

## Bible Version Paper for CCHH Elders NM, January 2017

### 1. Context and scope

The withdrawal by the publishers of the 1984 New International Version (NIV84) that we currently use forces us to consider which Bible version we should adopt for public reading and preaching in the future. The alternative versions considered in this paper are the English Standard Version (ESV) and the 2011 New International Version (NIV11). These are the two versions most commonly used amongst conservative evangelical churches in the UK and so I have restricted my evaluation to these two translations. Other versions that might be considered are the New Living Translation (NLT) and the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB). The latter has much to commend it, but is not currently available in a 'British' English version. The American spellings and usage would make it objectionable to many and so I have not given it detailed consideration. The NLT is highly readable and could be valuable for personal reading. However, in pursuing the goal of readability, it probably moves too far from a 'literal' rendering of the original language text for use in preaching.

### 2. Reference Documents

Bock, Darrell L. 2002. *Do Gender-Sensitive Translations distort Scripture? Not necessarily*, published in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 45/4 [pages 651-69]

Chapple, Allan. 2003. *The English Standard Version: A Review Article*, originally published in *The Reformed Theological Review*.

Decker, Rodney J. 2011. *An evaluation of the 2011 Edition of the New International Version*, published in *Themelios* 36.3 [pages 415-56].

DeYoung, Kevin. 2011. *Why our Church switched to the ESV*, published by Crossway [2011]

Grant, Sandy. 2011. *After the NIV, then what?* Published in the Briefing, October 2011.

WELS. 2011. *Supplemental Report of [the Translation Evaluation Committee] for the 2011 WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) Convention*.

### 3. The challenge of Bible translation

In fairly evaluating translations, it is essential to have some awareness of and keep in mind the challenges that face the translators. These challenges arise from the nature of language, the differences between languages, not only in vocabulary but structure and idiom, the nature of Biblical revelation and the fact that living languages undergo constant change over time.

Even within a language the meaning of words is a complex matter. *Words are generally spoken or written in combination in order to convey meaning—and the meaning resides in the particular combination of words rather than in the words themselves.*<sup>1</sup> We then add to this the differences between languages.

*Languages differ so much in vocabulary, word-formation, word order, verb systems, methods of declension and conjugation, prepositional systems, and idioms in an almost endless profusion that a simple word-for-word reproduction as the standard for translation is totally unrealistic and impossible.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chapple, p.8

<sup>2</sup> Chapple, p.16, quoting B Ramm.

For the Bible translator, the most profound challenge is created by the fact that God's revelation in scripture is both verbal and propositional. The very words and sentences of the scriptures (as originally written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) were so breathed-out by God so exactly that these very words and sentences constitute his word. Yet the revelation of God is not confined to the outward form of the words (the external *forma*). God's revelation *does not consist simply of words, like beads on a string: it is propositional. The words of the Bible mean something and teach something. It is not words as such that constitute revelation, but 'propositions': that is, revelation has to do with what these particular words, in these particular combinations and sequences, in these particular writings, actually mean.*<sup>3</sup> (The internal *forma*).

If the revelation of God were restricted and confined to the outward *forma*, the words and sentences of the texts of scripture as originally given, then translation itself would not be a legitimate exercise. We would have to treat the Bible as the Muslims treat the Quran. However, *to distinguish the 'inner forma' ('propositional revelation') and the 'outer forma' ('verbal inspiration') of the Bible gives us the freedom to translate it: it shows that Bible translation is theologically legitimate.*<sup>4</sup>

However, whilst legitimising the translation exercise, this distinction between the *inner forma* and the *outer forma* gives rise to the biggest tension in the work of translation. This is the tension between staying as close as possible to the *form* and *structure* of the original text and conveying the *meaning* of the text in as clear and understandable a way as possible in the receptor language and culture. Replicating as closely as possible the form and structure of the original text is referred to as *formal equivalence*. Conveying the meaning of the original in as natural a way as possible in the receptor language is termed *dynamic* or (perhaps better) *functional equivalence*.

