

THE TNIV AND GENDER DISTINCTION IN THE CHURCH

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By

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The Today's New International Version (TNIV) is currently the most controversial of the widely-read English translations of the Bible on the market. There is always much debate surrounding a new translation. For many Bible readers the dozens of translations that have come since the King James Version (KJV) are insufficient. Some were able to move from the KJV to the New King James Version (NKJV) while others chose the more advanced, literal translations, based on a better collection of manuscripts, such as the English Standard Version (ESV) or the New American Standard Bible (NASB). For others it was readability of the New Living Translation (NLT), New Century Version (NCV), or the New International Version (NIV) that was favored.

From 1993 to 2002 *The Message*, a translation done by pastor-scholar Eugene H. Peterson that was released in several segments, was criticized by many Bible readers because the translation philosophy behind this version was an attempt to make the Bible readable for a modern English audience using modern English idioms. While some of the aforementioned easier-to-read translations such as the NLT and NIV shared this goal *The Message* pressed further than any other translation as regards trying to capture the message of the text in exchange for a word-for-word English translation from the biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Eventually, as with translations such as the Amplified Bible, *The Message* was accepted by many for what it is and for what the translator attempted to accomplish. After this the TNIV—which was released through Zondervan Publishers in 2002—became the most debated of English translations. Unlike most of the aforementioned translations the philosophical debate was not between readability and literalness. In fact the TNIV models its predecessor, the NIV, and is more concerned with readability. The philosophy behind the TNIV was the question of gender specific renderings of the biblical text.

For most of the history of the English language, as with most languages, the masculine “he” or “him” was used in generic sentences as a representation of something that could refer to either a male or a female. If someone wanted to write an entry in a procedure manual for a company we may read a sentence like this, “In case of equipment error the employee should power down the machine and contact *his* manager immediately.” Since the way the language functions often reflects the trends of the society in which it is used it would be no surprise to read this same sentence in an updated manual as reading, “In case of equipment error the employee should power down the machine and contact *his* or *her* manager immediately.” “He” may also be replaced by the less grammatically accurate, yet gender neutral, third person plural “they”, or “the employee” may be repeated in order to avoid any gender specific pronouns at all. Since American society now has women as an equal part of the workforce it is deemed offensive by some to use masculine specific pronouns that may exclude females.

Since the Bible is translated from languages that used the masculine pronouns to refer to things that could apply to a male or female most English translations reflect this. In order to adapt to the cultural move toward gender equality the TNIV translators decided to take texts that refer to something that could be applied to a male and/or female and neuter them to apply equally to both. For many this was deeply upsetting. For others this was something to applaud.

Members of the ‘Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’ wrote articles, like “The TNIV: Gender Accurate or Ideologically Egalitarian” by Peter Jones, that questioned whether or not the TNIV was attempting to neutralize those passages that in context refer to males and females, yet used male nouns and pronouns that could distract from the message of the text, or if the TNIV was trying to sneak an egalitarian ideology into their translation that could

influence the reading of debatable texts.<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg of Denver Seminary wrote an article arguing that the critics of the TNIV were ignoring that most of these gender neutral translation correspond to gender neutral words like *anthropoi*, *huoi*, and *adelphoi*, that in a given context can refer to either “men”, “sons”, or “brothers” but that can also refer to “people”, “children”, and “siblings/brothers and sisters” and that the TNIV retains gender-exclusive statements in many places where context deems this necessary.<sup>2</sup>

The question we must ask is whether or not the TNIV is (1) acknowledging gender-equality that is inherent in the original biblical languages, (2) is taking texts that could be read either way and are moving to the side of gender equality, or (3) are blatantly pushing a doctrinal agenda regarding men and women in the church?

It would seem that a critic would have to be slightly paranoid to suggest that (3) is true of the TNIV. As Peter Jones acknowledged the TNIV does not come even close to *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* published by Oxford University Press “which refer to God as Mother/Father, eliminate all male pronouns for God, and designate the eternal Son as ‘child’”. The TNIV maintains gender exclusivity in many places where the translation committee understood the original language to do so. This includes using the masculine pronoun “he” for God.

As regards (2) this is relative to the passage. For instance, the NIV reading of Genesis 1:27 is, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” The TNIV reading is, “So God created human beings in his own

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Jones, “The TNIV: Gender Accurate or Ideologically Egalitarian?”, accessed from <http://www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-7-No-2/The-TNIV-Gender-Accurate-or-Ideologically-Egalitarian> on 23 June 2009. For more articles: <http://www.cbmw.org/Search?base=cbmw&cof=FORID:11&cx=011400881947094347003:ofc-iux8daw&q=TNIV&sa=GO>.

