A Brief Layman’s Guide: 
Understanding the Problems With 
Gender-Neutral Translating

Introduction

This paper is a basic study of gender-neutral language, particularly in the NIV11. A gender-neutral translation removes or retranslates many words and phrases that are gender-specific, that is, words that refer specifically to a man or a woman. While all translations have used inclusive language to a limited extent, a dedicated gender-neutral translation has as one of its goals to remove all gender specific language. There is no problem with words that refer to specific male individuals like Moses or Abraham, but with words that refer or can refer to men and women in a mixed group. Almost all of the effort in gender-neutral translating is spent on male words. The main words affected are those that traditionally have been translated “man,” “he/his/him,” “father,” “brother,” and “son.” This paper talks about the reasons for gender-neutral translations, whether gender-neutral translating is accurate, and how it affects the teaching of the inspiration of Scripture. As much as possible, this paper is written in nontechnical language to help lay readers understand the issues.

I am an editor at Northwestern Publishing House. If our synod chooses to use the NIV11, I will use it in my work as an editor. However, I have serious enough concerns that I will not use it in my personal teaching and preaching.

If the NIV11 did not go beyond legitimate gender-neutral changes, and many such changes could be made (I’ll explain this in the following), it would be a useful update of the 1984 NIV. The NIV11’s translations of some verses are substantially improved over the 1984 NIV. True, we find unfortunate word choices here and there like we find in all translations, but pastors could make their members aware of these isolated problems.

This paper is not concerned about isolated problems, nor is it a general review of the NIV11. It is about one aspect of the new NIV, namely, its use of gender-neutral language. This is a more widespread translation procedure—one that is deeply embedded in the NIV11 translation. Our Translation Evaluation Committee has been asking to see a “deal breaker” for our use of the
NIV11. For me, this is a deal breaker. At the least, this paper will give you an opportunity to explore the issues surrounding gender-neutral translating. After you read this paper, you should have a list of things to think about and discuss with your pastor, and you should be ready to read more in-depth books and papers on the subject.

_The Historical Background_

The process of evaluating gender-neutral translations has been going on for some 20 years. The first gender-neutral translation was an update of the Revised Standard Version, released in 1989. It is called the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

In the early 1990s, an arm of the International Bible Society called the CBT (Committee on Bible Translation), laid plans for an update of the 1984 NIV. This update was to be a gender-neutral translation. (Note: The International Bible Society, now called Biblica, owns the copyright to the NIV text, the CBT is their committee in charge of translating the text, and Zondervan Publishing House is licensed by Biblica to print and distribute the NIV.)

When the CBT announced its plans for a gender-neutral translation and laid down guidelines for its translators, there was quite a stir in the Evangelical world. Many scholars wrote against a gender-neutral Bible, which prompted other scholars to offer arguments in favor of such a Bible. The CBT’s first gender-neutral Bible, the NIVI, was released in 1996. Zondervan decided not to release it in the US. It was published and released in Great Britain and is now out of production.

In the US, the CBT had already modified the NIVI into a young person’s Bible called the New International Reader’s Version (the NIrV). Many parents did not want their children reading a gender-neutral Bible, so in 1997 the CBT said it would restore the children’s NIrV to the gender-specific language of the 1984 NIV and said it would not go forward with another gender-neutral translation.

The CBT, however, did go ahead with a gender-neutral translation called the Today’s New International Version (TNIV), released in 2002. This version did not find the wide acceptance Zondervan hoped for and was withdrawn from the market. The NIV11 is the fourth gender-neutral Bible to be released by Biblica and the first one whose release was accompanied with the 1984 NIV being removed from production.

During all this time, for roughly 20 years, a body of literature has been forming on both sides of the controversy. In the late 1990s, the Missouri Synod’s doctrinal commission issued a statement with its conclusion that gender-neutral translating was not faithful to Scripture. The
Missouri Synod subsequently adopted the English Standard Version (ESV). During this time, the controversy did not receive the kind of attention in the WELS that it has received in other church bodies. Professors at our synod schools and those pastors interested in Bible translations were aware of these happenings, but many pastors and the vast majority of laypeople have not yet begun to understand and wrestle with gender-neutrality.

