

Do Gender Sensitive Translations Distort Scripture? Not Necessarily

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The following remarks appear in a combination of outline and text. I hope to help Bible readers sort through the recent controversies tied to the discussion of gender issues in Bible translation. This discussion is not intended as an endorsement of any version. Rather the remarks serve as an explanation of the issues tied to these recent controversies. The goal is that the reader appreciates the issues involved in the production of various Bible translations that relate to gender sensitive renderings.

1. Two Approaches to Basic Translation Theory that Underlie the Debate

To begin with, it is important to consider how the gender sensitive translations relate to the bigger issues of translation theory. There are two fundamental approaches to translation theory as a whole (regardless of whether one is concerned to be gender sensitive in the translation or not). These are “dynamic/ functional equivalence” rendering and “formal equivalence.” (1) “Dynamic/ functional equivalence” means translators are *trying to render the force* of the passage. Here one’s goal is to be clear about the fuller meaning of the passage with concern for it making good sense in the “target” language (i.e., the language into which the text is being translated). For our versions, the target language is English, as the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic are rendered into English. The phrase “dynamic/functional” appears here because some call this approach dynamic equivalence and others call it functional equivalence, but the same thing is meant. In contrast, (2) “formal equivalence” means *rendering the passage as precisely as possible in conjunction with the forms and expressions of the original language* of the text. Formal equivalence means making renderings that keep the gender, number, lexical and grammatical force of the originating language as much as is possible and still be understandable in the target language. This is often labeled a “literal” translation.

In general, gender sensitive renderings tend to embrace dynamic equivalence, while those opposed to gender sensitive renderings prefer formal equivalence in translation. Sometimes lines of difference are drawn right here at the start.

But is there one type of gender sensitive translation or are there variations in how gender sensitive translations are made? The short answer is that there are variations in how gender sensitive translations are made. To really appreciate the discussion, one needs to be aware of these types of gender sensitive translations.

2. More Basic Definitions: Two Basic Approaches to Gender Sensitive Translations

Descriptively speaking, there are two basic types of gender sensitive approaches to translation: *ideological* gender sensitive renderings and *translational* gender sensitive renderings. I am presenting these two terms to describe gender sensitive renderings in order to classify clearly the variations within gender sensitive translation. These terms are not currently in common use, but they best define what is going on with these translations.

They can be defined as follows:

A. *Ideological Gender Sensitivity*: This type of translation seeks to “degenderize” the Bible (that is remove all language that is male specific and excludes women as a result). The argument is that the Bible arose in an era of patriarchy (where men ruled the culture and women were seen as less than equal). In this approach even male metaphors for God and/or Jesus are changed to more neutral language (so Jesus is not called “Son of Man” but “son of a human being”).

B. *Translational Gender Sensitivity*: This approach renders terms to make clear the gender scope of passages, especially when they use an all-encompassing reference to man or mankind to address both men and women. So, for example, the rendering of a term that is translatable as “men” is made into “men and women” when the meaning intention or application of a passage is broad and not gender specific.

Individual translations run along a spectrum involving these two approaches. In other words, different translations may have varying degrees of each type of translation. Some are thoroughgoing in their ideological rendering. Others try to keep to a translational rendering. Some mix the two. Identifying the particular approach requires looking at how a series of texts are handled to see which type of rendering is being applied. Unfortunately most translations do not use these adjectives to describe the type of gender sensitive renderings they are employing. The reader must figure it out by examining a series of examples within the translation.

However, both these gender sensitive approaches are usually “dynamic/ functional equivalence” renderings as opposed to “formal equivalence.” Nonetheless, ideological gender rendering is very different from translational gender rendering in the amount of changes it makes to surface the dynamic element in translation. Generally speaking, translational renderings are more restrictive and will make fewer changes than ideological renderings will. Dynamic equivalence translations are common today. Among the better known are the Living Bible, the New Living Translation, and Today’s English Version.

So how do gender sensitive translations describe themselves? Do these descriptions help us understand what they are attempting to do?

3. The Problem with Common, Current Terminology about Gender Sensitive Translations

Unfortunately the three normal names used today for gender sensitive translations do not necessarily reveal the type of gender sensitive translation theory applied. Common expressions for these translations today are “gender-inclusive translations,” “gender-neutral translations,” or “gender-accurate translations.” “Gender-inclusive” means that the translation has included the careful consideration of gender in making its renderings. The translation has focused itself on these passages with special attention. Often gender inclusive translations are ideological in their approach. “Gender neutral” often means that the translation has tried to be as “neutral” in the presentation of gender as possible. These translations can be of either type: ideological or translational. “Gender accurate” means that the translation has attempted to be accurate with regard to the rendering of gender. Usually this points to a translational approach. Each of these three terms (gender inclusive, gender neutral, and gender accurate) tends to show up in newspaper and periodical reports about translations, sometimes synonymously. However, these three descriptions are inadequate

in classifying the translation's approach to gender sensitivity (i.e., ideological or translational). Thus, the gender labels "inclusive," "neutral" or "accurate" alone do not often help us understand how gender is being translated, despite the claims implied in their definitions.

What is needed is an explanation of the type of gender sensitive approach taken by the translation in question. Of these three commonly used terms (inclusive, neutral or accurate), the clearest is "gender-accurate." When this term is used, the translator or version is claiming that the rendering is an attempt to be accurate with regard to gender issues in translation. This means that the version desires to be accurate with regard to the original intent of the text. But again to really tell what gender sensitive theory is being applied (ideological or translational) requires the examination of a series of specific examples.

