

DOES INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE ACCURATELY CONVEY TRUTH
IN TODAY'S ENGLISH?

Josiah Meyer

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INTRODUCTION

The inclusive language debate first came to the public's attention with the 1997 publishing of Susan Olasky's emotive article in *World* magazine entitled, "The Stealth Bible."¹ Due to the brevity of this paper, it is impractical to recount all of the events which have transpired in the course of the past decade,² but many have bemoaned the fact that since Olasky's article, the debate has been less than amicable. Since opposition to inclusive language has come largely from political and ideological pressure,³ rather than linguistic scholarship, this issue has become unnecessarily complicated and volatile.

In an attempt to concisely negotiate this complex arena of debate, this paper will completely disregard the question of whether or not inclusive language serves a feminist agenda. Although not unimportant, this author recognizes that, "whatever the reasons for the changes in the English language...the translator's job is always the same: translate the Word of God into the *current* language."⁴ Thus, the scope of this paper will be limited to the question of whether or not inclusive language accurately translates the Word of God into today's English.

¹ Susan Olasky, "The Feminist Seduction of the Evangelical Church: the New International Version of the Bible -- the Best-Selling English Version in the World -- Is Quietly Going 'Gender-Neutral'," *World Magazine* (March 1997).

² For two helpful reviews, from either side of the controversy, consider, D.A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: a Plea For Realism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 15-38, and Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Word*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 29-54.

³ Poythress and Grudem write: "It seems to me that the three most significant influences were *World* magazine (with its surprisingly widespread and influential readership), the opposition of James Dobson (with the potential for arousing at the opposition of the millions of listeners to his radio program), and the opposition of the Southern Baptist Convention, particularly the Baptist Sunday School Board at the May 19th meeting in Nashville." Poythress and Grudem, 2000, 51.

⁴ Carson, 1998, 188.

I. Is Inclusive Language Becoming Normative?

According to Carson, the question, “But Is the English Language Changing?” (also the title of his final chapter), “raises *the issue* that lies behind so much of the rest of the debate.”⁵ If the English language is not changing, then inclusive language is certainly not worth defending.

It is interesting to note that the words “man” and “he/his/him” (for the purposes of this paper, “the generic ‘he’”) did not always function as it does now. Rather, “In Middle English *man* primarily meant ‘human being’; the separate words *wer* and *wif* mean ‘male human being’ and ‘woman’”⁶ – although it was also possible for *man* to refer to a male human being. “Eventually this [latter meaning] became the primary meaning, whereas the generic meaning ‘human race/human being’ has been relegated to a peripheral position, particularly in twentieth-century usage.”⁷ Likewise, “*he* took on generic functions after the loss of grammatical gender in the Middle English period,”⁸ but increasingly came to include females only by implication or male representation.

Because of their hard stance on certain other gender-issues, opponents of inclusive language tend to support the generic ‘he’, precisely *because* it is male-oriented. Poythress and Grudem quote *The American Heritage Dictionary* approvingly on this point:

...the use of [the generic ‘he’] forces the reader to envision a single male who stands as the representative member of the group... Thus *he* is not really a gender-neutral pronoun, rather, it refers to a male who is to be taken as the representative member of the group referred to by its antecedent. The traditional usage, then, is

⁵ Carson, 1998, 158.

⁶ Steven J. Clancy, “The Ascent of *guy*” *American Speech* 74, (1999), 282-294, [document on-line] available from http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/american_speech/v074/74.3clancy.html. Internet. Accessed. 3 Oct. 2007, 282.

⁷ *Ibid*, 283.

⁸ *Ibid*, 282.

not simply a grammatical convention; *it also suggests a particular pattern of thought.*⁹

The bottom line is that Poythress and Grudem believe that a “pattern of thought” which places a male as a representative of humanity is intrinsically Biblical – thus, the generic ‘he’ is more correct, especially for Biblical translations. It should be upheld over and against inclusive language (which ignores or “mutes”¹⁰ this fact) even if it becomes archaic and unpopular.

