

The TNIV and Gender-Accurate Language

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The release of [Today's New International Version](#) (TNIV) has reopened the debate on the use of gender-accurate language in Bible translation. This article is a brief primer on definitions and clarifications for those who are new to this debate.

The first necessary clarification is that this debate is not about the role of women in the church. The failure to distinguish these two issues has created much confusion. Many conservatives on the issue of women in ministry (like myself) support the kind of moderate inclusive language used in the TNIV.

The real issue is about translating the Word of God as accurately as possible. It is about rendering the *meaning* of the original Hebrew and Greek into the most precise English equivalents possible. A simple example will illustrate this. When Paul writes, "a man (*anthropos*) is justified by faith" (Rom. 3:28 NIV), the Greek word *anthropos* does not mean "a man," but "a person." The reference is intended by Paul to be generic and inclusive, referring to both men and women. Everyone agrees on this. The TNIV therefore accurately translates this verse, "a person is justified by faith." This is what the Greek term means in this context. The TNIV is gender accurate in that it seeks to use inclusive terms when the original author was referring to members of both sexes, that is, when the original Greek or Hebrew warrants it.

Most Bible versions produced or revised in recent years—including those done by theological conservatives—have adopted this kind of gender-accurate language. Some of these are the *New Living Translation* (1996), *God's Word* (1995), the *Contemporary English Version* (1995), the *Good News Bible* (revised 1992), the *New Revised Standard Version* (1990), and the *New Century Version* (1987). In fact, the use of such language is nothing new, and all translations of the past have used some inclusive terms for masculine generic terms in Hebrew and Greek. The *King James Version* often used the inclusive "children" for masculine generic terms sometimes rendered "sons." Matthew 5:9 KJV reads: "Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the *children* of God." The KJV translators correctly recognized that though the Hebrew and Greek terms (*banim, huioi*) were masculine in form, their meaning in context was generic and inclusive.

Another clarification is also important. This kind of gender-related language has nothing to do with God-language. None of these versions introduce feminine language for God or eliminate masculine terms used for God in the Bible. They introduce inclusive language only with reference to human beings and only when the original author intended to include both sexes. These are not "feminist" versions of the Bible.

Some Difficulties

While the basic issue of gender-accurate translation is relatively straightforward, the actual process can be very difficult. This is because of the complex nature of language and the arduous task of Bible translation. The difficulties come primarily in two areas: first, in determining which contexts are inclusive (referring to both men

and women) and which were not. While it is obvious that *anthropos* in Romans 3:28 means "person," in other passages it is difficult to determine whether the author was referring to men *and* women. In such cases, careful study of the historical and literary context must be made to determine the best translation. Translation is a difficult process and the meaning (and hence the translation) of each passage must be made on a case-by-case basis.

The second major difficulty comes in determining whether English masculine generics like "man" and "he" sound inclusive to English ears. That is, are they "heard" to include women as well as men? This is an area where there is significant disagreement. After all, what sounds exclusive to a young person may sound perfectly inclusive to an older person. What sounds exclusive to a woman may sound inclusive to a man. Different readers hear terms differently. Advocates of inclusive language point out that gender accuracy solves this problem. Whereas the translation "man" in Romans 3:28 is ambiguous (it could mean "male" or "person"), the translation "person" is precise and clear. Inclusive language renders the meaning of the Greek more accurately *for both kinds of readers*. Furthermore, empirical studies have demonstrated conclusively that the English language is changing, and that generic terms like "man" and "he" are increasingly viewed by readers as exclusive terms. If we want Bible translations that are as clear and unambiguous as possible, inclusive language should be utilized when the context is clearly generic.

Other Examples

"Man" and "he" are not the only masculine generics in the Bible. Other masculine generic terms are also used with an inclusive sense. The masculine Greek noun *adelphoi*, for example, has traditionally been translated as "brothers" or "brethren." However, an examination of ancient Greek literature reveals that *adelphoi* often means "siblings," or "brothers and sisters," not "brothers." This is also true of New Testament passages like Philippians 4:1, where the apostle Paul is addressing both men and women. Everyone agrees that the sense here is not "brothers" but "brothers and sisters," and so the TNIV accurately translates it this way.

Other examples abound. As noted above, even before this gender language debate, Bible versions like the KJV often introduced the inclusive term "children" for Hebrew and Greek terms traditionally rendered "sons" (*banim* and *huios*). Isaiah 1:2 NIV reads, "...I reared *children* (*banim*) and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me." Matthew 5:44-45 KJV reads, "Love your enemies...That ye may be the *children* (*huios*) of your Father which is in heaven." In these and many other contexts, *banim* and *huios* clearly mean "children," not "sons," and so that is how the TNIV translates them.

I heard a very conservative commentator recently refer to this debate as a "tempest in a teapot," and in many ways that is what it is. People are often bothered, even outraged, by these kinds of translations because they do not *sound* like the Bible they are used to. But to be honest, the original Bible—the Greek and Hebrew texts—does not sound anything like the Bible people are used to! The point is that every English translation must take Greek and Hebrew words and find their closest equivalent in contemporary English. This is exactly what the TNIV is doing.

Why Bother?

The reader may still ask at this point, "Why bother?" Why should we condescend to the changes in language produced by our heathen culture? But we might just as well

ask why the apostle Paul preached in Greek instead of Hebrew (the language of God's original revelation!). Or why on Mars Hill he preached about the "unknown God" (Acts 17) instead of giving his traditional message to Jews in the synagogue (Acts 13). The answer, of course, is that Paul sought to present the Gospel as clearly and accurately for the audience to which he was preaching. At the same time, he never compromised the truth of the message. Gender-accurate translations like the TNIV seek to accurately convey the sense of the Hebrew or Greek original, while utilizing the language people speak today. That is the best possible goal for Bible translation.

For more details on the pros and cons of gender related language see my book, [Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender-Accuracy](#) (InterVarsity Press, 1998)