Of course, one can have either goal (including accuracy) and not execute it. This is another reason why one has to look at specific passages as well as what is claimed by the translation.

As if these issues are not enough, there is the question whether gender sensitive rendering of the type we have described is even worth attempting. This is a completely different approach to the question. It adds a third approach to the discussion beyond ideological gender sensitivity and translational gender sensitivity. It is the view that gender sensitive translation should only take place within the formal guidelines of translation with a reliance on formal equivalence. It is this third view that leads into the basic dispute, but it has been a common approach to translation.

4. A Third Approach to the Question and the Nature of the Dispute

So the presence of this third approach raises the question of whether this type of gender sensitive translation should be attempted at all. This third approach argues that issues of gender should be subsumed under the formal limits of the meanings of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words used. This approach we shall call the non-gender neutral school. Those who object most strongly to gender sensitive types of translations (in either its ideological or translational form noted above) tend to prefer "formal" equivalence translation theory. The non-gender approach argues that such gender sensitive renderings should not call themselves translations at all, but paraphrases. In fact, the introductions to most translations do explain their most basic theory of translation [see section 1 above]. If they do explain themselves, then they usually will make the point as to whether they are dynamic or formal equivalent in approach. They may even address generally how they handle the issue of gender. But in doing so, they will speak of gender inclusive, gender neutral, or gender accurate to do so. These categories, as we noted in section 3 above, are not always helpful in describing what is really going on.

The non-gender approach also will acknowledge the difference between the two basic theories of gender sensitivity noted above in section 2. In general, they see translational gender sensitive renderings as far better than ideological renderings. Yet they still argue that both approaches, as a matter of translational principle, suffer from severe problems. They argue that it is better for the vast majority of individual passages and for the sake of accurate translation not to try to render passages in terms of gender sensitivity. Thus, this third school will often oppose such translation as a matter of translational principle.

The dispute on this point arises from a disagreement about whether it is wise as a mat-

ter of translation theory to render the overall scope of the passage rather than the grammar of the individual words (i.e., its gender and number). In other words, the debate is over what is gained and lost in such translations, including whether a distortion of the meaning of God's Word results. The gender sensitive approaches argue for changing "man" to make clear the scope of the passage. Ideological renderings argue one should do this throughout translations at every level. Translational renderings argue that it should only be done in contexts where a broad intention is clearly indicated by the context. The non-gender neutral approach argues it should only be done where it is explicitly expressed in the linguistic terms. This third approach generally argues that where there is doubt, leave the wording alone. Perhaps a good example illustrating the problem in English is how we use the phrase "you guys." In parts of the Northern and Midwestern United States, we use this term in many contexts as a shorthand when addressing both men and women. So the question is, how should one translate such a phrase if one were in the Southern United States? Should it be left as "you guys" (so non-gender neutral approach) or be rendered into "you men and women" (so the gender sensitive approaches to show its force in context). Coming to the Bible, the question for all translators is, should a translation now moving into a second language (from Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic into English) leave "man" alone (so non-gender neutral group)? (In Greek, there are four different ways to express the idea of "man," but those terms do not always mean "adult males.") Or should the translation make clear that the intent of the address is broad when the context may well suggest this (so the gender neutral group that is attempting a translational gender sensitive rendering)? Translators of all schools consider these translational questions and make judgments about the meaning and the context of the passage. Some say, "do not ever infer a broader context in the rendering" (so most non-gender neutral groups), others "sometimes it is OK" (some non-gender neutral groups in a few places and a few translational sensitive groups), others "wherever possible" (many gender sensitive groups), others "always" (the more radical ideological gender inclusive translations).

There is a recent example that is causing much of a stir. The Today's New International Version (TNIV) is attempting a translational gender sensitive rendering within its larger revision of the New International Version (NIV). It is less radical in its changes than most gender sensitive translations. Most (but not all) of the committee that translated this volume are *not* egalitarian (i.e., they do not believe women can do everything in ministry or can occupy every office). So most of them hold more traditional, conservative views on the role of women. They do not have a "politically correct agenda" they are pushing. They simply claim that they are attempting to translate the meaning of the text faithfully. This goal was their claimed intent whether it comes to issues of gender that are changed in the TNIV or a larger number of other, mostly stylistic changes the TNIV made. Of the changes from the NIV in the TNIV, 70 percent are not related to gender issues, 30 percent are. The TNIV changes 7 percent of the NIV text, and 2 percent relate to gender renderings.

People can discuss whether the TNIV is successful or not, but to do so they should appreciate the issues related to the attempt and not question the integrity of those making the effort. So a survey of the issues and some examples follow. The examples are rendered in a way that someone who does not have formal training in Greek and Hebrew hopefully can follow. Imagine yourself a translator. How would you handle texts in these contexts? But before we turn to specific examples, let us very briefly consider some history of translation that indicates that this translational question is not a new one but one that has actually been around for a long time.

5. The Problem of Gender Sensitivity in Translation Is An Old One — A Brief Glimpse at Translation History

William Tyndale published the first English New Testament in 1526. He rendered *huioi* (often rendered “sons”) in Matthew 5:9 as “children,” a gender neutral rendering.

In the Old Testament, the seventeenth century King James Version (KJV) rendered *ben* (or its plural) “son” or “sons” 2,822 times, and as “child” or “children” 1,533 times, or right at 35 percent.