From this quick etymology of the generic ‘he’ we may glean two insights: (1) the generic ‘he’ was once truly generic in that it could refer to female as well as male humans, and (2) it is no longer truly generic, since the current usage of the word has specifically masculine overtones.

From these conclusions, the necessity for inclusive language becomes obvious. When a, “male...pictorial starting point,”¹¹ is not intended by the author, or where an explicitly inclusive audience is meant, the generic ‘he’ becomes a misrepresentation of authorial intent. Thus, it is reasonable to, (1) examine proposed forms of inclusive language, and (2) ask which cases they may be used in.

II. Proposed Solutions to Exclusive Language

Whatever position one takes on the state of inclusive language in today's vernacular, it is hard to avoid the fact that today's English has a major flaw. It, "has no third person singular common gender pronoun."¹² As has been stated, this is a real problem which every English communicator must grapple with. According to Carson, there are basically four options for communicating the idea of an inclusive, singular, third person pronoun in English: (1) Use “his”

⁹ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (3rd ed.; Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 831. Cited in Poythress and Grudem, 2000, 145, *italics added*.

¹⁰ This stance is implied in the title of Poythress and Grudem's book, Poythress and Grudem, 2000.

¹¹ Poythress and Grudem, 2000, 145. *Italics added*.

¹² Carson, 1998, 92.

generically, (2) alternate between “his” and “her” throughout a work, (3) struggle with the cumbersome “his or her”, or (4) use “they” as a singular.¹³

Within the tight requirements of biblical interpretation, option two is probably not viable, since it is too random and open to misinterpretation. Option three is similarly dismissible, since it is too cumbersome for translations which are meant to be easily memorized and read. The English translator is left, then, with the first and fourth option. Both of these options are also flawed, however, since, "the first option breaches concord of gender (or we avoid admitting this point by saying that 'his' is gender-neutral), while the last option breaches concord of number (and we avoid admitting this point by saying, as some do, that this 'they' is singular)."¹⁴

Consider, for example, Romans 12:6-7, “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching.” Is the gift of teaching open to women as well? What of service? This rendering leaves the gender ambiguous.

Consider, however, 1 Corinthians 14:28 in TNIV, “If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church; let them speak to themselves and to God.” Is the speaker to speak to him/herself, or should the tongue-speakers in a church form an exclusive huddle and speak to each other? Although true to the author’s inclusive intent, this translation makes the number of the referent ambiguous.

A second solution is to simply re-write sentences so that the generic ‘he’ is avoided. To accomplish this, inclusive-language translations will often, "adopt passive rather than active

¹³ Paraphrased from Carson, 1998, 92.

¹⁴ Carson, 1998, 92.

constructions, or substitute descriptive nouns for pronouns in order to avoid using 'he'.¹⁵ So, for example, "...*he* will put *him* in charge of all *his* possessions," (Matt. 24:27, NASB) becomes, "*a servant* who is always faithful will be put in charge of everything *the master* owns," (CEV). Also, the inclusive 'he' is also sometimes avoided by changing the object from third to second person. So in Matthew 16:26, "what will *a man* give in exchange for *his* soul?" (NASB) becomes "what can *you* give in exchange for *your* soul?" (NIVI).¹⁶ Although the CSG give some cases where these changes are admissible,¹⁷ the option of rewriting verses is usually met with even more resistance than the previous option, since there is a more significant break from the original text.

The final process of gender-inclusion concerns cases where passages include distinctly masculine nouns like man,¹⁸ father, brother, brother and son. In these cases, inclusive-language translators either replace these words with inclusive terms or pair them with a feminine counterpart. So, "the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a *father* the *son* he delights in," (NIV) becomes, "the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a *parent* the *children* they delight in," (NIVI).¹⁹ Also, "I urge you *brothers*..." (NASB) becomes, "I urge you *brothers and sisters*..." (TNIV) in Romans 12:1.

