

Inclusive Language: Will It Solve the Problems?

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Introduction

The current debate over the use of inclusive language in English Bible translations necessarily embraces concerns of Truth. The fact that the rhetoric in the 1990s contains such great emotion reflects the seriousness of those involved in the dispute, each side being concerned that Truth not be sacrificed, but disagreeing on the way Truth should be maintained.

In the process of debating issues of original language, sociology, linguistics and “political correctness,” it is necessary to take an in-depth look at what an inclusive Bible translation is intended to solve. Is the preservation of Truth really the root issue? What concerns gave rise to the debate in the first place? Does the current debate have a direct relationship to these concerns? Will an inclusive-language Bible translation actually solve the problems, or will it only treat a symptom without dealing with the larger issues?

These questions and related topics will be dealt with in this paper.

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Gender-inclusive language: an old issue with a new twist

As has been repeatedly pointed out in recent debate and literature, the present dilemma with the less-than-perfect English pronoun system is not a new issue. Popular usage has rarely matched the exactitude demanded by grammarians in the agreement of masculine and feminine, singular and plural. Furthermore, what is considered correct English in one period of history will neither be spoken nor written the same in an ensuing period. Language is *alive*. It is alive because it grows and changes with age and use. Language changes as need demands. The more rapid the social change, the more rapid the changes in language. As a general rule, vocabulary increases with the age and usage of a language, while grammar simplifies.

English is going through rapid change. The grammar is going through a natural process of simplification, begun long ago. Its ancestor, Old English (OE), is a descendant of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages,¹ and shares some grammatical features with Latin, Greek and Sanskrit. Besides number, OE nouns, pronouns, adjectives and articles had gender as well as a four-case system.² Through the centuries, these features have either simplified or died out. Remnants exist in Modern English, most notably in the pronoun system.

Though this simplification of grammar could be called a “loss,” few English speakers today would bemoan the disappearance of a complicated case system or gender-marked nouns. Meaning that was conveyed through case is now handled in other ways. What was lost was not *meaning* but specific *forms*. The meaning that was conveyed through old forms can still be expressed, but by using different forms. Similarly, modern grammatical changes in English represent changes in form, not in the ability to express meaning. Old forms will adapt, or new forms will develop to cover the same meanings.

What is noticeably different in the gender-inclusive language issue now is the way in which change is being attempted. Instead of change occurring through natural processes of usage, change is being dictated by social agendas created by those who misunderstand the nature of language.

It is common today in public discussion, whether the context is academic, political, or even legal, to take it for granted that using the word “man,” in isolation or as a suffix, to refer to all of humanity, or using the pronoun “he” where any person, male or female, may be referred to, is to engage in “sexist language,” i.e.,

¹ OE is dated from approximately 450 AD, the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions of England.

² OE had masculine, feminine and neuter gender. The four cases were nominative, accusative, genitive and dative. There is evidence of an instrumental case, but it was already dying by the time the Anglo-Saxons came to England.

language that embodies, affirms, or reinforces discrimination against women or the patriarchal subordination of women to men. Not everyone agrees with this view, and “he” and “man” often seem to creep inappropriately into the speech of even those who consider themselves above such transgressions; but the ideology that there is “sexist language” in ordinary words and in the ordinary use of English gender rarely comes under sustained criticism, even in the intellectual arenas where all things are supposed to be open to free inquiry. Instead, the inquiry is usually strongly inhibited by quick charges of “sexism” and by the other intimidating tactics of political correctness.³

The whole idea of “sexist language” is based on the false idea that words are limited to one meaning:

...if “man” and “he” in some usage means males, then they cannot mean both males and females in other usage. This view is absurd enough that there is usually a more subtle take on it: that the use of “man” or “he” to refer to males and to both males and females means that maleness is more fundamental than femaleness, “subordinating” femaleness to maleness.⁴

The movement to remove “sexist language” from the English language is being done supposedly to correct certain social injustices. The assumption is that by making “corrections” in the language, some of the wrongs of male/female relationships will also be righted. This assumption presumes that grammatical gender is directly associated with male/female societal issues. To show how false this assumption is, Dr. Ross cites the grammatical realities of Persian:

We would expect that if linguistic gender were a correlate of social form, an engine for the enforcement of patriarchy or a reflection of the existence of patriarchy, then we would find it present in sexist or patriarchal societies and absent in the non-sexist or non-patriarchal societies. In fact, the presence of gender in language...bears no relation whatsoever to the nature of the corresponding societies. The best historically conspicuous example is Persian.

Old Persian, like Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, had the original Indo-European genders of masculine, feminine, and neuter. By Middle Persian all gender had disappeared. This was not the result of Persian feminist criticism, nor was it the result of the evolution of an equal opportunity society for women. It *just happened*—as most kinds of linguistic change do. Modern Persian is a language *completely without gender*. There are not even different words for “he” and “she,” just

³ Kelley L. Ross, Ph.D., “Against the Theory of ‘Sexist Language’” (www.friesian.com/language.htm, 3/15/99). Dr. Ross is with the Department of Philosophy at Los Angeles Valley College, Van Nuys, CA.

