

CTCR Staff Opinion on Inclusive Language in the New International Version (2011)¹

In 1998 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod published a report entitled *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*.² The report notes changes in the English language regarding terms that were once considered to apply equally to men or women (e.g., *man*, *mankind*, *chairman*, and so forth), but have come to be associated only with males. “In much common parlance, therefore, language which is regarded as neutral and inclusive has been substituted.”³ The report recognizes that “language evolves” and so takes no position with regard to the propriety of inclusive language in everyday life.

The concern that led to the report had to do with the removal of gender specific language from translations of the Holy Scriptures (for example, the *New Revised Standard Version*) and the substitution of gender inclusive language that is not present in the original languages and texts of Scripture. In this regard the report takes a clear position grounded in the understanding of revelation itself that is held by us as Lutheran Christians:

This raises a different set of difficulties, for the Scriptures are not merely the rendering of a culturally based understanding of God. They are to be regarded as revelation whose author is finally God himself. Moreover, not only the concepts of Scripture but the very words of Scripture have been given to the biblical authors to write (1 Cor. 2:9–13; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; Jer. 30:2). While the church will certainly wish to accommodate modern sensibilities and translate anew where the language of the Scriptures allows, the church is not free to alter the language of revelation.⁴

It is in the Word made flesh (John 1:14) that God has fulfilled “his purpose for humankind’s eternal destiny.”⁵ This purpose, in one particular Person born of Mary at a particular time and place, is revealed in the particularity of Holy Scripture and most specifically “in the written testimony of the evangelical and apostolic writings of the New Testament.”⁶ The specificity and particularity of the Word made flesh and the sacred Scriptures compel the church to “resist demands to change the words of Scripture or to replace them with words derived from common human experience, cultural predilections, or the ideas of philosophers and lawgivers.”⁷

Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language considers two aspects of the debate about masculine language in the Scriptures: the language that is used to refer to God and the language that is used

¹ This document is in response to a request from the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), who asked for an opinion on the appropriateness for use in the LCMS of the 2011 edition of the *New International Version*. The *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011) is referred to herein as NIV 2011.

² *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language* (abbreviated as *BRIL*) is available online at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=314>.

³ *BRIL*, 5.

⁴ *BRIL*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

to refer to humanity (both Christians and humanity in general). With regard to biblical language about God, the CTCR concludes: “If one wishes to *translate* accurately the words of the Scriptures, the language of both the Old Testament and the New Testament is clear enough concerning the terminology about God. God and his Spirit are consistently referred to in masculine terminology.”⁸ With regard to language about people, *BRIL* asserts that whenever the Scriptures speak about people, the texts should be translated in a way that is consistent with “the language which the biblical authors in fact use.”⁹

These conclusions are significant with regard to certain decisions of the translations committee for NIV 2011. The Committee on Bible Translation which is responsible for ongoing revision of the NIV states in the Preface to NIV 2011:

One of the main reasons the task of Bible translation is never finished is the change in our own language, English. Although a basic core of the language remains relatively stable, many diverse and complex linguistic factors continue to bring about subtle shifts in the meanings and/or connotations of even old, well-established words and phrases. One of the shifts that creates particular challenges to writers and translators alike is the manner in which gender is presented. The original NIV (1978) was published in a time when “a man” would naturally be understood, in many contexts, to be referring to a person, whether male or female. But most English speakers today tend to hear a distinctly male connotation in this word. In recognition of this change in English, this edition of the NIV, along with almost all other recent English translations, substitutes other expressions when the original text intends to refer generically to men and women equally. Thus, for instance, the NIV (1984) rendering of 1 Corinthians 8:3, “But the man who loves God is known by God” becomes in this edition “But whoever loves God is known by God.” On the other hand, “man” and “mankind,” as ways of denoting the human race, are still widely used. This edition of the NIV therefore continues to use these words, along with other expressions, in this way.

A related shift in English creates a greater challenge for modern translations: the move away from using the third-person masculine singular pronouns—“he/him/his”—to refer to men and women equally. This usage does persist at a low level in some forms of English, and this revision therefore occasionally uses these pronouns in a generic sense. But the tendency, recognized in day-to-day usage and confirmed by extensive research, is away from the generic use of “he,” “him,” and “his.” In recognition of this shift in language and in an effort to translate into the “common” English that people are actually using, this revision of the NIV generally uses other constructions when the biblical text is plainly addressed to men and women equally. *The reader will frequently encounter a “they,” “their,” or “them” to express a generic singular idea. Thus, for instance, Mark 8:36 reads: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” This generic use of the “indefinite” or “singular” “they/them/their” has a venerable place in English idiom and has quickly*

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Ibid., 31. As an example of improper translation approaches, *BRIL* cites the substitution of a plural pronoun for a singular pronoun in the text (changing “he” to “they”). However, *BRIL* states that not all changes to more neutral language are improper, for example, translations of the Greek word *anthropos* as “person” or “someone” rather than “man” (cf. 32-33). Yet, regarding the same term, *BRIL* notes that one ought not translate *anthropos* generically if it refers to a specific man (e.g., *di’ henos anthropou* in Rom 5:12 refers to one *man*, Adam; cf. 34).

