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Printed in the United States of America

0-8054-2441-5

Published by Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 220  
Subject Heading: BIBLE

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Poythress, Vern S.

The gender-neutral Bible controversy: muting the masculinity of God's words / Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8054-2441-5 (pb)

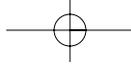
1. Bible—Translating. 2. Nonsexist language—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Bible. English—Versions. I. Grudem, Wayne A. II. Title.

BS449. P69 2000  
220.5—dc21

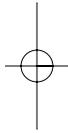
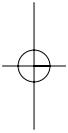
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**To Joel Belz and James Dobson,  
who saw that the preservation of God's Word was at stake,  
and stood firm**



# FOREWORD

by Valerie Becker Makkai

Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of Illinois-Chicago  
Past President, Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States

As a professor of linguistics with a keen interest in the theory and practice of translation, and as a committed Christian, my reading of various translations of the Bible has always been accompanied by a desire to know the original Hebrew and Greek wording on which the varying translations were based. Some knowledge of ancient Greek and of the Semitic languages, as well as study of commentaries, has only piqued my curiosity. As I read and study the Bible I find myself constantly wondering how closely and accurately each translation reflects the original. Thus I have followed with great interest the debate that has arisen over gender-neutral Bible translations in general, and the NIVI (*New International Version: Inclusive Language Edition*) in particular, and I was pleased to be asked to write the foreword to the present contribution to this debate.

In the present volume Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem have presented a well-reasoned and level-headed argument for their case. Indeed, they are a voice of reason in a dispute that is fraught with emotion and misinformation. They clearly understand the fluid and changing nature of language and their arguments are based on sound linguistic principles, some of which bear emphasizing here.

First, one of the basic facts about language is that all languages are constantly undergoing change. At any point in time, changes in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary are in progress. Most of the time the speakers of the language are not aware of the changes. But if we look back in time we can see that at earlier stages the language was different. We sometimes have trouble understanding the King James Version of the Bible or the plays of Shakespeare because they were written some four centuries ago and English has undergone many changes in that time. If we go back two hundred years farther in time, say to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, we have an even harder time understanding. And if we go back five hundred more

years to something that was written in Old English, such as *Beowulf*, we can't understand it at all—we have to read it in Modern English translation. Or look at Latin. In the course of less than two thousand years Latin has changed so much that it isn't Latin at all any more—it has become French and Spanish and Italian and several other languages. And so it is with all languages.

A second basic fact of language is that we cannot consciously control the changes that languages undergo. We cannot prevent the changes, we cannot stop a change once it is underway, we cannot predict what will change and what will not, and very seldom if ever can we consciously cause a grammatical change to occur. The reason for this lies in the fact that historically changes have originated as “mistakes” in pronunciation or grammar or word usage that children or others make. These “mistakes” often originate because the language contains some sort of irregularity in structure that people are unconsciously trying to regularize. If enough people make the same “mistake” over a long enough period of time, the new creation begins to be seen as less of a mistake—it becomes more acceptable, and eventually, if the more educated speakers of the language begin to use it, the new form becomes an accepted part of the language. Not all such “mistakes” are ultimately incorporated into the language, however, so we can never tell the end result until many years (often a century or more) have gone by.

As an example of this process, take the pronoun *you* in English. It can refer to one person or more than one. But in English we are accustomed to being able to distinguish between singular and plural, so our inability to make that distinction with *you* bothers us on some unconscious level. Thus, in various parts of the country a new “plural” *you* has been created (albeit without conscious intent): *you-all* or *y'all* (primarily in the South), *you guys*, *yous*, and even *yous guys*. These are all relatively recent creations, and they have experienced varying degrees of acceptance. In the south even educated speakers now use *you-all* or *y'all*, so this has become acceptable usage there. In other parts of the country *you guys* is commonly used, but is generally regarded as slang or quite informal—it has not been totally accepted even though some educated speakers may use it in very informal situations. *Yous* and *yous guys*, while often heard, are generally used only by less educated speakers, those who are less particular about grammatical correctness. It is important to realize that there is nothing *inherently* good or bad about *any* of these forms. They are all ones that various speakers, for various reasons, have created to fill in a perceived gap in English structure. Which one of them, if any, will eventually take over as “the plural” of *you* is still anybody's guess. But ultimately the decision is not made by grammarians or scholars or anyone else who might have an ax to grind. It is made by all the millions of average speakers of the language who, by consistently using a given form over and over, turn it into an acceptable part of the grammar.