The verbal inspiration of the scriptures pulls the translator towards *formal* equivalence because we have received the word of God in a given form with every word, sentence structure, metaphor and idiom inspired by the Spirit of God. However, the words, grouped as they are, mean something which the translator wants to convey as clearly as possible to the reader in a different form. The difference in form is demanded by the vocabulary and structure of the receptor language and the linguistic understanding of the intended reader. This creates a pull towards *functional* equivalence. As Chapple comments:

*The tension between 'accuracy' and 'communication'—the need for a trade-off between 'formal equivalence' in expression and 'functional equivalence' in communication—is thus not the result of pragmatism or bias: it has its roots in the nature of the Bible as the Word of God.*<sup>5</sup>

All Bible translations employ a degree of *formal* and *functional* equivalence. It is always a matter of judgement as to how to strike the balance between the two. Many of the differences between translations and the arguments over translations arise from differences over balancing these competing forces. There is no such thing as a completely literal translation that adheres completely to formal equivalence. The closest thing to that is an inter-linear which is not a genuine translation. At the other end of the spectrum, a translation that completely abandons loyalty to the form of scripture is not a genuine translation, but a paraphrase. All genuine Bible translations lie somewhere between the two. The differences are not absolute, but differences of degree. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that there will always be gains and losses as the translators choose one possible rendering of a given text over another.

The final complication is that language is not a static entity, but changes over time with use. And the pace of change and acceptance of change even within a given nation or culture is not uniform. Within a culture there are both generational and sub-cultural differences. Language changes more rapidly among younger people compared to older generations and certain sub-cultures are more conservative in adopting and adapting to changes in meaning and usage. Thus there are differences in language use amongst evangelicals compared to the general population. As a particularly pertinent example, this is evident when it comes to the synonyms used to refer to human beings as a group: *man, mankind, humankind, humanity, the human race, human*

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<sup>3</sup> Chapple, p.13

<sup>4</sup> Chapple, p.13

<sup>5</sup> Chapple, p.13

beings, humans, and people. In this instance, there is a dramatic difference in general written English usage and usage in “Evangelical English.” The usage of ‘man’ and ‘mankind’ is far higher amongst evangelicals, with the general population preferring to use the terms ‘people’ and ‘humans’. It appears that evangelicals, use an “insider” vocabulary and do not reflect the norms of the wider culture in this area.<sup>6</sup>

As an example of much of the above, consider the king James Version (KJV) translation of 2 Cor 6:11-13

*O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged. Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels. Now for a recompence in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.*

Not only does this text show how much the English language has changed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the high level of formal equivalence in the translation renders it incomprehensible to the modern reader. To be faithful and effective in communicating the word of God to the 21<sup>st</sup> century English-speaker requires a good deal more functional equivalence to be employed in the translation. The NIV11 translation, in common with many other modern translations is much to be preferred:

*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.*

At one level, this rendering could be criticised as a less ‘accurate’ translation, but it is nonetheless a much better translation for our contemporary context.

It is also evident from this example that accuracy alone is not a sufficient criterion for evaluating a translation. Fee and Stuart suggest that four criteria need to be used: accuracy, clarity, naturalness, and appropriateness.<sup>7</sup> Does a translation communicate the word of God with accuracy so that we understand what God intended us to understand by the form of words in the original text? Does it do so with clarity? Does it do so using expressions that sound natural rather than strange or awkward in the receptor language? Is it appropriate for the intended audience?

It is clear that, when choosing the best available Bible version to use in a given context, a broad set of criteria needs to be employed, with an awareness of the challenges of Bible translation.

#### **4. Strengths and weaknesses of the ESV when compared with the NIV**

The Scriptures are of such prime importance to Evangelicals that the issue of Bible Translation and choice of Bible Versions is an emotive issue. In some of the articles published on-line, exaggerated claims are made regarding the accuracy and consistency of the ESV over against the NIV. Much is made of perceived weaknesses (or worse) in the NIV and examples and statistics accumulated to prove the point, together with accusations of bias and hidden agendas. It is all too easy to be swept along by the polemic.