*become established as standard English, spoken and written, all over the world. Where an individual emphasis is deemed to be present, “anyone” or “everyone” or some other equivalent is generally used as the antecedent of such pronouns.*¹⁰

The Committee on Bible Translations makes important, legitimate points as it explains its desire to communicate the meaning of the Bible’s texts in English as it is used today. Nevertheless, the particular decisions to substitute a “generic” “they/them/their” for masculine singular pronouns in the texts of Scripture is contrary to the perspective in *BRIL* as noted above (cf. footnote 9). Also contrary to *BRIL*’s perspective is the similar decision to substitute a collective noun for a masculine singular noun. While there may be many examples in which such substitution does not change the sense or inherent intent of the passage, *BRIL*’s judgment that this approach not be followed is in order because of its *potential* to alter significantly the meaning of passages. We cite only two—but two very significant— examples of how this decision affects meaning adversely:

1. Genesis 1:26-27 in NIV 2011 reads: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind [collective noun substitution for “man”] in our image, in our likeness, so that they [the plural pronoun is in the original] may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind [collective noun substitution for “man”] in his own image, in the image of God he created them [plural pronoun substitution for “him”]; male and female he created them.”

In the first substitution of “mankind” for “man,” the particularity of the first man is made unclear. The rationale for this would seem to be the desire to emphasize that all humanity is created in God’s image, but the original text itself had made that abundantly clear already by paralleling “man” in the first clause of verse 26 with “they” in the following clause. In verse 27, the second substitution of “mankind” for “man” again undermines the particularity of Adam’s creation. Moreover, when coupled with the substitution of “them” for “him” as the verse continues, the progression of the verse is obfuscated. The original verse itself progresses from the particular creation of Adam—the one man who is father of all creation, created in God’s image, and in whom all will die through his sin (Rom 5:12)—to the male and female, which is paralleled to him. The original text then preserves *both* the particularity and universality which NIV 2011 undermines.

2. Psalm 8:4-5 in NIV 2011 reads: “What is mankind [collective noun substitution for “man”] that you are mindful of them [plural substitution for “him”], Human beings [plural noun substitution for “son of man”] that you care for them [plural substitution for

¹⁰ Emphasis added. We should note that the Preface seems to indicate a subtle assumption which Lutherans do not share, namely, the common Evangelical view that the primary purpose of the Bible is for individual reading. Lutherans, while certainly encouraging individuals to read the Bible, have a more ecclesial understanding of the role of Scripture, something consistent with the Bible itself: “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation” (ESV). In the Lutheran understanding of the necessity of the Office of the Ministry there stands a curb against each individual making purely personal and idiosyncratic understandings. The pastor, “apt to teach” in part because of knowledge of the original languages of the Word, is able to illuminate the texts of Scripture in the context of the faithful. He has a sacred and sober responsibility for “properly dividing the Word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15)—both in its particularity and its inclusiveness of all humanity.

“him”]? You have made them [plural substitution for “him”] a little lower than the angels and crowned them [plural substitution for “him”] with glory and honor.”

Once again, the rationale for the translation changes seems to be the desire to emphasize a universal truth about all humanity—that humankind has received glory and honor as the crown of creation. The translation decisions, however, obfuscate other things. First, and most importantly, the decision to use plurals here vitiates the Messianic meaning of this psalm, its particular application to Christ. Hebrews 2:5-9 quotes Ps 8:4-5 and notes that these verses testify to our Lord Jesus. He is the Man to whom the Lord gives all glory and honor; the Son of Man to whom all creation is subject. He is the One who exceeds the angels in glory and honor, even though he was made to be lower than them for our salvation.

Second, we should note that the substitution of a generic term like “human being” or “human beings” for “son of man” (a consistent pattern in NIV 2011), impoverishes the understanding of “Son of Man” as the self-designation our Lord uses throughout the Gospels. Jesus uses a term (a particular idiom, “son of man”) from the Old Testament that indicates full humanity and refers it to himself. This is of great importance, especially when it is seen in the light of Daniel 7:13-14. There that same term, “son of man,” is used in a prophecy of our Savior’s incarnation, where “one like a son of man” is “given dominion and glory and a kingdom” in which all nations are included under a rule that shall never be destroyed.

Given the significance of this issue and these examples, we find the NIV’s Committee on Bible Translation decision to substitute plural nouns and pronouns for masculine singular nouns and pronouns to be a serious theological weakness and a misguided attempt to make the truth of God’s Word more easily understood. The use of inclusive language in NIV 2011 creates the potential for minimizing the particularity of biblical revelation and, more seriously, at times undermines the saving revelation of Christ as the promised Savior of humankind. Pastors and congregations of the LCMS should be aware of this serious weakness. In our judgment this makes it inappropriate for NIV 2011 to be used as a lectionary Bible or as a Bible to be generally recommended to the laity of our church. This is not a judgment on the entirety of NIV 2011 as a translation—a task that would require a much more extensive study of NIV 2011—but an opinion as to a specific editorial decision which has serious theological implications.

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