In our Translation Evaluation Committee’s initial work for the 2011 synod convention, it arrived at its conclusion to recommend the NIV11 but did not choose to present the details of this controversy. The TEC now has a mandate from the 2011 synod convention to work for consensus in the WELS, not over which translation to use, but that we should use the NIV11.

The TEC should not be surprised if it hears concerns from within the WELS about the NIV11’s gender-neutral language. The LCMS, the Southern Baptist Convention, and most recently the ELS have declared that they consider the gender-neutral NIV11 to be too inaccurate a translation to use.

The Intricacies of Translating

The discussion about gender-neutral translations takes place on a number of fronts, which we will discuss in this paper. One of these fronts is the intricacies of translating.

Books and papers in favor of gender-neutral translating are filled with discussions on the intricacies of translating. We do not question the facts presented in these discussions. What we do question, however, is whether all the points discussed are important for understanding the more narrow topic of gender-neutral translating.

In one sense, it is easy to understand translating. It’s taking a document written in one language and putting it into the words of another language. To translate literally means to “carry across,” in this case, to carry the meaning of the words written in one language and express that meaning in another language.

The following illustration will help us understand the concept of translating: On a recent hiking trip, my son and I had to climb a rock ledge. For a reason I still can’t understand, my 25-year-old son made it up without any help, and I was left below, struggling to get up. So he planted his feet and reached down with his hand. I curled my fingers like a hook and he did the same. We grasped each other’s hand—finger to finger—and he pulled me up. It worked quite well. Since
our hands were shaped the same, our fingers fit together nicely. It was a good, tight grip that didn’t come apart as he pulled me up.

That’s the goal of translating—to achieve as perfect a fit as possible between two languages. It’s as if God reached down to us with the hand of his Word (written in the Greek and Hebrew languages), and we have the task of wrapping our English language around it so he can pull us up.

In real life, all I had to do was match up my fingers with my son’s to get a nice, tight bond. Our hands were similar enough that it didn’t take much effort to create that bond. That’s what we hope will happen in the task of translating. With a dictionary and some hard work, we hope we can turn Greek and Hebrew into good English—just by matching up the words. However, a professional translator knows it’s not that simple. You also know this if you studied a foreign language in high school and had to speak or translate it. Think about the picture of my son’s hand matching up with mine as he pulled me up. Imagine my son had looked down and seen E.T. standing there. The 1982 movie character was from another world. He had four fingers attached to a rather small hand. His fingers were more than two times as long as the fingers of the human boy who became his friend. If E.T. had expected to be pulled up, he would have been faced with a challenge. It would have been difficult to match his fingers with my son’s because of the difference in the makeup of their hands.

Real-life translating is like that, but far more complicated. Sometimes it’s hard to match up the words of the original document with words from your own language. Languages also handle themselves differently, that is, they are structured in different ways. Some languages depend heavily on word order to make sense. Other languages have complicated word endings that serve the same purpose, telling the reader which noun, for example, goes with which verb or pronoun.

All languages have idioms, that is, short combinations of words that make little sense when treated individually but to which a language has attached a specific meaning. To “hit the road” in English cannot be translated word for word in another language and still have the same meaning attached to it, or any meaning at all.

Sometimes words match up pretty well and translating is easy. But sometimes you must substitute an entirely different set of words to make a meaningful sentence in your own language. Sometimes the meaning of a single word in the document you are translating can only be expressed by using several English words. Sometimes the words seem to match up pretty well, but later you realize you made a subtle mistake and have not really conveyed the meaning of the
document you were trying to translate. You are embarrassed to realize that you missed something even a little Hebrew or Greek child would have picked up on.