A more balanced case for the ESV is cogently and graciously made by Kevin de Young in his booklet, ‘**Why our church switched to the ESV**’. He begins by stating ‘*unequivocally that the Lord in his sovereignty has used and will continue to use many different English translations to build up his church*’. He goes on to affirm that ‘*an attitude of thanksgiving should permeate this whole discussion*’ for the riches we enjoy, namely 500 years of Bible translation history and the availability dozens of Bible translations in the English language. Thirdly his support for the ESV is ‘*not because I loathe other translations and certainly not because I haven’t read from or been blessed by any other English translation*’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Decker, p.433

<sup>7</sup> quoted in Decker, p.446

<sup>8</sup> DeYoung, pp.6-7

DeYoung summarises his reasons for preferring the ESV when he writes, ‘*After using the NASB for several years and reading through it several times, I switched to the ESV because it had precisely the balance I was looking for: more literal than the NIV and more readable than the NASB.*’ He goes on to give seven reasons for preferring the ESV over the NIV.

- i. *The ESV employs an “essentially literal” translation philosophy.*
- ii. *The ESV is a more transparent translation.*
- iii. *The ESV engages in less over-translation.*
- iv. *The ESV engages in less under-translation.*
- v. *The ESV does a better job of translating important Greek or Hebrew words with the same English word throughout a passage or book.*
- vi. *The ESV retains more of the literary qualities of the Bible.*
- vii. *The ESV requires much less “correcting” in preaching.*

This is a fair summary of the advantages that many see in the ESV and these points need to be weighed.

- i. *The ESV employs an “essentially literal” translation philosophy.*

As DeYoung concedes the difference is *not a chasm, but one of degree*.<sup>9</sup> Whilst it is true that ESV lies somewhat nearer the Formal Equivalence, there are *many examples of ‘dynamic equivalence’ tendencies in the ESV*.<sup>10</sup> The claim that the ESV employs a different translation philosophy which is to be preferred to that of the NIV, making it a principled choice is overstated by many. Both translations use dynamic equivalence and the ESV does give ‘thought-for-thought’ as well as ‘word-for-word’ translations.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore there is a danger of confusing ‘literal’ with ‘accurate’ as though the two are to be equated. This is true to some extent, but only to some extent. There is a point where more literal becomes more obscure and the translation becomes inaccurate by failing to communicate with or, even worse, misleading the reader.<sup>12</sup>

Setting aside the issue of gender-neutral translation which we will come to, the least that must be said is that choosing between the ESV and the NIV is matter of judgement not a decision of principle. The translation philosophy is not so *essentially* different.

- ii. *The ESV is a more transparent translation.*

The point being made is that the ESV leaves more interpretive ambiguities unresolved so that the reader or preacher or student, rather than the translator, can determine which meaning is best.<sup>13</sup> This is certainly true, particularly, for example, when it comes to the genitive construction in the Greek. It is also true that it is a hindrance to the preacher when he reaches the conclusion that the NIV has resolved the ambiguity in the wrong direction. He is left explaining that he thinks that the Bible does not say what the translation that has just been read says.

However, the cost of leaving the ambiguities unresolved is that it leaves the average reader of the Bible with ambiguities that they may well not be in a position to resolve. Where the original readers receiving the text in a language familiar to them would still have found it ‘ambiguous’, this is a good thing. There is an ambiguity in the text intended by the Holy Spirit which should be preserved. But where the original readers would have had a clear understanding of meaning of the text, the NIV may be doing a good thing in removing the ambiguity and giving them a clearer understanding of what is really being said. The question is how dependent the *reader* should be on a *teacher* to explain the text to them.

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<sup>9</sup> DeYoung, p.10

<sup>10</sup> Chapple, p.4

<sup>11</sup> Chapple, p.8

<sup>12</sup> Chapple, p.10

<sup>13</sup> DeYoung, p.11

Only in a relatively small number of instances would the 'interpretation' involved in the NIV rendering be truly and significantly contentious. In at least one contentious instance the NIV11, when compared with the NIV84 has moved back to a translation that leaves the ambiguity for the reader to resolve. This is in Romans 1:17, where the NIV84's 'a righteousness *from* God' (which interprets the genitive) has been replaced in the NIV11 with 'the righteousness of God'.

*iii. The ESV engages in less over-translation.*

This point highlights the tendency the NIV has, in places, to add words (in DeYoung's view unnecessarily) that are not in the Greek or Hebrew text to clarify what the translators think the passage means. This relates to the previous point and again, it is true to a degree. The debate again revolves around removing ambiguity and clarifying. The NIV may not have got this right in every instance. However, the instances DeYoung cites are not ones where the NIV is being massively misleading.