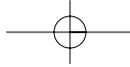
Attempts have often been made to stop such language changes in progress, but to no avail. One of the most interesting cases comes to us from Classical Latin times. A language purist (whose name has not come down to us) wrote a document which is called the *Appendix Probi*. It consists of a list of some three hundred Classical Latin words which, the author complained, everyone was mispronouncing. He carefully indicated the proper classical pronunciations (what “you should say”) alongside the mispronunciations (what “you should not say”). No doubt he was not the only scholar of the times who was appalled at the common people’s lack of knowledge of their language. Yet as we look at later Latin and at the languages that have descended from Latin, we find that every one of the “mistakes” that the author complained about took hold and is reflected in the daughter languages. No one, apparently, paid any attention to the instructions of the grammar teachers and scholars. They just went on saying “what came naturally,” which was what they heard other people saying.

This is essentially what we all do, even though we may “know better.” How many of us have said *it’s me* in answer to the question *Who’s there?* Do we know that *It’s me* is bad grammar and that we’re supposed to say *It is I?* Probably. Then why do we say it? Most people would reply, “because that’s what everyone else says,” or “it would sound stilted or silly to say *It is I,*” and so on. The point is that the language is changing, and we say what we hear others saying. The purpose of language is to communicate, and if we don’t communicate in the way others do we are in danger of being misunderstood or being thought of as weird or pedantic or a jokester.

With all this in mind, when we consider the question of “politically correct” language, we can see that there is a totally different process at work in this case. Instead of letting the language change naturally, as the speakers feel the need for new forms, those who are pushing political correctness are trying to impose change on language from the outside. The politically correct language movement attempts to speed up and control the direction of language change. It is a conscious attempt to mold the language into the form that certain people think it should take rather than let it take its normal course. From a theoretical linguistic point of view such an attempt would be doomed to failure, as we have seen, if it weren’t for the fact that those who are controlling the movement have managed to give us a guilty conscience on the subject. We have been made to feel that somehow we are being insensitive to the feelings of various groups if we say the wrong thing, and so we try to follow the dictates of the “language police,” as Poythress and Grudem have termed them. This has resulted in a number of words being replaced by other, “more acceptable” words, not through a natural process of change, but because of outside pressure to do so.<sup>1</sup> And for the

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed discussion of this subject, the reader may wish to look at my “Correctness in Language: Political and Otherwise,” 1996 Presidential Address, *The Twenty-third LACUS*



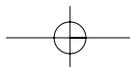
most part these changes have occurred first among educated, scholarly speakers, those who are doing the writing and who do not want their writings to be stigmatized as insensitive or prejudiced. That is, the changes have occurred first in the written word, and have only later trickled down to the spoken language of some people, though by no means all. This is the exact reverse of the usual process of language change, and it remains to be seen whether changes introduced in this fashion will stick. There is a considerable amount of backlash against politically correct language, taking the form of humor, or derision, or simple refusal to use the new forms.

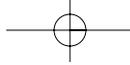
With regard to the issue at hand in the present volume, namely gender-neutral forms, and in particular the issue of generic *he*, there is even more resistance to the changes that the “language police” would have us make. There are several reasons for this. One is that it is relatively easier to replace one vocabulary item with another (to replace *blind* with *visually impaired*, for example) than to change a person’s understanding of the meaning of a word (e.g., to claim that *man* can no longer be used to mean “humanity” in general). Secondly, in the case of *he* in particular, if we say that this word can no longer be used in a generic sense (to mean one person, unspecified as to gender) there is no good way to express the concept. We have no good replacement term, although a number of (rather silly) possibilities have been suggested. Thirdly, and most importantly, the speakers of English do not perceive a need within the language for such a change (as they do, for example, in the case of *you* discussed above). As long as the average speaker (and writer, as Poythress and Grudem illustrate in Chapter 10 and elsewhere) does not feel the need for such a change, and has no ready form to use as a replacement, it will not happen.

Poythress and Grudem show a clear understanding of the basic principles of language change, as outlined above, and have applied them to the subject of Bible translation with great sensitivity to the holiness of the task at hand. They clearly recognize that language does change, and that Bible translations must be revised from time to time to keep up with these changes. On the other hand, they also recognize that there are reasons not to jump the gun. They present statistics (Chapter 2) that show that in both 1996 and 1999 23.5% of Bibles purchased in the United States were the King James Version—written in four-hundred-year-old language! Not everyone is clamoring for a Bible in the most up-to-date language. Some people like the archaic flavor of the language of the King James Version; they find it beautiful; they trust it. On the other hand, modern language translations are also clearly needed—people want to be sure they understand what the Bible says and they don’t want to have to struggle to follow the language. Where the adherents of politically correct Bible translations go wrong, however, is that

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*Forum* 1996, ed. Alan K. Melby (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, 1997), 5–25.





they are rushing to judgment. They are hastening to make changes that the average speaker of English has not yet made and may never make. We do not yet know, for instance, what the ultimate fate of generic *he* will be, and we probably will not know for years. It is not the job of the Bible translator (it is not even the job of the grammar book writer or the dictionary writer) to lead the charge in such a case. It is, rather, their job, as Poythress and Grudem recognize, to follow the patterns of grammar and vocabulary that have already been firmly established through common usage.

