVI translate all three of those verses in gender-neutral ways; the NCV does the same in two verses, but preserves "man" in 1 Cor. 13:11.)

In a crucial passage on the qualifications for elders, the husbands have disappeared from the NRSV. Paul tells Titus to appoint elders in Crete who are "the husband of one wife" (Titus 1:6, RSV), but the NRSV translates, "married only once" (NRSV), which of course could include women elders as well as men.

But the Greek text specifies men, for *anēr* means explicitly a man in distinction from a woman (it can mean "man" or "husband," depending on the context). Moreover, the verse simply does not mean "married only once," because there is no verb for "married" in what Paul wrote: he just said *mias gynaiikos anēr*, which is literally "the husband of one wife." (The CEV also allows for women elders with its translation

“faithful in marriage,” while the NCV, NLT, and NIVI accurately preserve the idea that the verse is speaking about a husband.)

Such changes indicate an antipathy toward the word “man,” even when the original text had the male-specific term *anēr*. The National Council of Churches required that much “masculine-oriented language” should be “eliminated,” and the translators carried out that mandate.

Another Greek term, *anthrōpos*, can mean either “man” or “person,” depending on the context. But the NRSV often refused to translate it “man” or “men” even when that sense was clear. For example, the RSV rightly says that the Old Testament high priest was chosen “from among men” (Heb. 5:1), but the NRSV changes it to “from among mortals”—for what purpose? No woman could be a high priest in the Old Testament.

Even Jesus is not exempt from the NRSV’s aversion to calling a man a man. Where the RSV had “as by a *man* came death, by a *man* has come also the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:21), the NRSV says, “since death came through a *human being*, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a *human being*” (1 Cor. 15:21). This is theologically important: the representative headship of Adam and Christ as *men* is omitted. (The NCV and NLT have “man” here, but the NIVI has “human being”; the CEV paraphrases with the proper names Adam and Christ.)

### *The disappearance of the righteous man from wisdom literature*

Psalm 1 begins with a description of a righteous man:

“Blessed is the *man* who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners... but *his* delight is in the law of the Lord” (RSV).

Here the Hebrew word for “man” is *ish*, which ordinarily means a “man” in distinction from woman (except in some rare idiomatic constructions). The “default” sense of the word, the sense readers would attach to this word unless the context required another sense, is “man.” Psalm 1 holds up a solitary righteous man who stands against plural “sinners” as an example for all Israelites to emulate (similarly, Proverbs 31 holds up a godly woman as an example to emulate).

But this righteous man is gone from the NRSV:

“Happy are *those* who do not follow the advice of the wicked...but *their* delight is in the law of the LORD.”

The NIVI similarly says “Blessed are *those...their* delight...,” and the NCV, CEV, and NLT do the same.

Now there is no ambiguity in the original Hebrew text over the fact that the righteous “man” is singular and “the wicked,” “sinners,” and “scoffers” are all plural. Prior to the advent of the “gender-neutral” NRSV in 1989, all English translations rendered Psalm 1 this way—the blessed “man” was singular, and “sinners” and “scoffers” were plural. Of course, some scholars may question whether the psalmist *intended* this singular-plural contrast to be something that readers noticed, something that is important to interpreting the Psalm, so that we notice the courage of this solitary man in

contrast to many “sinners.” People may differ over whether this is intended, but the point remains: English readers should be able to have an English translation that lets them know that the singular-plural contrast is there, so that they may consider for themselves whether such a contrast is important for interpretation. With a gender-neutral translation, they do not even have that option.

The NIVI “Preface” explains what led to this translation of Hebrew singular words with English plural words. It was not that scholars suddenly discovered in 1992 that the singular Hebrew word *ha’ish* (“the man”) was really plural (which would have required *ha’anashim*). Rather, the translators tell us that “*In order to avoid gender-specific language in statements of a general kind, it was agreed that the plural might be substituted for the singular and the second person for the third person*” (p. vii). Evangelical Christians should ponder that sentence well: it says they “substituted” plurals for singulars, and second person statements for third person. It does not say the original Hebrew or Greek words were plural, or were in the second person. It says they changed (“substituted”) singulars to plurals and third person to second person.

Psalm 1 is a good example of this process: the maleness of the passage was “muted” by changing to plurals: “Blessed are *those...their* delight is in the law of the LORD.” Suddenly the “patriarchal” language is gone. It hasn’t disappeared from the Hebrew text (which still talks about a single “man,” and uses masculine singular pronouns to speak of “his” delight in the law of the LORD, on which say “he” meditates day and night.) But the offensive “patriarchalism” that was in the Hebrew text has disappeared from the English translation.

I strongly disagree with this procedure. The evangelical doctrine of Scripture is that every word of the original is exactly what God wanted it to be, because “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). If God caused Psalm 1 to be written with singular nouns and pronouns, then we should reflect the sense of those words in English translation. We must not “substitute” other words with different senses.

At this point someone may object, “But doesn’t Psalm 1 also apply to women? Then shouldn’t we translate it as “they” so that women don’t miss the point?” Of course it *applies* to women as well, just as the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) *applies* to daughters as well as sons. But we must not translate Luke 15 to speak of a prodigal “child,” or Psalm 1:1 to speak of the blessed “person,” for that is not what the words mean in those verses. The definite expression *ha’ish* (“the man”) uses a specifically male-oriented word to mean, “the man.”

### *Making the army of Israel gender-neutral*

Several battle passages talk about the “men of war,” such as, “Your servants have counted the *men of war* who are under our command, and there is not a man missing from us” (Num. 31:49, RSV). The word “men” was objectionable here, however, so the NRSV has, “Your servants have counted the *warriors* who are under our command, and not one of us is missing. (NRSV). Similarly, in Numbers 31:28, “the *men of war*



who went out to battle" (RSV) becomes "the *warriors* who went out to battle" (NRSV). Even the males who were circumcised in Joshua 5:4 are not called "men of war," but "warriors."