*iv. The ESV engages in less under-translation.*

The charge here is that the NIV *at times avoids theological words and important concepts found in the original languages.*<sup>14</sup> Examples quoted include the NIV translating YHWH *tsavaoth* as LORD Almighty rather than 'Lord of hosts' as the ESV does, and the use of 'sacrifice of atonement' to translate *hilasmos* and its derivatives rather than using 'propitiation' as the ESV does. The NIV may not have the best rendering in either case. But then the ESV rendering is open to criticism. To many readers, 'Lord of hosts' may sound like the Lord who has a particular interest in those who host dinner parties. 'Lord of armies' would be better if the intention is to convey the literal sense of the Hebrew. Similarly, 'propitiation' is a word that fails to communicate anything meaningful to the modern English reader. It may have been preferable for the NIV to have stuck with it nonetheless. But, either way, both translations, 'sacrifice of atonement' and 'propitiation' will need explaining by Bible Teachers if the concept of a sacrifice that turns away wrath is to be understood from the text.

*v. The ESV does a better job of translating important Greek or Hebrew words with the same English word throughout a passage or book.*

In some instances this is true and the NIV can be frustrating when it seems to needlessly obscure repetition in the original text, presumably for the sake of good English style. The ESV does better with some words. However, it too frustrates with the *inconsistency* of its attempts at consistency. For example, it translates the Greek word for preaching the gospel (*euangelizo*) in *eleven* different ways. Undoubtedly lexical and contextual considerations will require some degree of variation in translation. But the NIV only uses *nine* different words and the NASB manages to restrict itself to just five different words to translate *euangelizo*. The ESV is not as consistent as is claimed. In one chapter (Acts 8) it translates *euangelizo* four different ways!<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the NIV11 has gone some way towards remedying a fault in the 1984 translation. It does better at not omitting the important logical connective *gar* ('for') from the translation, although it still omits some occurrences.

Chapple concludes that *with regard to 'consistency of translation,' the ESV is, on average, not as good as the NASB and little or no better than the NIV or NRSV.*<sup>16</sup>

*vi. The ESV retains more of the literary qualities of the Bible.*

The issue here relates to such things as 'the artistry, meter, subtlety, multi-layeredness and concreteness found in the literature of the Bible, especially in poetry.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> DeYoung, p.17

<sup>15</sup> Chapple, p.15

<sup>16</sup> Chapple, p.16

<sup>17</sup> DeYoung, p.21, quoting Leland Ryken, 'The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation.'

Since the ESV lies nearer the formal equivalence end of the translation spectrum there is no doubt some truth to this argument. At points, it will, for this reason, more closely reflect the form of the original text than the NIV and retain more poetic metaphors. The cost may be some loss of clarity.

However, the counter concern, is that it retains archaic vocabulary, literary style and phraseology that it has inherited from the KJV via the RSV. For some, this is a positive merit, as it is seen to have more of the literary merit of the KJV. However, the great cost is that it can sound stilted, quaint or faintly odd, or even awkward and unnatural<sup>18</sup> as well as using words that are not understood by the average person today. Chapple cites the following examples:

*abhor, abide, abode, adjure, ascribe, chide, confute, convocation, counsel (as both a noun and a verb), entreat, exult, festal, haughty, invoke, kin, ordain, portent, rail (as a verb), rend, revile, sated, smitten, sojourn, stripes, swaddling, swear.*<sup>19</sup>

For some, this will make is 'sound like the Bible'. For others, it will sound strange and somewhat inaccessible. What is being experienced in both cases is not so much the 'sound' of the original text, or the strangeness and inaccessibility of the original text, but the echo of Elizabethan English that it retains. For some familiarity means that this echo sounds beautiful and appropriately reverent. For others it is a discordant and potentially off-putting noise that may get in the way of them hearing the Word of God. The more our culture and language moves away from the culture and language that was shaped by the King James Version of the Bible, the more strange and inaccessible the ESV is likely to sound to the average person.

