

*The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism.* By D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, 221 pp., \$13.99 paper. *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy.* By Mark L. Strauss. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 240 pp., \$12.99 paper.\*

The other day, my six-year-old daughter Lauren and I read the gospel account in which Jesus promises to make his followers "fishers of men" (or so it read in the NIV that we were using). My daughter commented: "Daddy, I'm going to be a fisher of *women*," and then adding, with customary "generosity," "Tahlia [her younger sister], *she* can be a fisher of *men*." I was struck by the perceptive nature of my daughter's remark: unaware of the recent inclusive-language controversy, she had unwittingly yet intuitively picked up on the need for Bible translators in this day and age to be sensitive to how they render gender-related terms in Scripture.

The "inclusive language debate" that first erupted in the spring of 1997 is one of the most recent controversies that has pitted sincere, godly, card-carrying evangelicals against one other who defend with equal fervor the validity of their respective viewpoints. Who is right? Here are two authors, both complementarians — though Strauss's comment that "Adam's priority in creation *may perhaps* mean that he is to function as leader in the relationship (1 Tim 2:12–13)" does not exactly sound very convinced (p. 139, emphasis mine) — who argue forcefully that a gender-inclusive approach to Bible translation is not only not necessarily in conflict with a high view of Scripture, but alone does justice to the requirements of proper translation. Because of the significant overlap between these works, this review, after a brief sketch of the contents of both works, will focus primarily on Carson's contribution owing to the perhaps more influential nature of his treatment and refer to Strauss only where this is called for in light of additional information provided by him or a variance in viewpoints.

Carson moves from a thumbnail sketch of the recent debate (chap. 1) and a presentation of two largely competing sets of guidelines on the translation of gender-related terms of Scripture (chap. 2) to a discussion of the nature of Bible translation with special emphasis on the rendering of gender-related language (chaps. 3 and 4). This is followed by a brief evaluation of the guidelines produced by the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT), which is responsible for both the NIV and the NIVI (an inclusive-language version of the NIV first published in the UK in 1995) and the Colorado Springs Guidelines (CSG, crafted at a May 1997 meeting convened by Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family; chap. 5) and a treatment of some additional OT and NT passages, as well as some critical passages with important doctrinal issues at stake (chaps. 6–8). After addressing the effect of changes in the English language on the translation of Biblical terms related to gender (chap. 9), Carson concludes with several "pastoral considerations" (chap. 10). Carson's book also has a general and a Scripture index (both unfortunately missing in Strauss's volume).

Strauss likewise begins by seeking to set the present controversy into historical perspective (chap. 1), which is followed by a survey of gender-inclusive as well as feminist versions (chaps. 2 and 3); the latter is, perhaps appropriately so, not deemed necessary for inclusion in Carson. The remainder of the book is given to critique. This includes a discussion of the nature of Bible translation (chap. 4), inclusive language related to human beings: generic "man" and "he" (chap. 5, plus an excursus on contemporary English usage; Carson devotes an entire chapter to this), other generic terms (chap. 6), and language related to God and to Jesus Christ (chap. 7). The final chapter presents Strauss' conclusions (chap. 8) and is followed by two appendixes on the CSG and a comparison of gender-inclusive versions. Not only is these two authors' procedure quite similar, they argue the same case, often using the exact same examples to illustrate their point. For this reason it would be redundant to trace the argument of both in detail. As mentioned, the remainder of the review therefore will focus primarily on Carson.

In the tradition of adjudicating controversial issues (see his earlier *The King James Version Debate*), Carson issues "a plea for realism" regarding the use of inclusive language in Bible

translation. He contends that "all translation is treason" (p. 47), quoting III old Italian proverb (*traddutore, traditore*), and that compromise is the stuff of which translations are made. Gender systems differ from language to language, so that a formal-equivalence approach fails to do justice to the complex task of translating the Scriptures from the original Greek and Hebrew into contemporary English.