The NRSV is inaccurate on two counts here: First, there is no reason to hide the historical fact that only men went forth to war in the Old Testament. Second, the Hebrew phrase *'anshē hammilchāmāh* can only be male: it says "men of war." (The CEV, NCV, and NIVI similarly change "men of war" to "soldiers" in Num. 31:28, 49, while the NLT has "army" in one verse and "men" in the other. But all four versions differ from the NRSV and wisely indicate that it was men who were circumcised in Joshua 5:4.)

Does this make any difference? I recently corresponded with people involved in the current national debate over whether women should serve in combat in our armed forces. They were wondering if the Bible showed a pattern of male responsibility to go to war and protect a nation's women and children. I found quite a bit of evidence for such a pattern in the Old Testament historical narratives in the RSV, but much of it was obliterated in the NRSV, because the "men of war" had all disappeared.

Of course, someone may wish to argue that an all-male combat force was an Old Testament custom that was culturally limited to that time, and need not be a pattern for us today. But that is not my point here. My point is that translators have an obligation to translate the Old Testament *so that readers can at least know that that was what happened then*. What use we make of the text is another question, but before we can even ask that question we need to know what the Old Testament text actually says. The NRSV does not tell us.

### *Eliminating "son of man" in the Old Testament*

In the interests of gender sensitivity, the NRSV systematically removed the phrase "son of man" from the Old Testament (it occurs 106 times in the RSV Old Testament, but zero times in the NRSV Old Testament). Especially troubling is Daniel 7:13, "with the clouds of heaven there came one like a *son of man*" (RSV), which is changed to "one like a *human being*" (NRSV). Readers of the NRSV would never know that Jesus refers to this passage when he tells the high priest, "Hereafter, you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64, rsv). The phrase is made "gender-neutral," but unnecessary inaccuracy is introduced.

The NRSV also changes "son of man" in Psalm 8:4 "What is *man* that thou art mindful of him, and the *son of man* that thou dost care for him?" (RSV) becomes, "What are *human beings* that you are mindful of them, *mortals* that you care for them?" (NRSV). The quotation of this verse and its application to Christ in Hebrews 2:6-9 are obscured. In Ezekiel, where God often calls the prophet "son of man," the NRSV consistently changes the title to "mortal" ("O mortal, stand up on your feet," Ezek. 2:1).

The NCV is also consistently gender-neutral in these passages: it changes "son of man" to "human being" in Daniel 7:13 and "human beings" in Psalm 8:4, and has

God repeatedly calling Ezekiel "Human" rather than "son of man." The CEV, NLT and NIVI, however, only avoid "man" and "son of man" in Psalm 8:4, not in Daniel or Ezekiel.

### *Is this just a difference of translation theory?*

At this point someone may object that I am just arguing for a certain theory of translation, one that advocates "literal translation" rather than "dynamic translation." This is not an accurate way to represent my position, nor is this issue one of literal versus dynamic translation theory, because the *Living Bible* was a dynamic translation, and for the most part it was not gender-neutral. In fact, some of the translators who worked on the *New Living Translation* did not use gender-neutral language in their dynamic translation work, but their work was changed at a higher editorial level. But this was not necessary, for even in very simple, easily understood translations, the words "he" and "man" and "father" and "brother" are not hard to understand. Far less readable is "mortal," "humanity" or "humankind"!

### **Changes made to eliminate fathers, sons and brothers**

#### *The neutering of fathers and sons*

A computer analysis can show us the extent of other word changes, at least for the NRSV. The word "father" (including plural and possessive forms) occurs 601 fewer times in the NRSV than in the RSV. The word "son" occurs 181 fewer times (including the loss of "son of man" 106 times in the Old Testament). The word "brother" occurs 71 fewer times. Coupled with the loss of "he, him, his" (3408 times where it is dropped or changed to "you" or "we" or "they"), and the loss of "man" (over 300 times where it is changed to "human" or "mortal, mortals"), this drive for gender-neutral language has resulted in unnecessary introductions of inaccuracy in over 4500 places in the Bible.

Why do I say inaccuracy? Because we have gained no new knowledge of Hebrew or Greek that would so fundamentally change our understanding of the common Hebrew and Greek terms that have always been translated "father," "son," "brother," "man," "he, him, his," etc. It is rather that these terms have now been thought unacceptable or "patriarchal."

With regard to the other translations, an electronic text is not yet available to me, so I can only report a general impression that the NIVI and CEV are perhaps two-thirds as "gender-neutral" as the NRSV, and the NLT and NCV perhaps a little over one-half as "gender-neutral." The "thought-for-thought" philosophy of the NLT makes it harder to compare at times, because the absence of gender-specific language in some verses was probably not due to a desire for inclusive language but to a judgment that gender details in the original were not essential to the main thought being translated.

*Orphans with living mothers*

Sometimes the results of this gender-neutral policy are bewildering. For instance, the NRSV removed "fatherless" in 39 verses, substituting instead the word "orphan." But an "orphan" is a child with no living parent, something different from being "fatherless." Some strange passages result, even defying logic, as in one passage where the NRSV has orphan (!) children nursing at their mothers' breasts: "There are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast..." (Job 24:9).

*Warning daughters about immoral women*

Sons do not fare well in the NRSV either. For instance, several warnings from a father to his son in Proverbs contain caution against the immoral woman. Though the Hebrew word *ben* in singular always means "son," not "child," the NRSV has warnings to *children*—presumably because we are not supposed to think that ancient fathers were so sexist that they only warned their "sons" about immoral women: "My *child*, be attentive to my wisdom....for the lips of a loose woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.... And now, my *child*, listen to me....Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house" (Prov. 5:1, 3, 7-8, NRSV).