Translating is not a science but an art. Translators must be skilled enough to know what the original document is saying and be skilled in their own language. Most important, they must have the ability to elegantly carry the meaning from the original language over to their own.

Sometimes the translator succeeds; sometimes not. He or she must live with the sad thought that the translation has only captured 95 percent of what the original reader got out of the original words. To return to our pictures, a human boy’s hands are fine for him and other humans, and E.T.’s hands are fine for him in his native environment, wherever that is, but fitting the two hands together to get a nice, tight grip is sometimes more easily said than done.

I accept the fact that languages all have different “hands” which must be shaped to fit the hand of God’s Word and that shaping the hands of foreign languages to fit Scripture is often very difficult.

However, the discussion about translation difficulties sometimes makes evaluating gender-neutral language needlessly more complicated than it really is. First, we are not working with a variety of world languages and trying to understand their differences and similarities. We are dealing with three—the two biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek and our language, English. Second, we are not dealing with all the problems one might encounter while translating all of Scripture. In general, we are dealing with a small number of key words and their meanings: the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated into English as “man,” “he/his/him,” “father,” “brother,” and “son.” Third, we are not dealing with complex issues of formal grammatical gender so prominent in some languages. The key words in the original are all naturally masculine as well as grammatically masculine. That is, they are male words, and their formal masculine gender has been determined by what they mean—they are male words and their grammatical gender is masculine.

Fourth, we are not dealing with words whose meanings are difficult to line up across the languages. The main meaning of the Hebrew word for “father,” for example, is not much different from the main meaning of “father” in English. True, there are several Hebrew words that can be translated “man,” and the translator often has to choose whether or not to reflect some nuance of meaning in his or her translation. But with some explanation, those additional words can easily be understood by a layperson. Fifth, very often in gender-neutral translating the changes that are being suggested do not entail subtle judgments on which English word to use in
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translation. Rather, in the interest of keeping the translation gender-neutral, a completely different word is sometimes used, or words are omitted altogether.

Sixth, the English pronouns “he,” “his,” and “him” fit together fairly well with the masculine singular verb and noun endings and pronouns of the original Hebrew and Greek languages. True, there will be times when the translator will have to adjust the grammar a bit for the sake of English style. But a large part of gender-neutral translating is deciding how to rewrite a sentence so masculine pronouns or masculine words in general do not have to be used.

My advice to laypeople is not to be afraid to discuss gender-neutrality because you think that the complexities and difficulties of translating in general are over your head. We are dealing with a narrowly defined set of words whose meaning can easily be carried across from the original language to English, unless, of course, one is striving to be gender-neutral. This is not to oversimplify the problems that do exist; it is only to let you know that in gender-neutral translating there is a more narrow set of problems than is sometimes implied.

Changes in the English Language

Sometimes translating becomes more difficult because languages can change. The Hebrew and Greek original manuscripts never change. What can change, however, is the language into which the original is being translated. This hardly needs stating. The English that was used in the King James Version is not the English we use today. Reading the King James with understanding is possible, but it takes more effort than reading a modern translation like the NIV. English is a living language. It changes slowly and almost imperceptibly to those who use it. But over time it does change and a translation must take those changes into account. To use our picture, as I grow older, my hand changes a bit so that I must compensate a little as I try to form a tight fit with my son’s hand that is reaching down to pull me up. The NIV translation committee, the CBT, was convinced that English had changed enough since the 1984 NIV was published to warrant a new updated translation.

Most changes in the NIV11 are relatively minor. There is one major change, however, namely, how gender language is addressed. Gender-neutral translators argue that English has changed over the last 30 years in how it uses the key male words referred to previously, especially “man” and “he/his/him,” when these words are referring to a group of both men and women. Thirty years ago these male words could be easily understood in reference to a group of men and women. Not so today.
There is little doubt that a change has taken place. It took place quickly. Most will agree that the feminist movement had much to do with this. Today, gender-neutral language is used in most books and publications, even by publishers like Northwestern Publishing House, and people are used to it. The translators of the NIV believed they had to take this fact into account when updating the NIV. They believed that if the Bible is to be understood in our society, there can be no gender-specific language. They wanted to produce a translation that is more clear to those who only know gender-neutral language and especially to those outside the church whom we are trying to reach with the gospel.