As the authors point out again and again, a translator, and most particularly a Bible translator, does not have the option of injecting personal ideas and interpretations into the translation. If we are going to call the result a “translation,” then we must *translate*—not rephrase or paraphrase. Many participants in the translation dispute seem to have an agenda of political correctness which is fueled by the feminist revolution. They want to change gender references and other terms to reflect current views and attitudes toward women. But as Poythress and Grudem state, our only agenda should be to represent God’s Word as it was written, not what we wish His Word had said, nor what we think His Word would have said if it had been written today. Working with a translation that reflects as closely as possible the meaning of the original, Biblical scholars and others who want to interpret the Bible and to understand its meaning in today’s setting are free to do so. But if the translation is done in such a way that the original meaning is obscured or changed, all Christians are deprived of the opportunity to read God’s Word as it was given and then to interpret it according to our own beliefs. In essence we are being *told* what to believe.

This point strikes at the heart of my own personal faith. For most of my life I have belonged to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination which grew out of the Presbyterian and Methodist movements in the early 1800s. It arose from a commitment to the unity of all Christians and thus it rejected the various doctrinal requirements of different churches of that time. We take the Bible as our only creed, and the statement is often made that “where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” This does not necessarily mean that we subscribe to a strictly literal interpretation of Scripture. In fact, most Disciples, for instance, believe that it is acceptable in modern times to have women as pastors and in roles of leadership in the church. I personally have been an elder in my local congregation for over ten years and I also currently hold the office of President of the Congregation and Chair of the General Board. I understand that the teachings of the Bible were intended for people of a different era, and I am perfectly capable of interpreting those teachings and applying them to modern times. It is not necessary for translators to do that for me, nor do I want them to. On the contrary, it is of utmost importance to me, as a Christian, to know exactly what the Scriptures say, in a translation that reflects as closely as possible the exact meaning of the original. Only then

can I decide how the Biblical teachings apply to my life today. As Poythress and Grudem imply, it is insulting to me as a woman and as a thoughtful reader of the Bible to insinuate that I cannot appreciate the differences between ancient and modern cultures, that I am incapable of understanding accurately the meaning of something like generic *he*, and that I have to be catered to lest I be offended by such a “sexist” usage.

This attitude is evident in the fact that some participants in the translation debate take the position that for modern times the Bible ought to be modernized. Poythress and Grudem include the following quote from the Preface to the *Inclusive Language Edition* of the NIV: “. . . it was recognized that it was often appropriate to mute the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers . . . .”<sup>2</sup> And (from a set of internal guidelines used by the Committee on Bible Translation for the NIVI): “The patriarchalism . . . of the ancient cultures in which the Biblical books were composed is pervasively reflected in forms of expression that . . . deny the common human dignity of all hearers and readers.” As Poythress and Grudem forcefully maintain, how does anyone dare condemn God’s own Word as denying the “common human dignity” of His creation! It is rather *we*, in the supreme egotism of assuming that our culture is better than that of the patriarchs, who deny *their* human dignity. How much better to simply say that we will translate God’s Word as it was written, without changing meanings and nuances any more than we absolutely have to, and then allow modern Christians to interpret the message of God’s Word for modern times in whatever way seems best to them.

One of the major problems in translating, which the authors discuss at length, is that one cannot always easily translate all of the meanings contained in a passage. Connotations of words (the extra meanings or associations that a word brings to mind which are not part of the dictionary definition of the word) are an important part of the process of communication, and the connotations of a word in one language are rarely the same as the connotations of the corresponding word in a another language. The choice of one or another translation of a word or phrase may significantly affect the reader’s understanding of a passage. Thus, as the authors point out, it is of great importance that the translation reflect as many as possible of the connotations and nuances of meaning of the original.

Some adherents of gender-neutral language seem not to understand a basic principle which Poythress and Grudem clearly recognize—that nuances of meaning are of tremendous importance in translation (as indeed they are in any act of communication). Linguists are in agreement that *any* change in grammar or wording, no matter how slight, *always changes meaning*. Take as an example the following situation: eight-year-old twins, Susie

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<sup>2</sup>See Chapter 8 for the full text of this and the following quote.