*Dropping "brother"*

The word "brother" was another "masculine-oriented word" modified by the NRSV, but a problem arose in the church discipline passage in Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (RSV).

Here the NRSV could not change the singulars to plurals, because the dispute is between only two people. In some passages, the NRSV changed "brother" to "brother or sister," but even if that were accurate it would not work here, because it would have changed a 27-word sentence into a cumbersome 39-word conglomeration:

If your *brother or sister* sins against you, go and tell *him or her his or her* fault, between you and *him or her* alone. If *he or she* listens to you, you have gained your *brother or sister*.

Another solution was necessary, so the NRSV in this case decided to keep the singular nouns but change "brother" to "member of the church":

If another *member of the church* sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the *member listens to you*, you have regained *that one* (NRSV).

The difference in meaning will have consequences. First, this translation will be misused, because many people will think the passage only applies to church members and doesn't apply to Christians who attend church but haven't yet joined. Others will think it doesn't apply to Christians who are members of other churches in town—someone who sins against me is not "another member of the church" that I belong to! Second, this translation may be read anachronistically, projecting the modern concept

of church membership back into the first century. Third, the strong nuance of membership in a family is lost when "brother" is deleted.

Finally, the phrase "you have regained that one" is awkward, stilted English and excludes the idea of family reconciliation found in "you have gained your brother." We may not like the fact that Jesus said, "you have gained your brother," but that is what the text says, and that is how we should translate it.

The family nuance conveyed by "brother" is also lost in the CEV ("one of my followers"), NCV ("your fellow believer"), and NLT ("another believer"). It is preserved in the NIVI ("brother or sister"), but it adds "or sister," which Jesus did not say.

*The loss of "representative generic" expressions*

In the example above, why did Jesus say, "If your brother sins against you..." rather than, "If your brother or sister sins against you"? He did it because he was using a form of speech that we may call a "representative generic" expression. One individual is mentioned ("your brother") as a representative of a whole group (all brothers and sisters in Christ). Other examples of representative generics are "Blessed is *the man* who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked" (Psalm 1:1) and "I will come in to *him* and eat with *him*, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). This is a form of the literary category "synecdoche," the use of one part to represent the whole.

Another type of generic statement may be called a "pure generic." It does not use one individual to represent a larger group, but uses a general expression like "everyone," "all people," "anyone," or "no one." The Bible has many "pure generic" expressions like, "If *any one* would come after me..." (Matt. 16:24) or, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), or "*no one* will be justified before God by the law" (Gal. 3:11).

Both "representative generics" and "pure generics" are inclusive references. That is why it is really incorrect to frame this as a discussion between "inclusive" and "non-inclusive" language. *Both* kinds of references are inclusive, but they take different forms.

The point is this: the Bible has many "pure generics," and it has many "representative generics." In order to bring over into English the full sense of these expressions as nearly as possible, English translations should translate the pure generics in Hebrew and Greek as *pure* generics in English, and the representative generics in Hebrew and Greek as *representative* generics in English. That would preserve their distinctive nuances.

However, these more recent gender-neutral Bibles translate the pure generics as pure generics, and they also translate the representative generics as pure generics. "Blessed is the man..." becomes "blessed are those..." "I will come in to him" becomes "I will come in to them." Someone may object that these really "mean the same thing," but the feminists who protested against representative generics twenty or thirty years ago certainly did not see them as equivalent in meaning. They objected to representa-

tive generics precisely *because* they singled out a male human being as representative of a group, and thus they had male-oriented overtones. It is precisely these overtones that are filtered out in modern gender-neutral translations.

In these new translations, the nuances of the representative generics are lost. Of course, what is lost is precisely what the early feminists objected to—the masculine overtones of these representative generics, for they nearly always have a male (“he,” “man,” “brother”) standing for the whole group. Therefore the masculine overtones have been systematically filtered out.

Is this really bringing over “meaning for meaning” or “thought for thought” into English? It is not even bringing over “thought for thought” as accurately as it could be done, for the thought is changed: the male overtones are filtered out. The male overtones are what much of our culture objects to today, and they are the part of the meaning that is lost in gender-neutral translations. This does not really increase accuracy or even increase understanding of the representative generic idea that is in the original. Rather, it obliterates this idea. Accuracy in translation is lost, and the meaning is distorted.

#### *But what about “brothers and sisters”? A difference between Greek and English*

Up to this point I have listed numerous examples of inaccurate translations in the NRSV and other gender-neutral versions. A different matter arises, however, with the plural form of the Greek word *adelphos*, “brother.” Although in many cases the plural word *adelphoi* means “brothers,” and refers only to males, there are other cases where *adelphoi* is used to mean “brother and sister” or “brothers and sisters.” Consider the following quotations from Greek literature outside the New Testament:

1. That man is a cousin of mine: his mother and my father were *adelphoi* (Andocides, *On the Mysteries* 47 [approx. 400 B.C.]).
2. My father died leaving me and my *adelphoi* Diodorus and Theis as his heirs, and his property devolved upon us (*Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 713, 20-23 [97 A.D.; Diodorus is a man’s name and Theis is a woman’s name]).
3. The footprints of *adelphoi* should never match (of a man and of a woman): the man’s is greater (Euripides, *Electra* 536 [5th cent. B.C.]).
4. An impatient and critical man finds fault even with his own parents and children and *adelphoi* and neighbors (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12.20-21 [approx. 130 A.D.]).