This desire is valid, and it is not necessarily fueled by a feminist agenda among the CBT translators. As mentioned, Northwestern Publishing House itself uses gender-neutral language in its publications for this very reason. We acknowledge the change. We don’t argue that gender-neutral language is merely a fad. And we believe we are free to use that kind of language if it more easily fits today’s way of speaking and writing. All the editors are very much aware of the techniques for making our language gender-neutral. We realize that some techniques weaken the language a bit. But, in general, we believe one’s message can be conveyed in gender-neutral language. This entire paper is written using gender-neutral language.

The real issue—actually the only issue—is this: Can the gender-neutral language of the NIV11 accurately carry the meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew words across into the English language? Is it a good tool to use in fitting the hand of our English language into the hand of the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures?

The Question of Accuracy

Those familiar with the 1984 NIV will find noticeable changes in the NIV11. Some are rather jarring. When Paul, for example, addresses members of his churches, we are familiar with his address “Brothers! . . .” The NIV11 translates, “Brothers and sisters! . . .” The reader asks, “Where did ‘sisters’ come from?” When they are told that “sisters” is not in the original but was added by the translators, they wonder why. (This is not a comment on whether or not that particular change is accurate. It is only an example of a more obvious change.)

Most changes, however, are less obvious but far more common, numbering in the hundreds or thousands throughout the NIV11. They are the kind of changes I’m making as I write this paper if I notice I have used some gender-specific language. You might notice the changes if you went back to my original and compared it with the new version. But you would not notice them in
normal reading. In reference to the NIV11, you would likely not notice the vast majority of gender-neutral changes even if you were thoroughly versed in the Scriptures and read from them daily. They are embedded in the fabric of that translation.

Such changes made in the NIV11 were not goofs, nor were they blatant attempts to change Scripture. The CBT made its changes in a careful, deliberate way for one purpose, namely, to make its translation gender-neutral. But again, the main question is this: Are the changes accurate translations of the Bible words in question? When the June district conventions are held, this question will take on huge proportions. With a “yes” vote, a delegate will be saying, “I think these changes are accurate.” With a “no” vote, he will be saying, “I don’t think these changes are accurate.”

I would like to offer two pieces of advice for those who are voting. First, don’t go along with the argument that all translations contain errors and the NIV11 is no different. Gender-neutral translation is a systemic issue—to use a medical term. It is not a matter of a botched translation here or there, or an occasional unfortunate use of words, or even a few passages translated to reflect a translator’s erroneous doctrinal position. It is careful and consistent changes made to remove the male aspects of Scripture, which are considered to be stumbling blocks to the modern reader.

Second, delegates will not have the option of relying on the experts. There are enough experts on both sides of the fence, both in the Evangelical world and in Lutheranism. And, I might add—and this is perhaps the hardest sentence of this paper to write—among us in the WELS. Yet this should not frighten us. Rather, it should lead us as individuals to make up our minds on this issue—in favor of the NIV11 or against it—in a careful and deliberate way. The last thing anyone wants, regardless of their convictions, is to be the last one to speak to a district convention delegate who has not made up his mind, and know that your last-minute encouragement to vote this way or that led him to cast an uninformed vote.

**ADAM: A Word Study**

They say that the devil is in the details. Nowhere is this more true than in the issue we are facing. To make a decision on the NIV11 we cannot be satisfied with general information on translating. If we are to make decisions about accuracy or have the ability to sort through the decisions others have made, we must look at the words themselves and determine their meaning.
from how they are used in Scripture. In this paper we will use the Old Testament, written in Hebrew, in most of our discussion.