¹⁵ Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Word*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 119.

¹⁶ Matt. 16:26

¹⁷ The Colorado Springs Guidelines (CSG) A. 1, 6 & 7, state that, "substantive participles such as *ho piseuon* can often be rendered in inclusive ways, such as 'the one who believes' rather than 'he who believes.' [also,] ... In many cases, pronouns such as *oudeis* can be translated 'no one' rather than 'no man.' [and] When *pas* is used as a substantive it can be translated with terms such as 'all people' or 'everyone.'" Carson, 1998, 44-48.

¹⁸ For the most part, I have been referring to 'man' under the heading of 'generic "he"'. I mention it here, however, since it is, properly, a noun and not a pronoun.

¹⁹ Proverbs 3:12.

Although this solution often has the advantage of communicating an inclusive message without changing the person or number of a sentence,²⁰ it has the distinct disadvantage of changing other, potentially more important, details in a sentence.

III. Which Texts Could/Should Become Inclusive?

Although not readily apparent through the “fog of war” created by the recent controversy, there is a fairly sizeable middle ground on this issue, which enjoys solid agreement from both sides.²¹ Since everyone recognizes (to some degree) the limitations of generic ‘he’ in today’s language, even Grudem has no problem with inclusive language, so long as it is limited to cases, “where there is a non-male meaning in the original text.”²² He notes that the Greek words *anthropos, tis* and *oudeis* are key examples of this. The Colorado Springs Guidelines (CSG) also reflect this, especially in points “A. 5-8,” where they add *pas* and *anthropoi* to the list of Greek words which may be translated gender-inclusive.²³ Since the publishing of the CSG, several popular translations have been released which reflect these concessions.²⁴ These translations have

²⁰ Sometimes this is not true, since the singular may have a slightly different connotation than the plural. “Child,” for example, usually brings a young son/daughter to mind, while “children” may refer to offspring of any age.

²¹ Mark L. Strauss provides a 16-point itemized list on which there is complete agreement in this debate. See Mark L. Strauss, “Current Issues in the Gender Language Debate: a Response to Vernon Poythress and Wayne Grudem,” Glenn G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, Steven M. Voth, eds. *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) [chapter on-line]; available from http://www.tniv.info/pdf/Strauss_CurrentIssues.pdf; Internet. Accessed 26 Sept. 2007, 5-7. One critical point of agreement is also pointed out by Mike Stallard as he writes, “at this point no Evangelical is questioning whether God himself, especially in passages where he is called Father, should be designated by gender-neutral language such as parent or he/she.” Dr. Mike Stallard, “Gender Neutral Translations: the Controversy over the TNIV,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 26 (Spring 2003) [journal on-line]; available from http://www.bbc.edu/journal/volume7_1/TNIV-Stallard.pdf. Internet. Accessed 26 Sept. 2007, 5.

²² Wayne Grudem, “Are the Criticisms of the TNIV Bible Really Justified?” *JBMW*, Fall 2002, 32. *Italics were hidden.*

²³ Colorado Springs Guidelines, Carson, 1998, 47.

²⁴ Poythress and Grudem note that the *New English Translation* (1998), *International Standard Version* (1998), *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (1999), the revised edition of the NIV and the *English Standard Version* (announced 1998; released in 2001) are all “gender-specific” in that they conform to the CSG. Poythress and Grudem, 53.

gone under the title of “gender-correct,” since they attempt to communicate the explicit gender, number and person of the ancient texts as “correctly” as possible in today’s vernacular.

Although virtually all new translations agree that inclusive language should be employed in cases where the original authors *explicitly* communicated an inclusive message, there is a great deal of controversy over the use of inclusive language where the original authors (1) clearly implied (2) may have implied, or, (3) clearly did not imply an inclusive meaning. In general, “gender-correct”²⁵ translations prefer to use the generic ‘he’ in all of these cases, since it better reflects the male “nuances” of the original. Inclusive language translations may be arranged along a spectrum, with most using inclusive language in the first case, some in the second, and a few in the third.