In standard English, we just don’t say, “My *brothers* Dave and Jenny.” So the Greek plural *adelphoi* sometimes has a different sense from English “brothers.” In fact, the major Greek lexicons for over 100 years have said that *adelphoi*, which is the plural of the word *adelphos*, “brother,” sometimes means “brothers and sisters.” (so Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, 1957 and 1979; Liddell-Scott-Jones, 1940 and as early as 1869).

One other important factor is that the masculine *adelphos* and the feminine *adelphē* are just different forms (masculine and feminine) of the same word *adelph-*.

But the plural form of this word would be *adelphoi* when talking about a group of all men, and it would also be *adelphoi* when talking about a group of both men and women. Only the context could tell us whether it meant “brothers” or “brothers and sisters.” This makes Greek different from English, where bro- and sis- are completely different roots, and we wouldn’t call a mixed group of men and women “brothers.” (The root *adelph-* is from *a-*, which means “from,” and *delphus*, “womb” (Liddell-Scott-Jones, p. 20) and probably had an early sense of “from the same womb.”)

Why then does the New Testament sometimes specify “brothers and sisters,” putting both masculine (*adelphoi*) and feminine (*adelphai*) forms (as in Matt. 19:29 or Mark 10:30)? Sometimes the authors may have specifically included feminine forms in order to prevent any possible misunderstanding, to make it very clear that women as well as men were included in a certain statement.

But frequently in the New Testament the word *adelphoi* is used by itself when both men and women are addressed:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers (*adelphoi*), in view of God’s mercy... (Rom. 12:1),

Here it seems that the original hearers would have understood him to mean something very much like “brothers and sisters” in English today. (Or technically “siblings,” but that is not the way anyone speaks to anyone else today: would we say, “Therefore, I urge you, siblings...”?)

What does the NRSV do with *adelphoi*? It translates it “brothers and sisters” in some places where this is probably an improvement:

I appeal to you therefore, *brothers and sisters*, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1-2).

To the saints and faithful *brothers and sisters* in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father (Col. 1:2)

For we know, *brothers and sisters* beloved by God, that he has chosen you (1 Thess. 1:4).

The NCV, NLT, and NIV also use “brothers and sisters” in these passages, and so preserve the nuance of family relationship. The CEV, however, uses the translation “dear friends.”

This situation seems to me to be one where the current controversy has caused us to look again at the reasons for our traditional translations and to ask if they are the best translations possible. In many cases they are, but in the case of *adelphoi* these more recent translations seem to have made a genuine improvement in accuracy. But I realize that not everyone will agree with me on this conclusion. Many translations may wish to leave the traditional “brothers” in these verses, out of a sense that in the current controversial climate any such change may *appear* to be a concession to societal pressures to adopt gender-neutral Bible translation even when accuracy is sacrificed. I under-

stand and respect that consideration. But in this case, it seems to me that accuracy is improved by “brothers and sisters,” since “brothers” in standard current English is not a term that includes women, as the Greek intends.

### ***The question of English usage today***

#### *Has English changed that much?*

Some may object that our language has changed so much that even the uses of the words *he*, *him*, *his* in generic statements, or the use of *man* to refer to the human race, would not be proper in English today. We have no choice, they would argue, but to use alternative expressions.

But this is not true. Consider the following examples from standard, contemporary English:

#### *Examples of generic “he”*

A student who pays *his* own way gets the tax credit. (*USA TODAY*, July 30, 1997, p. 3B, discussing the 1997 tax bill and its tax credits for college tuition.)

“Or is it when someone with a heavy accent calls up (a news organization), *he* tends to be dismissed more readily than someone who speaks standard English?” (*USA TODAY*, Aug. 21, 1997, page 3D, quoting Ted Koppel who was preparing a *Nightline* broadcast on claims of police brutality in New York City.)

Anyone can do any amount of work, provided it isn't the work *he* is supposed to be doing at that moment. (*Reader's Digest*, Sept., 1997, page 61, quoting Robert Benchley.)

If a worker tells the boss *he* needs time off because *he* is “depressed and stressed,” then a “reasonable accommodation” should be made. (*Reader's Digest*, Sept., 1997, p. 126, quoting James Brady's summary of government regulations in *Crain's New York Business*.)

Wages are flat, hours are up, bosses are morons and everyone's stuffed into a cubicle—if *he's* lucky enough to have a job. (*Newsweek*, Aug. 12, 1996, p. 3.)

During the 22 minutes an average person spends grocery shopping each week, 70 percent of *his* purchasing decisions are made in the store (*Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1996, Sec. 4, p. 1, italics added).

A reverse mortgage can allow a senior citizen to remain in familiar surroundings for the rest of *his* life. (*Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1996, sec. 6, p. 3.)

...even if a person has gotten enough sleep, *he* is likely to be irritable or blue if *his* waking hours center on a time when *his* biological clock tells *him he* “should” be asleep. Conversely, even if a person stays awake 36 hours straight,

*he* may say *he* feels terrific if you ask *him* about *his* mood at an hour when *his* biological clock tells *him he* is supposed to be awake, findings suggest. (Associated Press dispatch downloaded from America Online, Feb 12, 1997). (There are twelve uses of generic “he-him-his” in those two sentences.)

...every college professor doesn't need to put *his* main energy into expanding the frontiers of knowledge. (*US News and World Report*, Dec. 30, 1996, pp. 45-47.)

If the person involved thinks the code has been misapplied, or that the code itself is defective, *he* goes to the courts for relief. (*Christianity Today*, May 19, 1997, p. 28, quoting Robert Bork on the American legal system.)

“If a timid person who wants to be more assertive at work takes Prozac without dealing with the issues that make *him* timid, the message becomes the opposite of what we try to do with therapy...” (*Christianity Today*, Aug. 14, 1995, p. 36, quoting Wheaton psychologist Karen Maudlin.)

