

COMMENTS ON MARK STRAUSS'S RESPONSE

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I would like to reply to Mark Strauss's response (in this issue of *WTJ*) to an article of mine, entitled "Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011" (in a previous issue of *WTJ*).¹ In writing a reply, I would normally prefer to be short and to confine my remarks to the topics on which my original article focused. But Dr. Strauss's response has raised issues that I chose not to discuss in the original article, and other issues on which I barely touched or that I presupposed. A thorough analysis of such issues would involve book-length discussions.

I. *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*

Fortunately, we already have discussions in print, and my original article refers readers to them in its opening footnote.² Dr. Strauss himself has written one of the two major books that came out in 1998 in defense of gender-neutral translation policy.³ In 2000 Strauss's book received a response from Wayne A. Grudem and me in a book entitled *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words*.⁴ Our book was updated in 2004 to include a discussion of the TNIV.⁵

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¹ Vern S. Poythress, "Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011," *WTJ* 73 (2011): 79-96, now available online at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2011Gender.pdf (accessed Jan. 9, 2012).

² *Ibid.*, 79 n. 1.

³ Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation & Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998). The other book that appeared the same year was D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). It should be noted that Strauss's book discusses not only gender-neutral translations such as the NRSV and the NIVI, which were in print in 1998, but also radical feminist translations that systematically avoid using masculine terms (such as he/him/his) to refer to God. Strauss rightly criticizes these radical feminist translations (Strauss, *Distorting Scripture*, 60-73; Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000], 5; Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004], 117). But, with certain minor qualifications, he and D. A. Carson defend gender-neutral policies with respect to pronouns and nouns referring to human beings.

⁴ Poythress and Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (henceforth, *GNBC*). The book is online at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_books.htm (accessed Jan. 9, 2012).

⁵ Poythress and Grudem, *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (henceforth, *TNIV-GNBC*). In comparison to *GNBC*, this later book inserts six new chapters, chs. 1-6, that focus on the

All of these books appeared as part of a larger controversy, the gender-neutral Bible controversy, the main events of which are catalogued in the books by Wayne Grudem and me.⁶ (I use the expression *gender-neutral*, rather than *gender-accurate* as Dr. Strauss prefers, because the latter expression begs the question.⁷) The controversy continues today, as can be seen from the present interchange between Dr. Strauss and me, and from criticisms of the NIV 2011 by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and the Southern Baptist Convention, to which the NIV Committee on Bible Translation responds.⁸

As far as I can see, no new principles or fundamental insights are introduced in Dr. Strauss's latest response. In substance, Dr. Strauss is reiterating views and arguments that appear in his 1998 book—but of course they are now applied to verses found in the NIV 2011. So, rather than undertake a complete re-statement of the issues, I intend in this reply to refer readers to the books published in 2000 and in 2004, which interact with and criticize Strauss's book.

II. *Positive Points*

Dr. Strauss is understandably distressed that my article did not spend much time discussing the positive points of the NIV 2011. Nor did my article take space to point out ways in which the NIV 2011 improved verses that had “men” and other male-marked meanings in the NIV 1984, but where the original languages had no such male prominence.⁹ My article did not engage in such discussion because, as its title indicates, it focused narrowly on the difficulties that remain in the NIV 2011 because of its gender-neutral policy. Dr. Strauss's reminders concerning positive features are useful to readers who are not aware of them, but they are not really pertinent to the point made in my article. In fact, they are among the responses that defenders of gender-neutral policy have regularly offered, and such responses are already mentioned and critiqued in 2000. One response runs, “But many verses are still OK.”¹⁰

TNIV. But the text of the remaining chapters is the same as the text of *GNBC*. In my citations I have included the *GNBC* for completeness, but the *TNIV-GNBC* (2004) includes all the information of the earlier *GNBC* (2000).

⁶ *GNBC*, 9-36; *TNIV-GNBC*, 1-148.

⁷ *GNBC*, 5-6, 115-17; *TNIV-GNBC*, 117-18, 227-29.

⁸ The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood offers a number of critiques at <http://www.cbmw.org/Resources/Articles/An-Evaluation-of-Gender-Language-in-the> (accessed Jan. 9, 2012) including Denny Burk et al., “The Translation of Gender Terminology in the NIV 2011,” *JBMW* 16 (2011): 17-33. The Southern Baptist Convention statement from their national meeting in June 2011 is online at <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1218> (accessed Jan. 9, 2012). The response from the NIV Committee on Bible Translation can be found at <http://www.niv-cbt.org/> (accessed Jan. 9, 2012).

⁹ See *GNBC*, 91-99, 233-89; *TNIV-GNBC*, 203-11, 345-401.

¹⁰ *GNBC*, 197-98; *TNIV-GNBC*, 309-10. I agree with much of what Strauss says about positive points, but there remain some disagreements even here. We must confine ourselves to the main issue.