As Carson demonstrates at the very outset, a concern for gender inclusion in Bible translation is not a recent phenomenon. Tyndale's 1526 version (Matt 5:9), the KJV (translation of Heb. *bēn*, pl. *bēnîm*), and even Paul (2 Cor 6:18 quoting 2 Sam 7:14) and the LXX (Hos 2:4 [6]) evidence gender-inclusive renderings. Yet, Carson laments, the recent debate is largely characterized by mutual distrust, polarization, ignorance of the nature of Bible translation and an illegitimate linking of Bible translation to the question of Biblical fidelity.

Chronicling the debate surrounding the 1997 revelation of Zondervan's plans to produce a gender-inclusive version of the NIV, Carson notes that complementarian scholars (such as himself) broke with the leading complementarian organization, the *Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, "because they disagreed with its tightly linking the issue of complementarianism to that of gender-inclusive translations" (p. 35).

Indeed, one of the more significant effects of the current debate has been the dividing of the complementarian camp into advocates and opponents of a gender-inclusive approach to Bible translation. Carson points out that at least some (if not most) signers of the CSG produced by those opposing such an approach do not have formal training in Biblical languages or Bible translation and presumably signed the statement primarily out of trust in those crafting it owing to their complementarian commitment and a concern that feminism appears to be making inroads in the area of Bible translation. I should point out, however, that there are at least a few who do have linguistic expertise (see esp. Vern Poythress, "Gender in Bible Translation: Exploring a Connection with Male Representatives," *WTJ* 60 [1998] 225–253, esp. 226, n. 5).

An adjudication between both sides of the debate then ensues, in which Carson concurs largely (though not entirely without reservations) with the guidelines produced by the NIV's CBT. In the slightly ponderous chap. 4 on the nature of gender in language Carson shows how translators must understand how the gender system works in both donor and receptor languages. Gender systems in two languages will be different, so that the issue is marked by considerable complexity, and there is no possibility of faithful renderings by way of formal equivalents.

For this reason "the argument that attaches a particular formal equivalent in gender assignment to faithfulness to the Word of God is profoundly mistaken in principle" (p. 98). Thus Carson (rightly, I believe) calls on Wayne Grudem to withdraw his charge to that effect (p. 206, n. 4) and on *World* magazine to apologize publicly for its tendentious reporting (p. 194). Overall, Carson finds the CSG "open to far more and far more serious linguistic objections" than the CBT principles (p. 111). According to Carson, the CSG frequently appeal to conservatism in language (when, according to Carson, the English language has changed with regard to gender language), and its proponents tend to be characterized by lexical woodenness (p. 120).

In his treatment of specific Biblical terms involving gender, Carson maintains that the term *anthrōpos* never means "man" (that is, a male human being), though it may *refer* to such a person, while the expression *anēr*, while having "male human being" as its default meaning, also occurs in a generic sense. Those who believe that "male human being" is part of the semantic range of *anthrōpos* are charged with confusing meaning and reference (though Carson seems to leave the door open just a bit when he refers to "human being" as "the *primary* meaning of *anthrōpos*," pp. 150–151 [italics mine], calling this the "normal" or "default meaning," pp. 153, 160). While conceding that the inclusive edition of the NN already published in the UK is "too loose" at times (p. 125), he maintains that it is generally on target.

Regarding the translation of *adelphoi* (rendered as "brothers" in the NN) as "brothers and sisters,"

Carson asserts that "[t]his is not flawed translation: rather, the expanded English expression is including people who would have felt included in the Greek *adelphos* but who by and large do not feel so included in English 'brothers'" (p. 131). Strauss's argument is identical (pp. 147–151). Notably, even Grudem and the (revised) CSG concur, at least regarding instances of *adelphos* in the plural (though they are rightly chided by both Carson and Strauss for failing to extend the same principle to the singular as well).