⁴ Ibid.

the unisex *un*....Nevertheless, after some progress under Western influence, Iran has retreated from the modern world into a vigorous reestablishment of mediaevalism [sic], putting everyone, especially women, back into their traditional places. So the advice could be: If someone wants “non-sexist language,” move to Iran. But that probably would not be quite what they have in mind.⁵

The Malay languages of Southeast Asia provide another example of how linguistic gender is unrelated to male/female social issues.⁶ As can be seen by the following tables showing Indonesian,⁷ both pronouns and nouns are unmarked for gender. They are “gender neutral.”

Table 1: Indonesian (Malay) pronouns

| <i>Person & number</i> | <i>Level</i> | <i>Subjective, Objective, Possessive Pronouns</i> ⁸ | | <i>English equivalent</i> | <i>Gender</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------|--|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| | | <i>Full form</i> | <i>Affixed form</i> | | |
| 1s | formal | saya | | I, me | m/f |
| | familiar | aku | ku-, -ku | I, me | m/f |
| 2s ⁹ | formal | engkau, kau, saudara ¹⁰ | kau-, -kau | you | m/f |
| | familiar | kamu ¹¹ | -mu | you | m/f |
| 3s | | dia, ia | -nya | he, she, it, him, her | m/f |
| 1p | incl. | kita | | we, us | m/f |
| | excl. | kami | | we, us | m/f |
| 2p | | kamu, kalian ¹² | -mu | you | m/f |
| 3p | | mereka | (-nya) ¹³ | they, them | m/f |

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The author worked in five Malay-related languages in her 25 years of living in West Kalimantan (Borneo) and the Philippines.

⁷ Indonesian is the national language of Indonesia and closely related to Malay. It is also known as *Bahasa*.

⁸ The specific pronoun used may vary in different localities.

⁹ In many situations, it is considered impolite to address another using the pronoun at all. Instead, a noun referring to the person's position in society is substituted. Many of these would be gender specific; for example: *bapa* (lit., father), *ibu* (lit., mother), *nenek* (lit., grandmother, though sometimes grandfather), *kakek* (lit., grandfather)—where such terms may indicate respect without being literally applicable.

¹⁰ *Saudara* does have a feminine form—*saudari*—but it is not used in all places where Indonesian is spoken.

¹¹ Also 2p. The usage varies by geographical area.

¹² From *kamu sekalian*, “all of you.”

¹³ Usually singular, but occasionally plural.

Table 2: Examples of gender-inclusive words and expressions in Indonesian (Malay)

| <i>Term</i> | <i>English equivalent</i> | <i>Biblical usage</i> | <i>English equivalent</i> |
|--|---|---------------------------|---|
| <i>anak (s)</i> <i>anak-anak</i> <i>(pl)</i> | child (m/f) | <i>anak laki-laki</i> | boy |
| | | <i>anak perempuan</i> | girl |
| | | <i>Anak Allah</i> | lit., Child of God, but refers specifically to the Son of God |
| | | <i>anak Allah</i> | child of God , m/f |
| | biological offspring of animals and some plants | <i>anak domba</i> | lamb (lit., offspring of sheep) |
| <i>orang</i> | person (m/f) | <i>orang laki-laki</i> | man, male |
| | | <i>orang perempuan</i> | woman, female |
| | | <i>orang berdosa</i> | sinner, m/f |
| | | <i>orang yang percaya</i> | believer, m/f |
| | | <i>tiap orang</i> | each person, m/f |
| | | <i>segala orang</i> | everyone, m/f, focus on individual |
| | | <i>semua orang</i> | everyone, m/f, focus on the totality |
| <i>manusia</i> | mankind, humanity | <i>segala manusia</i> | all of mankind (as a class), m/f, includes everyone |
| <i>saudara</i> | sibling | <i>saudara-saudara</i> | brothers, brothers and sisters |

Table 3: Samples of biblical text with gender-inclusive language

(Indonesian text with English gloss)

| |
|---|
| <p>Example No. 1: John 1:12-13</p> <p><i>Tetapi semua orang yang menerimanya diberiNya kuasa supaya menjadi</i> But all person(s) who receive-3s are-given-by-3s power [purpose] become</p> <p><i>anak-anak Allah, yaitu mereka yang percaya dalam namaNya; orang yang</i> children of-God, [rel pro] they who believe in name-3s person who</p> <p><i>diperanakan bukan dari darah atau dari daging, bukan pula secara</i> born not from blood or from flesh, not either a-manner</p> <p><i>jasmani oleh keinginan seorang laki-laki, melainkan dari Allah.</i> physical by desire one-person male, but from God.</p> |
|---|

Example No. 2: Genesis 1:26-27

Baiklah Kita menjadikan manusia menurut gambar dan rupa Kita . . .
It-is-good We make mankind¹⁴ following image and form of-Us