Near the beginning Dr. Strauss rightly points out that all translation involves *some* loss of nuances, because two languages never match perfectly in their meanings.¹¹ That is not the question. The question is whether the gender-neutral policy in the NIV 2011 has led to loss that could have been avoided by using generic “he” and other resources still available in the English language.

III. *Revelation 22:18*

Dr. Strauss then cites an example, from Rev 22:18: “If *anyone* adds anything to them, God will add to *that person* the plagues described in this scroll” (NIV 2011; italics mine). I criticized this wording,¹² but Dr. Strauss defends it. My critique of the expression “that person” is a minor point, but since Dr. Strauss takes it up early in his response, let us start there. Dr. Strauss alleges that potentially a *worse* loss would occur if we use generic “he” (in this case, in the form of “him”) rather than the phrase “that person.” He queries, “But how can potentially leaving out half the population by introducing a male term [i.e., “him”] in a truly generic context represent ‘maximal accuracy?’” (italics are his). The answer is the same one already given in 2000 in the book written by Wayne Grudem and me: the English language still has generic “he,” and in this verse it is easily perceived as generic because of the antecedent word “anyone.”¹³ Generic “he” does not “potentially [leave] out half the population.” Rather, it is “generic,” which means that it functions as part of a general statement that holds for both male and female human beings.

Some major books on style recognize the continued use of generic “he” and even recommend it in contrast to alternatives. *The Associated Press Stylebook* (2009) says,

Use the pronoun *his* when an indefinite antecedent may be male or female: *A reporter tries to protect his sources.* (Not *his or her* sources . . .)¹⁴

The 2010 edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* recommends using either *he* or *she*, but not *they*:

Many people substitute the plural *they* and *their* for the singular *he* or *she*. Although *they* and *their* have become common in informal usage, neither is considered acceptable in formal writing, so unless you are given guidelines to the contrary, do not use them in a singular sense.¹⁵

It does appear to me that generic “he” typically carries the nuance of suggesting a male instance used to exemplify a general principle, but the same is true

¹¹ See the discussion of translation in *GNBC*, 57-90; *TNIV-GNBC*, 169-202.

¹² Poythress, “Gender Neutral Issues,” 89.

¹³ *GNBC*, 111-232, 335-52; *TNIV-GNBC*, 223-344, 447-64.

¹⁴ *Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 131. I thank Dr. Wayne A. Grudem for drawing my attention to this and the following quote.

¹⁵ *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), § 5.227, p. 303.

with the Greek generic third-person masculine singular pronoun. The match between Greek and English in this instance is very good.¹⁶

IV. *The Main Point of Contention*

It is worth pausing for a few moments to consider Dr. Strauss's argument in more detail, because it reveals one of the main points of contention between us. It seems to me that Dr. Strauss does not think that "he" is usable in generic statements. I think that it is. Dr. Strauss thinks that it seriously distorts meaning (at least "potentially"); I do not. Dr. Strauss maintained this position in 1998, and he still maintains it today. If Dr. Strauss is right, the NIV 2011 is doing more or less the best it could, and I should stop complaining. If, on the other hand, Dr. Strauss is wrong, his mistaken conviction leads him to eschew the use of generic "he" in many situations where its use would result in a very good, superior match in meaning between the original languages and the rendering in English translations. In that case, the systematic refusal to use generic "he" leads repeatedly to losses in accuracy. That was one of the main points of dispute in 1998, in 2000, in 2004, and now today. The fundamental issue has not changed.

It is all the more regrettable that Dr. Strauss has not advanced the discussion. Rather, his formulation on this point is confusing. Consider his rhetorical question, "But how can potentially leaving out half the population by introducing a *male* term in a truly *generic* context represent 'maximal accuracy'?" First, the expression "a *male* term" needs nuancing. He is referring to the question of whether to use generic "he" (in the form "him") in Rev 22:18. The form "him" is grammatically masculine in English, and the underlying Greek form (*auton*) is grammatically masculine in Greek. What is its meaning? To say baldly that generic "he" is "male" overlooks nuances. Some people argue that because generic "he" occurs in the context of a preceding generic term *anyone*, it is completely gender-neutral in its meaning in this context. That is to say, it carries no connotations of male meaning.

I believe that the situation is more subtle. Given the antecedent word *anyone*, the word "he" or "him" is indeed generic. It functions as part of a general statement that includes male and female persons in principle. But the masculine term *him* is not only grammatically masculine; it suggests the idea of a male instance exemplifying the general, inclusive principle. The same holds for the Greek generic third-person masculine singular pronoun underlying the English.¹⁷ Dr. Strauss oversimplifies not only by not mentioning the complexity involved in using a male example to express a general truth, but by not discussing the fact that the Greek does the same thing.

Dr. Strauss talks about "a truly *generic* context." What context? The context of neighboring verses does not forbid the use of a male example in this verse. What Dr. Strauss presumably means is that a pronoun (such as *him* in English or *auton*

¹⁶ GNBC, Appendix 3, 335-47; TNIV-GNBC, 447-59.