*vii. The ESV requires much less "correcting" in preaching.*

This is an important point, not merely because of the extra work that the preacher must do, but because repeatedly 'correcting' the translation may undermine the confidence of congregation members have in the Bible in their hands.

The time required in preaching to deal with issues in the translation probably cuts both ways. Preaching from the NIV, time may need to be taken at points explaining the 'literal form' that lies behind the English translation. Preaching from the ESV, time may need to be taken explaining what an expression in the English translation means where the meaning would have been more transparent in the NIV.

The issue of confidence is the more serious one. However, the examples that DeYoung cites are not so bad as to seriously undermine confidence in the NIV as a translation. As DeYoung is careful to say near the end of his booklet:

*I want to reiterate that the NIV is not a bad translation. It was not wrong for my church to use the NIV, or for me to preach from it. Churches will continue to grow using the NIV. The lost will still be saved through the NIV and Christians will be built up in the faith with the NIV. I don't want to tear down the NIV.*<sup>20</sup>

The important thing is for the preacher not to tear down whatever translation he is expected to preach from. Some of the translation differences are simply reflective of the challenges and difficulties facing translators and the choices they have to make. From time to time, there may be a good opportunity to educate a congregation about some of those translation issues. Certainly those teaching regularly need to be trained to compare translations when studying a text and be aware of their comparative strengths and weaknesses.

*Conclusion regarding the ESV/NIV comparison*

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<sup>18</sup> Chapple, p. 23

<sup>19</sup> Chapple, p. 25

<sup>20</sup> DeYoung p.30

I have a huge respect for Kevin DeYoung and greatly value his preaching and writing ministry. I understand his reasons for preferring the ESV over the NIV, but I do not share his conclusion. I think that when it comes to congregational use in reading and preaching, the merits of the ESV are outweighed by its comparative awkwardness and inaccessibility and its failure to achieve the level of consistency that is claimed for it. Both are accurate translations supported by tremendous levels of scholarship, although the arguments will continue to rage over relative accuracy. However when it comes to clarity and naturalness, the NIV (in both the 1984 and 2011 editions) seems to me to be clearly ahead, and for our context I would judge it to be preferable in terms of appropriateness.<sup>21</sup> Kevin DeYoung is ministering in a different context where the appropriateness argument may be weighed differently.

## 5. Gender Language in the NIV11

The most controversial changes in the NIV11 (compared to the 1984 edition) involve gender language. All of the above arguments regarding the preferability of the NIV could be outweighed if we were sufficiently concerned that these changes were (1) not defensible or (2) represented a serious hindrance to maintaining biblical orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy in gender-related matters. The impact of feminism on our culture, and more recently the growing influence of queer theory and the propagation of notions of gender-fluidity, must make us particularly alert to anything that *might* weaken our ability to hold firmly to the teaching of scripture in this area.

Rodney Decker helpfully summarises the reason for the changes in the NIV11.

*...the motivation for updating gender language is predicated on the conclusion that the English language has changed. If a translation intends to communicate in contemporary English, then that translation is fully justified to make changes that reflect current usage. Some translations do not attempt to use contemporary language and are content with dated English that is still, hopefully, intelligible, even if it is not natural written or oral English.*

*The principle involved in the NIV 11, as is the case with a number of other evangelical translations (e.g., ESV, HCSB, NET, NLT), is that wording in the donor language that is not gender specific should not become gender specific in the receptor language. The issue involved is not if some form of inclusive language should be used, but what specific types of language are legitimate and how extensive they should be.<sup>22</sup>*

He goes on to say:

*I suspect that all translators would agree in principle that translations should represent the donor language in regard to gender language as accurately as possible in the receptor language. That is, if the NT makes a statement that refers to men and women, the translation should do the same to the extent possible. The rub comes not with the principle, but with deciding exactly where such reference is used and how best to express it in English.*

It is important to note that the TNIV published in 2005 went further than the NIV11 in updating the gender-related language of the 1984 NIV. In reading critiques (especially those published on the internet) the reader needs to be careful to identify whether it is the NIV11 or the TNIV that is being critiqued (or criticised). The NIV11 is in part a corrective response to some of the criticisms of the TNIV. One charge was that too many gender-related changes had been made without evidence that these changes were necessary due to language change. The translators commissioned a study of gender language based on the Collins bank of English – a 4.4 billion-word database of English usage worldwide based on both print and audio recordings. This resulting report was a tool available to the translators in reaching decisions about gender-related issues in the translation.<sup>23</sup>

### 5.1. The defensibility of the gender-related changes

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<sup>21</sup> See Rodney Decker's conclusions regarding the NIV11 assessed against these four criteria. Decker, pp. 446-449

<sup>22</sup> Decker, p. 431

<sup>23</sup> Decker, p.422

Primarily, the gender-related changes are of three sorts.