Hosea 2:4 gives us an example as it discusses Gomer’s three children, two sons and one daughter. The Hebrew of Hosea 2:4 reads translated formally, “Upon her sons also I will have no pity, because they are sons of whoredom.” Yet the KJV, American Standard Version (ASV), NIV, and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) all opt for “children.” Even the Septuagint (LXX), dating from about 100 BC, also uses the Greek neuter term for children (Hosea 2:6 LXX: *tekna*). Thus the principle of such translation has been around a long time.

6. Moving to Specifics about Translations

We have many translations today in part because different versions (1) hold various views about the amount of formal or dynamic equivalence to give to a translation. (2) They also differ in goals as to the appropriate style and vocabulary level into which to render the text. For example, children’s translations will use a simpler English and less complex vocabulary in rendering the text. (3) There also is discussion on what Greek manuscript text base they are translating. (4) Then there is the decision about how to handle the question of gender in translation.

A. It is often valuable to use a variety of translations, because no single translation is perfect. This is because translation often involves judgment on what rendering is most satisfying in a given context (regardless of gender issues).

B. Translation must be contextual, working one passage at a time and that process can ask gender specific questions about the context. A translation should not be evaluated for whether it asks gender questions but how well it renders each of the passages in question in relationship to its meaning in context.

C. Translational options in such texts are just choices about what rendering is most adequate. Often in the decisions the translator makes there are both gains and losses in respect to the meaning. Often one either removes ambiguity in an effort to gain clarity or keeps ambiguity at the expense of clarity in order to maintain formal accuracy. The attempt is usually to get the best contextually driven meaning in the most efficient way.

D. It is often the case with any translation that individual experts in the language will prefer the way another translation renders a particular passage. This preference may include suggesting that in a given translation several passages are less than ideally rendered and could be improved.

E. It is this last point that also contributes to the number of translations we now have. It also explains the tendency of many individual versions to periodically update themselves. The translators seek to take the overall critique of their translation seriously and

hope to improve it when they update it.

F. Judgments about how well or poorly a translation has accomplished its goals will differ. The success depends on how well or poorly the translators executed their goals and what their goals were. However, this same is true for those who critique translations. There is always the factor in the critique of how the critic views the translation's goals. If the critic thinks the goals are flawed, they will rate the translation accordingly.

G. For careful translators the standards of evaluation are usually twofold: (1) to give careful attention to the original meaning of the text being translated and (2) to have a concern that the text be clearly rendered.

7. Some Specific Examples To Consider in Thinking Through Gender Sensitive Translation

Here are some examples to walk the reader through the translation process. It shows the kind of choices one faces in terms of possible options that a translator of the Bible faces. In the cases where options exist, a dividing symbol of / is used. In other cases, the options are merely summarized. In each case, it is recommended the reader look at the few verses before and after the text in question to get a sense of the context. Now imagine yourself as a translator. How would you render these texts in their context? Read the discussions and consider the options. Then make the call. This will give you a sense of the factors a translator must weight in deciding on specific wording.

A. **Genesis 1:26-27:** Is the context clear that the reference to *a-da-m* includes both male and female (see Genesis 1:27 and the reference to male and female)? What should be the translation at the start of the verse? Should it be God created man/mankind/human kind/humanity in his own image? Is either generic "man" or "humanity" or "human kind" is acceptable for "God created man"? Are any of these translations really wrong? Which is clearer? One might argue that for clarity the rendering of "humanity" is a better rendering in the target language to show the scope of who is created in the image of God [i.e., both male and female], since "human kind" is awkward and "man" might imply only males are meant. "Mankind" is also a solid rendering.

A claim that *a-da-m* has "male overtones" and thus the term must be translated "man" is linguistically naïve. Such a rendering could serve as an example of a confusion that words have a base meaning they carry in all their uses. This is major linguistic mistake. The word simply has distinct senses in distinct contexts within a range of meaning a term can possess. The restrictive claim for "man" can under-express the text's sense in this context where male and female are explicitly invoked. A rendering of "man" with an appreciation of its generic force, however, is a good rendering of this text.

But note the claim of error in not translating this term as "man" leaves a misimpression. The misimpression is that a serious error has been committed when such is not the case. This is why examples have to be assessed one passage at a time, and claims of error have to be evaluated. Such a charge in Genesis 1:27 exaggerates the meaning of the term *a-da-m*. It claims that inherent male headship is indicated. The claim is that a reference to "man" excludes woman or humanity, or at least minimizes such a broad reference. But how can one make this linguistic argument when the Genesis context is clear that "man" (i.e., *a-da-m*) in Genesis 1:27 includes male and female? This claim

actually may be guilty of a theological error and risks suggesting that there is an inherent maleness in the woman (since the term here describes both). This reading, supposedly orthodox, actually risks dissolving the very creative distinction of gender God built into the creation. Ironically, it is a distinction that the argument for male headship wants ultimately to protect. (In this case, the error that emerges in arguing for “man” is not intended by the translator but emerges from trying to defend a translational principle in a less than satisfying way. Many translational errors are innocent like this in their intent.) In this example, the rationale for reading the term in its most common rendering of “man” as male leads to a likely misreading of textual meaning. Other renderings are better and clearer.