¹⁷ GNBC, 335-47; TNIV-GNBC, 447-59.

in Greek) occurs in the context formed by the rest of this verse, which is a generic verse. That is, the verse makes a general statement, true for "anyone." But then what does it mean for a statement to be "truly generic" rather than "generic"? I am not sure. I fear that such an expression befogs the issues under debate. The expression "truly generic" might to some readers be equivalent to "gender-neutral." Is it then being assumed that, if we have a general statement, it must be purely gender-neutral? Are we assuming that it is not permissible to use a male (or a female!) example to exemplify a general principle? Must everything be *purely* generic, with no hint of a specific example belonging to one gender or the other? The way that Dr. Strauss has formulated the issue glosses over several points. First, is the purpose of producing a general statement compatible with using a male example to do it? I believe it is. Second, does the Greek do just this when it uses a third-person masculine singular pronoun? I believe it does. Third, can we achieve a very close match in meaning by using "him" in English? I believe we can. All these points were defended at length in 2000.¹⁸ It does not advance the discussion for Dr. Strauss to gloss over them with a foggy statement.

Dr. Strauss essentially repeats the same views when he talks about what he alleges is "the major loss of *inclusive* nuances when masculine terms are used [in English] in generic contexts" (*italics his*). My reply is that generic "he" in English implies inclusion of both genders in a way that neatly matches the same implication of inclusion in Greek. This position received a detailed exposition in 2000.¹⁹ There is no "loss," and Dr. Strauss has not presented any evidence to the contrary.

Again Dr. Strauss complains, "There seems to be little or no concern about introducing inaccurate male connotations into a generic context." The word *inaccurate* begs the question. The arguments presented in print in 2000 show that the same connotations present in English are there in Greek and Hebrew. Thus, there is no inaccuracy in using generic "he." In a typical translation context, generic "he" neatly reproduces the meanings from Greek and Hebrew generic third-person singular masculine pronouns. Rather, inaccuracy arises from refusing to use generic "he."

V. "Potential" Loss

Dr. Strauss also talks about "potentially leaving out half the population." We have already observed that generic "he," following the word *anyone*, belongs to a *generic* sentence; such a sentence does not leave out half the population. So Dr. Strauss's formulation does not help. Within his formulation, what does the word "potentially" mean? I do not know. If he said that the sentence *actually* leaves out half the population, his meaning would be clear. And it would be easy to refute, because the statistics from the Collins study of English indicate that generic "he" is still being used in generic statements about 8 percent of the time (in contexts where *some* kind of generic pronoun appears). Moreover, the *Associated Press*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *GNBC*, 335-47; *TNIV-GNBC*, 447-59.

Stylebook (2009) actually recommends generic “he,” and the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2010) sees it along with generic she as the main permissible alternatives. In addition, in 2000 we already dealt with this question concerning the understanding of generic “he,” and even addressed directly the objection that it will be misunderstood.²⁰

So what is Dr. Strauss saying? It is possible, I suppose, that the “excluding” of half the population does not mean a literal exclusion, but some kind of metaphorical exclusion. For example, some people might feel that the use of generic “he” is insensitive to women or disrespectful to women, or that it has bad connotations. Allegedly, women are emotionally “excluded.” This is a serious issue, to which analysis was devoted in 2000 and 2004.²¹ There is not space to repeat the analysis here.

Or perhaps the word *potentially* means that someone *could* misunderstand the verse if he forces generic “he” and the rest of the verse around it to be restricted only to males. Yes, of course, but any verse anywhere in the Bible can be misunderstood if we force meanings onto it that do not take into account other parts of the verse (“anyone”), or do not take into account how the whole verse functions in its context, or do not take into account the range of usages of English words.

In 2002 I already addressed the issue of excessive fears about misunderstanding.²² It is reasonable for translators to try to reword texts if, in real life settings, they demonstrably lead to widespread misunderstanding. Such procedures are quite different from allowing merely hypothetical fears to paralyze us. If we allow it, the “language police” for political correctness will manipulate translations and all other kinds of English as well by appealing to fear. They will claim that generic “he” “potentially” means “male” and results in sentences that exclude half the population. They will excite fear of potential misunderstanding. If we let ourselves be manipulated, we are yielding to an ideology of political correctness, whether or not we sincerely want to avoid it. The word *potentially* opens the door to such manipulation.

In view of the way that Dr. Strauss brings up for debate the same issues that were addressed in the original gender-neutral Bible controversy, it seems to me worthwhile to stress that my recent 2011 article did not intend to revisit the principal issues. Rather, it intended to evaluate the character of the NIV 2011 on the basis of principles that I already defended in 2000 and in 2004. Naturally, I did not undertake any wide-ranging discussion of the possible nuances, alleged misunderstandings, and male connotations of generic “he.” I proceeded to do the one thing that my article actually intended to do, namely to sift through what the NIV 2011 presents to us, and to evaluate it according to criteria already in place

²⁰ *GNBC*, 111-232, esp. 223-24; *TNIV-GNBC*, 223-45, esp. 335-36.