Maka Allah menciptakan manusia itu menurut gambarNya, menurut gambar
Then God created mankind [dem.] following image-3s following image-3s

Allah diciptakanNya dia; laki-laki dan perempuan diciptakanNya mereka.
of-God was-created-by-3s 3s male and female were-created-by-3s they

Gen. 1:26-27

Example No. 3: James 2:14-16

Apakah gunanya, saudara-saudaraku, jika seorang mengatakan, bahwa ia
What [q] use-3s, my-brothers-and-sisters,¹⁵ if a-person says that 3s

mempunyai iman, padahal ia tidak mempunyai perbuatan? Dapatkah iman itu
has faith, when-in-fact 3s [neg] has deed/s? Can [q] faith [dem]

menyelamatkan dia? Jika seorang¹⁶ saudara atau saudari tidak mempunyai
save 3s If a-(person) brother or sister¹⁷ [neg] have

pakaian dan kekurangan makanan sehari-hari, dan seorang dari antara
clothing and lacking food daily, and a-person from among

kamu berkata: "Selamat jalan, kenakanlah kain panas dan makanlah
2p says: "Safe travel, put-on [command] cloth warm and eat [command]

sampai kenyang!", tetapi ia tidak memberikan kepadanya apa yang perlu
until satisfied!", but 3s [neg] give to-3s that-which needed

bagi tubuhnya, apakah gunanya itu?"
for body-3s, what [q] use-3s that?

¹⁴ *manusia* has no gender nuances. It could be translated equally well as *humanity* or *humankind*. Its origin is Sanskrit, and means "the descendants of Manu." In Hindu mythology, Manu is the first man. [From an Indonesian dictionary no longer in print, compiled by Sutan Mohammad Zain, *Kamus Moderen Bahasa Indonesia* (Jakarta: Penerbit Grafika Djakarta [no date]). Interestingly, English *man* is also traced to Sanskrit *Manu*.

¹⁵ There is no gender distinction in the Indonesian.

¹⁶ *orang* here functions as a counter, a grammatical feature that has no equivalent in English.

¹⁷ Since James specifically mentions both *brother* and *sister*, and it is possible to translate it this way, the Indonesian has done so. This is not normal Indonesian, however. The preferred choice would be simply *orang*, which would refer to any person, male or female. Compare the first line of the passage where *saudara-saudara* is used as an inclusive term.

In the above samples, there are none of the gender-specific words that have become flash points in English. All pronouns are either gender-neutral or gender-inclusive. There is no similarity between the word for *mankind* and *man* that could give rise to issues of gender exclusiveness or male dominance. If a male or female person is meant in the context, the neutral word must be marked by the addition of *laki-laki*¹⁸ (male) or *perempuan* (female). If it is not necessary to distinguish the two in the context, then the gender-inclusive word is left alone, i.e., left unmarked.

As is the case with the Persian language, it would be expected that if grammatical gender were correlative to societal relationships between males and females, then this would be evident in Indonesian society. Such is not the case. In the world's largest Islamic country, male dominance is the norm and disrespect for women all too common.¹⁹ In the author's personal experience among the Dayaks in West Kalimantan,²⁰ men typically spoke disparagingly of women, and physical abuse was rampant within families. A common remark was that women were good only for sex and childbearing.

One could think that Christianity as well as modern secular ideas from the West might modify the prevailing attitudes. Indeed, there is evidence of slow change, but such change does not come easily. In one close community of approximately 150 families, most of them claiming to be Christian, it was said that there were only two husbands who did *not* hit their wives.²¹ Verbal abuse was common on both sides. Merely having a gender-inclusive language did not effect a social atmosphere of equality or mutual respect. Neither will it do so where English is spoken. Changing nouns or pronouns that are perceived to be “sexist” will not resolve the underlying tensions between males and females.

One critical difference between natural language change and the present attempt to make English gender-inclusive is the element of power. Language expresses thought. By controlling the words people may or may not use, those in power, like the rulers of Ingsoc,²² want to control how people *think*. The working philosophy would argue that if certain words are no longer available, then the thoughts that supposedly go with them will disappear as well.

¹⁸ An alternative form is *lelaki*.

¹⁹ The influence of Islam is pervasive, but it is not as restrictive as in the Islamic countries of the Middle East or, for example, Pakistan.

²⁰ i.e., West Borneo. The lower three-fourths of the island belongs to Indonesia and is called Kalimantan. The upper fourth of the island forms East Malaysia and Brunei.

²¹ The remark was made orally during the 1980s regarding a specific community in West Kalimantan.

²² The reference is to George Orwell's novel, *1984*, in which the totalitarian socialist party of Ingsoc, over a period of time, changes Oldspeak (English) to Newspeak, where only certain words and grammatical structures are allowed in speech or print. The concept behind this political agenda was that the loss of words to express thought would eventually result in loss of the “incorrect” thoughts themselves. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1961).

