

GENDER-INCLUSIVE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

by
Ron Minton

A gender-inclusive¹ translation seeks to translate Hebrew and Greek gender-generic words, mostly nouns and pronouns, with equally generic English words. For example, Romans 3:28 says *a man is justified by faith*,² but a gender-inclusive rendering might say “a person is justified by faith” or “one is justified by faith.” Here, the Greek word does not mean male as opposed to female. English frequently uses masculine terms generically, but gender-inclusive translations avoid this practice.

The following chart gives an overview of the situation. Most existing translations include examples of all four possible types of renderings. On the other hand, Gender-generic translations frequently exemplify Type-3 and Type-4 renderings.

	Gender-Specific Greek	Gender-Generic Greek
Gender-Specific English	1. Equally Specific	2. Overly Specific
Gender-Generic English	3. Overly Generic	4. Equally Generic

¹ Gender-inclusive is the same as gender-neutral or gender-generic. For information on gender-inclusive translations, see Mark Strauss, “Linguistic and Hermeneutical Fallacies in the Guidelines Established at the ‘Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture’,” *JETS* 41 (June 1998): 239–62 and Wayne Grudem, “A Response to Mark Strauss’ Evaluation of the Colorado Springs Translation Guidelines,” *JETS* 41 (June 1998): 263–86. For greater treatment, see Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? Gender-Inclusive Language and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); D.A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000). Strauss favors gender-inclusive language for translation, but opposes the extreme inclusiveness of feminist Bibles. Grudem takes a less gender-inclusive view. For interesting debate on this issue, see Wayne Grudem and Grant Osborne, “Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture?” *Christianity Today*, October 27, 1997, 26–39.

² Unless otherwise noted, Scripture translations are the author’s.

It is important to emphasize that every translation uses some gender-inclusive language. The use of gender-inclusive language is appropriate when the original text also does so. The problem arises in extreme gender-inclusive versions that go far beyond what the original languages of Scripture allow.³ On the other hand, there are places where mild increases of gender-inclusive language may make a translation more accurate and consistent. For example, a mild form of gender neutrality would change *If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever* (John 6:51 KJV) to “If anyone eat of this bread.” In this verse the word *man* paraphrases a Greek word signifying *anyone*. The Greek does not distinguish males from females. In this case, however, the generic *he* renders a generic use of the masculine personal pronoun. Such generic uses of *he* occur in Hebrew, Greek, English, and many other languages. Some gender inclusive translations would change *he* to “they.”⁴

In this same passage, the words *whoso eateth* (6:54) and *he that eateth* (6:56) are exactly the same in Greek. Changing the KJV words *he that eateth* to *whoso eateth*, as in verse 54, improves a translation and makes it slightly more gender-neutral. The KJV and modern translations which use this very mild form of gender-neutrality are not radical feminist Bibles. They are not even gender-inclusive translations, but actually render the text more accurately.

³ Extreme feminist Bibles may refer to “God the father” as “God the father-mother” or “God the eternal one” (e.g., see Oxford’s *Inclusive New Testament*). Many would be surprised to find Matthew 3:9, *We have Abraham as our father* rendered “We have Abraham as our father and Sarah and Hagar as our mothers.” Yet this is done in extremely radical editions like *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*. Jan DeWaard and Eugene Nida, *From One Language to Another*, 24–25, correctly call this “an almost incredible distortion.” It might also be noted that the Greek language did have separate words for father, mother, and parent.

⁴ For discussion of issues such as changing the singular to plural, see Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate*.

Unfortunately, some radical feminist Bible translators emphasize gender equality and political correctness⁵ above accuracy in translation. The radical gender-inclusiveness of some translations seriously distorts the Word of God. For example, the 1995 Oxford *Inclusive Version* avoids *him* and renders *son* as *child* or *one*. John 5:26–27 reads “For just as God has life in Godself, so God has granted the same thing to the Child, and has given the Child authority to execute judgment, because of being the Human One. Do not be astonished at this.” James R. Edward asks an appropriate question in response to this rendering, “Who could help but be astonished?”⁶

2 Corinthians 6:18 quotes 2 Samuel 7:14, which says, *I will be his father, and he will be my son*. Paul changes this to *I will be your (plural) father and you shall be my sons and daughters*. This indicates that words like *son* can have a broader meaning than just male children. This also shows that gender-inclusive language debates can be very complex. Several of the above works discuss such passages.

Gender-inclusive versions, like the NRSV, attempt to eliminate terms like father and brothers, and replace them with terms like parent and brothers and sisters. Some passages make such practice a disaster. Even the NRSV retains *brothers* in Acts 15:1, *teaching the brothers unless you are circumcised . . . you cannot be saved*.