²¹ *GNBC*, 166-75; *TNIV-GNBC*, 278-87.

²² Vern S. Poythress, “Political Correctness and Bible Translation: A Preliminary Response to Ellis W. Deibler,” online at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2002Political.htm (accessed Jan. 9, 2012).

(for instance, in the Colorado Springs Guidelines of 1997).²³ Dr. Strauss is of course free to bring up the old issues of principle, but in that case he needs to interact with the counterarguments.

VI. *John 14:23*

Dr. Strauss discusses a second example from John 14:23, where the NIV 2011 exactly matches the TNIV. Wayne Grudem and I complained in 2004 about the TNIV's handling of this verse.²⁴ Our criticism remains unanswered. Dr. Strauss asserts that "they" is "a singular 'they'" and that it means "'that person just referred to.'" But, as our discussion in 2004 shows, "they" with singular antecedent (in this case "anyone") still carries some nuance of plurality in its meaning.²⁵ This kind of plurality comes out clearly if we imagine a hypothetical continuation. Suppose that, after the expression in the NIV 2011 John 14:23, "we will come to them and make our home with them," we add, "and they will share a new spiritual life together." "They" in this instance clearly refers to a multiplicity of people, even though its antecedent from the beginning of the verse might be "anyone."

So the plural form *they* in this context is not merely plural in *form*. It can suggest a plurality of people being referred to—a plurality in meaning. When so understood, it opens the possibility of understanding the verse as a whole as a promise that the Father and the Son will make their home (singular) with all believers *together*. The meaning of the whole verse takes a turn in a corporate direction—the single home is with all believers together, rather than with each one individually.

Dr. Strauss alleges that my view "confuses form and function." This response falls within the category of objections, "Critics are confusing form and meaning," to which our books respond.²⁶ I specifically warn critics that the issue of entanglement of form and meaning is complex. In the context of discussing gender language, simple appeals to a form-meaning distinction easily become oversimple, because in actual languages the two come together in form-meaning composites, and they interact; they are not strictly separable.²⁷ This complexity is exactly what we see with the use of the plural form *they* following a singular antecedent ("anyone"). This kind of complexity also occurs with generic "he," since the form is masculine and the function is generic.

Dr. Strauss concludes his discussion of John 14:23 by expressing concern about "the exclusion of half the population." This worry about exclusion is the

²³ *GNBC*, 299-319; *TNIV-GNBC*, 411-31.

²⁴ *TNIV-GNBC*, 70, 92-93. See also discussion of John 14:23 elsewhere in the book.

²⁵ *TNIV-GNBC*, 92-95.

²⁶ *GNBC*, 190-91; *TNIV-GNBC*, 302-3.

²⁷ *GNBC*, 82-90; *TNIV-GNBC*, 194-202; Vern S. Poythress, "Gender and Generic Pronouns in English Bible Translation," in *Language and Life: Essays in Memory of Kenneth L. Pike* (ed. Mary Ruth Wise, Thomas N. Headland, and Ruth M. Brend; Dallas: SIL International and the University of Texas at Arlington, 2003), 371-80, online at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2003Gender.htm (accessed Jan. 9, 2012).

same as what we addressed above. This time, Dr. Strauss formulates his concern in a slightly different way. He worries that “a reader will perceive the text as referring primarily or exclusively to males.” Which is it, “primarily” or “exclusively”? If we pick the alternative “exclusively,” it lands us back with the issue of fear concerning hypothetical misunderstandings. So does Dr. Strauss mean “primarily”? That alternative raises again the issue of whether it is permissible to use a male example to express a general truth. I claim that the Greek does. And so it is right for the English to do so. There is nothing new in Dr. Strauss’s concerns.

VII. *Proverbs 12:15*

In Prov 12:15, Dr. Strauss sees no difference in meaning between the two renderings,

NIV 2011: The way of fools seems right to them.

NIV 1984: The way of a fool seems right to him.

I thought my article made the difference clear, but since Dr. Strauss makes a counterclaim, let me spell out the difference in still more detail.