...to whom much is given, from *him* that much more shall be expected...(*US News & World Report*, May 19, 1997, p. 30, in a column by Arianna Huffington.)

...technology now enables physicians to watch a patient's condition almost as if they'd shriveled themselves up and traveled inside *his* body. (*Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 17, 1997, sec. 5, p. 1.)

...the first evidence of whether or not a person has a “politically correct” attitude is often *his* use of politically correct or incorrect language...there is considerable resistance to [PC language], a good deal of it taking the form of humor or mocking... For example, a high school student calls one of *his* friends who is rather short in stature “vertically challenged”... (“Correctness in Language: Political and Otherwise,” the 1996 Presidential Address of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the U.S., by Valerie Becker Makkai, published in *The Twenty-third LACUS Forum 1996*, ed. Alan K. Melby (Chapel Hill, NC: The Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, 1997), pp. 5-6.)

The Cardmember agrees to use the service only for *his* benefit and for the benefit of members of *his* immediate family. (“Your Personal Benefits Guide,” a terms of service brochure received from Discover Card Aug. 8, 1997, p. 14).

For example, a patient who has stabilized on an antidepressant can take months to adjust to a new medication, or *he* may fail completely and revert to a suicidal state. (*US News and World Report*, Sept. 1, 1997, p. 73.)

The latest PBM strategy is to woo the pharmacist *himself*—a practice that druggists fear could undermine confidence in their profession. (*US News and World Report*, Sept. 1, 1997, p. 71.)

A student should also make a habit of coming home, emptying *his* backpack in a certain location and figuring out exactly what schoolwork has to get done that night. (*Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 7, 1997, Sec. 13, p. 8).

...when you buy a new customer with a check, you've bought a temporary customer who will jump when *he* gets another check from someone else. (*Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 9, 1997, Sec. 3, p. 3.)

Even *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* (1994) directs, "use the pronoun *his* when an indefinite antecedent may be male or female: *A reporter attempts to protect his sources.* (Not *his or her sources...*)" (p. 94).

Major dictionaries all recognize generic "he," not as archaic but as current English. The definition of "he" as a pronoun that is "used to refer to a person whose gender is unspecified or unknown" is given in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, third edition (1992), p. 831. Similar definitions are found in *Webster's New World Dictionary*, third college edition (1994), p. 820; the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, second edition, revised (1993), p. 879; *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, unabridged edition (1981), p. 1041, and *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition (1995), p. 534. Sample sentences include, "He who hesitates is lost," "No one seems to take pride in his work anymore," and "One should do the best he can." There is no dispute over whether such generic usage is understandable in ordinary English today.

When we come to recommendations for how people should speak and write today, there is simply no consensus. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1992) polled the 173 members of its Usage Panel of experts in the English language on how to complete a series of sentences such as, "A patient who doesn't accurately report \_\_\_\_ sexual history to the doctor runs the risk of misdiagnosis." In their responses, an average of 46% of panel members used forms such as "his or her" or "her/his" (this statistic combines several forms), 37% used "his," 3% used "their," 2% used "her," 2% used "a" or "the," and 7% gave no response or felt no pronoun was needed, and a few gave other responses. But if 37% of these experts (the largest for any one specific response) continued to use "his" as their most preferred word in these sentences (and many more would have said it is acceptable but not preferred), then no one can rightly claim that generic "he, him, his" is improper English today. In spite of about 30 years of discussion, no substitutes have gained general acceptance.

#### *Examples of "man" used to designate the human race, or human nature generally*

When we turn to the question of "man" used to designate the human race, or human nature in general, again there are many examples in current written and spoken English:

For *man*, autumn is a time of harvest, of gathering together. For nature, it is a time of sowing, of scattering abroad. (*Reader's Digest*, Sept., 1997, p. 61.)

"Early *Man's* Journey out of Africa" (*US News & World Report*, Nov. 27, 1995, p. 18, headline).

[Jewish talk show host Laura Schlessinger was] "reading in Genesis about the covenant between God and *man*." (*US News and World Report*, July 14, 1997, p. 51.)

After telling how excellent a new car guidance system is, the commercial says that "*man* has finally caught up with nature." (October 12, 1997, television commercial for new car guidance system from Phillips.)

"In the future, the greatest threat to our survival will not come from *man*...." (camera shows giant insects invading the earth). (August, 1997 movie preview for the movie *Starship Troopers*.)

"Somewhere between the law of the wild and the nature of *man* lies... *The Edge*." (August, 1997, movie preview for the movie *The Edge* (starring Anthony Hopkins as billionaire lost in frozen wilderness.)

Clean air and ozone obey no *manmade* boundaries. (*Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1997, p. 1 headline.)

[vitamin deficiencies] can be remedied by replacing the dwindling bodily resources with *manmade* substitutes. (*Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1997, sec. 1, p. 8.)

The conquest for supremacy between man and machine may in fact be the dominant struggle for the Air Force in coming years. (*US News and World Report*, Sept. 29, 1997, p. 24)

*The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* (1994) says of the terms "man, mankind" that "Either may be used when both men and women are involved and no other term is convenient" (p. 120).

Once again current dictionaries support this as a current meaning. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1992) gives the meaning "the human race; mankind," and says, for example, that 81% of its usage panel of experts approved the sentence, *If early man suffered from a lack of information, modern man is tyrannized by an excess of it*, and 86% approved the use of the word "man" in the sentence, *The Great Wall is the only man-made structure visible from space*. Similar definitions of "man" to mean "the human race" are found in the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (1993), p. 1116, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, third college edition (1994), p. 820, and *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition (1995), p. 705.