A few additional cases exist where gender inclusiveness helps a translation involving *a-da-m*. Genesis 6:7: “I will blot out *a-da-m* (‘humanity’) whom I have created....” The allusion is to the judgment of the flood where both men and women are intended. The same applies for Genesis 9:6: “Whosoever sheds the blood of a ‘human being’ (*a-da-m*).” This describes murder, which is not limited to eliminating men.

B. Matthew 12:12: In Matthew 12:12, a similar rule applies to *anthro-pos*, where the text reads, “how much more valuable is a human being/is a man/are people than a sheep.” Again target language clarity would suggest that human being is an excellent rendering. It keeps the singular force of the example but renders the gender force clearly. But “are people” is not a bad rendering in terms of force. This is because the reference to man is not to any individual man but as a representative of the species. Yet, in terms of clarity and smoothness, this rendering of “people” is a little awkward in terms of the parallelism between people (plural) to a sheep (singular). So overall, the clearer rendering is “a human being.”

Now some might argue that a Greek term *anthro-pos* can be rendered “people” when it is generic but not as “a human being,” because as a singular it retains its focus on maleness. The BDAG lexicon (Bauer/Danker/ Arndt/Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*) names such a rendering as possible for *anthro-pos* but it does not name this verse (p. 81, 1b). Thus, such a rendering is lexically possible here. So why not retain the singular human being here in a context where the issue is the value of a given person as compared to a sheep, not just the value of a male person? This keeps one closer to the singular, representative form of the original Greek and still renders the term in an appropriate lexical way. Walking through this example shows the series of judgments a translator wrestles with in a given text. Both gender issues and those of grammatical number are in play in this example.

C. Psalm 34:20: “The Lord protects all of his/their bones, not one of them is broken.” Does one translate singular “his bones” or “their bones”? The choice by some versions to render the singular “his” as “their” is an attempt to acknowledge that the Psalm is about the group of the righteous (see vv. 15, 17 [understood from v. 15], and v. 21), not just about one individual. The righteous are both male and female, not just male. The individualizing language of the verse is an illustration that picks up on how God defends one person, a man, as an example of how he defends any who are among the class of righteous (Jesus included, since the verse is also mentioned in John 12:46). So how does one translate this verse?

Note that either rendering “his” or “their” can work here conceptually. The advantage of

the singular is that it clearly indicates the specificity of the illustration. The advantage of the plural is that it reminds the reader that a class of people is in view theologically which serves as the base behind the individual example. What is true of this one righteous person (a man whose bones are spared) is true of all who are righteous, male or female. Each rendering risks gaining and losing something at the same time. Each is acceptable, and neither is unorthodox. The mistake is to claim otherwise. Some reject a translation of “their” and claim that the individuality of the messianic prediction of John 12 about Jesus is lost, but this charge is linguistically naive. The moment one appreciates that a class of people is appealed to here in the Psalm, then it is clear that the text fits Jesus as well as one of the righteous. Messianism is not impacted by either rendering. It is true, however, that the maintaining of the singular more clearly preserves the example and more explicitly parallels the connection to the passage’s later use in John 12. As such, it might be better here to render “his.” But the other rendering is not as wrong as some suggest. The plural opts to make explicit the connection to the group of righteous. The ultimate allusion to Christ, though less obvious, also fits this “broader” rendering properly understood.

D. 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men/humankind/humanity (*anthro-poi*), the man/person/human (*anthro-pos*) Christ Jesus.” Once again the options noted are not examples of choosing a right or wrong translation. The basic translation question is, “Is the key to Jesus’ role as mediator that he mediates for males or for men and women?” There also is the aesthetic need to be sensitive to the word-play in both halves of the passage involving *anthro-pos*. The BDAG lexicon also opts for a generic rendering (p. 81, 1d). Now here the objection has been that a rendering of “human” compromises Jesus’ maleness which also is in play here. But the question is which rendering might surface more confusion—a use of generic “men” or a rendering of “humans”? Which point is more central, the redemption of humanity or Jesus’ masculinity? Everyone knows Jesus was male! I’d argue again that rendering the verse humankind/human is a totally acceptable way to translate the verse. No issue of orthodoxy is present. If one also wishes to highlight Jesus’ maleness, a note in the margin, common to translations, would fix the apparent oversight. Once again my argument is not that the different choices lead to wrong translations, but that to insist on only one rendering in cases like this is too linguistically restrictive, cutting the translator off from viable, and in some cases, solid translational options. Any particular rendering loses something of the full force of what is going on. In fact, in some cases, like this one, any choice ends up losing some of the overall force because of the differences between Greek and English. This situation can occur in rendering between two languages and is why translators work so hard to try to get it right and yet sometimes differ on their translation of a given text.

E. Ephesians 6:4. Might we have failed to translate this text correctly? Is it possible that our propensity to read the text as male-focused has caused us to miss the point in this verse? The BAGD lexicon notes that *hoi pateres* can mean “parents” (p. 635, 1a; BDAG, p. 786, 1b; citing Hebrews 11:23 (*to-n patero-n autou*); Plato, *Leg.* 6 p. 772b, plus a few other texts). Contextually the appeal in the previous address to the children is to honor mother and father (i.e., the parents, see Ephesians 6:1-2). In every other pairing in Ephesians 5:22-6:9, the same paired groups are addressed in each half of the exhortation (husbands-wives, slaves-masters). Perhaps the exhortation here is to

both parents and not just the father. At the least such a rendering should be seriously considered, not rejected. On the other hand, one could argue that fathers are purposefully singled out as head of the home. So the traditional rendering also can be defended. That rendering would argue that the normal pairing as seen in the other units is broken here because of the cultural (and/or theological) expectation that men were the heads of ancient households.

