

GENDER-NEUTRAL BIBLE TRANSLATIONS, SOME TWENTY YEARS LATER

VERN S. POYTHRESS

Twenty some years after the gender-neutral Bible controversy, the principal issues about gender-neutral Bible translation remain the same. In translating the Bible, do we put in place a policy of employing gender-neutral language? More specifically, when we are translating statements that express general truths, applicable to both sexes, should we suppress male meaning nuances in the original languages when we render the meaning in a modern language? The answer is no. Rather, we should try to capture as much meaning from the original as we can, within the constraints of the target language.

The issues were first debated with respect to translations into English. But, with appropriate adjustments taking into account the variations in gender systems in various modern languages, the principles are permanently relevant.

We briefly review the earlier debate. Then we reaffirm that changes in languages and cultures should certainly be inspected, but that the principles remain the same. It is appropriate to say so, because pressures to avoid “politically incorrect” expressions remain in place in modern cultures.

It is now twenty-five years since the gender-neutral Bible controversy exploded onto the scene. It was sparked by *World* magazine’s article “The Stealth Bible,” March 29, 1997.¹ It is twenty years since the book by Wayne Grudem and me appeared (2000), objecting to the losses in meaning that gender-neutral policy entailed. It is over thirty years since the NRSV appeared

Vern Poythress is Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Biblical Interpretation, and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.

¹ Susan Olasky, “THE STEALTH BIBLE: The Popular *New International Version* is Quietly Going ‘Gender-Neutral,’” *World*, March 29, 1997, 12–15. For a timeline of the events, see Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 15–28. A second edition of this work appeared in 2004, entitled *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, which included additional chapters (1–6) devoted to the TNIV New Testament of 2002.

(1990), perhaps the first major English Bible translation that tried to carry out a gender-neutral policy.²

The controversy of 1997 has died down. Time has passed. It is a good time to assess what permanent lessons can be learned from the controversy.

We do not intend in this article to revisit in detail all the arguments, pro and con, that arose in the decade 1996 to 2005. Books published in 1998, 2000, and 2004 set forth nearly every angle, and we refer readers to them for the details.³ Here, we content ourselves with a brief review of only a few of the issues, with a view to a long-term assessment.

I. *The Principial Issues Remain the Same*

The first and most important point to observe is that the central principial issue remains the same. The issue is whether the adoption of an overall *policy* of gender-neutral translation results in unnecessary losses in meaning—in particular losses of male-oriented meanings in a considerable number of Bible verses. The book by Grudem and me (2000) claims that there are such losses. And they could have been avoided by alternative choices in wording, choices closer to the typical choices made in English translations before 1985.⁴

The advocates of the newer translation policy sometimes call it “inclusive-language” translation or “gender-accurate” translation.⁵ But these two labels are not the most helpful in indicating what the dispute is about.⁶ Wayne Grudem and I have always said that there is nothing the matter with “inclusive language” in English, whenever it accurately represents the meaning in the original language:

Of course I agree with removing male-oriented words when there is no male-oriented meaning in the original Greek or Hebrew text. But when there is a male meaning,

² The *International Children's Bible* (ICB 1986) and the *New Century Version* (NCV 1987) appeared earlier, but did not draw attention; see Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 9–10; on the NRSV, see pp. 10–12.

³ In 1998 two books appeared defending gender-neutral policy (“inclusive language”), with some qualifications: D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998); and Mark Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). See also Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (2000); and its sequel, Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV* (2004).

⁴ It should be noted that special challenges arise in producing written and oral materials for people with mental handicaps, or handicaps in processing language, or poor knowledge of English. In such cases, the materials that are produced may include only a small vocabulary and simple sentence structure. In such circumstances, nuances of meaning are inevitably lost that would not be lost if we were to allow ourselves the normal resources of English. Such specialized products are nevertheless acceptable because of their tightly circumscribed purpose.