Someone may object, "But these are not very common anymore." I agree that such expressions are somewhat *less common* than they used to be, but that does not mean we should avoid them in translation. All major English Bibles use numerous expressions that are much less common than these, but understandable, and necessary for accurate translation. The question is, "Does the English language today, as under-

stood by the vast majority of its adult speakers, have “he-him-his” as a generic pronoun? And does it have the word ‘man’ to designate the human race?” The answer to both questions is clearly and certainly yes.

#### *What if some women feel excluded?*

Another objection is, “Some women Bible readers feel excluded by such generic uses of ‘he, him, his’ and by the use of ‘man’ to name the human race, etc.” Here we have two alternatives: (a) we can change the translation to something less accurate in response to these women’s feelings, or (b) we can retain the accurate translation and *explain* that such language in fact is *not* exclusive if understood correctly—to say it is exclusive is to misunderstand it.

How do we know such expressions do not have an “exclusive” meaning? Because the original author did not intend such an exclusive meaning, the translators did not intend such a meaning, and that is not the meaning the words have when interpreted rightly in their contexts, contexts which give abundant clues that broader senses are intended. This is just another instance of something Christians do all the time—explain the meaning of the text to those who are misunderstanding it. We must not choose alternative (a), however (changing the translation to something less accurate), because it distorts the translation, and because once we do this there will be hundreds of others who will say they feel excluded by calling God “Father” and calling Christ “Son.” Will we change the translation again because of these objections?

Now someone might respond that some readers will misunderstand or be confused by generic “he.” But this *possibility* does not compare with the *certainly* that all readers will misunderstand the meaning if “he” is changed to “you” or “we” or “they” where the original Greek or Hebrew text does not have those words or convey those meanings.

Of course, we must admit frankly that there are powerful forces in the larger culture (including style manuals imposed on students in various universities) that are saying “he, him, his” and “man” *cannot* have those inclusive senses. They tell us we cannot use these words in ways they have previously been used, even if we want to. However, we must not give in to such pressures in Bible translation, for the ability to translate God’s Word accurately is at stake.

Moreover, we must remember that modern style manuals give recommendations for writing our own new compositions, an activity different from the translation of ancient documents that already exist. In accurate translation, I am not at liberty to rewrite what another person said. For example, in my own writing I may decide to say, “If people are sick *they* should call for the elders,” but when I find that James said, “Is any among you sick? Let *him* call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over *him*” (Jas. 5:14), I am not at liberty to change his singulars to plurals and say, “Let *them* call for the elders of the church and let them pray over *them*.” I may not even like the fact that James used singular pronouns, but that makes no difference whatsoever to

my task of translation. The fundamental question here is honesty in translation. If the sentence we are translating cannot be expressed accurately in English without using singular pronouns in a generic way, then we must still use *he, him, his* in translating Scripture.

#### *But shouldn't we let Bible scholars decide this question?*

Some people may think that this whole matter is a technical question that we should let Bible scholars argue about, not a question Christian lay people should be involved in. I disagree with this idea. In most of the verses I have discussed, Bible scholars agree on the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek texts. In no verse quoted above does the discussion turn on intricate and highly advanced details of Hebrew and Greek. Rather, the question is really about English. Which English expressions best translate the meaning that is there in the original? Is generic “he” understandable and proper English today (as in the examples above)? Is the word “man” an understandable and proper name for the human race (as in the examples above)? Does a change from “he” to “you” or “we” or “they” distort the meaning or not? Everyone who speaks and writes English can contribute legitimately to that discussion, and can come to an informed decision on it. That is why the decisions of whole churches and whole denominations are significant in this matter: these are people who speak and write English, and many of them understand very well what the issues are. They consider this an important issue for preserving accurate translations of the Word of God.

Individual Christians, along with individual churches and denominations, will ultimately decide this issue, because they will decide which Bible translations they will buy and use. Scholars of course should have a role in the discussion, but it is also possible for scholars to become too isolated in the academic world and lose a “large picture” perspective, even on the state of the English language itself.

#### *Are most Bibles today gender neutral?*

It is important that the larger Christian public not be misled into thinking that gender-neutral Bibles are “inevitable” or are “the wave of the future.” Some incautious statements have implied just this. For example, one article said, “Most Bibles today render gender-specific terms such as *he* or *men* with more accurate terms, such as *they* and *human beings*, when translators believe the text warrants it” (*Christianity Today*, July 14, 1997, page 62).

The sentence seems to say that most Bibles today are gender-neutral. But recent Bible sales figures show that the NIV is the largest selling English Bible, with 35%-45% of the market, and it is not gender-neutral. In approximate numbers, the KJV accounts for another 25% of the market, and the NKJV another 10%, and they are not gender-neutral. When we add the substantial sales of the NASB, along with the *New American Bible* (a Roman Catholic version that accounts for 6%-10% of the market), Bibles that are *not* gender-neutral have over 80% of the market for English Bibles

sold today. As this current controversy over gender-neutral Bibles becomes more broadly known to the Christian public, I believe most Christians and most churches will decide not to accept gender-neutral Bibles, and then the market share held by Bibles that are not gender-neutral may well reach over 90%. In any case, it is simply not true that most Bibles sold today use gender-neutral language.

*Should we translate according to how we predict the language will change?*

At this point someone may say, "The language is changing whether we like it or not, and generic 'he-him-his' will not exist in 5 or 10 more years." This claim should be recognized for what it is: an unsubstantiated prediction of the future which cannot be proven. In fact, several factors argue against this prediction. English stylist William Zinsser, in *On Writing Well*, fifth edition (1994), says, "let's face it: the English language is stuck with the generic masculine" (p. 123). The current *American Heritage Dictionary* (1992), concludes a long discussion on generic "he" with this prediction: "The entire question is unlikely to be resolved in the near future" (p. 831).

