

Inclusive Language Bible Translations

By Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

Despite their concern to translate the Bible accurately, many opponents of inclusive-language Bible translations use words that offer more emotional impact than accuracy. Bible translations that do not use “man” or “men” or “brothers” to indicate people in general—but rather use terms such as “person,” “people” or “brothers and sisters”—are accused of being “unisex” translations that “neuter” the Bible and “obliterate gender distinctions.”

What is unisex about speaking of the human race with words that clearly indicate both sexes are present and accounted for? It would be much more logical to call “unisex” the practice of referring to both males and females with masculine terms, for this collapses both sexes into one, subsuming the female gender under the male gender and obscuring not only the inclusion of females in the human race but also the distinct presence of two sexes.

Inclusive-language opponents insist that when women come across terms such as “man” and “men” in Scripture, they are supposed to understand when women are included. Any woman who can’t negotiate this internal translation process has simply been brainwashed by feminists. After all, you don’t neuter the Bible and obliterate God-ordained gender differences just to make women feel included.

Yet if, in fact, “man” and “men” are used in Scripture to refer to males and females equally, then the meaning of these terms in such contexts is already gender-neutral, and the use of other, more obviously gender-neutral terms in translation does not change or further neutralize their meaning. In other words, if and when the intended meaning of words translated “man” and “men” in non-inclusive versions is that of humans in general without respect to gender, then their translation into inclusive terms such as “person,” “one,” “people,” or “mortals” does not change or neuter the meaning of the words in the original text, but rather clarifies their meaning.

But if, on the other hand, the generic use of “man” and “men” points to the centrality and normativity of maleness in both the divine and human agendas, then these terms are never truly gender inclusive; they refer primarily to men and only secondarily to women. In this case the use of masculine terms in the generic sense cannot be defended by insisting that women simply need to understand that these male-oriented terms include them too. If the underlying meaning conveyed by the generic use of masculine terms points to the spiritual primacy of maleness in any sense, then women are being excluded and marginalized by such language. Try as they might, opponents of inclusive language translations can’t have it both ways.

If translations that fully include women in God’s agenda for humanity “neuter” the biblical view of gender difference, then the Bible was written more for men than for women, and any talk of male/female equality is nonsensical. But if God’s Word is for women and men equally, then translating it accordingly does not “neuter,” render

“unisex,” or otherwise obliterate God-ordained gender differences.

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