Let us think about fools. Certain patterns of thought and behavior tend to be common. Fools do not reckon with future consequences; they tend to be unteachable; their pride leads them to actions that bring uncomfortable consequences. On the other hand, folly can have more than one form. One fool shows his folly by words: “a babbling fool will come to ruin” (Prov 10:10). Another shows folly by quick and unbridled anger: “The vexation of a fool is known at once” (Prov 12:16). Another shows folly by repeating the same mistake: “a fool who repeats his folly” (Prov 26:11). The expression “the way of fools,” with the singular term *way* and the plural term *fools*, invites us to focus almost completely on the “way” that is common to all fools, that is, the commonalities. The proverb as a whole then means that fools in general think that this common way is right. By contrast, the expression “the way of a fool,” while it may call to mind the commonalities, allows the possibility that we may think of *a specific way* that is characteristic of a single fool. Thus it is open to us to think about the foolish “way” characterized by babbling, and a second foolish “way” characterized by unrestrained anger, and so on, depending on which fool we choose as our focus. The fool given to babbling thinks that his way of babbling is “right,” and the fool given to unrestrained anger thinks that his way of anger is “right.” There may even be different forms of babbling, each of which is right in the eyes of the one who is characterized by his own particular form of babbling.

Thus, there is a difference between “the way of fools,” focusing on what is common, and “the way of a fool,” which opens the possibility that the details of “the way” of a particular fool may differ from the way of a second fool. The way is specific to each fool. It seems to me that Dr. Strauss dismisses some of my examples without having grasped the kind of difference in nuance to which I am referring.

VIII. *Connotations and Perceptions*

Dr. Strauss also says that a “reader may comprehend what the translator is trying to say, but still consider the translation to sound exclusive, when the original was intended to sound inclusive.” Here Dr. Strauss describes a reader who “may comprehend what the translator is trying to say.” That is, the reader comprehends that a statement is generic and that it includes both males and females in the scope of its principles. Yet the reader still considers the verse “to sound exclusive.” Apparently, it sounds exclusive when its meaning is inclusive. How can its “sound” be the opposite of its meaning?

Such a paradox begs to be unraveled, and it is unraveled in the discussions in the 2000 and 2004 books. Partly, the issue involves the possibility that generic “he” may be perceived as insensitive to women or as having bad connotations.²⁸ Partly the issue may be that generic “he” in English seems to suggest that a male example is being used to illustrate a general truth. The same phenomenon occurs in Greek and Hebrew, so an English generic masculine “sounds” no more exclusive or inclusive than the original.²⁹

It should also be recognized that when we compare generic “he” to the alternative of converting everything to plurals (“they”), the situation is not fully symmetrical. The use of generic “he” at least allows the reader to see the meaning of the original (though it may be claimed that the English does not “sound” right). By contrast, the change of whole verses into plurals leaves in English no sign as to whether the original was singular or plural. The extra meaning cannot be recovered. Anyone who has been informed about these conversions into plurals knows that he has lost information with respect to the converted verses; he has also lost information with respect to generic verses like Prov 21:7 and 22:23 that are plural in the original, because he no longer knows whether he can trust the plural structures that appear in English. He cannot tell whether they too have been converted from a singular sense in the original.³⁰

IX. *Cultural Pressures*

We should also ponder whether a particular choice of words is perceived as taking sides on issues about women, “sexism,” and political correctness. Some people may perceive the use of generic “he” as politically biased. Some of these people may of course object even more strenuously to direct complementarian teaching in the Bible, such as we find in Eph 5:22-33. Egalitarian ideology is strong in modern cultures, and when we confront ideology, generic “he” is a gnat in comparison to the camel represented by biblical teaching that speaks about different roles for men and women. No one can satisfy mainstream

²⁸ *GNBC*, 163-75; *TNIV-GNBC*, 275-87.

²⁹ *GNBC*, 335-47; *TNIV-GNBC*, 447-59.

³⁰ *GNBC*, 118, and *TNIV-GNBC*, 230, indicate why there is characteristically some difference in meaning when plurals substitute for singulars.

modern culture unless he or she simply renounces (or “reinterprets”) what the Bible says in this area.

But, still, the “gnat” that consists in the use of male examples to state general truths should be considered. When we translate verses of this type, the issue of modern perception cuts both ways. Generic “he” will be perceived by some modern people as taking sides on the political and social issues of women’s roles, generating feelings of “exclusion,” and connoting disrespect for women. On the other side, the decision to replace singular statements in the Bible with plurals, once it comes to readers’ attention, can be perceived as taking sides in the political battle at the expense of accuracy.³¹ Dr. Strauss’s discussion presents at best only one side in this political tug of war.

I quote what Wayne Grudem and I already said in 2000 and in 2004:

The gender-neutral translator may say, “But I do not intend to be political.” But given our cultural atmosphere, any move you make will be interpreted politically. A gender-neutral translation is politically loaded for the same reasons that generic “he” is.³²

Given our cultural context, the refusal to use generic “he” is politically slanted even though it does not intend to be. A political slant to the Bible is abhorrent to people who care for accuracy and who are at odds with the cultural trends. Translators cannot simply cave in to people who have negative feelings about generic “he.” If they are determined to consider feelings, they must also consider the negative feelings that some people have about losses in meaning that take place through systematically avoiding generic “he.”