Some often-cited cases are Luke 17:3-4, “If your *brother/brother or sister* sins, rebuke *him/them...*” (NIV/TNIV), Revelation 22:18, “...God will add to *him/ them* the plagues...in this book,” (NIV/TNIV), and Matthew 5:9, “...the peacemakers...shall be called *sons/children* of God,” (NASB/KJV). According to Grudem, the fact that these passages have a clearly inclusive message does not sanction inclusive language. Rather, since masculine terms were used in the original Greek, inclusive terminology would “mute” an important nuance.

A much more firmly opposed usage of inclusive language are those cases where the intention of the author is open to interpretation. These changes are especially controversial when inclusive language changes the meaning of a passage. In Acts 4:4, for example, the CEV renders the text as; “...by now there were about five thousand *followers* [NIV – “men”] of the Lord.” In this case, the meaning of the passage is significantly altered, since the meaning of the NIV’s

²⁵ This term is a slippery one, since, of course, every translation would like to present itself as being “correct” in their translation of Scriptures. For the purposes of this essay, however, this term will only refer to the Bibles which correspond to the CSG.

rendering “would make a congregation of at least 10,000 assuming an equal number of women, and more with children.”²⁶

In a more theologically and ecclesiologicaly charged case the CEV alters the qualifications of “overseers” in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Rather than, “husband of one wife,” the “CEV merely says that a ‘church official’ must be ‘faithful in marriage.’ All the ‘he’s’ become ‘they’s.’”²⁷ In so doing, “The CEV eliminates all signs that Paul expected the elders to be men.”²⁸ Since the TNIV tends to be more conservative in their approach, it has left this and many other ambiguous and/or doctrinally-charged passages alone.²⁹

The final category of inclusive language involves changes which the original authors clearly did not intend. Most of the examples which Poythress and Grudem note are based on the CSG guideline A.4.: “Hebrew *‘ish* should ordinarily be translated ‘man’ and ‘men,’ and Greek *aner* should almost always be so translated.”³⁰ Although Blomberg and Carson cite examples where this rule does not apply,³¹ there is almost unanimous support for translating *‘ish* and *aner* with the generic ‘he’ in cases where the context does not provide strong evidence to the contrary.

Two examples of this are Acts 20:30, “Even from your own number *some* [Greek *aner*] will arise and distort the truth...” (NIVI) and 1 Corinthians 13:11, “When I became an *adult*, [Greek *aner*] I put childish ways behind me,” (NIVI); Carson rejects these examples as

²⁶ Poythress and Grudem, 267.

²⁷ Ibid, 23.

²⁸ Ibid, 23.

²⁹ Blomberg notes that the TNIV has left “The Famous Gender Role Passages” of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:33-38, 1 Tim. 2:11-15, Eph. 5:21-33, Col 3:18-19, basically untouched. Craig Blomberg, “Today’s New International Version: The Untold Story of a Good Translation,” *Contextualized Biblical Studies conference*, 2003, 16-19.

³⁰ CSG A.4., Carson, 1998, 45.

³¹ See Blomberg, 2003, 15-16 and Carson, 1998, 120-128.

being “prejudicial” and “silly,”³² respectively, since the context makes it reasonably clear in both cases that the author intended a masculine interpretation.

IV. Form vs. Function: the Crux of the Matter

According to Darrell L. Block, the real issue underlying the inclusive-language debate is whether one subscribes to a “dynamic/functional” or a “formal” equivalence philosophy of translation. Bock explains that in the case of functional equivalency translations, “translators are *trying to render the force* of the passage,” in which case inclusive language may be helpful. Since formal equivalence translating, “means *rendering the passage as precisely as possible in conjunction with the forms and expressions of the original language* of the text,”³³ however, formal translators almost never use inclusive language.