Issues of sexist language in the Church have been around for a long time, but they have not until recently focused so heavily on concerns of grammar and vocabulary. In 1984, the Evangelical Colloquium on Women and the Bible in Oak Brook, Illinois heard both men and women speak to critical concerns regarding the relationships and roles of men and women within the Church. Of the 14 essays and their responses printed in *Women, Authority & The Bible* (1985), only one mentions sexist language. Joan D. Flikkema lists as a “high-risk” endeavor the addressing of sexist language. In her recommendations of actions Christians can take towards solving gender problems in the Church, she includes:

31. Noticing sexist remarks, actions and atmospheres; indicating that they are inappropriate, especially for Christians.
32. Noticing sexist language and imagery in the church service (liturgy, sermon, music, etc.) and church materials. Indicating that it is inappropriate for Christians to be so male oriented in word choice and imagery when half of the church's members are female....²³

Only no. 32 above would suggest a disapproval of gender-exclusive vocabulary. No. 31 more accurately represents the concerns of the rest of the essays: the unchristian putting down of women and arguments over woman's role in ministry. In this context sexist language refers to intent, not specific words. It involves attitudes. It entails the underlying *meaning* of what is being said, not the surface *form*. An innuendo without gender-specific vocabulary is still sexist language.

The present discord over gender-inclusive language in the Bible points to an underlying unresolved issue: the ongoing tension between men and women in the Church. So-called sexist language is only a symptom. Making a new translation of the Bible for the purpose of ridding it of perceived sexist language will not solve this root disease. Even if someone were successful in providing a translation completely free of gender-exclusive language and at the same time completely faithful to the meaning of the original, this will not solve the male/female tensions that exist in the Church. There still will be people who will mistakenly declare, for example, that an inclusive *they* is *he* in the original and cannot include *she*, or that *humankind* in the original is really *mankind* and has nuances of male superiority. Sin will always twist God's Word, regardless of the form used to express the meaning.

²³ Joan. D. Flikkema, “Strategies of Change: Being a Christian Change Agent,” in *Women, Authority & The Bible*, Alvera Mickelsen, ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 264.

Emotive language and presuppositions

Even though a Bible using gender-inclusive language will not solve underlying discrimination issues, evidence suggests that *not* using gender-inclusive language will impede the effectiveness of the Bible's message. In a misguided attempt to remain true to the *form* of the original language in matters such as linguistic gender and number, the message is actually distorted. The fact that the change occurring in English is propelled—one could say forced—by political correctness does not negate the need to recognize that change has taken place. The Church cannot safely ignore the influence that the recent movement has had upon the English shared by Christian and non-Christian alike.

Guidelines for virtually every publication in the English language now include the requirement that their contributors employ inclusive language. Those who think the move to inclusive language is a short-term aberration are like creationists who think the theory of evolution will go away.²⁴

Words are given meaning by their context and by the people who use them.²⁵ It would be possible for us to insist that English *he* in context can refer to either sex, or that *mankind* refers to both male and female collectively—and we would be historically correct.²⁶ Insisting on

²⁴ The quote is preceded by these words: “The...constant claim is that it is a small number of 'radical feminists' who are calling for inclusive language. This is simply false. Richard J. Clifford, S.J., has given helpful historical notes concerning the development of the issue, including a list of 18th- and 19th- century English authors who 'resolved the problem of gender concord by [using the] singular they.' The practice," Father Clifford wrote, "is defended by the Oxford English Dictionary (1908!) as sometimes necessary."“ Joseph Jensen, “Watch your language! Of princes and music directors,” in *America*, June 8, 1996, citing from “The Bishops, the Bible and Liturgical Language,” in *America*, 5/27/95.

²⁵ This is not to suggest that an author or speaker has the freedom to use words without regard to conventional usage and range of meaning. Communication can only take place when the “players” adhere to the rules of the “language game.” See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., Inc., 1968).

²⁶ *Man* meaning an *individual human being* was dying out a century ago. “The two chief English-language problems affecting inclusive language are the ambiguous meaning of man and grammatical concord in the pronoun system. Here I draw from Dennis Baron, *Grammar and Gender* (Yale Univ. Press, 1986) and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 1908). Man in all the Germanic languages has the two-fold meaning 'human being' and 'adult male human being,' a situation creating the potential for ambiguity. All the Germanic languages except English transferred the original generic sense of man to a new word, e.g., *Mensch* in German, thereby freeing man in these languages to mean 'adult male human being.' There is no doubt that man was a gender-neutral noun in early stages of English, but some disagreement exists whether the meaning of man in Modern English, which never developed a derived generic, has been in any way restricted to minimize ambiguous reference. The OED claims that man in the sense of 'human being' had become obsolete by the 19th century except in specific contexts such as indefinite or abstract use without the definite article.