Gender-inclusive Bibles include varying amounts of gender-neutral language in the translation. Most translators seek to render the Word of God accurately. Some include gender-inclusive language as a means to help achieve this goal. Gender-inclusive

⁵ *The New Testament and Psalms, An Inclusive Version* (Oxford: University Press, 1995) was even called the “Politically Correct” (PC) Bible when it first came out.

⁶ The comment is from James R. Edward’s review in *JETS* 41 (March 1998): 126–28.

versions⁷ include new translations, revisions of previous translations, and lectionaries. Such versions first appeared in the mid 1980s. They include the following, listed by date of first issue:

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1. ****An Inclusive Language Lectionary** (National Council of Churches, 1983).⁸
2. *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB, 1985).⁹
3. *New Century Version* (NCV, 1986, 1987, 1988).¹⁰
4. *New American Bible* (NAB, 1988 and 1990 revisions).¹¹
5. *Revised English Bible* (REB, 1989).¹²
6. *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV, 1989).¹³
7. *Good News Bible* (GNB, 1992 revision).¹⁴
8. *The Message* (1993).¹⁵
9. *The New International Reader's Version* (1994, 1996, not 1998).¹⁶
10. ****The Inclusive New Testament** (Priests for Equality, 1994).¹⁷
11. *Contemporary English Version* (CEV, 1995).¹⁸
12. *God's Word* (GW, 1995).¹⁹

⁷ Some of these translations are more extreme than others. For example, the 1989 NRSV, one of the first major gender-inclusive translations, has altered the text more than 4,000 times to make it gender-neutral (see Wayne Grudem's study in "Do Inclusive-Language Bibles Distort Scripture?" 32).

⁸ *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983).

⁹ *New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1985).

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: New Century Version* (Dallas: Word, 1986, 1987, 1988).

¹¹ *New American Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1970). The 1988 and 1990 revisions are gender-inclusive.

¹² *Revised English Bible* (Oxford, England: University Press, 1989).

¹³ *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: ABS, 1989).

¹⁴ *Good News Bible* (GNB, 1992 revision).

¹⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*: (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993).

¹⁶ *The New International Reader's Version* (1994, 1996, not 1998).

¹⁷ *The Inclusive New Testament* (Hyattsville, MD: Priests for Equality, 1994).

¹⁸ *Contemporary English Version* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995).

¹⁹ *God's Word* (Grand Rapids: World Publishers, 1995).

13. *New International Version Inclusive Language Edition* (NIVI, 1995; it was published only in Great Britain).²⁰
14. *******New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (Oxford University, 1995).²¹
15. *New Living Translation* (NLT, 1996).²²
16. *New English Translation* (NET Bible, 1998)²³
17. *Today's New International Version* (2001, a gender-inclusive edition of the NIV).²⁴

****** = The more radical feminist translations.

Conclusion

There have long been traditional gender translations of the Bible into English. Since the 1980s, gender-inclusive translations have become popular. Often the Word of God has been made clearer in such editions, but the Word is sometimes changed and even distorted for contemporary politically correct culture. This is especially the case with the radical feminist editions, which, thankfully, have been few in number. Any increase in gender-neutral language must accord with the truth of the original, not the mere winds of doctrine (cf. Ephesians 4:14). Not all recent translations are gender inclusive. The English Standard Version

²⁰ *New International Version Inclusive Language Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). It was published only in Great Britain.

²¹ Roland Gold, ed., *New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²² *New Living Translation* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1996). The NLT and some of the others do not consider themselves as gender-inclusive, but gender-accurate. They try to detect where the text is not focusing on one gender and choose appropriate English phrasing to communicate it. While all translations have some gender-inclusive language, there is a distinction between those that make special efforts at gender-equality. For example, the NIVI and TNIV are gender-inclusive but the NIV is not.

²³ *New English Translation* (Garland, Texas: Biblical Studies Press, 1998). The NET Bible uses a play on words and is also known as the Internet Bible since it is fully available on line at www.bible.org.

²⁴ *Today's New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

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(ESV) of 1999 is a very good non-gender-inclusive translation and seems to be gaining favor among many conservative Christians.

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Ron Minton earned a BA in Greek at Grace College and the M.Div. at Grace Theological Seminary, where he also received a Th.M. in Hebrew and OT Studies. He received a Th.D. from Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minnesota. Ron has presented scholarly papers at SBL and ETS meetings as well as published articles and reviews in evangelical periodicals. He is in his 36th year of service in the military and is a Navy Reserve Chaplain with the rank of Captain. He has given more than 40 seminars in the past four years on “How We Got the Bible,” and is finishing a book on *The Making and Preservation of the Bible*. He is Associate Professor of New Testament at Capital Bible Seminary in Lanham, MD. Dr. Minton’s email address is rminton@bible.edu.