⁵ The NIV, published in Great Britain in 1995 and 1996, was officially titled the *New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition*.

⁶ Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 5–6.

we dare not under-translate and conceal that meaning just because that emphasis is unpopular today.⁷

The upshot is that the various instances of “inclusive language” that occur in translating verses in the Bible do not all have the same status.⁸ They do not all generate objections. Language that faithfully represents the details in meaning in the original is unobjectionable. Language that *suppresses* male-oriented meanings in the original is not acceptable.

II. *The Principial Issue Is Relevant to Bible Translation into Any Language*

What about languages other than English? In our book, Wayne Grudem and I conducted the discussion with examples from *English* Bible translations, rather than any other language. We did so because we were writing in English, because we had to use *some* language for illustration, and because the controversy at the time focused on English. But the principles are relevant to any language in the world.

The *application* of the principles is naturally different, because different languages have different vocabulary and different grammars. Some languages have gender systems that extend through larger portions of the vocabulary (Spanish, French, German, and Italian). Others do not (English and Chinese). But the principles come to bear whenever the original language texts of the Bible show a male-oriented meaning. Wherever that occurs, there arises the question of whether that element of male-oriented meaning can be smoothly conveyed in the target language. Often it can. For example, many languages have in their vocabulary distinct terms for “father” and “mother,” and perhaps a third term like “parent” that includes both father and mother. Languages may have distinct terms for “son,” “daughter,” and “child.” In general statements, such as we find in the book of Proverbs, the target language may allow a choice between a male-oriented term like “son,” a female-oriented term like “daughter,” or a sex-neutral term like “child.” The issue is then whether we allow a general gender-neutral policy to erase a male-oriented meaning in the original text, by using a sex-neutral term like “child” in the translation.

III. *What New Arguments Have Arisen?*

Since the year 2000, have new arguments thrown more light on the controversy? My assessment is that there have been no new arguments regarding the *principles*. The period 1997–2000 saw the production of three substantial

⁷ Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV*, 1; also see Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, ch. 5.

⁸ Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 94.

books on the gender-neutral controversy.⁹ The publication of the TNIV New Testament in 2002 was followed by a flurry of discussion, pro and con. The translation itself was new, and therefore a large number of verses were reinspected. But the shape of the arguments was not new. At the level of principle, scholars on both sides repeated the arguments already made at greater length in the three major books.

The subsequent years have seen the volume of publications on gender-neutral policy die down.

The next milestone was the publication of the new 2011 edition of the NIV. When it appeared, the publishers phased out the publication of the TNIV and the NIV 1984 edition. The TNIV represented gender-neutral policy, while the NIV 1984 was not gender-neutral. According to the publishers' plan, both were supposed to be superseded by the single new NIV 2011 edition.

Inspection of the NIV 2011 in a large number of verses confirmed that it had corrected some of the problematic gender-neutral renderings in the TNIV, but other problematic renderings remained, a comparatively large number.¹⁰ There was an exchange concerning the NIV 2011 in the pages of the *Westminster Theological Journal*.¹¹ But this exchange did not introduce fundamentally new arguments.¹² There were also a few other short pieces, pro and con.¹³

Since 2012, I have not seen much scholarly debate over the issue. Why not? I can only speculate. The NIV 2011 did not generate the volume or intensity of controversy that arose in 1997 during the initial phase of the gender-neutral Bible controversy. It seems to me that the decrease was partly due to exhaustion. The issues had already been debated earlier, and there was not much to add. The critics simply observed that the NIV 2011 continued at many points the earlier directions taken by the NIV and the TNIV (but with some notable improvements).

The lower intensity of conflict may also be partly due to a change in the larger spectrum of English Bible translations. In 1997 the NIV occupied a central position among Bible translations used by evangelicals in America. Any proposed changes in the NIV would affect a large number of people, all those who used the NIV as their main translation. By 2011, the NIV was competing with the *English Standard Version* and the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (now the *Christian Standard Bible*).¹⁴ Both the ESV and the CSB have *not* adopted a

⁹ Carson, *Inclusive-Language Debate* (1998); Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (1998); Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (2000).