Note two things about this example. First, the TNIV did not change this example. They rendered it in the traditional form, “Fathers,…” If gender change had been an “agenda” for this translation, then this text would have been changed as well. (Interestingly, the translation did not treat all such examples the same way, as Luke 1:17 was changed from the “hearts of the fathers to their children” to the “hearts of the parents to their children.” Why one was changed and the other left alone is something only the committee can explain to us.) Second, either choice in such examples risks missing the text’s meaning (if the wrong choice is made), and the problem could exist going either way. Either Paul had parents in mind or just fathers. In this case, it is not entirely clear which is meant. This is another reason why care needs to be given to each choice—and why one should have some appreciation for the difficulty of making a choice. Here is another good candidate for a marginal note giving the option not taken in the text of the translation.

F. Hebrews 2:6 and 2:17: The issue here is how Jesus is described in his function of identifying with people. Two passages in Hebrews 2 are often discussed when the issue of gender sensitive translations is considered. **Hebrews 2:6** can read, “What is man/a human/are mere mortals/the human race, that you are mindful of him/them, or the son of man/human beings/a human being/mankind, that you care for him/them?” Traditionally this passage is rendered “man” and “son of man” with singular references: “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?” This is a solid, accurate rendering. However, are the alternatives really so wrong or so off the mark as to be a major problem?

The verse is a citation of Psalm 8, where it is the creation of humanity that is in view. The Hebrew term here for the first reference to man is *‘enosh*. In the second line, the reference to “son of man” uses an idiomatic phrase that simply means “a descendant of a human.” The term is not a title in the Psalm but a phrase used in parallelism to the first mention of “man” as mankind in the previous line. The Psalm is not extolling the creation of males, but of humans created in the image of God, a psalm in praise of God’s act in Genesis 1. So renderings that refer to a human being would be generic of the class of humans God has created. In addition, the use of the plural where the singular is present in Hebrew simply makes explicit this generic force. Now one could honestly debate whether these alternative renderings are really better than the more traditional reading, but nothing major is lost in the alternative, other than some detail of formal equivalence in the translation. For the psalmist’s point is not the creation of males, but of humanity. At the most, what would be lost is the idea that humanity started with Adam, but this is Adam as an example of the humanity God created in his image. Ultimately Adam in God’s image refers to a creation of the male and female. It is the creation of that general role for all people that is encased in Adam’s creation that amazes the psalmist.

What about the use of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2? Some argue that the loss of the rendering in 2:6 of “son of man” into a reference to human(s) (either singular or plural) loses an important christological element in the passage. However, this is not correct. First, as we noted, the phrase “son of man” is not a title in Psalm 2, it is a description which simply means the descendant of a man/person (i.e., a human being). Second, nowhere else in the New Testament does the Son of Man title for Jesus get linked to its usage in Psalm 8. Rather the Old Testament text that has christological significance and is cited in the New Testament as such is Daniel 7:13, where the term is also not a title but a description of a human figure who receives judgment authority from the Ancient of Days (a reference to God). Jesus turned the Danielic description into a title in his ministry. But Hebrews 2:6 is not yet describing Jesus. He is brought into the discussion in 2:9. He is connected to the language of Psalm 8 not at the level of the son of man phrase but as one who “for a little while was made lower than the angels,” that is, through the next line of the Psalm. So the allusion back into the psalm and its overall portrait is clear enough without any appeal to the son of man phrase. Hebrews 2:6 is about the creation of humanity. So the likelihood of any christological significance in 2:6 is not great. Thus no loss of meaning is likely in the alternative rendering, even though one might be quite content with the traditional rendering as well. In fact one might make a case that a move from singulars to plurals is not necessary in this passage. A gender sensitive rendering could be made with singulars as well. What would remain is the representative use of “him” at two points in the verse. This use of the third person masculine pronoun is a perfectly good use of English and in certain contexts where it has already been established that the usage is broad, can be maintained as a generic reference, preventing some awkward English style. The previous reference to a human being that indicates that humanity is male and female makes it clear that such a use of the singular is generic. The BDAG lexicon renders the text this way for 2:6a (p. 81, 1d). So one can render this text, “What is a human, that you are mindful of him, or a human being, that you care for him?” That rendering gives a good sense to the passage. However, any one of several options give a good sense for the meaning here, including “What are mere mortals, that you are mindful of them, or human beings, that you care for them?” or “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?”

What about **Hebrews 2:17**? Here the text can read, “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers/brothers and sisters/humans in every respect, so that he might become a merciful high priest.” Now the question here is twofold. (1) Is the point that Jesus had to be like a male to be a merciful high priest? Or is the point that was it his humanity that lets him be a merciful high priest? It is his sharing in humanity that allows him to qualify. 2) Does a rendering that includes sisters in every respect clearly communicate in English? Although it is not technically wrong in terms of force, the inclusion of sisters in every respect can be over-read in English to be saying more about the gender of Jesus than the passage intends and as such is not as clear a rendering as one might want. So a gender sensitive rendering of humans here honors the plural of “brothers” (*adelphoi*) yet also communicates the non-male force of the point here. As such, it is a better gender sensitive rendering, although brothers and sisters here is not wrong in terms of what it is attempting to affirm. Rather, it is less than clear. So render, “Therefore he had to be made like humans in every respect, so that he might become a merciful high priest.”