Translators are going to offend some people no matter what wording they use.³³ Given the polarization in our culture, the only sensible course seems to me to be to use all the resources of the English language, including generic “he” as well as plurals, and to try to render each verse with maximal accuracy. Of course, the NIV 2011 translators may *claim* to be seeking maximal accuracy. But in a case like ours involving cultural polarization, “maximal accuracy” cannot mean avoiding all possible bad perceptions and connotations, because it is impossible to do so. The translator who, *unlike* the NIV 2011, avoids making concessions can at least justify the rendering by saying that it is faithful to the original.

Dr. Strauss repeats the same points with respect to other examples, so I need not comment further.

X. *The Collins Study of English*

Dr. Strauss then discusses the Collins study, and concludes with the lines, “. . . they [generic masculines] are in fact *less accurate* if they are perceived as

³¹ *GNBC*, 163-66; *TNIV-GNBC*, 275-78.

³² *GNBC*, 165; *TNIV-GNBC*, 277.

³³ And indeed, the criticisms of the NIV 2011 by the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and the Southern Baptist Convention show that the NIV 2011 has generated a negative reaction, despite trying to be neutral.

male-oriented instead of truly generic. And the Collins study shows this is exactly how they are being perceived today” (*italics his*). The expression “male oriented” is vague. More precisely, generic “he” suggests a male example used in the formulation of a general (“generic”) truth. It is generic and *also* has a male component of meaning. The two are not in contrast. So Dr. Strauss’s formulation is inapt. I would guess that he says “truly generic” when he means “gender-neutral.” As before, my response is that English, like Greek and Hebrew, uses masculine generics in a way that suggests a male example and *also* expresses a general truth. This parallelism between the languages is obscured by Dr. Strauss’s formulation.

Dr. Strauss then adds that his view is confirmed by the Collins study. That is Dr. Strauss’s *interpretation* of the Collins study. But the study itself is more limited. The Collins study is a statistical study, and does not comment one way or the other on what people “perceive.” The Collins study indicates that people are using generic “he” less frequently than five or ten years ago, but the study does not speculate as to why. Our book in 2000 already addresses the issue of perceived feelings of exclusion.³⁴ It also addresses the issue of frequency of use, and why some people might avoid generic “he” in their own usage.³⁵ I am therefore not surprised that the percentage of usage has declined, but that decline does not affect the principal arguments in favor of using it when it is needed for maximal accuracy.

Near the end, Dr. Strauss collects some examples from the ESV. I admire the ESV, but I will resist the temptation to go off topic and engage in an analysis of these examples. I do think that these examples, as well as selected examples from the NIV 2011 or any other translation, show the challenges involved in translation, and they illustrate the fact that translations between two languages do not succeed in capturing absolutely everything. If we took the time, we could also show that many translation decisions that appear to be “inconsistent” when judged by some simple rule of thumb are not in fact inconsistent, because the translators are taking into account constraints in meanings that vary from passage to passage. Such points are interesting, but they are not really relevant to the disputed issues.

XI. *Inconsistency in Gender Policy?*

Dr. Strauss may have included these examples partly because he disagrees with my assessment that the NIV 2011 is “inconsistent or uneven.” What kind of “inconsistency” are we discussing? My statement needs to be taken in the context of my article. The inconsistency of which I spoke is an inconsistency with regard to the use of generic “he.” In some places (a few) the NIV 2011 is willing to use it; in many other cases where it would be appropriate and accurate, the NIV 2011 refuses to use it. I called this practice inconsistent against the background assumption that generic “he” is in fact usable in English, and that its use does not

³⁴ *GNBC*, 166-69; *TNIV-GNBC*, 278-81.

³⁵ *GNBC*, 203-15; *TNIV-GNBC*, 315-27; *GNBC*, 163-75; *TNIV-GNBC*, 275-87.

result in general statements that exclude “half the population.” In detecting inconsistency, I was tacitly using assumptions about generic “he” that I defended in 2000 and in 2004 and that are embodied in the Colorado Springs Guidelines for gender language. I think my meaning is reasonably clear within the context of my article.

Dr. Strauss’s own view with respect to generic “he” is different. It seems to me that he does not think it is usable. If he is right, then not only the NIV 2011 but all other English translations—the ESV, NKJV, HCSB, NET, NASB, and so on—need to find alternatives. Given his assumption, many of the alternatives that the NIV 2011 puts in place make sense. Hence, the NIV 2011 is “consistent,” given Strauss’s prior assumption about generic “he.”³⁶ My main point is to dispute Strauss’s prior assumption.

But still, there are at least a few places where the NIV 2011 *does* use generic “he.” What does Dr. Strauss think about these cases? He says that in these verses the reference is male (meaning that the verse is not intended to include women in any sense, and the pronouns are not generic), or else all the alternative wordings are awkward. But if I look at the NIV 2011 charitably, the use of generic “he” in a few places seems to me to suggest that at times the NIV 2011 comes to its senses and realizes that generic “he” is normal English. Thus, despite Dr. Strauss’s attempt to explain, I see an inconsistency. But then I am still seeing things against the background of my own views about the usability of generic “he.”