Because of their firm stance on plenary inspiration, formal translators have two main contentions with functional equivalence translations. First, they blur or (to use Poythress and Grudem’s term) “mute” the subtle nuances of these words, and secondly they make, “explicit what the original text leaves implicit.”³⁴ Although helpful for the beginner, these translations, “have blurred the line between translation and commentary. Christians need to be aware of their limitations...and move beyond them as they mature in their own study.”³⁵

A common accusation which formal translators must grapple with is that they are naïve in their approach to translation.³⁶ Carson is especially vocal on this point, devoting an entire

³² Carson, 1998, 159.

³³ Darrell L. Bock, "Do Gender Sensitive Translations Distort Scripture? Not Necessarily," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 4, (December 2002), 26.

³⁴ Poythress and Grudem, 2000, 92.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Leland Ryken identifies this as one of the "Five Myths about Essentially Literal Bible Translation," Wayne Grudem, Vern Poythress, C. John Collins, and others, *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 60-70.

chapter to what he calls the "treason of translation."³⁷ Anyone familiar with more than one language knows that many nuances, jokes, styles and meanings are simply not translatable: something is always lost in translation. For this reason, the idea of a truly "formal" translation is something of a misnomer. In the context of inclusive language, there are at least three dangers which must be avoided in the use of formal translations.

First, it is essential to know that, "Since no word or phrase in one language corresponds exactly to any word or phrase in another, a strict literal or word-for-word translation is impossible."³⁸ An excellent example is the Greek word *adelphoi*. In this case, Poythress and Grudem rightly recognize that, "Subtle differences exist between the Greek word and the corresponding English word."³⁹ Since the range of *adelphoi* could refer to an exclusively female as well as a mixed or all-male group of siblings and/or believers, the formal rendering of *adelphoi* as "brothers" or "brethren" (NASB) is not as accurate as the TNIV's functional rendering of "brothers and sisters", or "believers" (TNIV) in Acts 13:26 and John 21:23, respectively.⁴⁰

A second key acknowledgment is that gender – like any other linguistic pattern – rarely matches from one language to another. For this reason, it is not a given that the generic 'he' functions in the same way from language to language.⁴¹

³⁷ His premise is based around the other Italian phrase *traddutore, traditore*, which means, "translators, traitors." Carson explains, "This Italian pun insists, in effect, that all translation is treason. The pun 'works' because the words for 'translation' and 'treason' in Italian are very similar. It doesn't work in English -- which is precisely the point." Carson, 1998, 47.

³⁸ Mark L. Strauss, "Is the TNIV Faithful in its Treatment of Gender? Yes: The TNIV Does not Eliminate Gender Distinctions but Rather Clarifies Them," *Christianity Today Magazine* (September 2002).

³⁹ Poythress and Grudem, 2000, 252.

⁴⁰ Poythress and Grudem recognize that "brothers" or "brethren" is sometimes too narrow for *adelphoi*. They are very cautious with the phrase "brothers and sisters," however, since it "makes the inclusion of 'sisters' explicit, where as the Greek word leaves it to context to decide." Poythress and Grudem, 2000, 253.

⁴¹ By way of example, Carson gives thirteen examples of languages which have between two and nine genders, designating anything from sexuality, to power to usefulness, to edibility, among other things. Carson, 1998, 81-83.

In English, for example, gender is almost always tied to sexuality, and sometimes animation. Consider the following example: "She's a fine, sturdy ship!" In English, this sentence would normally be understood as attributing sexual qualities (e.g. dependability and/or beauty) and sometimes animation (e.g. the ship is "alive" to the speaker) to the object. In French, however, neither sexuality nor animation is understood by this use of gender. Translated formally, the gender of French into English would have the absurd result of considering counters more "manly" than tables, or reading animation into everyday objects!