The reason that people who speak and write English resist abolishing generic *he, him, his* is that there are times when clear and accurate writing requires the use of a third-person singular pronoun with the person's sex unspecified or unknown. Zinsser says, "A style that converts every 'he' into a 'they' will quickly turn to mush....I don't like plurals; they weaken writing because they are less specific than the singular, less easy to visualize" (pp. 122-123). And the *American Heritage Dictionary* speaks of "a persistent intuition that expressions such as *everyone* and *each student* should in fact be treated as grammatically singular" (p. 831).

Three professional linguists have told me they knew of no human language that lacked a singular pronoun that was used generically (in some languages it is a masculine singular pronoun; in others, a neuter singular pronoun). Therefore, people who predict that English will soon relinquish generic "he, him, his," when there is no commonly agreed singular substitute, are predicting that English—perhaps the most versatile language in history—will lose a capability possessed by all major languages in the world. This is highly unlikely.

In fact, people who predict that English will lose generic "he" need to explain why they think English will become different from all other human languages that have a singular pronoun (not just a plural one like "they") that is used generically.

In any case, we should not base present translations on uncertain predictions of what the language will be in the future. Predictions of the future have a surprising way of turning out to be wrong.

***Cultural pressures on language are not always neutral***

I have talked to several people who worked on translating some of these gender-neutral versions, and I realize that many of them do not have "feminist" convictions or share the goals of "egalitarians" or "evangelical feminists." However, I am not sure if people

realize how much our language has been under pressure to conform to "politically correct" patterns of speech that were first demanded by feminists in the 1960s and are now demanded by other interest groups as well. Moreover, the preface to the NRSV explains exactly what led to these changes: It was a requirement from the National Council of Churches to eliminate "masculine-oriented language." And the preface to the NIVI explains that they thought it appropriate at times "to mute the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers." Those who protest that these gender-neutral changes in Bible translation are *only* for purposes of clarity and proper use of English today have not fully taken into account these fundamental statements of translation goals expressed in prefaces of these translations. Certainly there was *some* desire to mute the masculine-oriented language of the Bible as originally written in Hebrew and Greek, if these sentences have any meaning at all.

But we should all agree that another factor was also involved, the desire to use contemporary English that is clear and understandable to readers in general. As I have noted throughout this booklet, not all of the changes due to perceived changes in English have been objectionable, and some (such as saying "any one" instead of "any man" where the original is not gender-specific) have been improvements.

However, we should not assume that modern language trends are always morally and spiritually neutral, so that Christians should meekly follow these trends or even try to keep one step ahead of the latest fad. The attempt to eliminate "man" as a name for the human race is not neutral, but conflicts with the male-oriented name *ādām* that God gave the race in Genesis 1:27 and 5:2. And the attempt to do away with "he" as a generic pronoun—especially if no other singular pronoun is widely accepted—would make the accurate translation of most generic singular statements in Scripture impossible.

Some style manuals imposed on students today tell them to avoid generic "he" and rewrite their sentences in other ways. Of course people can rewrite their sentences with plurals, or change to the second person, or clutter them with "he or she," but then the sentences say something different and they sound different and their meaning is different. But if the author does not want to say the "something different," but wants to use a pronoun to say something that is brief, uncluttered, specific and individualized, then a generic third person singular pronoun is needed. Since "he" is the only recognized English word that functions that way, if "he" is ruled out, the result will be that the would-be rulers of the language will have told us that *there are certain things that we cannot say*. We are permitted by them to say something similar, something related, something that sounds nearly the same, but we cannot say precisely what we want to say. It is not surprising that wise writers have resisted such a mandate, for if this kind of rule should ever prevail, the English language would be impoverished, and our thought would be impoverished.

The pressure to conform to "politically correct" speech is primarily a pressure *not* to use certain expressions. But when our freedom to use certain expressions is taken away, then our ability to think in certain ways is also curtailed. For example, if all

generic singular statements are removed from the Bible, then the ability to *think* of a representative individual who stands for a whole group will have been removed—for we will have no words in which to formulate our thought. There will be no way to say, “If any one loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23), and thus there will be no way to think of that precise idea. Restricting certain types of expression is restricting certain types of thought.

George Orwell understood this well in his novel *1984*. One of the government functionaries who is rewriting the dictionary explains what is really happening when he revises English into the Newspeak that is required by Big Brother,

You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone....It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well...Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it....Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller. (pp. 45-46).

We must not quietly acquiesce to every modern trend in language, nor should we feel powerless before these trends. The evangelical world as a whole also has an influence on the language. Bible translations in particular have historically had a major impact on their own languages, and still have much influence today. The Bible is still the most widely read book in the English language, and retaining generic “he” in Bible translations will also help protect our ability to use this precise translation in future generations.

This will not be the last time that trends in the culture bring pressure to bear on the language and pressure to bear on Bible translation. Already the CEV has removed another supposed source of modern “offense,” because it changes “the Jews” to “the people” or “the crowd” in passages where they oppose Jesus, as Matt. 28:15; John 10:19,31; 18:31; 19:7,12. And one prominent reviewer of the NRSV complained that it had not gone far enough, because it “makes not the slightest gesture toward minimizing masculine pronouns for God,” and he calls this “the single deficiency of the NRSV which is of such magnitude as will render it in its present form unusable for many believers” (Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr., “The NRSV and the REB: a New Testament Critique,” *Theology Today* 47:3 (Oct., 1990), p. 286).