XII. *Policy and Its Results*

In the end, I do not think that Dr. Strauss’s way of defending the NIV 2011 helps his cause. Dr. Strauss sincerely believes that generic “he” is unusable. So it makes good sense to him personally to defend the NIV 2011 on this basis. But by being so frank about his reasoning, he brings the issue of political correctness to the surface. Many people will think that a blanket rejection of generic “he” expresses political correctness, whether or not it is so intended. So the NIV 2011 gets perceived as a politically correct translation. It has taken sides on the cultural issue. And that does not help to increase its popularity, if it aspires to be accepted by those who do not already agree with the ideology of political correctness.

Near the beginning of his response, Dr. Strauss notes that since 2005 he has been a member of the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT), the central committee charged with the responsibility for updating the NIV (and that earlier was responsible for the TNIV). He is currently Vice Chair of the Committee.³⁷ To me, these facts are not reassuring. To be sure, in his response he speaks for himself, not for every member of the NIV translation Committee. But if his reasoning is typical of the Committee, it implies that the Committee wanted to exclude

³⁶ This point about the effect of assuming the *unusability* of generic “he” is already stated in *GNBC*, 357; *TNIV-GNBC*, 469. It makes plain why the books spend so much time on presenting arguments to show that generic “he” is in fact usable.

³⁷ <http://www.niv-cbt.org/translators/> (accessed Jan. 9, 2012).

generic “he.” In my opinion, this exclusion is a serious misjudgment. It restricts their ability to represent meaning accurately in a large number of verses where there are generic formulations.³⁸

XIII. *More on Generic “He” in Modern English*

In his conclusion, Dr. Strauss comments on my statement, “But a translator must use his head.” He says, “When I read that, it struck me as inaccurate and imprecise, since I know many women who are exceptional translators. I would have said ‘Translators must use their heads.’” He indicates that he finds ambiguity in what I have written: “I suppose Dr. Poythress would say his statement is perfectly acceptable, since ‘his’ sounds generic to him (or perhaps because he considers Bible translation to be the domain of men—though I do not know this to be the case).”

When Dr. Strauss says that “‘his’ sounds generic to him [Poythress],” his wording obliquely indicates that he has in fact understood my meaning. So I think that Dr. Strauss meant these remarks as a joke. It is as if he said, “See, I can find difficulties even in your own statement if it uses generic ‘he.’ Ha, ha! That is why generic ‘he’ should be avoided.” I appreciate the humorous irony in using my own words against me, so I say in reply, “Ha, ha! Clever! You got me.” The joke is a light counterpoint to the otherwise serious dispute between us, so the tension is relieved and we can walk off arm in arm. It is a fitting conclusion.

I wish I could leave the matter there. But of course we do have a serious dispute. And even a joke can play a role in a dispute. Is a serious point being made by means of the joke? The point of Dr. Strauss’s joke seems to be to reiterate his earlier claim that generic “he” is unusable—despite the evidence I have presented both from the Collins study and from handbooks of style. Dr. Strauss earlier claimed that sentences with generic “he” could “potentially” be “excluding half the population.” It seems that we are returning to the word “potentially.” When Dr. Strauss offers the interpretation, “perhaps because he considers Bible translation to be the domain of men,” he shows that *potentially* my words can be misunderstood, and on account of this possibility my words could also be construed as “inaccurate and imprecise.” But he also includes the caution: “—though I do not know this to be the case.” These qualifying words indicate that in fact he himself knows better than to cast aspersions. He is nevertheless worried that others may *potentially* misunderstand. The same is true for virtually any use of generic “he.” We have already discussed this issue in talking about excessive fears of misunderstanding.

³⁸ The CBMW report finds 2000 cases where the NIV 2011 left in place plurals used in the TNIV to avoid generic “he” (“An Evaluation of Gender Language in the 2011 Edition of the NIV Bible: A Report from the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood,” June 6, 2011, 5, online at https://www.cbmw.org/images/articles_pdf/cbmw%20final%20analysis%20of%202011%20niv.pdf [accessed Jan. 11, 2012]).

XIV. *The Language Police*

My concern is that Dr. Strauss's rhetoric, though intended as a joke, has actually been used as a serious method of attack by the language police. It is wise to consider this serious attack, lest we be tempted merely to give way to the language police and thereby damage our translation policy.

So let us return to what I actually said: "But a translator must use his head." When I wrote that sentence, I was very much aware that I was using generic "he." I also thought about the fact that both women and men engage in translation.³⁹ But I judged that it was not relevant to express that fact explicitly. I expected my readers, as readers aware of the normal functions of the English language, to grasp what I was saying. If they happened to notice generic "he," it would serve as one illustration of my point about its usability. If they did not notice it, it did not matter, because they would still have grasped my point, namely to draw attention to the principle that translators should weigh translation possibilities in each verse rather than merely going by statistical averages.