- i. A shift from masculine singular pronouns to plurals and gender-neutral pronouns where the reference is understood to be inclusive of men and women.

e.g. **Mark 4:25**

NIV84

*Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*

NIV11

*Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.*

This reflects the fact that in a context like this many people now hear the masculine pronoun 'he' as excluding women. However, if it was not the intention of the Lord Jesus to exclude women from the principle he was teaching, the plural may more accurately convey the meaning of the verse in modern English. It is a *functionally* equivalent translation even if a degree of *form* equivalence has been sacrificed. The point is that the translation is defensible and its merits can be argued on these grounds.

It seems highly significant in assessing the legitimacy of this sort of translation that we find instances where the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the NT to make a similar move in quoting from the OT:

- 1) How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of *him* who brings good news (Isa 52:7)

As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of *those* who bring good news.' (Rom 10:15)

- 2) There is no fear of God before *his* eyes (Psa 36:1)

As it is written (v. 10) . . . , 'There is no fear of God before *their* eyes (v. 18).' (Rom 3:10, 18)

- 3) Blessed is *he* whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. (Psa 32:1)

David says the same thing . . . 'Blessed are *they* whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.' (Rom 4:6-7)<sup>24</sup>

- ii. The translation of the Greek word, *adelphoi*, with 'brothers *and sisters*', especially in the vocative, when it is clear that both genders are in view; and likewise the translation 'sons *and daughters*' rather than just 'sons' where both genders are in view.

e.g. **Php 1:12**

Now I want you to know, brothers *and sisters*, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

At the first instance of this in a given Bible book, a footnote is included such as this one referenced at this verse:

The Greek word for *brothers and sisters (adelphoi)* refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family; also in verse 14; and in 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 8, 21.

The argument is that when Paul addressed the whole congregation using the term *adelphoi* he would not have intended to specifically exclude the women in the way that 'brothers' sounds excluding in modern English usage. Thus 'brothers *and sisters*' is a *functionally* equivalent translation.

A somewhat different example would be **Hebrews 2:10-12**

<sup>10</sup>In bringing many sons *and daughters* to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he

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<sup>24</sup> These examples are taken from Bock p. 665

suffered. <sup>11</sup>Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers *and sisters*. <sup>12</sup>He says,  
'I will declare your name to my brothers *and sisters*;  
in the assembly I will sing your praises.'

Likewise the argument would be that the reference to *sons* in verse 10 is inclusive of all believers and that the translation *sons and daughters* makes this explicit so that the modern English reader rightly understands the text. The same applies to *brothers and sisters* in verses 11 and 12. Once more the translation is defensible on the grounds of *functional* equivalence.

Again it is instructive to find the Apostle Paul making a similar move in quoting from the OT.

**2 Corinthians 6:18 (ESV)**

and I will be a father *to you*, and *you* shall be sons *and daughters* to me, says the Lord Almighty.

The original text in the OT (2 Sam 7:14) reads

I will be to *him* a father, and he shall be to me a *son*. (ESV)

After citing this example, Bock quotes Don Carson at length:

Note carefully what the apostle Paul has done. He has taken the third-person singular ("he will be a son to me") and rewritten it as a second-person plural— not only a second-person plural, but in terms that expand the masculine "son" into both genders: "you shall be sons and daughters to me." Nor is it the case that Paul is simply citing the common Greek version—some form of the Septuagint (LXX)—without worrying too much about the details, for here the LXX follows the Hebrew rather closely... There are complex reasons why Paul can argue this way, bound up with an important typology that needs to be explored. But the least we can say is that the apostle himself does not think that Hebrew singulars must be rendered by Greek singulars, or that Hebrew "son" should never be rendered by Greek "sons and daughters." No one, I think, would quickly charge Paul with succumbing to a feminist agenda.