¹⁰ Vern S. Poythress, "Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011," *WTJ* 73 (2011): 79–96, <https://frame-poythress.org/gender-neutral-issues-in-the-new-international-version-of-2011/>.

¹¹ Mark Strauss responded to my article in "Gender-Language Issues in the NIV 2011: A Response to Vern Poythress," *WTJ* 74 (2012): 119–32; I wrote a rejoinder, "Comments on Mark Strauss's Response," *WTJ* 74 (2012): 133–48.

¹² Poythress, "Comments on Mark Strauss's Response," 134.

¹³ Poythress, "Comments on Mark Strauss's Response," 134n8.

¹⁴ The KJV, NKJV, and NASB also offered alternatives. But for various reasons they were not as attractive to people who had previously been using the NIV 1984.

gender-neutral policy. Evangelicals who did not like the gender-neutral policy of the NIV 2011 knew that they could go elsewhere.

Whatever might be the detailed reasons, as of 2022 the controversy has died down. In the debate on principles, we have not moved beyond the positions staked out by the three major books published in 1998 and 2000. As far as I know, there are no new arguments. Naturally, as one of the co-authors of the 2000 book, I maintain that it has the superior position. It has answered the counterarguments offered in 1998. Its own arguments have not been adequately answered in the twenty succeeding years, though they have been misrepresented.¹⁵

IV. *How Has English Changed over the Last Twenty Years?*

What about language change? Natural languages all over the world undergo gradual changes over time. The romance languages of Europe originated by gradual differentiation away from Latin. Modern English differs from Shakespearean English, which in turn differs from Chaucer's English. But the changes are typically slow and gradual, over a period of generations. They are almost imperceptible to the average native speaker.

So how have changes in English over the last twenty or thirty years altered the landscape? Twenty years is far too short a time for seeing major organic changes. But changes in gendered language constitute an exception. The reason is obvious: there is social pressure. This includes stylistic guidelines put out by publishers and stylebooks.

In 2000, when Wayne Grudem and I wrote our book, we already knew what the social pressure was and what the trend was.¹⁶ Especially in formal writing and in academic discourse, distinctly masculine terms were in decline when writers and speakers gave expression to general truths. Generic "he" was being used less frequently, in comparison with substitutes like generic "she," "he or she," pluralization ("they"), and other work-arounds. "Man" without the article, as a designation for the human race, was in decline ("Neanderthal man," "man-eating tiger," "man-made artifact"). "Police officer" gained in relation to "policeman." And so on.

We have additional data provided in 2010 by a report that the NIV translation committee solicited from an independent organization, "Collins Dictionaries." The report was based on computer-aided research using the "Collins Bank of English," "a database of more than 4.4 billion words drawn from text publications and spoken word recordings from all over the world."¹⁷ Not surprisingly,

¹⁵ Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV*, ch. 2.

¹⁶ Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV*, 213–21, 362–64.

¹⁷ "Updating the New International Version of the Bible: Notes from the Committee on Bible Translation," <https://www.biblegateway.com/niv/translators-notes/> and <https://www.biblegateway.com/niv/Translators-Notes.pdf>. The full report from Collins Dictionaries can be found at <https://>

the report shows a continued decline of the use of generic “he” over time:

As of 2009, generic “he” occurs 8 percent of the time in general written English. Plurals (“they,” “them”) occur 84 percent of the time.¹⁸

The same trend holds for generic “man.”

