

# good news for all people: the case for inclusive language Bibles

A group of 8 year olds in Sunday School were looking at John 15:5 in the (1984) NIV:

*'I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.'*

In the ensuing discussion a question was raised as to whether this verse applied to everyone or only to men. Every single child said that the verse was directed *expressly* to men and not to women. [In Greek it reads literally: 'The [one] who remains ....this one will...']

## **Eight reasons for inclusive language Bibles**

1. **Faithfulness to Scripture.** Inclusive language is more faithful to the Scripture than is exclusive language. Past Bible translations and hence liturgy following it, have obscured intended inclusivity. Hebrew and Greek both have two words for the ones commonly translated 'man'. One of these (e.g. *adam* in Gen 3:22-24) means 'human being', while the other means 'male person'. Secondly, Greek uses pronouns more often than English does, and these have in the past been translated as 'A man' or 'he', where the original was indefinite. John Stott writes: 'Where *man* means human being, and when the use of *brothers* was never intended to exclude sisters, then to retain such gender-specific words would be offensive...Even worse, it would actually misrepresent the meaning of the biblical text.'
2. **Need for clarity.** Because language usage is changing, gender biased language is now a barrier to getting the message across. Women are sinners too. And Jesus died for women too. Think how people might hear: '...God our Saviour who wants all men to be saved' (1 Tim 2:4-6), or '...that life was the light of men...' (John 1:4).
3. **Obligation to the Great Commission.** According to Genesis 1:26-7, *man* was intended to be an inclusive term. But that has been lost. Inclusive language restores the original intention. We may offend women if we do not use it - and we offend some men. It may not be a problem to us. But the question is: is it a problem for those we are trying to reach? We do not want to place unnecessary stumbling blocks in the way of people.
4. **The gospel and the church were intended to be inclusive.** At Pentecost the Spirit fell on men and women equally. The church was to be a place where gender distinctions were irrelevant (Gal 3:28).
5. **Language imputes value to things - and people.** Therefore inclusive language is a moral issue, like racist language. It is wrong to degrade, devalue, discriminate against or subjugate any part of humanity, based on biological difference.
6. **Inclusive language is the new standard for English today.** It is how English is being taught, adapted and adopted across the English-speaking world. The future of English is therefore inclusive. It is to our shame that the Church is sometimes behind in this. If publications do not use it, or churches do not, they will seem dated and archaic.
7. **Inclusive language is not about being pc.** Just because inclusive language accords with the culture does not discredit it. That assumes that culture has not influenced the use of exclusive language. Christ came to redeem and restore what was lost. The assertion of equality is not new - nor a feminist prerogative. What matters is not whether something is politically correct, but whether it is redemptively correct!
8. **All newer translations use inclusive language** to refer to men and women where this is what is intended in the original: e.g. *New Revised Standard Version* (1989), *Good News*

*Bible* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1994), *Contemporary English Version* (1995), *TNIV* (2005), *New Living Translation* (2007), *NIV* (2011). New liturgy uses inclusive language.

All biblical translators are influenced not only by their cultural presuppositions but often by theological understanding. This in turn influences the translation of particular words or phrases, which in turn again influences how readers form their theology from what they read! Hence faulty theology can be based on mistranslation. Here are some examples of how different translations of various words and phrases related to women's ministry have far-reaching implications.

### **Was Phoebe a servant or a leader ?**

In Romans 16, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea. *Diakonos* can mean 'servant' but it is a masculine word not normally applied to female servants. Consider the difference in implication between the 1984 NIV and KJV which refer to Phoebe as a 'servant', while RSV has 'deaconess', NRSV has 'deacon' and NEB 'one who holds office'. [NB: Paul uses the word elsewhere of himself.]

### **Was there a female apostle?**

In verse 7, the name of someone who is a notable apostle, or notable among the apostles, is *Iouinian* (the accusative case), which could be a man or a woman. Junia was a common female name, while there is no record of Junias as a man's name. So the only reason to translate the name as a man is if there is a presupposition that a woman could not be an apostle. NIV (1984), RSV, JB and NEB all prefer Junias, while KJV, NRSV and GNB use Junia.

### **Can women pass on Paul's teaching to others?**

2 Timothy 2:2: 'The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others' (NIV, 1984). Paul uses the word *anthropos* here, which could refer to humanity in general, or to a group of men and women, as well as to a group of men. If Paul clearly intended men, he could have used the word *aner*. Hence NRSV translates: ...'entrust to faithful *people*', which leaves it open for this question to be decided on the basis of other texts.

### **Do women need a male 'head'?**

Greek *gyne* can mean either woman or wife, and *aner* means either man or husband. While in Ephesians 5 Paul is clearly talking about husbands and wives, in 1 Corinthians it is not so clear. Yet AV and NIV translate 'the head of the woman is man', while the GNB and NRSV translate *aner* and *gyne* as husband and wife (i.e. 'the husband is the head of his wife'). Furthermore, it is not always clear that the word *kephale* is used by Paul to mean 'head' in the sense we understand it; some scholars translate it 'source', for example.

### **Further reading:**

DA Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate* (Baker/IVP, 1998). Detailed discussion of the late 1990s crisis over the Inclusive NIV, with more general exploration.

Andrew Perriman, *Speaking of Women* (IVP, 1998). Includes a brief appendix on the NIVI controversy.

Bridget Jack Jeffries, 'Book Review: The 2011 NIV Bible', *Priscilla Papers*, Vol 25, No 1 (Winter 2011) . This can be accessed via 'free articles' at [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org).