Baron summarizes the lexical evidence: 'Lacking a comprehensive frequency study, we cannot assess with any accuracy just what the present state of the use of *man* may be. Since many people sought an alternative like (*cont.*)

being *historically* correct, however, ignores what is happening in the general public through the influence of *political* correctness, and especially what is occurring in the public school system. Gender-inclusive language in speaking and writing is becoming the norm. *He* and *mankind* are considered exclusive, regardless of what they were in the past. Such words now carry emotive content related to sexist (i.e., discriminatory) social sins. We must both admit and address reality. Wishful thinking is not going to bring back a supposedly ideal linguistic past.

In addition, good translation technique involves recognizing not only the referential meaning of words but also their connotations, including the emotive response they can cause. Words may be translated correctly with regard to referent, but still be incorrect with regard to connotation. To be faithful to the message of the original, the translator is obliged to consider connotations and the emotional responses that the intended reader can be expected to have. Ignoring these factors can result in a distorted message. Consider the words below that frequently have dissimilar connotations between the biblical languages and the receptor language (Table 4).

Table 4: Sample exercise focusing on connotations of words

(From *The Practice of Translating*)²⁷

| | <u>Biblical context</u> | <u>Your culture</u> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. betrothed (Matt 1.18) | _____ | _____ |
| 2. dream (Matt 2.22) | _____ | _____ |
| 3. salt (Matt 5.13) | _____ | _____ |
| 4. heathen (Matt 6.7; 18.17 KJV) | _____ | _____ |
| 5. leper (Matt 5.13) | _____ | _____ |
| 6. tax collectors (Matt 9.11, 11.19) | _____ | _____ |
| 7. pig/swine (Mark 5.11) | _____ | _____ |

people or *human being* long before general *man* became a feminist issue, it might not be too hazardous to agree with the OED that for most of us it has been some time since there was a pair of men in paradise. Despite pronouncements to the contrary, the range of generic *man* seems to be shrinking, even within the literary/proverbial registers where it is most likely to occur. And in ordinary language its range is even more limited, as speakers continue to avoid generic *man* in favor of *person...human, individual, indefinite you, even guy and fellow'* (p. 150).” Richard J. Clifford, “The Bishops, the Bible and liturgical language,” *America*, May 27, 1995, p. 12.

²⁷ Jacob A. Loewen, *The Practice of Translating: Drills for Training Translators* (London: United Bible Societies, 1981), 127.

| | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|
| 8. poor (Luke 4.18) | _____ | _____ |
| 9. spirit (Mark 1.12) | _____ | _____ |
| 10. lightning (Luke 10.18) | _____ | _____ |

The connotations of words like *mankind*, *man*, and *brothers* or *brethren* in English have changed. Not only have they become gender-exclusive, but also it is being taught that these words are indicators of an unethical male dominance in society. Students in public schools learn that it is incorrect (not just *politically* incorrect) to use these gender-specific terms in an inclusive way. Even though we may not buy into the philosophy that dictates the change, it is essential that we come to terms with the influence it has had. Overriding, exclusively male connotations exist in these words for a growing part of society.²⁸ If the authorial intention in Scripture is inclusive but an exclusive term is chosen for translation, negative connotations associated with sexist discrimination can then be extended from the word to the message itself. In Bible translation, then, it is better to choose words that avoid exclusively “male” connotation when such is not intended by the original text. Deliberately ignoring this factor is to distort the message of Scripture.

Those pushing gender-inclusive language in society are not the only ones who change the connotations of words. Christians far removed from any direct involvement with “political correctness” can treat biblical language the same way, applying their own presuppositions to words where those connotations do not exist in the original text. A recent example of this can be seen in the resistance to giving up *thee* and *thou* when referring to Deity, even though such forms have long disappeared from everyday English. A connotation of *respect* was applied to the archaic pronoun *thou* that was not an inherent part of the biblical word which it translated.

The word *man* has connotations not only for proponents of gender-inclusive language but also for those who insist upon retaining *man* as the only proper translation of Hebrew inclusive *adam*. Whereas the former may hear *man* as a word associated with the unpleasantness of unbiblical male dominance, the latter hear it as a “noble” word, associated with the being that is created in God's image.

The majestic, noble name which God gave us as humans at the beginning of creation—the great and wonderful name “*man*”—is no longer our name in [gender-

²⁸ The emotive response may be positive, negative or neutral, depending upon one's view of males.

inclusive translations of] the Bible.... Feminist pressure has renamed the human race. We are now to be called “humankind,” instead of the name God gave us.²⁹

Assuming that this statement is actually arguing on behalf of Hebrew *adam* rather than English *man*, it still must be established that the word itself—whether it be the letters אָדָם or *m-a-n*—is inherently noble.³⁰ Combinations of letters or sounds produce neither nobility nor ignobility. The dignity and majesty associated with being in the image of God have in this case been mistakenly applied to a word that denotes the creature.