G. Acts 20:30: Here Paul is warning the Ephesian elders of the danger of false teachers arising. The issue is whether the verse should be translated, “From your own selves will arise *men* (*andres*) speaking twisted things,” or “From your own selves will arise *some* speaking twisted things?” The premise for translating “men” is that the bulk of teachers in the early church would have been men, especially if the reference is to false teachers arising from *within the elder group*, which is possible in this context. This is a good, cultural argument from the first century. The premise for the broader reference is that the point is that false teachers will emerge from *within the believing community* as a whole, which could mean men or women, even though it would more likely be men. This is because both men and women teach in the church, even if that is seen as women most often or always teaching only women. The reference to the “flock” in verse 30 could well point to such a broad context for this remark. That women might fit here can be seen by what did happen at Thyatira, where the false teaching of one called Jezebel later plagued the church (Revelation 2:20). Thus a gender sensitive rendering here might be possible and is not misleading, if the pool of potential teachers is seen as coming from the church as a whole rather than just from elders. Here one’s choice about the scope of the context will influence the rendering. If the context is broad, looking to the whole church then the rendering is an acceptable one. The BDAG lexicon makes the point that it is possible to translate *ane-r* with “someone,” although they do not mention this passage in the entire entry (p. 79, 2; Romans 4:8 is an example with the previous line referring to “those whose iniquities are forgiven,” so it is likely that people, both male and female, are meant)

These examples show the kinds of decisions translators must make. In many cases they must make multiple decisions in one context with one term or phrase. In all the cases, a gender sensitive rendering was possible without diverting into a rendering that necessarily raised a major doctrinal issue. In some cases, it was a solid candidate as a preferred rendering, in a few it was not. But part of the point of the many examples is to show how the discussion is very much a case-by-case study.

One final argument remains. It is that the Greek noun for “man” (*ane-r*) should never be rendered “human” or in a way that includes women (either “men and women” or a generic “those”). The claim for this limitation is that there is no clear example of such usage. However candidates for such generic reference to humans or to “ladies and gentlemen” to audiences that are mixed do exist in both the Old (if one is thinking about the force of the Greek in the LXX) and New Testaments. Here one could consider Psalm 84:5, 112:1, 5. Renderings of a generic “those” (84:5) or “person” (112:1, 5) make the point that the psalm is not just praising males, but the righteous person, who in the text is called man as part of a generic class. Romans 4:8 has already been mentioned as an example. More to the point are several texts in Acts, where a broad crowd is addressed (Acts 3:11-12; 13:38; 17:22; 19:35; 21:28; 22:1; note in many of these examples how the nearest antecedent for the audience is expressed in broad terms like “the crowd” or “the people”). In each of these contexts the address appears to be to a mixed audience. So the application of the desired response is for anyone in the audience who would respond. A gender specific rendering of “men” might suggest that only the men were being addressed. Some might wish to argue for this limitation in this ancient patriarchal culture. However, it really is a point that would need specific defending, given that the application in terms of the response called for by the speaker is for the benefit of anyone who is hearing the speech. Here is a case for which our modern “you guys” being used as a shorthand form of initial address may well be

the better parallel. The biblical examples in this paragraph all use *ane-r*. The options here again show the nature of what is being discussed by each side with reference to how to render these texts. Gender sensitive renderings in some of these cases are likely to be adequate renderings for these texts. They are neither necessarily wrong nor are they doctrinally offensive.

8. A Few Examples from the Spirit's Use of His Own Text: The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament

Here we consider some examples where Scripture is quoted within Scripture by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What kind of things do these examples show us?

A. **Acts 4:11**— “This is the stone which was rejected by *you* the builders, but which has becomes the head of the corner.” This citation of **Psalm 118:22** changes the pronoun of the Old Testament by adding a reference to “you” that the Old Testament does not possess to drive home the fulfillment of the passage in those who reject Jesus. This kind of explanatory addition, which fits conceptually with the reading of the text, is not too radical for the Spirit to perform in rendering the divine text. The claim that this is revelation so the Spirit can do it does not make the example irrelevant, since we do not wish to suggest that what the Spirit does is inherently illegitimate or misleading. These are good examples of renderings for sense (i.e., a dynamic rendering).

See also the use of **Deuteronomy 32:21** in **Romans 10:19**, where again an explanatory “you all” is added to the text to make its force clear.

B. Three New Testament Texts Citing Old Testament Texts Show How Common This Kind of Move Is. (Note how each New Testament citation in the examples below is introduced by a formula looking back to what God or the human author said so the impression is that the text is being cited and quoted.) Key differences between the texts are noted in italics.

1) “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of *him* who brings good news.” (**Isaiah 52:7**)

“*As it is written*, ‘How beautiful are the feet of *those* who bring good news.’” (**Romans 10:15**)

2) “There is no fear of God before *his* eyes.” (**Psalm 36:1**)

“*As it is written* (v. 10)..., ‘There is no fear of God before *their* eyes (v. 18).’” (**Romans 3:10, 18**)

3) “Blessed is *he* whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.” (**Psalm 32:1**)

“*David says the same thing*... ‘Blessed are *they* whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.’” (**Romans 4:6-7**)

Apparently Paul did not feel constrained by limitations in his rendering of these Old Testament texts that some have suggested for such texts. Paul makes such a move even in theologically polemical contexts where he is making a case for his view of sin and salvation—and the wording of texts is important to his argument.

