



# LOST IN TRANSLATION

Bob Smietana

A new version of the New Testament has sparked a debate on how to translate God's word into modern language.

Walk into a Christian bookstore today and ask for a Bible, and you may be overwhelmed by your choices. There are student Bibles, study Bibles, men's Bibles, women's Bibles, couple's Bibles, and children's Bibles. One-year Bibles. Precious Moments Bibles. Prayer of Jabez Bibles. WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) Bibles. You might even find a "Pizza Lover's Bible," says Larry Eskridge, associate director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals. "People are pretty comfortable with different packaging of the Bible," Eskridge says. "But when you start tinkering with the text, that becomes more troublesome."

Disagreement over what is legitimate revision and what is tinkering with the Bible is behind much of the controversy surrounding the Today's New International Version (TNIV). At issue is a decision made by the Committee for Bible Translation (CBT), which produced the New International Version (NIV) and the TNIV, to stop using "he" and "man" as generic terms for people. Instead, the CBT uses "gender-neutral language"—"they" or "human beings" in places where the text refers to human beings in general. In most cases, the TNIV also uses "brothers and sisters" instead of "brothers." All male references to God and to Jesus remain unchanged.

The changes affect some of the most familiar passages of the New Testament. First Corinthians 13:1, which in the NIV begins, "If I speak with the tongues of men or angels but have not love," becomes, "If I speak in human or angelic tongues." In Matthew 3:30, Jesus says, "Come . . . and I will make you fishers of men in the NIV. The TNIV passage reads, "Come . . . and I will send you out to catch people."

The TNIV, which was unveiled by the International Bible Society (IBS) and Zondervan Publishing at the Christian Booksellers Association Expo on January 28, came under immediate criticism from conservative groups like Focus on the Family. James Dobson accused the IBS, which oversaw the translation, of distorting the Scriptures to appease feminist elements in the church.

"I am now adding my name to the list of those who disagree with the liberties IBS has taken with God's Word in the new translation," Dobson said in a statement on February 7. ". . . I will continue to speak out against any effort that alters God's Word or toys with translation methodology for the sake of 'political correctness.'"

The Committee for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) called the CNT's decisions "dangerous and irresponsible." *World* magazine accused the translators of the TNIV of behaving as "if the Bible were their proprietary possession."

*World*, Focus on the Family, and CBMW all opposed an inclusive version of the NIV (the NIVI) which is available only in Great Britain. In 1997, representatives from those three groups met with Zondervan and IBS in Colorado Springs and reached an agreement about restricting the use of gender-neutral language. Zondervan and IBS withdrew from the agreement a

Standard Version, use "gender-accurate language." None of those translations has been criticized for that decision, says Bolinder.

That's because groups like CBMW and Focus on the Family don't see those translations as "their Bible," says Linda Belleville, professor of biblical literature at North Park Theological Seminary. (The NIV, which makes up 40 percent of Bibles sold, has become the standard Bible in most evangelical churches.)

"The issue is not translation accuracy," says Belleville. "What is driving this is a cultural agenda. That very conservative constituency within the evan-

## Then his daughter asked him, "Why is the Bible only written to boys?"

few days before announcing the TNIV.

Scott Bolinder, a member of Thornapple Evangelical Covenant Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and executive vice-president of Zondervan, says that the translators of the TNIV had only one agenda in mind—to create the most accurate translation of the Bible they could. Any revisions were driven by new biblical scholarship and changes in the English language. Rather than imposing specific language on the text, he says, the translators were reacting to the way people use English.

"The English language changes," Bolinder says. "There is no debate about that, just about when it changes and how often it changes." Because the last revision was done nearly twenty years ago in 1984, says Bolinder, it was time for a new version of the NIV. Otherwise, the NIV would lose its effectiveness as a translation.

He also notes that most new translations, such as the New Living Translation (NLT), the Contemporary English Version, and the New Revised

gecal community views the NIV as *their* Bible. The reason the NLT did not get any flack is because they don't see it as their Bible that supports their agenda.

Belleville, who worked on the NLT and in an advisory capacity with the TNIV, says she is concerned that any one translation is seen as "the Bible."

"That is very dangerous," she says. "That invests human translators like me with infallibility—that's not the way God works in terms of inspiration. We are not inspired and we don't claim to be inspired."

Randy Stinson, executive director of the CBMW, says his organization would be concerned about any translation that would be considered gender neutral. Stinson worries that people will assume the TNIV is as reliable as the NIV, something he believes is not the case.