In Genesis, the first mention of *adam* is in the deliberation of God himself, before man existed: “Let us make man in our own image.”³¹ No immediate reason is given for the choice of this word. In Genesis 2-3, however, there is a textual connection made between *adam* and *adamah*, earth. Man was made from the dust of the earth—Adam directly and Eve indirectly, but of the same substance as Adam.³² The connection is made clear again in Gen. 3:19. Because man has come from the earth, he will return to the earth.³³ The *textual* evidence would indicate the linguistic sign for *man* is connected with the linguistic sign for *earth*. There is nothing in the text that associates the nobleness of the creature with the name given to that creature.

Nor is there *textual* evidence that there are nuances of male headship in the word *adam*, as is claimed.³⁴ This does not mean that headship is not a biblical concept—only that it is a separate issue. The point is that the concept of headship does not exist in the word *adam*. What has happened is that a theology of headship developed from other portions of Scripture has been imposed upon an unrelated word. Even when Paul argues for women not having authority over men and uses creation in support of his teaching, he argues from the *order* of creation, not from the vocabulary.³⁵

²⁹ Wayne Grudem, “What’s Wrong with ‘Gender Neutral’ Bible Translations?” (a paper delivered at the national convention of the Evangelical Theological Society in Jackson, Miss., November 1996), p. 1; cited in Mark Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 136.

³⁰ It also needs to be established that God was speaking Hebrew when he named man *adam*. Grudem says that the naming took place at creation. Does this mean that the original language of human beings was Hebrew? Or that God was speaking Hebrew in his own counsel before creation? Or is *adam* itself a translation or modification of an earlier form? With no linguistic or scriptural evidence regarding the first language, it is precarious to build arguments on what was the form of a word “at creation.”

³¹ Gen. 1:26, NIV.

³² Gen. 2:7, 21-23.

³³ Gen. 3:19. Some scholars claim an additional relationship between *adam* and the Hebrew words for *red* and *blood*. There is no *textual* reason to make such a connection, and the linguistic evidence is only tentative.

³⁴ Grudem, “Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture? Part 1,” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 27, 1997.

³⁵ 1 Tim. 2:11-14.

Man as translation of *adam* in its inclusive sense was originally a word that simply designated the beings created out of the dust of the ground. However, the connotations have changed. On one extreme there are those who, when hearing *man*—even when the speaker intends an inclusive meaning—picture a domineering human of the class “male” who has historically (and perhaps personally) exhibited discriminatory and hurtful behavior against females. On the other extreme there are those who, when hearing *man* in the same context, imagine the class “mankind,” the beings that God created in his own image and who bear dignity and worth because of that relationship.

Words *do* develop emotive meaning. This is neither right nor wrong. In translation, however, emotive meaning and theological presuppositions must not be imposed upon the words of the original text. To do so is to distort the message by changing the meaning. The meaning *never* comes from the reader but from the author. What should determine translation is the literal meaning of Scripture itself.

Political correctness *has* influenced English, but translation itself is not a political issue. It is a linguistic and social issue. Language is a part of culture. When words of the original carry different connotational meanings than the corresponding *glosses* or surface structure of the receptor language, other words and structure must be chosen. The failure to heed this critical aspect of translation will result in a distortion of meaning.

Theological implications

Two important doctrines of the Christian faith are at risk in the battle over inclusive language: the perspicuity of Scripture and the nature of God, the first arising out of the second.

The God who communicates clearly

When God created Adam and Eve in his image, he gave them language to communicate with each other and with him.³⁶ A God who is *person* created *persons* in his image capable of using language to speak in meaningful expressions. God revealed his purpose and blessing to

³⁶ Grudem says, “Before Adam and Eve fell into sin...they spoke the *same language* and were *united in service of God* and in fellowship with him.” Taken from his discussion of “Tongues in the History of Redemption,” in *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, Great Britain: Inter-Varsity Press, and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 1069. Italics are in the original.

Adam and Eve through language.³⁷ Through language he communicated clearly to them the one prohibition they were to observe in the Garden of Eden.³⁸

God's transcendence did not prevent him from having fellowship with the ones whom he had created. Sin distorted human nature, but God's nature did not change; neither did his purpose for humanity—to be in fellowship with him. God remains transcendent as the Creator, but also immanent, desiring that people walk in faith and trust with him.³⁹ God used language to reveal both his character and his redemptive instructions.⁴⁰

The very word *revelation* signifies that God does not keep his truth hidden but lets it be known, for the purpose of revelation is *to reveal*. Language is the tool through which clear revelation takes place. Although Jesus revealed in visible form the character of God, he used language to explain God. He used language to give perspective to his miracles, and to correct both false teachings of the past and misinterpretations of the present.

The perspicuity of Scripture

Finally, language was the tool through which God's revelation was enscriptured for future generations. The Holy Spirit caused chosen persons to write in human language God's holy truth,⁴¹ not in mysterious or outdated words and convoluted syntax but in language that could be understood, so that all people might know and worship God.