In conclusion, Carson appeals for high journalistic standards, calls for the participants in the debate to slow down, encourages them to avoid impugning others' motives, to eschew entrenched positions, to shun manipulative language and to be careful what they sign on to. Carson finds the criticism of gender-inclusive translation in large part motivated by a certain social agenda regarding the roles of men and women.

What are the merits of Carson's (and Strauss') case? Space permits only a few substantive comments of evaluation. To begin with, Carson must be credited with a thorough grasp of the nature of translation and an ability to communicate often complex issues in intelligible terms to a popular audience. As one who initially shared many of the concerns of those opposing a gender-inclusive approach to Bible translation, I found myself a cautious convert to Carson's position.

I am a "convert," because Carson has, to my mind successfully, demonstrated that formal equivalence is severely flawed as an approach to translating gender language in Scripture. Thus, at least in principle, a functional equivalence approach must be used. This renders many of the criticisms set forth by opponents of a gender-inclusive approach invalid (such as Wayne Grudem's "Response to Mark Strauss' Evaluation of the Colorado Springs Translation Guidelines," *JETS* 41 [1998] 263–286).

I remain a "cautious" convert, because in some matters of (not insignificant) detail some residual questions remain. Perhaps the most important pertains to the meaning of *anthrōpos* and *anēr* (see the perceptive critique by Poythress, "Gender" 226–227). Is the meaning "male human being" in the case of *anthrōpos* really to be consigned exclusively to the category "referent," as Carson maintains (pp. 126–127)? On this point even Mark Strauss includes "male human being" in the semantic range of this word (e.g. p. 14: "Here [in Matt 9:9] *anthrōpos* clearly means 'a male human being'" [emphasis mine]; p. 195: "The Greek lexeme *anthrōpos*, for example, has a semantic range that includes the various senses 'human being,' 'male human being,' 'humanity' and so on"). Andrew Perriman, who likewise shares Carson's overall view, independently asserts the same, speaking merely of "a more inclusivist semantic profile than *anēr*" in the case of *anthrōpos* (*Speaking of Women: Interpreting Paul* [Apollos, 1998] 215).

Are Strauss, Perriman and others then all subject to "confusion over the elementary linguistic distinction between meaning and referent" (Carson, p. 127)? Or is Carson's case here unduly dichotomous? Apart from the fact that most standard NT Greek dictionaries include "male human being" in the semantic range of *anthrōpos*, one may cite numerous passages in the LXX such as Gen 20:7; 26:11; Exod 2:21; Lev 20:10; Num 5:15; 25:8; 31:35; Deut 17:5; 20:7; 21:15; 22:16,22,24; 23:1 [22:30]; 25:7; 1 Sam 25:3; Esth 4:11; Eccl 7:28; Isa 4:1; Jer 51:7 [44:7]; 1 Esdr 4:25; 9:40; Tob 6:7 (not to speak of extra-Biblical references such as Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *De compo verb.* 18.201; Dio Chrysostom, *Drat.* 32.89.3; or Clement of Rome, *Homil.* 13.15.2) where *anthrōpos* quite demonstrably stands in semantic opposition to *gynē*, "woman," which suggests that "male human being" at least in these instances is a semantic component of *anthrōpos* rather than merely coming into play at the level of reference (see Perriman, *Speaking of Women* 218). Incidentally, this is where Strauss's consistent dichotomization between *anthrōpos* in a certain context meaning "male" rather than "human being" (e.g. p. 184), based on his maxim that a "word generally has only one 'sense' in any particular literary context" (p. 99), turns out to be doubtful, because it unduly biases the interpreter against possible male connotations of *anthrōpos* in a given instance (e.g. John 10:33; see Grudem, "Response" 277–278). As Perriman notes, "It is important to keep in mind that

*anthrōpos* may have masculine overtones which are lost in an inclusive translation" (*Speaking of Women* 217).