Stinson believes that some of the changes in the TNIV have altered the

**Bob Smetana is features editor of the *Companion*.**



meaning of the texts. “The English language does change over time,” he says, “but when you are talking about translating a historic document, like the Bible, you have to be faithful to the original meaning of that historic document. And the Bible is much more serious than just an average historical document because we believe that it was inspired by God. For us that means every single word is inspired. Every word is important.”

In the TNIV, the Greek word *aner*, which means “man,” is sometimes translated as “human,” something Stin-

son says is not accurate. “Even if 1,000 years from now, no one understands the word ‘he’ to mean people or persons,” he says, “you still would not be able to translate *aner* in a generic way because it is not allowed linguistically.”

Translation use an approach called dynamic equivalence or “meaning for meaning.” In looking at 1 Corinthians 1:26, a translator would try and find out what Paul meant, and then find a corresponding English phrase. In the NIV and TNIV, that verse is translated, “Not many of you were wise by human standards.” The NLT says, “Not many of you were wise in the world’s eyes.”

Even the literal translation still has to make judgments about what the text means, says Belleville. The King James translates Philippians 1:8, “For God is

changes include using “Jewish leaders” when the Gospel writers refer to a specific group, not the whole community, and using “believers” or “God’s people” instead of “saints.”

“We have tried to clear up the problem with the word ‘saints,’” says Madvig, “which was not intended in the Bible to refer to extraordinary Christians. It meant just ordinary Christians.”

Another change was using *bags of gold* instead of *talents* in Matthew 25:14–30. “The word *talent* does not refer to an ability,” Madvig says. “It refers to a weight. So we have changed it to ‘bags of gold,’ so that people will understand that the text is talking about money—not abilities.”

A lighthearted change came when the committee looked at the word *alien*, says Doug Moo, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College. “We realized that we had to stop using the word *alien* in the text to refer to a foreigner,” says Moo. “In the light of the popularity of *E.T.* and other space programs, most readers, when they read the word *alien*, will think of someone from another planet.”

Although the TNIV Old Testament will not be completed for several years, Madvig estimates the revisions will affect about 7 percent of the text—the same as the New Testament.

Madvig says that accusations that the CBT has been influenced by a feminist agenda are groundless. All the committee members are conservative evangelicals and have a very high view of Scripture. That belief in the importance of the Scriptures drove the revisions, says Madvig, including being gender accurate. “There is a certain element in our population that don’t hear masculine terms as generic anymore, particularly children,” he says. “Young girls feel left out when masculine terms are used.”

Madvig, who recently finished an interim ministry at the Covenant church in Jericho, Vermont, says that he assumed that everyone in his gen-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

## “So I understand your husband is putting out a Bible that makes God a woman.”

son says is not accurate. “Even if 1,000 years from now, no one understands the word ‘he’ to mean people or persons,” he says, “you still would not be able to translate *aner* in a generic way because it is not allowed linguistically.”

That view of the word *aner* is not correct, says Belleville. She says that some authors, like James, use *aner* and the Greek word *anthropos* (which can mean human) interchangeably. “If you say *aner* means a ‘male human being’ all the time,” she says, “you are not taking into account how different authors use language.”

In trying to judge the accuracy of the TNIV, Belleville says, it’s important to understand the translation guidelines the CBT used. There are two basic approaches to Bible translation. First is a formal equivalence or “word for word translation,” such as the King James, Revised Standard Version, or the New American Standard Version. This approach tries to find an English word that is the equivalent of each Greek word in the text.

“So if the Greek says ‘flesh’ in 1 Corinthians 1:26—Not many of you were wise according to the flesh—that’s a word for word translation,” she says.

The NIV, TNIV, and New Living

my record, how I long for you in the bowels of Jesus Christ.”

“The Greek word means bowels,” says Belleville, “so it’s a word for word translation. Back in the 1600s, that might have been understandable. Now the English is not understandable and a word for word translation isn’t going to help.” That verse reads “how I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus” in most translations.

Don Madvig, a retired Covenant minister and seminary professor, worked on both the NIV and the TNIV and is vice-chair of the CBT. He says that there is no such thing as an infallible or perfect translation. “Every translation is an interpretation,” he says.

Madvig bristles at the suggestion that the TNIV uses gender-neutral language. Instead he says, translators have used “gender-accurate language.”

“Masculine terms are used for men and boys,” he says, “just as feminine terms are used for women and girls. What we have done is to avoid the generic use of masculine terms whenever the reference is clearly to both men and women.”

Using gender-accurate language is only a small part of the revision work in the TNIV, says Madvig. Other