As mentioned previously, there are five key words about which decisions must be made when creating a gender-neutral translation. These are the Hebrew words we translate “man,” “he/his/him,” “father,” “brother,” and “son.”

One of the Hebrew words we translate “man” should receive the lion’s share of our attention. It is a very special word, and I believe a study of this word will go a long way in helping us evaluate our topic. This word provides insights into how the Lord taught his people to understand gender issues. Understanding this word will, in my opinion, help us understand why Scripture refers to males and females as it does and give us a framework in which to evaluate gender-neutral translating.

The word is ADAM. Don’t pronounce it like you pronounce the name Adam. Rather, pronounce the two “A”s like you would if a doctor asked you to open your mouth and say, “ahhh.” And put the accent on the second syllable. That’s closer to how the Hebrews pronounced it.

This word is found repeatedly in the section of Scripture where Moses describes the creation of men and women, Genesis chapters 1–5. These chapters lay the foundation for the rest of Scripture. They tell us about God’s perfect creation, especially his creation of the first two people. They also tell us about how people fell into sin and about the difficulties he sent into their lives because they fell. These chapters also tell us about the first promise of a Savior. They tell us about the first events of life outside the Garden of Eden. We will concentrate on the meaning of the word God used to refer to the first man and woman.

There is an advantage to starting with this section of Scripture. When dealing with the use of male-oriented terms in Scripture, the subject of cultures comes up. Later in this paper, we will talk more about this. For now, however, note that some who favor a gender-neutral translation believe that the male words used in Scripture merely reflect the culture in which the Bible text was written. Some say that regardless of how much meaning the people of that culture saw in these words, it was meaning imposed on that word by their society and, therefore, finding meaning in these ancient male words is not important for people of other cultures or times. For those who think this way, gender-neutral language is not a major concern; indeed, it is the way to go. However, those who are not in favor of gender-neutral translating believe that the male language of Scripture rises above culture, that God had a reason for including this kind of
language in his revelation to us, and that the male words used in Scripture reflect—determine is too strong a term—his teaching on the roles of men and women found in the clear passages of Scripture that teach these roles.

In Genesis chapters 1–5, we are in the early world of creation and are dealing with the lives of the first two human beings. This is before the various ancient cultures had time to develop, and therefore, unless we claim that Moses’ own culture influenced how he expressed himself in these chapters, using this section of Scripture as a starting point takes the matter of culture off the table. This is the world Saint Paul went back to when he taught Christians in the New Testament how God wants his people, men and women, to live in the New Testament church and at home. Paul draws his teaching from the two main events recorded in this section: (1) the order in which God created man and woman and (2) the process through which sin entered the world. In 1 Timothy 2:12-14 Paul prohibits certain activities to women and explains his reasons: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” Here we see that the clear passages of the New Testament on the roles of men and women are largely based on events that happened in these early chapters of Genesis.

We are going to focus on the word ADAM found in these chapters. But how should we proceed? In preparing to write this paper, I got some good advice. I read a book by a professor of ancient languages at a college in the eastern US. The writer was completely in favor of gender-neutral language and attempted to prove that it was the only accurate way to translate. I found much to question in her book, but I appreciated how she approached the issue. She insisted that we first determine precisely what an original word meant. At the outset, we must put away concerns about how to express a Hebrew or Greek word in English. We must simply focus on original word, grasp its meaning, and only then concern ourselves with choosing English words to express that meaning. Indeed, at first we must not even think in terms of possible English words to use in translation. We must study the Hebrew and Greek words as they are used in Scripture, in other words, on their own terms. We must construct as close as we can what the original readers were thinking when they heard those words.

Think for a moment about our picture of two hands grasping each other. When my son and I clasped hands as he reached down to pull me up, our two hands formed around each other. My hand shaped itself to fit his. His hand also adapted itself to fit mine. However, when we translate any document from one language into another, we must adjust our picture. Imagine my son’s hand being made of steel—real steel, not figurative steel—completely unable to adjust itself to
my hand. Its shape is fixed and cannot change; since his hand is made of steel, he can take no part in making a tight fit between our hands. It is completely my responsibility to conform my hand to his and to create the right fit that would enable him to pull me up.