C. **2 Corinthians 6:18**— “and I will be a Father *to you*, and *you shall be my sons and*

daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” The italics in this verse show where the changes are from the Old Testament text being noted. Note here the corporate application of the singular language of **2 Samuel 7:8, 14**, where the promise is expanded to include men and women explicitly. This text occurs in a context where Paul is stringing together Old Testament citations. The original text in the Old Testament reads: “I will be a Father to *him*, and you shall be a *son* to me.” Again Paul’s text reads, “I will be a Father to *you [all]*, and *you all* shall be *sons and daughters* to me.” Note also the inclusion of the phrase “you all” to drive home the point. Should we accuse the Spirit of gender bias by the inclusion of daughters here, or his move from singular to plural?

I quote Carson here because he says it so well:

Note carefully what the apostle Paul has done. He has taken the third-person singular (“*he* will be a *son* to me”) and rewritten it as a second-person plural—not only a second-person plural, but in terms that expand the masculine “son” into both genders: “*you* shall be *sons and daughters* to me.” Nor is it the case that Paul is simply citing the common Greek version—some form of the Septuagint (LXX)—without worrying too much about the details, for here the LXX follows the Hebrew rather closely. Nor can one easily imagine that Paul was ignorant of the Hebrew and LXX texts. Even the more biblically literate in the Corinthian congregation would have been familiar at least with the Greek text.... There are complex reasons why Paul can argue this way, bound up with an important typology that needs to be explored. But the least we can say is that the apostle himself does not think that Hebrew singulars must be rendered by Greek singulars, or that Hebrew “son” should never be rendered by Greek “sons and daughters.” No one, I think, would quickly charge Paul with succumbing to a feminist agenda. (*The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, p. 20)

Now it is claimed by some who want to question the relevance of this example that quotation does not equal translation. However, one should not ignore the introductory formula to this text which says “even as God said” (so Paul is explicitly citing revelation from the past in 6:16). There also is the claim to nullify the example that we have a patching together of passages here (and there is some of this earlier in the citation). However, this also is less than likely for this specific portion of 2 Samuel 7 under discussion here. The supposed patch text to get to the plurals and to the addition of daughters is Isaiah 43:6. A closer look makes this Isaiah suggestion unlikely. That verse reads, “Bring my sons from distant lands and my daughters from the remote regions of the earth.” The only reason this text is suggested as influencing the wording is the presence of sons and daughters close together. However, the theme of that verse and the intervening material make an allusion to it less than likely. This potential allusion also cannot explain the move from third person masculine singular to a *second person* plural inclusive of women. It also cannot explain a third person plural that is explicit in including daughters. So Paul cites and expands 2 Samuel 7:14 without feeling bothered by it, while saying God said this (not God is now saying it as a matter of current revelation). Even if the claim that one should distinguish translation from quotation is true (and it is a point to be taken seriously), the kind of move Paul makes here within the quotation proves too much. For Paul reports the text as God’s speech and yet the expansion is seen as acceptable in principle. The change is acceptable because it makes a theological point that is in line with what God is doing. Paul brings out the force of what God intended to accomplish with his promise. At the least this

example shows that such a move is not a theological affront to the presentation of God's Word or to God himself since he inspired the change.

Summary on this section: These examples show that the standards are not applied within Scripture by God in as detailed a way as some might wish. The test of appropriateness in translation work may not be as confined as some suggest. At least three of the first five examples are all cases where a single passage is clearly being cited and thus translated. Now the additional claim might be that these texts are Scripture, so translation constraints do not apply to God in rendering his own Word. But the point I am making is that what God has done has a legitimacy that his actions would not violate. The Old Testament text is pointed to as something that was said and that verifies a point now being made. The legitimacy of the argument depends on the legitimacy of the reading of the textual point and its rendering. God through the Spirit appears not to be bothered by the kind of limitations some are insisting upon. So perhaps those limitations should not be elevated to quite the status some wish to give them. The plea here is not for the freedom to translate as we wish or to perform an agenda. That is clearly wrong and should be avoided. Warnings that we be careful about translation are worth hearing and taking seriously. However the plea is for the recognition that translation can be slightly open when it comes to pointing to the scope of the intended force of a text without violating the key intention of that text. (The same principle can be seen in the way God has inspired the words of someone speaking, when rendering them in parallel accounts where the same utterance is in view. Moves between second ["you"] and third person ["this"] also happen in such texts, as Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, and Luke 3:22 show.) The plea is to allow room for what God seems to allow for within the reproduction of Scripture within Scripture itself. The standard should be both accuracy and clarity, but with an appreciation that sometimes judgments are being made and that sometimes people may get it wrong without intending to mislead.

9. Some Final Matters

Let us consider some final questions. First, some may ask, if this kind of gender sensitive rendering produces all of this disturbing reaction, why bother and create a problem where one did not exist? "Leave well enough alone" might be the cry. One can understand this sentiment. But the fact is the effort may teach us all to appreciate the Word better. In addition, one may reply that there is value in creating a translation that shows where the limits of gender sensitive rendering may well lie by striving for gender accuracy. One need not or should not change figures related to God as Father or Jesus as Son (or figures where God is portrayed exercising 'motherly' characteristics, either). However, in texts that are written and intended to refer to people (male and female) or humans as a class addressed as "man," it can serve the church well to make such renderings clear where they are present. This is not political correctness (though gender sensitivity in our culture may have made us more sensitive to the issue). It is an attempt to render more clearly and faithfully Scripture and its intended scope in terms of who is addressed in many texts. (A few generations ago, controversy surrounding the race issue made us all more racially sensitive. The church today has acknowledged that some of that was good for all of us, including the church).