The doctrine of the perspicuity, or clarity, of Scripture is related to the fact that God has *revealed* himself. Though not given separate emphasis until the Reformation, the perspicuity of Scripture was not a new teaching. It was a resurrected one, a teaching that had been set aside when the Church adopted an allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Based on Origen's principles of exegesis, this "spiritual" hermeneutic evidences a differing view of God. Rather than *revealing* himself in the words of Scripture, God *hides* himself in "forms and types of hidden and sacred matters."⁴² The language is divine, not human, "extremely difficult and obscure for human perception."⁴³ Although some portions, especially narrative, may be understood without much difficulty, such surface meaning is of little value when compared to "great and excellent" secret mysteries hidden under the ordinary words,⁴⁴ requiring "great zeal and effort" to understand, to

³⁷ Gen. 1:28-30.

³⁸ Gen. 2:16-17.

³⁹ Mic. 4:6, Eph. 4:6.

⁴⁰ Gen. 3:8-19.

⁴¹ 2 Pet. 1:20-21.

⁴² Origen, *On First Principles*, IV.i.2

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, IV.ii.8

be searched for like a “treasure hidden in a field.”⁴⁵ God’s aim is “to envelop and hide secret mysteries in ordinary words under the pretext of a narrative of some kind and of an account of visible things.”⁴⁶

Borrowing a phrase from Augustine, Pope Gregory in the sixth century described the journey into the allegories of Scripture as an excursion into a deep, dark forest,⁴⁷ a place of refreshing mystery where spiritual food that could delight the soul might be found in the surrounding obscurity.⁴⁸ This view of Scripture prevailed throughout the Middle Ages. It was based, however, on a view of God that made him incomprehensible, a view that emphasized his transcendence at the expense of his immanence. God was too great to be revealed in human language.⁴⁹

The example of Luther

The Reformers brought the Scriptures into the light of day by insisting that God’s Word is clear. Its message is not hidden in obscure allegories but discerned by carefully reading the text. God is not playing hide-and-seek, slipping behind the trees of a mystical dark forest, teasing his children into chasing him through the shadows. The appropriate metaphor for Scripture is not darkness but light.

Luther insisted upon the Bible’s grammatical and spiritual clarity. Anyone can understand its sentences and its basic message, made even more discernible through faith in Christ.⁵⁰ Official interpretation from the Pope or other church authorities is not necessary.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ibid., IV.iii.11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., IV, ii.8.

⁴⁷ Lat. *opacitas silvarum*.

⁴⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’Écriture* (The Four Senses of Scripture), Vol. 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1954-1964), 588.

⁴⁹ St. John of the Cross said, “In spite of all their commentaries, the holy doctors, together with all those who could be numbered in their ranks, have never fully interpreted Scripture: human words cannot enclose what the Spirit of God reveals.” Quoted in Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: the Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., and Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1998), 79-80.

⁵⁰ He also included “essential clarity,” the understanding that the perfected saints in heaven have. Theodore Mueller, “Luther and the Bible,” in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 111-112.

⁵¹ “If anyone of the [the papists] should trouble you and say: ‘You must have the interpretation of the Fathers since Scripture is obscure,’ then reply: ‘It is not true! There is no clearer book upon earth than the Holy Bible, which in comparison to all other books is like the sun in its relation to all other lights.’ ...It is indeed true, some passages in Scripture are obscure, but in these you find nothing but what is found elsewhere in clear and plain passages.” Ibid., 111. Cited from Luther’s works, V: 334ff.

Like Wycliffe before him, Luther knew a God who wanted to communicate with every person. The Word is supreme. Every believer must know its Christological story. His continual goal was to bring the people back to the Scriptures that had largely been forsaken by the Church.⁵²

Luther's conviction that Scripture is clear led him to emphasize the use of the vernacular in his ministry. He was well able to use Greek, Hebrew and Latin, but he preached and taught in German. He denounced the priests for hiding the meaning of the mass behind unintelligible words of Latin.⁵³ In contrast, Luther kept his sermons uncomplicated, using everyday speech simple enough for all to understand.⁵⁴

This conviction also led him to translate the Bible into German, often considered his most important work.⁵⁵ It has been called the keystone of the Reformation. He faced severe opposition, because it was inconceivable to some that God wanted to communicate with everyone, or that the common man was capable of discerning the meaning of that communication.

Luther had the gifts of a translator, being able to express the meaning of the original languages in the popular idioms of German.⁵⁶ Before *functional equivalence*⁵⁷ became a byword

⁵² "What punishment ought God to inflict upon such stupid and perverse people! Since we abandoned his Scriptures, it is not surprising that he has abandoned us to the teaching of the pope and to the lies of men. Instead of Holy Scripture we have had to learn the *Decretales* of a deceitful fool and an evil rogue. O would to God that among Christians the pure gospel were known.... Then there would surely be hope that the Holy Scriptures too would come forth again in their worthiness." Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," cited in Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 110-111.