*(The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998])*<sup>25</sup>

In defence of the principle of functional equivalence it is noteworthy that Paul follows the quotation with the words, 'says the Lord Almighty.' He equates the words he has used with the word which God has spoken even though he has sat loose to the original form in his quotation and translation of the OT Hebrew.

- iii. A move to using 'People' and 'humans' (and 'human beings') widely for Greek and Hebrew masculine forms referring to both men and women; and a variety of words — 'humanity,' 'human race,' 'man,' 'mankind' —being used to refer to human beings collectively.

An example of the first is **Matt 4:19**

NIV84

'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.'

NIV11

'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.'

In this case, we may prefer the older translation because we view '*fishers of men*' to be more striking and memorable as a phrase than '*fish for people*'.

But it is hard to reject the translation on principle. The Greek word translated 'men' in the 1984 NIV and 'people' in the 2011 NIV is the word *anthropos*. Whilst in certain contexts, the word is used to refer specifically to adult males, it often has a generic sense of human being or person.

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<sup>25</sup> quoted in Bock, p.665-666

This is recognised in both the 1984 NIV and ESV translations of **Mark 8:24** when we compare it with the KJV.

KJV

'And he looked up, and said, I see men (*anthropous*) as trees, walking.' However,

ESV

And he looked up and said, "I see people (*anthropous*), but they look like trees, walking."

NIV84

He looked up and said, "I see people (*anthropous*); they look like trees walking around."

Going back to Matt 4:19, the different translations illustrate the way that gains and losses arise with different renderings. With the move from *fishers of men* to *fish for people* there is a gain in terms of making explicit the generic scope of the text, but a loss, at least in terms of memorability. We may prefer the older translation, but it is not in principle wrong.

An example of the second shift under this heading, to use a variety of terms to refer to human beings, collectively is in Psalm 8. The NIV11 renders verses 4 to 6 as follows.

4 what is *mankind* that you are mindful of them,  
*human beings* that you care for them?  
5 You have made *them* a little lower than the angels  
and crowned *them* with glory and honour.  
6 You made *them* rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:

The traditional rendering of 'man' and 'son of man' in verse 4 has been changed for 'mankind' and 'human beings'. The masculine singular pronoun 'him' in verses 5 and 6 has been replaced with the generic plural 'they'. Whatever our instinctive reaction to these changes, the NIV11 translation is defensible on the grounds that the psalm is not extolling the creation of males, but of human beings, male and female, created in the image of God. It is a psalm in praise of God's act of creation in Genesis 1 through which both the first man and the first woman were given authority to subdue the earth and rule over its creatures.

Some object to the translation on the grounds that it weakens the Messianic reference. But that is to misunderstand the nature of Christ's fulfilment of the Psalm. The Hebrew 'son of man' in v4 is not used as a Messianic title giving the psalm the force of direct prophecy of the coming of Christ. The psalm itself looks back to creation, using 'son of man' as a Hebrew idiom meaning 'descendant of a human being' which is parallel to the first reference to man/humanity in the first line of verse 4. The typology brought out in Hebrews 2 works in terms of the incarnation, death and exaltation of Christ being the means by which God's creation purpose is fulfilled in a redeemed humanity. He is not connected to the Psalm through the *son of man* phrase but as the one who '*was made for a little while lower than the angels*' but is now '*crowned with glory and honour.*' His incarnation, death, resurrection and exaltation qualifies him to bring many sons (and daughters!) to glory so that together with him, the brothers (and sisters) he has redeemed will rule the age to come. None of this is lost with the NIV11 translation.<sup>26</sup>

The point of working through these examples is to illustrate (rather than prove) how the NIV11 gender language updates are in principle defensible linguistically as providing functionally equivalent renderings of the text in the original languages. Subjectively, we may be more or less happy with the choices the translators have made in each instance. But that is a different matter to the principles and guidelines that shaped the translation being fundamentally flawed. What is more some of the criticisms regarding loss or obscuring of Messianic connection, as for instance with Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2, have been exaggerated and are in some cases ill-founded.