When I read the report, I was not surprised to see the decline. What surprised me was that the decline was not steeper. It seemed remarkable to me that, after more than twenty years of constant social pressure, the use of generic “he” remained at 8 percent. What? Why not lower? Why not 1 percent? Why not 0.01 percent (1 in 10,000)? I reacted to the report in the opposite way to how some people would react. To me, the remaining 8 percent suggested not only that generic “he” remained in use, but that there was some counteracting pressure as to why it remained in use. The most obvious pressure is convenience. People continue to find that on some occasions there is no good substitute.¹⁹ So some people—of course it depends on the person and on the context of use—override the social pressure and still use it.

As far as I know, there is no comparably massive study of generic “he” for 2020 and beyond. If such a study were done, what would we find? Is its use now down to 1 percent?

There is still another factor to consider, namely, that every natural language operates using analogies.²⁰ We may begin with an illustration. Suppose that a young child has heard the word “road” a number of times, but has never heard the plural of “road.” He nevertheless recognizes the plural “roads” the very first time he hears it, because he has already heard a large number of plurals and recognizes a general pattern. Of course, sometimes the pattern gets broken, with irregular plurals like “feet” as the plural of “foot.” But the pattern is there. Similarly, there is a general pattern for the use of personal pronouns. Generally speaking—there are exceptions—singular personal pronouns refer to single individuals and have singular antecedents. That is why some people have noted that they knew the meaning of generic “she” the very first time they saw it in print.²¹ They recognized the analogy with generic “he.” And of course every new occurrence of generic “she” helps to maintain the systematic analogy, so that, hypothetically, someone who has never heard generic “he” before understands it without hesitation, by analogy with generic “she.”²² The result is that generic “he” would remain understandable even if the percentage of usage were to go down nearly to zero.²³

www.thenivbible.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Collins-Report-Final.pdf (accessed Jan. 31, 2022). See discussion of the Collins report in Poythress, “Gender Neutral Issues,” especially 89–95.

¹⁸ Poythress, “Gender Neutral Issues,” 90.

¹⁹ Poythress, “Gender Neutral Issues,” 91–95; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 214–17.

²⁰ Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, ch. 10, especially 215–21.

²¹ Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 221.

²² Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 214, 221.

²³ For fuller discussion, see Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 215–21.

V. *Manuals of Style*

What has happened with manuals of style over twenty years?²⁴ We need not go into a lot of detail. I would be surprised if manuals of style, over the past two decades, have not shifted to come more into line with the trend against generic “he” and other locutions that are labeled “sexist.” But of course all these manuals are focused on advising writers and editors and publishers, not translators. So we must exercise circumspection in analyzing what they say. Are they merely saying that in some circles generic “he” is not preferred? Or are they saying that it is completely forbidden? And if they say that it is forbidden, is the ban being applied to newly authored material only? And what is the reason for the ban?

For academic writing, the gold standard for style is the *Chicago Manual of Style*. I expected to find that the 2017 edition²⁵ would ban generic “he” and generic “man” completely. To my surprise, I found that it was quite cautious. It seems to recognize that there is an ongoing struggle and debate, and that there is no easy solution. There is no one-size-fits-all formula. The most relevant sections in the *Chicago Manual* are 5.4–48 and 5.251–60. In section 5.251 the *Chicago Manual* introduces its main discussion of “Bias-Free Language” by discussing “credibility”:

Biased language that is not central to the meaning of the work distracts many readers and makes the work less credible to them. Few texts warrant a deliberate display of linguistic biases. Nor is it ideal, however, to call attention to a supposed absence of linguistic biases, since this will also distract readers and weaken credibility.

The tone here is not that of laying down the law, but a tone of friendly advice. It is pragmatic in orientation. If you want credibility, here is what we advise you to do. “Few texts warrant a deliberate display,” it says. But the *Chicago Manual* does not say “no texts.” It gives advice. In effect, it says, “Think about what is your main point, and how best to achieve it.”