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, “Today’s New International Version: The Untold Story of a Good Translation” accessed from <http://www.cbeinternational.org/?q=content/tniv-untold-story-good-translation> on 23 June 2009. For more articles: <http://www.cbeinternational.org/?q=content/bible-translations>.

image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” The TNIV switched the first use of the word “man” into “human beings”. This is a contextually accurate reading of the use of the Hebrew word *ha’adam* in v. 27a which can mean “man” as in male or “man” as in human. In this context the male gender is depicted by the word *zakar* in v. 27b which is gender specific.

There are other passages where it may not be as justifiable to use “human” rather than “man”, or “sons and daughters” rather than “sons”, but there is little evidence that the TNIV committee intentionally sought to alter particular passages that were obviously referring to something gender specific by making it gender neutral. This means that it is only fair minded to suggest that the TNIV committee understood (1) the biblical languages to refer to something gender neutral.

Let us consider the dozens of references that refer to Christians as sons. Many of these passages speak of sons receiving an inheritance. It is well understood that the ancient near east and most often in Greco-Roman society it was the son or sons of the family that received the inheritance from the father. If the biblical writer would have referred to daughters receiving an inheritance it would not have made much historical sense. On the other hand, these epistles were written to whole churches—churches with men and women—so it was understood that these women were “sons” in the sense that these women too would received the heavenly inheritance promises to the children of God.

As a translation philosophy something will be gained and something will be lost by saying “sons and daughters” instead of “son”. What will be gained is the radical nature of these statements that women too would receive the heavenly inheritance from God. What is lost is that in this context it is even more radical that women are included as “sons” and if you make the text

gender neutral the casual reader will never think to ask the question, “Why does the author call Christians ‘sons’?” This could stymie further research into the biblical text and could have proven fruitful for that individual.

Pastors and church leaders must individually determine whether or not they feel that the TNIV is a translation that they should publically recommend or publically discourage. It is also an option to not address the issue at all, but this could lead to questions in the future that the pastor could have answered in a general way for the entire congregation.

If the pastor decides to recommend the TNIV the pastor should inform the congregation about both the positives and negatives associated with this translation and encourage the congregation to read the TNIV next to other translations (as should be the case whenever one reads an English translation so that no one becomes dependent on one translation for doctrinal discussion). The same should be said of those who discourage the translation philosophy of the TNIV. The congregation should be told why this is so and why the pastor finds the TNIV insufficient.

Of course, the ideal is that someone would be able to function in the biblical languages that the text was written in. Nothing can substitute for reading the text in its original languages and learning what Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek vocabulary words have the range of meaning that can be either gender specific or gender exclusive. In addition the reader should never ignore context. In those passages like Colossians 3:18-25 and Ephesians 6:1-9 where the context is address gender distinctions specifically it would be a great error for any translation to attempt to neutralize the wording. Other passages are debatable. Other passages likely should be translated as gender neutral like Genesis 1:27a.

In conclusion we present several personal recommendations for pastors regarding the TNIV:

(1) Encourage the reading of various translations, do not discourage it, especially do not ban it. If a pastor bans a particular translation of the Bible this could very well lead to parishioners becoming paranoid about the level of control the pastor seeks over the Bible. If a pastor disagrees with the TNIV openly banning it will only cause more people to become interested in it. This could lead to more problems than a straightforward addressing of what concerns you about the translation.

(2) Equally, do not *become a sales person* for the TNIV. There is no perfect translation. To promote the TNIV to the point where parishioners do not read the NASB, the ESV, the NLT, or other translations would be a big mistake since it would make them one-dimensional Bible readers.

(3) Teach, teach, and teach some more. If you are more or less a complementarian, teach the Bible to your church as you honestly understand that it should be read. If you are an egalitarian do the same thing. Whatever one does there should not be any demonizing of those who hold the other position. Christianity is built on Jesus Christ the chief corner stone, not on gender issues.

(4) Retain your knowledge of the biblical languages so that you can best assist the people in your church who are reading the Bible in English only so that when they come to you with questions regarding what they have read you can take them further into the text by addressing it from the original languages. If you do this you will not feel as if you have to control what translation people in your church read. You know that they can read and that they should feel comfortable coming to you as the teacher in the church to clarify obscure passages for them.