We must realize that such pressure to change the text of Scripture to conform to certain trends in the culture will be relentless, and it will be applied to every Bible translation, and it will not be satisfied merely with the kinds of changes in the NRSV, CEV, NCV, NIVI, and NLT. If evangelical translators and publishers give in to the

principle of sacrificing accuracy because certain expressions are thought to be offensive to the dominant culture, this altering of the text of Scripture will never end. *And then readers will never know at any verse whether what they have is the Bible or the translator's own ideas.*

### Conclusion

I realize that some Christians will object to the fact that I have even written this pamphlet or raised this issue. Isn't this just “fighting over all the wrong issues”? Why do Christians have to differ with each other over these matters?

I do not think this is an issue that should be swept under the rug. The Southern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Conservative Congregational Christian Churches passed resolutions this summer (1997) opposing gender-neutral Bibles, because they knew this was an important issue. The accuracy and integrity of many words of Scripture are at stake, and these are the very words of God.

When I read the NRSV, I wonder what has happened to the reverence for every word of Scripture that was so common in the church in previous generations. The words of Scripture are not ours to tamper with as we please. In the second century, Marcion tried to remove from Scripture all the sections he disagreed with. The Jehovah's Witnesses have a special translation that changes a few key words to suit their doctrine. Now we have an NRSV that does a very similar thing in order to eliminate masculine language from thousands of verses of Scripture. When it does this, it unnecessarily distorts the meaning of the Word of God. And so do the other gender-neutral versions (CEV, NCV, NIVI, and NLT) that follow its precedent.

September 22, 1997



# Appendix

## COLORADO SPRINGS GUIDELINES

**I**N RECENT CONTROVERSIES OVER GENDER-NEUTRAL BIBLES, Christians have begun to wonder which Bibles they can trust to translate gender-related language accurately.

Here are some guidelines recently endorsed by Christian leaders who agreed that “it is inappropriate to use gender-neutral language when it diminishes accuracy in the translation of the Bible.” These guidelines were written at a meeting convened by Dr. James Dobson in Colorado Springs on May 27, 1997 (and revised September 9, 1997).

If you want to know what Bible translations you can trust, one place to start is to ask your Christian book dealer or your pastor if your translation meets these guidelines. Several widely-used translations already meet these guidelines, including the NIV, NASB, RSV, KJV, and NKJV.

### **Colorado Springs Guidelines for Translation of Gender-Related Language in Scripture**

- A. Gender-related renderings of Biblical language which we affirm:
1. The generic use of “he, him, his, himself” should be employed to translate generic 3rd person masculine singular pronouns in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. However, substantival participles such as *ho pisteuōn* can often be rendered in inclusive ways, such as “the one who believes” rather than “he who believes.”
  2. 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 or first person statements, with only rare exceptions required in unusual cases.
  3. “Man” should ordinarily be used to designate the human race, for example in Genesis 1:26-27; 5:2; Ezekiel 29:11; and John 2:25.
  4. Hebrew *’ish* should ordinarily be translated “man” and “men,” and Greek *anēr* should almost always be so translated.
  5. In many cases, *anthrōpoi* refers to people in general, and can be translated “people” rather than “men.” The singular *anthrōpos* should ordinarily be translated “man” when it refers to a male human being.
  6. Indefinite pronouns such as *tis* can be translated “anyone” rather than “any man.”
  7. In many cases, pronouns such as *oudeis* can be translated “no one” rather than “no man.”

8. When *pas* is used as a substantive it can be translated with terms such as “all people” or “everyone.”
  9. The phrase “son of man” should ordinarily be preserved to retain intracanonical connections.
  10. Masculine references to God should be retained.
- B. Gender-related renderings which we will generally avoid, though there may be unusual exceptions in certain contexts:
1. “Brother” (*adelphos*) should not be changed to “brother or sister”; however, the plural *adelphoi* can be translated “brothers and sisters” where the context makes clear that the author is referring to both men and women.
  2. “Son” (*huios, ben*) should not be changed to “child,” or “sons” (*huioi*) to “children” or “sons and daughters.” (However, Hebrew *banim* often means “children.”)
  3. “Father” (*pater, ’ab*) should not be changed to “parent,” or “fathers” to “parents” or “ancestors.”
- C. We understand these guidelines to be representative and not exhaustive, and that some details may need further refinement.

### **Some examples you can check for yourself**

The following verses illustrate the guidelines for translation of gender-related language in Scripture.

#### *For Guideline A1*

(first sentence): John 14:23; Rev. 3:20;

(second sentence): John 3:18.

#### *For Guideline A2*

Psalms 1:2; 34:20; Gal. 6:7; James 5:14-15.

#### *For Guideline A3*

See guidelines for examples; also Psalm 90:3.

#### *For Guideline A4*

Hebrew: Psalm 1:1; Greek: Acts 20:30; 1 Cor. 13:11.

#### *For Guideline A5*

(first sentence): Matt. 12:36;

(second sentence): 1 Cor. 15:21; 1 Tim. 2:5.

#### *For Guideline A6*

Matt. 16:24.

#### *For Guideline A7*

Gal. 3:11.

*For Guideline A8*

John 12:32.

*For Guideline A9*

Psalm 8:4; Dan. 7:13.

*For Guideline A10*

Matt. 6:9; John 3:16.

*For Guideline B1*

Matt. 18:15.

*For Guideline B2*

(first sentence): Gal. 4:7; (second sentence): Exod. 19:6.

*For Guideline B3*

Gen. 48:21.

(This list of verses was not part of the original signed statement.)

Affirmed at a meeting at Focus on the Family Headquarters, May 27, 1997 (and revised Sept. 9, 1997), by:

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*These guidelines have also been endorsed by*

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Clinton E. Arnold	Jack Hayford	J. I. Packer
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Resolutions opposing "gender-inclusive" Bible translations were also passed in the summer of 1997 by the Southern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference.

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