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<sup>26</sup> see Decker, pp. 426-430, and Bock, pp.661-663.

## 5.2. The potential for the gender-related changes to undermine the defence of biblical orthodoxy and/or orthopraxy.

Here we are not concerned with the rights or wrongs of any particular rendering of verse of scripture, but with the more subtle impact of an accumulation of gender-related changes. This assessment from the *Translation Evaluation Committee of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* is helpful.

A larger issue, but a more difficult one to get a handle on, is the matter of introducing, by means of a routine use of inclusive language, a subtle cultural distortion into the text. We certainly have a right to expect that a translation will accurately reflect the culture and worldview of the original. It's fair to say that in the ancient near east, men were seen as representatives for their entire family, their entire tribe, and their entire people (e.g. "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—see Exodus 3:6).

The language the Bible uses reflects that point of view. When many of these references are absorbed into a more inclusive manner of phrasing, will the reader come to the incorrect conclusion that the ancient near east was culturally very similar in this respect to 21st century America? In evaluating this concern, the committee would like everyone to bear in mind that a certain amount of cultural distortion is part and parcel of any translation. After all, neither Moses nor Paul spoke English! Furthermore, a translator as we have already said has to make decisions about what features of the original he will preserve and which he must regretfully let go, since no one translation can do it all. We may disagree with the translator's choices in this context or in that one. But we do understand that such choices have to be made. Readers also have to consider the importance of this issue relative to all the other matters that need to be weighed in evaluating a translation. So far as the committee is concerned, we remain of the opinion that the respective callings of men and women are clearly and fully taught in the new NIV in those Biblical passages that deal with the doctrine directly.<sup>27</sup>

Without accusing the translation committee responsible for NIV11 of any bias or hidden agendas, the gender-related language updates reflect shifts in the English language which in turn reflect ideological currents and shifts in prevailing worldview. Sensitivity in the culture to the use of language in relation to gender is reflective of viewpoints which would stand in opposition to biblical belief and practice regarding the identity and calling of men and women as males and females made in the image of God.

However, as the WELS committee concludes, *'the respective callings of men and women are clearly and fully taught in the new NIV in those Biblical passages that deal with the doctrine directly'*. And more broadly, there is no reason why the gender-related changes taken as a whole should hinder preachers and teachers from teaching a biblical view of manhood and womanhood and gender identity from the pages of the NIV11. Indeed the changes may help believers gain a hearing on these culturally-sensitive and contentious issues. More gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language should mitigate the sense of alienation and/or exclusion many women experience when they read the Bibles or hear the scriptures read. It may also serve to reduce the risk of an immediately hostile reaction to the language so that the voice of scripture may be more readily heard.

From this broader perspective, adopting the NIV11 would bring with it overall gains and losses. However, my judgement is that the net effect would not constitute a significant threat to our ability to uphold the teaching of scripture with regard to the identity and calling of men and women, as men and women, made in the image of God.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendation

There is no such thing as a perfect translation. As an Italian proverb says, 'All translators are liars.' However, we are blessed with a wealth of fine translations in the English language each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. When the two main alternatives, the NIV11 and the ESV are compared, both can be viewed as

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<sup>27</sup> WELS, lines 192-209

*accurate* translations when the issues around *formal* and *functional* equivalence are properly understood. But the NIV, in its 2011 form, continues to be preferable in terms of its clarity, naturalness and appropriateness for our context.

The gender-related updates provide serious pause for thought and it is important to consider the issues. However, the changes are, in principle, defensible from a translation legitimacy viewpoint and may well be helpful in our current and changing cultural context. This remains true even though we may have good reasons to be concerned about some of the cultural forces that have contributed to the shifts in the English language. The truth, so powerfully demonstrated at Pentecost, remains that our God who desires all people (men *and* women) to be saved desires them to hear his word in the language that they themselves speak. This is the truth that motivates and guides the work of all Bible translators and the NIV11 is a worthy product of this principle being applied with rigour and reverence for the God who has spoken.

I am satisfied that the NIV11 represents the best choice of Bible version for Christ Church at this time. Whatever version we adopt for the future, may God's voice be heard as his word is read and preached and may we remain committed and obedient to his word.

Praise God for his open word!