Let me be painfully explicit about my key sentence. The expression "a translator" is a generic expression. It encompasses within the scope of its possible referents any translator, man or woman, young or old, professional or unprofessional, rich or poor. When my readers come to the expression "his head," I expect them, using their knowledge of English, to look for an antecedent for "his." They find "a translator." Because the expression "a translator" is already generic, "his" with generic antecedent must be generic, and therefore does not restrict the referential scope of the phrase "a translator." I respect my readers, and expect that they understand the sentence. But my sentence irritates the language police, the appointed guardians of politically correct speech, because it uses generic "he." In 2000 and 2004 I discussed this issue of irritation, along with the alleged insensitivity to women, bad connotations, and so forth.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, some (not all) of the language police have used unethical tactics. They endeavor to suppress generic "he" by making it difficult for anyone to use it. They interrupt the flow of discourse by jumping on cases that violate their restrictions. They also draw unwarranted inferences. They infer, for example, from a sentence like mine that the author may harbor particular views on women. It may be alleged that an author wrote the key sentence "perhaps because he considers Bible translation to be the domain of men." The tactic is this: when the language police detect generic "he," they target the speaker by suggesting, or even directly asserting, that the person in question may be a male chauvinist. This person's views about women are suspect.

Over the decades, this kind of propaganda has had considerable influence, especially among educated people. Many people who would like to live in peace

³⁹ I received my own training in translation theory from Wycliffe Bible Translators at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, partly from women teachers; and I dedicated one of my books to "my friends in Wycliffe Bible Translators," an organization that I think has more women translators than men.

⁴⁰ *GNBC*, 135-87; *TNIV-GNBC*, 247-99.

have repeatedly heard the propaganda of the language police. They have heard virtually no opposition, no debate, because opposition is suppressed by the dominance of political correctness in positions of power. They too have begun partly to believe the propaganda and to feel that women are being excluded, pushed back, or somehow mistreated. They feel the pressures and begin to wonder about occurrences of generic "he."

May I point out the obvious, namely that one cannot infer a person's views on women from a generic statement? Or do we have to reduce to absurdity this kind of tactic by showing where it will lead? For example, if someone writes, "A translator must use her head," should an analyst suggest ominously that it may be because the author thinks that translation is the domain of women? Or, even more absurdly, if someone chooses to use plural expressions, "Translators must use their heads." should a hearer observe that this latter rendering has avoided saying anything specifically about women? Should the hearer then suspect, from the author's silence on the subject, that the author secretly harbors chauvinist views about women translators? In ordinary circumstances, people know better.

In fact, the Christian faith enjoins us to love even our enemies, and not to slander by subtly or overtly raising suspicions that are not warranted by a person's words. We are supposed to read a person's speech with charity, inferring the best sense. We must address the language police themselves by the principles of love. I would humbly suggest to them that, as people made in the image of God, they disgrace themselves and the high moral purpose that they see in their cause if they use unethical tactics by twisting people's words and spewing out slanderous suspicions in order to get their way. These tactics are oppressive, not freedom-loving.

Similar principles apply to labels like "imprecise" and "inaccurate." Any piece of discourse could always be supplemented by more information, and its meanings could be further specified by more elaborate expressions that attempt to head off outlandish ways of twisting its meanings. But when language police attack generic "he" by means of these labels, the labels get used pejoratively.⁴¹ They promote exclusion. They exclude and demean the utterances of anyone who presumes to violate the taboo of political correctness. This tactic of exclusion is hypocritical, since the language police claim to care about inclusion and to condemn exclusion.

I see a moral lesson here. The language police, and also those like myself who want to see generic "he" retained in Bible translation, should guard our tongues

⁴¹ May I be permitted to point out that an analogous pattern of reasoning could be used by language police when they inspect the original Greek and Hebrew of the Bible? Since the Bible in the original languages characteristically uses masculine nouns and pronouns in generic statements, the language police could cast aspersions on the Bible by saying that in these cases the Bible is "imprecise" and "inaccurate" because it does not make explicit the implied inclusion of females. Exod 20:17 says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife," and so will be labeled "imprecise" and "inaccurate" for not making it explicit that wives are forbidden from coveting their neighbors' husbands. It will be said that it sounds "exclusive."

and speak with love, respect, and kindness, even when we face disputes. At the same time, Christian love should encourage us to rebuke language police when they use unethical tactics, rather than passively accept such tactics. In contrast to these tactics, I think that Dr. Strauss has taken the high road by his courtesy. I appreciate his joke.

XV. Conclusion

Though Dr. Strauss has been courteous and humorous, I still do not think he has been convincing. When Dr. Strauss's arguments are carefully analyzed, they involve confusions or vague formulations at crucial points; they skirt over some of the issues; and they do not address opposing argumentation that already anticipates their claims.