In the work of translating, the original document is as fixed as a hand of steel. If I want to grasp that hand in my translation, I must take full responsibility to fit my words and way of speaking—as complex as that process may be—around those words. I must make my language fit the original even if my language is as different from the original as E.T.’s hand is from my son’s hand. This is true for a translation of any ancient or modern document, regardless if it is God’s Word or not. But the fact that we are dealing with God’s Word makes it imperative that we work to make the tightest fit we can, even if our final translation can’t capture everything in the original.

The only way to accomplish this is first to focus on the word used in the original language and not let ourselves be drawn into figuring out which English words we might use to translate it. A problem with books and papers on gender-neutral translating is that they often turn this around and begin with the needs of the modern reader, which quickly overruns the process of finding the meaning of the world in the original. The issues soon become all jumbled up.

So at first, we will not even think about which English words will be easier or harder for our readers to understand, or even which is the best English word to convey the meaning of the original. We will first determine the meaning of the original word, in this case ADAM, on its own terms, and go from there. I am confident that this will give us direction in our desire to understand gender-neutral translating.

Here’s how we will proceed. Because you probably don’t know Hebrew, I’ll write out the pertinent passage using the 1984 NIV; however, by doing this I am not implying that the 1984 is always the best translation, only that in the gender-specific passages it more often reflects the original Hebrew. We will have more to say about the NIV’s use of ‘man’ later in this paper. Then we will refer to each occurrence of ADAM in order as it appears in Genesis chapters 1–5. I’ll offer some brief comments. But because I am trying not to use any English words that might be used in translation, and merely deal with the Hebrew word on its own terms, I’ll insert ADAM when it occurs in the original. My comments might read a little oddly. But I’m merely trying to help us think as much as possible in terms of the Hebrew word ADAM and a few other associated words found in these chapters.

*Genesis 1:26*
Then God said, “Let us make ADAM in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

In addition to the various kinds of animals he had already created, the Lord wanted to create another “kind” called ADAM. God said, “Let us make ADAM. . . .”

God then said, “. . . let them rule.” Here it is clear that ADAM is a plural idea, including both men and women. Also note that the male and female shared in God’s command to rule over the earth.

*Genesis 1:27*

So God created ADAM in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This verse refers to the general act of creating ADAM, which happened on day six. (Genesis chapter 2 is a flashback to the sixth day, giving us the details of how he created ADAM.)

God created ADAM. He created OTHO, a Hebrew singular pronoun. This means ADAM is a singular concept. He also created ADAM as OTHAM, a Hebrew plural pronoun referring to their creation as male and female. ADAM in the first line could refer to the man later named ADAM. Better, it could refer to the new “kind” God was creating, equivalent to the “kinds” of living beings he had already created. So ADAM is a singular and a plural world, singular in the sense of a “kind,” plural in the sense of including male and female.

*Genesis 2:4,5*

When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no ADAM to work the ground,

Here we enter a flashback describing ADAM’s creation as briefly described in Genesis 1:26,27. God did not send rain on the earth because there was no one from that special creation—no ADAM—in existence to till the ground.

*Genesis 2:7*

the Lord God formed the ADAM from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the ADAM became a living being.
The Lord made ADAM in a special way. He formed ADAM from the dust of the ground, breathed into ADAM the breath of life, and ADAM became a living being. Here ADAM refers to the first person God created, the male. (Incidentally, the Hebrew word for dust is ADAMAH and the Hebrew reader would have picked up on this immediately. ADAM was the being “from the dust of the ground.” It is nearly impossible for an English translation to retain this connection. Sadly, a bit of meaning is lost unless explained in a footnote.)

**Genesis 2:8**

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the ADAM he had formed.

The passage refers to the male ADAM, not the female ADAM he would create later.