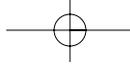
and Billy, are in the kitchen. Their mother comes in and finds milk spilled all over the table. She asks “Who spilled the milk?” and Susie replies “Billy did.” The mother then says one of the following:

- (to Billy) You need to wipe it up right now!  
(to Susie) He needs to wipe it up right now!  
Whoever spilled it needs to wipe it up right now!  
We need to wipe it up right now!  
It needs to be wiped up right now!  
Wiping it up right now would be a good thing!

Which of the above will Billy take more seriously? Which sentence will be most likely to cause him to jump into action? The same basic message (wiping up the milk) is present in all the sentences. Yet there is a clear difference in tone (in nuance) conveyed by the shift from second person (“you”), to third person (“he,” “whoever”), to first person (“we”), to passive—focusing on the milk (“it needs . . .”), to focusing on the action (“wiping it up . . .”). Does it make a difference which sentence the mother chooses to say? It most definitely does, as anyone familiar with children will immediately recognize.

While the above example does not involve generic *he*, the same principle applies to this and to all differences in word choice. The nuances of difference in meaning may at times seem trivial, but this is never the case—especially when we are dealing with Biblical texts which (in sermons, commentaries, and so on) are routinely subjected to intense scrutiny, with each word and its exact implications being carefully analyzed. Throughout their discussion Poythress and Grudem quite rightly emphasize that loss of nuance, with the resulting loss of details of meaning of the original, is something that should be avoided if at all possible. And their claim that substituting gender-neutral language does indeed change nuance and meaning is entirely linguistically sound.

While “translation is not treason,” as the authors point out (Chapter 4), bitter disputes over the translation of God’s Holy Word might be so regarded. It cannot please God to see the dissension that has arisen over what should be a joyous and loving part of fulfilling the Great Commission. Poythress and Grudem have attempted to set the record straight on a number of misunderstood issues in the inclusive language debate. It is to be hoped that all involved in the discussion will read this book carefully.



## Preface

Both of us authors think that the issue of Bible translation deserves careful reflection, and that Christians need to be aware of the problems with gender-neutral translations. So we have undertaken to co-author this book. Though some of the material derives originally from one or the other author, we have both gone through the whole book and we speak with a unified voice.

Because we are writing with all interested Christians in mind, we have tried to explain the issues in ordinary English and to stay free of technicalities as much as possible. Where references to Hebrew and Greek are necessary, we have used transliteration into English letters and tried to keep the argument understandable to ordinary readers. Scholarly readers must understand that in a number of cases, to keep the argument from becoming excessively complex, we have simplified the discussion. In language analysis, almost any generalization has exceptions, and we have refrained from tediously cataloguing them. But we believe that careful investigation will show that the points we are making can be expressed if necessary in more elaborate, precise terms.<sup>1</sup>

Many people have contributed to our understanding. We appreciate our Christian fellowship with all those who participated in the Colorado Springs meeting in May 1997; but special thanks go to James Dobson and Charles Jarvis for organizing the meeting. We are grateful to Kenneth Barker, Ronald Youngblood, Lars Dunberg, and Bruce Ryskamp, because they were willing to engage in kind, patient, and fruitful dialog at that meeting, and subsequently, in spite of earlier differences of opinion.

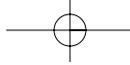
We have also profited from interaction with D. A. Carson, Grant Osborne, and Mark L. Strauss, and we are grateful to them for supplying us with earlier drafts of their work. We now have their published books and articles as well. We appreciate their stimulus and their friendship, even though we do not agree with many of their conclusions.

We appreciate the careful work of Roy and Joi Christians, students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who took a collection of various articles and

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<sup>1</sup>See especially our discussion of “levels” of analysis of linguistic complexity in the excursus at the end of Chapter 4.





unpublished manuscripts that both of us authors had written and helped us combine our work by weaving the bits and pieces into a first draft manuscript from which we could then work. We are also grateful to Aaron Thurber for quickly and accurately compiling the index of persons and the index of Scripture references.

We also wish to thank the members of Fellowship Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas, who generously provided a grant that enabled us to finish much of the work in the final months of this project.

We are thankful to journal editors and publishers for their permissions to republish some material here. We have incorporated in revised form pieces from Vern S. Poythress, "Gender in Bible Translation: Exploring a Connection with Male Representatives," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60/2 (1998): 225–253; Vern S. Poythress, "Explanation of the Colorado Springs Guidelines," at the Web site of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, [www.cbmw.org](http://www.cbmw.org); Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, and Leicester: InterVarsity, 1999), 33–48; and Wayne A. Grudem, "NIV Controversy: Participants Sign Landmark Agreement," *CBMW News* 2/3 (June 1997): 1, 3–6.