After a lengthy exploration of the complexities of Hebrew and Greek gender, Carson concludes that, "In exactly the same way that one cannot responsibly translate a Greek genitive absolute into English as an English genitive absolute, *because the syntactical structures of the two languages are different*, so one cannot responsibly translate all Greek specified genders into English as corresponding English genders, because the gender systems of the two languages are different."⁴² For this reason, it is often more accurate to render the *intended* meaning of an author, rather than the *explicit* meaning.

An example of this is the Hebrew word *adam*. Along with the CSG, Grudem contends that, "The English word 'man' most accurately translates *adam* because it is the only word we have that has those same two meanings (the human race, or a male human being)."⁴³ Carson partially agrees with Grudem, but then writes that, "what is really required is not a word that will include only these two senses, but one that will include a third as well, namely, the proper name 'Adam'.⁴⁴ Without this third meaning, significant nuances are lost in such meaning-laden passages as (Genesis 1:27), "God created *adam* in His own image, in the image of God He

⁴² Carson, 2000, 98.

⁴³ Wayne Grudem, "The Gender-Neutral NIV: What is the Controversy About?" *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 40, (Spring 2002), 38.

⁴⁴ Carson, 1998, 168.

created him; *adam* and female He created them,” or (1 Corinthians 15:45), “So also it is written, ‘The first *anthropos*,⁴⁵ *adam*,⁴⁶ BECAME A LIVING SOUL.’ The last *adam* became a life-giving spirit.”

More importantly, however, English word "man" no longer covers a fourth meaning of *adam* -- that of an exclusively female group. An example which is posted on the TNIV's website is Numbers 31, where a group of, “32,000 women (specifically called so in vv. 9, 15, 17, 18, 35) [with three Hebrew nouns] and further described as those who ‘had not slept with a man,’ vv. 17, 18, 35).are referred to by the Hebrew generic noun ‘*adam*’ no less than six times (vv. 28, 30, 34, 40, 46, 47), and in each case it is best translated, ‘women.’”⁴⁷

This discussion does not, of course, cast doubt on the ability of the Biblical authors to communicate biological gender. Rather it highlights the fact that they did not always use grammatical gender to do so. For this reason, a strict formal translation may at times be more guilty of “muting” gender-nuances than functional translations.

⁴⁵ This is the Greek word for “human,” person, or “man.”

⁴⁶ The Greek here transliterates the Hebrew *adam*.

⁴⁷ Today's New International Bible Website, “

CONCLUSION

We now return to the question posed in the introduction, “Does inclusive language accurately translate the Word of God into today’s English?” The question cannot be answered in a simple “yes or no” answer.

In cases where gender accurate translations can be true to the intended gender of the Biblical authors without changing their overall message, inclusive language represents a significant improvement over the generic ‘he.’ Unfortunately, however, the English language itself is in an awkward stage of development, and most inclusive language is impossible without losses in other areas. The advantages and drawbacks of inclusive-language must be carefully weighed, then against the needs of the individual readers of the Bible.

Mature Christians and clergymen need a meticulously accurate, trustworthy translation which they can study with confidence. In these cases, the need for a “formal” reflection of the person, number, sentence structure and noun usage in the original texts outweighs the advantages of inclusive language. For those outside of the Christian subculture, however, a translation which will remove the unnecessary distractions of unbiblical chauvinism (as well as other archaisms) by pandering to contemporary linguistics becomes an essential tool.

According to Eugene Nida, “No single translation of the Bible in a major language is likely to represent adequately the diversities of historical, vertical, and religious-political dialects. This means that multiple translations are inevitable.”⁴⁸

As an essential part of conveying aspects of truth, within a larger body of translations, inclusive language translations are an essential part of accurately communicating Revelation.

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⁴⁸ Eugene A. Nida, "The Sociolinguistics of Translating Canonical Religious Texts," *Traduction, Terminologie, Redaction (TTR) Journal* 4, (1st Semester 1991) [journal online] Available from <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/1994/v7/n1/037173ar.pdf>. Internet. Accessed 26 Sept. 2007, 212.

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