**Genesis 2:15**

The Lord God took the ADAM and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

The Lord took the ADAM (at this point the male individual) and put him in the Garden of Eden, which he had prepared for him. He gave the ADAM his work in life, namely, to care for the garden.

**Genesis 2:16,17**

And the Lord God commanded the ADAM, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

In addition to defining ADAM’s responsibility of caring for his creation, God also defined how he wanted ADAM (here the male individual) to worship his Creator and Lord.

At this point, the Lord had given the ADAM two things: his purpose in life and the instructions he needed to be able to worship God.

**Genesis 2:18**

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the ADAM to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the Lord turns his attention to fill a lack in the life of the ADAM. God said he would create a helper for him, the kind of helper the ADAM needed as he set about caring for the creation and worshiping the Lord.
**Genesis 2:19,20**

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the ADAM to see what he would name them; and whatever the ADAM called each living creature, that was its name. So the ADAM gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for ADAM no suitable helper was found.

The Lord prepared the male, ADAM, to meet his helper by having him examine and name the animals he had created. The ADAM concluded that unlike the animals, he was alone. He had no one to help him carry out his work in the garden and join him in worshiping the Lord.

**Genesis 2:21,22**

So the LORD God caused the ADAM to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s (Hebrew: “his”) ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made an ISHAH from the rib he had taken out of the ADAM, and he brought her to the ADAM.

God created a female from one of the ADAM’s ribs. He brought her to the ADAM to fulfill his need for a helper.

**Genesis 2:23**

The ADAM said,

“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘ISHAH,’ for she was taken out of ISH.”

The ADAM recognized that ISHAH was taken from him. He had been alone, but, in a sense, the ISHAH had been part of him, the ADAM.

Earlier God had said, “Let us make the ADAM in our image” and we were told “male and female he created them.” Here in Genesis 2:21-23 we see how the Lord did that. The ADAM had been one, a “he,” a male, but now the ADAM is more than one. Specifically, ADAM is an ISH and an ISHAH, a man and a women, or in the context of marriage a husband and a wife. Note how similar the two words are, emphasizing their difference but also their intimate union with each other. (In Genesis 1:27, Moses used different words for “male and female.” These words emphasized that the two were different—*male* and *female*.)

**Genesis 2:24**
For this reason an ISH will leave his father and mother and be united to his ISHAH, and they will become one flesh.

When the ADAM was created, in a way, the ISHAH was created along with him. Then God created her from him and they were two. But the Lord tells the ISH to leave his father and mother and once again become “one flesh” with his ISHAH. The Lord tells ISHAH and ISH (here referring to a man and woman entering into marriage) that they will once again become “one” in marriage.

*Genesis 2:25*

The ADAM and his ISHAH were both naked, and they felt no shame.

The ADAM and his ISHAH were perfect. Although they were naked, they felt no shame. Here Moses speaks in an interesting and significant way. The male retains the name ADAM (which we already know is both male and female), and the woman is referred to as his ISHAH.

On the basis of our word study, which includes everything related to their creation, let’s think of what would come to a Hebrew person’s mind when he or she heard the word ADAM.

- They would have understood ADAM as the word for the human race, comprised of both males and females.
- They would have understood ADAM as the male God created first.
- They would have seen God give the ADAM his responsibilities toward creation and the outline of how he was to worship him. The ADAM (the male, before God created ISHAH), was the first one who had the command to carry out these responsibilities.
- From ADAM, God created ISHAH. The two, who had begun as one (ADAM) and were now two, ISHAH and ISH, would become one again in marriage.
- When Scripture describes their lack of shame, it refers to the male as ADAM and the female as ISHAH. In other words, the male and female together are ADAM, and the male alone is ADAM.