The next section, 5.252, specifically addresses “gender bias”:

Consider the issue of gender-neutral language. On the one hand, many reasonable readers find it unacceptable to use the generic masculine pronoun (*he* in reference to no one in particular). On the other hand, it is unacceptable to many readers (often different readers) either to resort to nontraditional gimmicks to avoid the generic masculine (by using *he/she* or *s/he*, for example) or to use *they* as a kind of singular pronoun (but see 5.48). Either approach sacrifices credibility with some readers.

And then comes a further elaboration in section 5.254:

²⁴ Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 211–15, discusses what the situation was in 2000.

²⁵ *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

A careful editor ... ensures that any biased language that is retained is retained by choice. Although some publishers prefer to avoid certain terms or specific usages in all cases, Chicago's editors do not maintain a list of words or usages considered unacceptable. Rather, they adhere to the reasoning presented here and apply it to individual cases. What you should strive for—if you want readers to focus on your ideas and not on the political subtext—is a style that doesn't even hint at the issue. So unless you're involved in a debate about, for example, sexism, you'll probably want a style, on the one hand, that no reasonable person could call sexist and, on the other hand, that never contorts language to be nonsexist.

The *Chicago Manual* then goes on in section 5.255 to suggest specific “techniques for achieving gender neutrality,” involving a number of well-known routes, and it discusses other more specific issues (5.256–60).

The attention given to this topic witnesses to the fact that the editors of the *Chicago Manual* know very well that generic “he” and generic “man” and other politically loaded expressions are still being used here and there. They acknowledge that in some cases these problematic expressions might be “retained by choice” (5.254). They tacitly recognize that some writers *want* to use them or at least tend to use them unconsciously. That is why the *Chicago Manual* offers advice in the form of a whole list of techniques for avoiding generic “he” (5.255). Such advice would be superfluous if no users of English any longer had a live impulse to use generic “he.” They have to be *told* not to do it. And they have to be told how to produce alternatives, because otherwise it would be natural for them to fall into the old habits—the old ways. Sometimes, as we have observed, there is no good substitute for generic “he.”

The *Chicago Manual* even refers explicitly to the existence of generic “he”: “(he in reference to no one in particular)” (5.252). Why refer to a possible usage if it no longer exists, if no one any longer considers it to be a serious possibility? Why bring up the subject if everyone has already smoothly arrived at a resting place in which he no longer has any likelihood of slipping into the problematic usage? All of this material indirectly confirms that many people still know about generic “he.” It is deeply embedded. They have not forgotten about the possibility, even if they are being told not to make use of the possibility. It is being avoided for “credibility,” says the *Chicago Manual*.

As far as I could determine, the *Chicago Manual* has little to say about the generic use of “man.” But it does have one line, in section 5.250, p. 341: “*mankind*. Consider *humankind* instead.” The existence of this line is subtle evidence that some people are still tempted to use *mankind*. They have to be *told* to “consider *humankind* instead.” Note also that the tone is one of friendly advice rather than a strict prescription with no exceptions. “*Consider*.” In other words, think about it. But after you have thought about it, you have the freedom to do what seems to you best in your situation. More precisely, you have freedom unless someone in your circle forcibly deprives you, and tells you that you are not going to be allowed to speak or write that way.

VI. *Implications for Bible Translation*

This kind of reasoning gives a partial explanation for gender-neutral Bible translation. The goal for style, says the *Chicago Manual*, is “a style that doesn’t even hint at the issue” (5.254). Some gender-neutral Bible translations have heavily used *they* with an antecedent singular. The *Chicago Manual*, though not absolutely forbidding this use of *they*, issues cautions (5.252), because such a use of *they* can be conspicuous and can “hint at the issue.” By and large, gender-neutral translations try not to hint.

But there is a special difficulty with the Bible, because multiple translations exist, and people with the right tools can consult the original languages. The gender-neutral translation may not *want* to hint at the issue. But any rendering whatsoever can be compared with the original as well as with other translations. So a *Bible translation* cannot actually achieve the goal that the *Chicago Manual* sets out, a goal that might be realistic when an author creates a new work. The fact that the translators are translators rather than original writers means that they cannot achieve genuinely “neutral” style. They cannot escape doing things that someone or other will find offensive or will make the translators less credible.²⁶ And, needless to say, credibility has a high premium when it comes to Bible translation.