Second, one may ask, should we really be comfortable with people changing the unchanging Word of God? The question is another fair one. We need to think carefully about what inspiration affirms. Remember that inspiration applies to the original form of the Word.

God's work of inspiration applies to the production of a text. That base is what is unchanging and is what is inspired. Translations are our best attempts to render that product faithfully, but translations are not infallible or inerrant in themselves. So the effort to render the Bible more clearly is potentially a good exercise. Such renderings will inevitably have some variation in them because of the complexity and judgments involved in the translation process (as we have seen). With each new version, judgments will be made whether that version does so as well as another version or less well. The question should be whether the translation is faithful to the inspired Word. Every person with ability in the language will surely find texts in any translation that he or she thinks could be more accurately or more clearly rendered. Those judgments will continue to be made about versions and their quality as a whole as well. However, let us be careful not to make matters appear worse than they appear to be in evaluating these various versions and how they are attempting to do the job. Translations and paraphrases each have their value as they seek to bring out the complex dimensions of the difficult task of translating God's Word and its depth clearly. Sometimes the best way to see the whole of the depth of God's Word is to work with a variety of solid translations. Some translations also could better serve the reader by making more effective use of brief marginal comments to make the dynamics of their translation (and potential ambiguities of the text) clearer. It is here in my judgment where most recent efforts to make a gender sensitive translation have failed us. They have not shown the unsuspecting reader clearly enough where the moves have been made so the reader can get a sense of the judgment made and what the alternative may well be. So to all translations I would urge that they use marginal notes of alternative renderings more often, particularly in cases where there is serious uncertainty or dispute about the rendering. It is here that the New English Translation (the NET Bible) has done readers a great service by providing detailed notes and explanations of renderings. I am not arguing for such detail in other versions, but at the key places where translators know there are matters where discussion arises.

Finally, I wish to address the "inaccuracy" lists that are currently circulating about certain translations. They make a point to say that hundreds of inaccuracies are present. They leave an impression that a serious problem exists and that the Word of God has been badly distorted. One should realize, however, that what is taking place on such lists is that several classes of changes are being examined. Usually such lists will have six to ten basic categories to examine. Since the translation in question has made such changes as a matter of translational theory, one change will lead to several changes of the same type throughout the Bible. Thus lists that speak of hundreds of errors are only as legitimate as the accuracy of the claim that a given class or classes of changes should not be made. Our list of passages above has covered a variety of these kinds of changes. We have discussed the use of "man" as generic, the shift from singular to plural, and changes in pronouns between renderings. These are the key categories of discussion. We have suggested that none of them is necessarily wrong as a matter of principle and that each text should be taken one at a time. Each translation needs to be examined for the changes in question. It would be best to let each translation speak for itself if they supply such explanations, as well as checking such lists before making a judgment. However, the issue is not the number of inaccuracies such lists raise because the number will always be high given that many texts fall into such categories. The real issue is whether the basic categories they discuss are really as problematic as suggested.

These exercises in working with specific texts help the reader grasp the issues by taking

one through the process one must undertake to translate. Having seen some key examples, one can make a better judgment as to whether such gender sensitive translation is necessarily problematic in rendering the sacred Word of God. One can also keep in mind what factors one must weigh in coming to a decision about the debate and about the proper rendering of the biblical text.

10. A Plea

Let's not make an issue of orthodoxy from something that Scripture itself seems to treat with some freedom. Let's acknowledge what we are doing when we translate. Let's distinguish between attempts to render with gender accuracy for translational reasons from other efforts which more clearly try to distort the meaning of the text on clear ideological grounds. Such ideological renderings are worthy of harsh criticism. It also might help that when translations make a rendering in this direction that they supply in the margin the alternative wording, so readers who are concerned about the details can appreciate the nature of the rendering and be aware of the judgment the translator made. This can be done with very brief marginal notations giving the alternative as is often done in modern translations.

So in sum, does gender sensitive translation distort the Scriptures? Not necessarily. Let's let translators do their job and not unnecessarily restrict their translational options in bringing out the meaning of the text. Let's keep them accountable to being accurate to the Word, but do so with an appreciation of the difficulty and complexity of their task. If I may paraphrase, their work is hard enough without adding burdens to them that our fathers, the writers of Scripture, did not bear.

Three Books that Discuss the Issues

If you wish more detail on the basic principles of this dispute than I can trace here, see the following books. The first two books defend the possibility of certain kinds of gender sensitive translations as a matter of translation theory. The third book argues that most of what such translations do is flawed. They are not listed in any order of preference. All the writers are evangelicals who hold a high view of scriptural inspiration (i.e., inerrancy). All also hold to traditional views on the role of women in the church.

- A. Don Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Baker)
- B. Mark Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (InterVarsity Press)
- C. Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender Neutral Bible Controversy* (Crossway)

(Dr. Darrell Bock was a guest on our series *Jesus: The Search Continues*. This is a response to many of the false ideas about Jesus being promoted today, one example being the ABC/Peter Jennings' program entitled *The Search for Jesus*. The entire 2-hour special is available through our catalog in video, audio or written transcript formats.)