⁵³ "What we deplore in this captivity is that nowadays they take every precaution that no layman should hear these words of Christ, as if they were too sacred to be delivered to the common people. So mad are we priests that we arrogate to ourselves alone the so-called words of consecration, to be said secretly, yet in such a way that they do not profit even us, for we too fail to regard them as promises or as a testament for the strengthening of faith. Instead of believing them, we reverence them with I know not what superstitious and godless fancies." Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," cited in Lull, 297.

⁵⁴ "He liberated the sermon from its grave-clothes, and made it once again a means of grace to sinners.... In order to achieve this end, Luther's sermons were deliberately simple. There was nothing grandiose about his style or matter. He cut out anything that might not be clear to the common man. His preaching was popular in the truest sense of the word. It was for the people.... He used the ordinary speech of every day.... He always tried to make himself intelligible to the humblest of his hearers." A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 62.

⁵⁵ "Nothing that Luther ever did had more significant repercussions than when he put the Scriptures into the tongue of the common people in his land. The German Bible is his most enduring monument, and it is fitting that what he should be remembered by best of all has to do with the Word." Wood, 95.

⁵⁶ Luther's great gifts, qualifications, and the impact of his work are well recognized as the following quotations suggest: 'Luther is indeed one of the supreme literary geniuses of the entire Christian tradition' (Bluhm 1965:vii). 'Rarely has anyone been more thoroughly qualified for this work [of translation] than was Martin Luther' (Wentz 1953:27). 'German philologists regard the appearance of the *Luther Bibel* as the greatest literary event of the six-
(cont.)

among Bible translators, Luther practiced its main principles. His first priority went to the “broader principles of spiritual, theological, and contextual considerations. But he would consult the grammar too, on his own and through friends. He was not held captive to the grammar, however. He considered grammar in the light of broader issues.”⁵⁸

Pertinent to the topic of this paper is Luther's stress upon clear communication.

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German.... Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children in the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translation accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.⁵⁹

Luther's aim was to reach as many people as possible with the Word of God. He did this by translating into the common language of the people. God gifted Luther with linguistic talents to translate, theological training to interpret, and a heart of compassion to speak even as God speaks—in language that is understood.

Implications for the present

Modern efforts to translate the Scriptures into the languages of the world are based in these same beliefs: (1) that God wants to communicate his message to all in language they can understand, and (2) that the words of Scripture are clear. Hiding God's message once again behind unintelligible words is tantamount to denying these two tenets of the faith.

teenth century.... (Kooiman 1961:100). Milton L. Watt, “More on Luther's Bible Translation Principles,” *Notes on Translation* Vol. 11, no. 3, 1997, ed. Katharine Barnwell (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics), 25.

⁵⁷ Two categories used in modern Biblical translation are *formal correspondence* and *functional equivalence*. (*Functional equivalence* has replaced the overused phrase *dynamic equivalence* that developed some negative connotations when it was used to justify license in translation.) The first translates word-for-word, forcing the structures of the original onto the target language. “The result can in some places produce a foreign-sounding message in which the receptor language's unique structures have been sacrificed at the altar of those in the source language.... Functional equivalence means translating with the aim of reproducing the original author's meaning by using the forms and structures of the receptor language. The structures of the source language are changed, as necessary, to conform to the requirements of the receptor language. The result is to produce a smooth-flowing message which hopefully represents the intent of the original author.... These translation categories have come into vogue during the last fifty years, particularly through the work of Eugene Nida [who] has powerfully argued against the abuses of the formal correspondence philosophy and has shown conclusively that functional equivalence translating is a superior philosophy of translating.” *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁹ Luther, “Defense of Translation in the Psalms,” in *Luther's works*, vol. 35, Helmut T Lehmann, ed., trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960).

Conclusion

Using gender-inclusive language in translation will not change the underlying tensions that exist in the Church between men and women. No amount of adaptation to prescribed or proscribed words can change sinful attitudes of the heart.

Nevertheless, a new or revised translation is justified whenever a language has changed enough that readers are hindered in their understanding of God's message. Such a revision should never be attempted merely to solve a political issue or to bow to one group's agenda. However, when English has changed within society as a whole, regardless of the impetus of the change, then plans need to be made to keep the language of the Bible up to date.

Luther rebelled against the prevailing notion of the Middle Ages that only the clergy had the right to read Scripture, and then only in a foreign language. He believed God's enscriptured revelation is clear and demonstrated his conviction by translating the Bible into the common language of the people. That same conviction is carried out today in efforts around the world to bring the Scriptures to all people in their own language.

The Bible is not the sole possession of the theologian. Neither does the Church control the English language. Bible translation is a work that requires both the skills of the linguist and the training of the theologian. Linguistic and theological perspectives should not be polarized against each other but rather cooperate to make God's Word available to all in clear language.

In our considerations about words and language, it would be advantageous for us all to consider these words of Paul to Timothy.

*Here is a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him.
If we disown him, he will also disown us;
if we are faithless, he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.
Keep reminding them of these things.
Warn them before God against quarreling about words;
it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.*

2Tim 2:11-14

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