The translator who uses generic “he” and “son” and other male-oriented words when he needs to can still preserve his credibility *as a translator*. He can explain that he is just trying to be faithful to the original text. What happens with such a translation is that the Bible itself does not preserve its credibility with some portions of its readership. But that is inevitable, because the Bible does not match the predilections of many modern readers. It is not the responsibility of the translator to make it match.²⁷

VII. *Shifts in Cultural Hot-Points*

We may also ask whether changes in the culture in the last twenty years have altered the perceptions concerning gender-neutral Bible translation. That is hard to say. One could wish that someone would do an extended sociological analysis, which might examine a good many distinct subcultures and search for trends. One could envision a study that would examine many cultures of the world. I have not done such an analysis. So all I can offer are some personal perceptions of American culture, which may differ from other people’s perceptions.

My perception is that the issue of sexism is still a cultural issue of concern, especially among the leading lights of American culture. The magnitude of

²⁶ Poythress, “Comments on Mark Strauss’s Response,” 142; Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Translation*, 165.

²⁷ Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Translation*, 175: “translators must avoid prematurely deciding the issue.”

concern differs from person to person. And it differs partly along lines of education (postgraduate, college, high school, or less), lines of work (professional, business executive, white collar, blue collar, welfare, stay-at-home moms, temporarily unemployed, retired), sex, and ethnicity. It is strongest in the upper layers of social strata. It is strong in what has been called “the knowledge industry,” or “the chattering classes,” those who spend a lot of their energy in using words. Education and media are part of the knowledge industry.

The leading lights in education and media do care about sexism. But they care about a lot of other things as well. And in a time when more than 50 percent of college graduates are women,²⁸ they may feel that other concerns deserve particular attention: prejudices with respect to race, ethnicity, “sexual minorities” (LGBTQ+), and minority religions. In the face of these developments, old-fashioned sexism gets less attention and less energy. Moreover, given the continued recurrence of genuine and obvious cases of rape, sexual assault, and sexual predation, people may begin to feel that taboos against generic “he” and generic “man,” taboos in force for decades, are not the main key to eliminating the problem.

Once the social pressure goes mainly in other directions, people may revert to older locutions. I noticed that no less than three recently published books bear the title, *What Is Man?*²⁹

So one may raise the question of whether the alleged need for gender-neutral translation is gradually decreasing. Perhaps it no longer matters to the degree that it once seemed to matter.

VIII. *Social Stratification*

The stratification of the United States into subcultures raises a delicate issue. It is easier for those with more education and with great verbal facility to adapt quickly to new, artificial rules for the use of language. The new requirements tend to exclude the uneducated and those with less verbal facility. For example, consider a person who has lesser education, and who in addition has not held a steady job and is recovering from alcoholism. He is likely to say, “I don’t have time for fancy language. I want to have some basic skills and someone who will hire me, even to do manual work.” Special requirements that ban certain kinds of expression can unwittingly function as social barriers. Negative reactions to gender-neutral policy have sometimes arisen among people who have never

²⁸ Erudera College News, on Sept. 10, 2021, puts the percentage of female college students at 59.5 percent (“Women Outnumber Men In US Colleges—Nearly 60% Of Students In 2020/21 Were Women,” <https://collegenews.org/women-outnumber-men-in-us-colleges-nearly-60-of-students-in-2020-21-were-women/>).