Likewise, in the discussion of *anēr*, one should probably avoid placing proportionately too much emphasis on the generic sense of the term (which is suggested already by the availability of the less marked term *anthrōpos*). For instance, when Acts 17:34 is adduced as an instance where *anēr* means "male human being" because apparent reference is also made to a woman, Damaris, we should note that standard commentaries such as F. F. Bruce (*The Book of Acts* [NICNT; rev. ed.; Eerdmans, 1988] 343) take *anēr* as referring merely to a group of men (males) including Dionysius, which are set off from other converts such as the above-named woman. This is also the interpretation underlying both the NASB and the NIV. Presumably it is for this reason that Mark Strauss wisely refrains from using this passage to support his argument (pp. 108–109).

In light of the above, care must be taken to guard against a revisionist understanding and consequent erosion in the lexical understanding of various gender-related terms used in Scripture that may result from a gender-inclusive approach to Bible translation. That such an erosion has already occurred in some circles is evident from the translation of *anēr* as something other than man in passages such as Matt 7:24,26; Luke 5:18; 22:63; Acts 1:21; 9:7; 11:20 and 20:30 in certain gender-inclusive versions.

A second element of concern relates to the danger of down playing the presence of ideological elements in the debate (cf. Stanley E. Porter, "The Contemporary English Version and the Ideology of Translation," in *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects*, JSNTSup 173 [1999] 18–45, esp. 32–34). In fact, apart from the fact whether or not ideology is a *driving factor* in gender-inclusive translation, it is undeniable (acknowledged by both Carson, p. 159, and Strauss, pp. 45–46) that such translation may pave the way for an egalitarian understanding of Biblical teaching on gender roles (see e.g. gender-inclusive translations of Acts 1:21; 20:30; Titus 1:6; cf. Poythress, "Gender" 226). While gender-inclusive translation may in a given instance be *justified* on general linguistic grounds, this does not necessarily mean that such is to be preferred on the basis of contextual or larger theological considerations.

Finally, the price that has to be paid in gender-inclusive translation should be frankly acknowledged. For instance, while an inclusive rendering of *adelphos* in both singular and plural seems unobjectionable where this is indicated by the context, the underlying principle (stated in the NIV preface) that it is "often appropriate to mute the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers through gender-inclusive language" when this can "be done without compromising the message of the Spirit" may not be quite as unproblematic as Carson (pp. 27–28) and others contend. Such practice raises the specter of the historical particularity of Scriptural revelation as well as the issue of the task and nature of Bible translation. Is "muting the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers" necessarily the task of the translator or could this also be done by way of explanatory footnotes, Biblical exposition, or other forms of commentary on the text? Perhaps here the reluctance of conservative voices is not quite as illegitimate as it is made out to be by some.

On the whole, it can hardly be denied that the extent of agreement between the Biblical languages and contemporary English is diminishing (at least in the area of gender terminology), as was the case when "Thou" and "Thee" gave way to "you." Some may respond to this development with linguistic conservatism (Grudem) while others, more "realistically minded" (Carson, Strauss), are more readily prepared to yield to the (apparently) inevitable.

It may be concluded that Carson and Strauss have established — at least to my own satisfaction — that a gender-inclusive approach to Bible translation stands in no necessary conflict with the effort to preserve Biblical fidelity. Furthermore, it is in general the preferable way of rendering gender-related expressions from one language into another, because it is the only truly adequate and linguistically responsible way. Nevertheless, more work remains to be done on a proper lexical understanding of gender-related Scriptural terms such as *anthrōpos* or *anēr*.

It is hoped that the present polarization on this important issue can gradually give way to an increased understanding of the task and challenge of Bible translation and that the common ground between both sides can be enlarged. As Moises Silva has acknowledged in his conciliatory and judicious conclusion to *God, Language and Scripture* (pp. 137–138), there is indeed room for differing perspectives on this issue (and even kinds of translations). In light of this we would all do well to heed Carson's parting advice to slow down, avoid entrenched positions, and be careful what we sign on to.

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