²⁹ Theodore Austin-Sparks, *What Is Man?* (n.p.: Austin-Sparks.net, 2012); Edgar Andrews, *What Is Man? Adam, Alien, or Ape* (n.p.: Elm Hill, HarperCollins, 2018); The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man? A Journey through Biblical Anthropology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2021).

accepted the special rules about gender-neutral language. They may feel that these rules were being forced on them by people with superior positions of cultural power. Kristen West McGuire comments:

Inclusive language runs the risk of imposing a particular ideology on the listener. When working in a small blue-collar Protestant church, I found many parishioners very hostile to inclusive language. They saw it as elitist—a statement of my educational “superiority.” There was a certain truth in their appraisal. Clearly, inclusive language doesn’t necessarily communicate the gospel effectively.³⁰

The imposition of the rules becomes all the more painful if people think that the integrity of the word of God is at stake.

It is not so easy for the people who are scholars, who have the responsibility for Bible translation, to be in sympathetic communion with people who occupy lower strata in work and education. The scholars talk to themselves. If they are attentive, they do hear objections from people with less education and with no knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. They can understand that some of these people fear that gender-neutral policy leads to changes in meaning. But a good many scholars may assure them that it does not—when properly implemented. The scholars see the fears as understandable, but without informed reasons behind them. Their natural response is to say that people need to trust the judgment of the scholars.

It is therefore important that we weigh the arguments and principles in a fully informed way, with attention to the original languages. That is what the 2000 book by Wayne Grudem and me intended to do. But it also needs to be seen that the very principle of conforming to gender-neutral language is not accepted equally by everyone in our society. It seems like an inevitability to scholars, because the academic community and the publishers have already moved that way. To fight it is like fighting the incoming tide. But, as Kristen West McGuire indicates, other people are not swimming in the tide. They resist being forced into water into which they do not choose to go. They resist all the more when the scholars carry the Bible itself into the same tide.

IX. Have the New Rules for Achieving Gender-Neutral Language Helped Women?

What has been achieved through the new rules for avoiding male-oriented meanings? In situations of conflict, sinful people have always been able to find ways of using their words to insult each other, slander each other, mistreat each other, and show cruelty to each another. And such has been true in the relations between men and women, from time immemorial. But in the last forty years, the new language rules, the rules against generic “he” and generic “man” (for

³⁰ Kristen West McGuire, “A Case Against ‘Inclusive Language,’” *New Oxford Review* (January–February, 1997): 15–16; quoted in Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 165.

the human race) and other male-oriented meanings, go further. They ask us to avoid kinds of expression that were earlier considered to be innocent. Has it done us any good as a society to try to revise our language in this way?

The revisions have gone furthest in some subcultures, among which is the subculture of secular higher education, the secular colleges and universities. Here we often find speech codes. What have these speech codes actually achieved, in bringing respect for women? It might be argued that they have achieved something, by being symbolic reminders about the importance of women. But these same centers of education are full of sexual immorality. They support a culture of sexual promiscuity and casual sex that does immeasurable damage to women. So there is a tension between what the codes intend and what the culture actually practices.

In this respect, it appears to me that the predominant culture of secular higher education is a culture analogous to the culture of the Pharisees:

But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. (Luke 11:42–43)

The modern university professors and their students do not tithe. But they pay attention to mint—or rather a modern analog to mint. The modern analog, I suggest, is the avoidance of male-oriented meanings in general statements. The avoidance by university members is their “tithe.” It is a moral scruple, because, they say, to do otherwise would be “sexist.” Moreover, some of them are ready to search out and rebuke violations of these standards. They insist that others practice the same “tithe.”

So the modern practice is analogous to the ancient tithe. The difference is that God did actually institute a tithe of the crops, as one aspect of the Mosaic law. By contrast, the modern tithe is of merely human origin. And for doing these things, the practitioners get honor—not “the best seat in the synagogues,” but the approval of their peers. What do they neglect? The love of God, among other things. Chastity, sexual purity. Genuine kindness and thoughtfulness toward individual women, each in her uniqueness.

There is thus a discrepancy between two poles: on the one hand the scrupulous keeping of special, humanly prescribed language rules because of their symbolic value, and on the other hand the day-to-day treatment of one another. The modern campaign to help women through changing language is a failure. And the longer it goes on, the more manifest a failure it becomes.

Some people are beginning to realize it. They are ready to ignore the special, fussy rules, when they can, because they see that those rules are pharisaical. The rules are easy to keep, in comparison with the genuine, hard practice of sexual purity. The rules are an outward display. They allow people to feel virtuous while being “like unmarked graves” (Luke 11:44). The display of virtue

in rule-keeping conceals the real problem rather than exposing it. The deepest problem is in the human heart: sin.

X. *New Rules for Dealing with the Feelings of Special Minorities*

We may also observe that elite culture has expanded its attention beyond its earlier concern to show respect for women. It now includes attention to people who claim to be transgender or to be furry or to have other conceptions of themselves. Earlier concerns about the inclusion or marginalization of women now expand to address the inclusion or marginalization of transgender individuals. Of course, this concern builds on the Christian, biblical principle of loving your neighbor, a principle that includes especially neighbors who may be more vulnerable. But the principle becomes distorted and detached from the realities that the Bible teaches. In the process, there is intensification of the requirement that people in a special class not only be “included” in various ways, but that they *feel* included. They must be treated in harmony with their feelings rather than in harmony with the truth. Paradoxically, this has now led in some cases to opening women’s rest rooms, women’s prisons, and women’s sports to biological males. Women’s feelings—and in some cases, even women’s physical safety—seem no longer to matter, because of the heightened demand for honoring a new category of people.

We also see an effect on language. The words “woman” and “mother” may be avoided, lest they exclude someone. New rules ask us to use another person’s “preferred pronoun,” even if that does not match the person’s biological sex.³¹ The intention, as usual, is supposed to be to show respect and not to exclude a person with a particular sexual self-understanding. But what about those who do not agree? The rules are oppressive and promote exclusion of those who will not submit to them. And they lead to forbidding Christians from teaching what the Bible says on such matters, because such teaching is itself culturally unacceptable. It is labeled as exclusionary and hateful. The new rules do not help us to honor the truth.

The whole cultural movement to impose changes in language has achieved little and forfeited much. This failure suggests that the formulation of a special set of rules, imposed by the elite, has little positive value, though it is intended to *symbolize* a positive value. It is time to recognize the hypocrisy and to move beyond it. And so it is also appropriate to raise a key question: is it also time to move beyond having a special set of rules for handling male-oriented

³¹ Springfield College advises, “Do say ‘the pronouns someone uses’ or ‘their personal pronouns,’ rather than ‘their preferred pronouns,’ because the pronouns someone uses are not a preference.” And it wants us to avoid “gender-neutral” too: “Don’t refer to pronouns such as ‘they/them/their’ or ‘ze/hir/hir’ as ‘gender-neutral pronouns.’ While some people identify as gender-neutral, others see themselves as gendered in a nonbinary way. Better language is ‘non-binary pronouns’” (Springfield College, “Gender Pronouns,” accessed March 25, 2022, <https://springfield.edu/gender-pronouns>).

meanings in the Bible, rules that allow for the unneeded suppression of male-oriented meanings?

XI. *Overall Assessment*

In sum, gender-neutral Bible translations are unacceptable. They are unacceptable because they unacceptably drop male-oriented meanings from the original. This practice is unacceptable in all languages, not only in English, though the details of translation must take into account the details of resources available in each target language. The practice will always remain unacceptable, because its failure is principal.

Moreover, gender-neutral translation is part of a larger cultural failure in the West. The cultural failure needs to be frankly recognized, rather than ignored. As a culture, we need to repent, to seek God, to trust in Christ for salvation, and to pray for a continuing work of his Spirit in transforming us. Men need to love women with Christian love. We need also to love those who are confused about the meaning of their own identity, either sexual or racial or otherwise. Special language rules are not helping us achieve this goal.