When Paul spoke about a man and his wife being “one flesh,” he called their relationship “a profound mystery” (Ephesians 5:32) and compared it to the relationship of Christ and his church. The way ADAM is described in Genesis chapter 2 also is a mystery. ADAM is one, yet two. ADAM was first created as a male, and as a male he received God’s commands.
Then the female was created from him as a helper to carry out these commands. ISH is to return to his ISHAH and become “one flesh” with her.

We continue with our word study right after Satan had led Adam and Eve into sin.

**Genesis 3:8,9**

Then the ADAM and his ISHAH heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the ADAM, “Where are you?”

Moses refers to Adam and Eve as ADAM and ISHAH. Again, he uses ADAM, the more general term—the one that can refer to both the male and the female—to refer to the male alone. The female is referred to as his ISHAH.

When the Lord begins dealing with their sin, he first addresses the ADAM. From the context it is clear that the Lord is addressing the male.

**Genesis 3:12**

The ADAM said, “The ISHAH you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Here again, ADAM is used to refer to the male alone. The female is still referred to as ISHAH. You might think Moses would have said, “The ISH said, ‘The ISHAH you put here with me, . . .’” but he retains the word ADAM.

We see here that sin had struck at the heart of the “one flesh” union that ADAM and ISHAH enjoyed.

**Genesis 3:15**

And I will put enmity between you [the serpent, Satan] and the ISHAH, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

I included this passage since it places the female, not the male, at the heart of the first promise. *Her* seed, that is, *her* offspring, would crush the serpent’s head. This was a privilege God gave to the ISHAH and not to the ADAM.

**Genesis 3:16**

To the ISHAH he said,
“I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your ISH, and he will rule over you.”

Here the male is called ISH, referring to his place as husband of the ISHAH, with whom he became “one flesh.” The ISHAH’s work of bearing children (literally “sons”) would become difficult, and her intimate relationship with her husband would be strained. Her “desire” would be toward him, likely in the sense that she would desire her husband’s primary authority to carry out the responsibilities God had given the ADAM before she had been created. She had already done this by discussing with Satan the true nature of worship and not deferring to her husband to deal with the tempter.

In this verse, the male is cursed for his sin along with his ISHAH. Instead of fully enjoying the blessings of their “one flesh” union, he would be forced to constrain her in a God-pleasing way to keep in mind that the primary responsibility toward the creation and toward worship was his. Sin had struck at the very center of their purpose in life and their relationship with each other.

**Genesis 3:17**

To ADAM he said, “Because you listened to your ISHAH and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

It is clear that ADAM here refers only to the male. He (not his ISHAH) was personally created from the ground. He sinned with full knowledge when he listened to his ISHAH and did not accept the responsibility for worship which God had given him. The land he was to care for would not respond to his care, and he would have to pass through death before he could once again worship the Lord in the purity and freedom God intended. Of course, this curse also affected ADAM’s ISHAH. She would have put forth more effort as she worked the land along with ADAM.
But the curse of death was different from the other curses. In this case, the curse was spoken to the ADAM, and the ISHAH was included in the curse, but not in the same way she had to suffer the affects of the curse on the ground along with ADAM. Rather, death came to her as an extension of ADAM. God’s curse on ADAM became God’s curse on her because of her connection to ADAM. She would become dust once again as an extension of the ADAM because that is how she came into being in the first place.

*Genesis 3:20*

The ADAM named his ISHAH EVE, because she would become the mother of all the living.

ISHAH was given a name, Eve. She was the mother of all other human beings, including the promised Savior. This is interesting in light of what Paul says: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” (1 Corinthians 11:11,12, 1984 NIV). The Lord gives women the gift of carrying on the human race and of being the source of the promised Savior. ADAM honors her and assigns her a name to remind everyone of the special gift she alone has.

The male is named ADAM. The female is named EVE. Here the word ADAM refers to the male alone, even though ADAM was created male and female.

*Genesis 3:21-24*

21 The Lord God made garments of skin for ADAM and his ISHAH and clothed them. 22 And the Lord God said, “The ADAM has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” 23 So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24 After he drove the ADAM out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Is ADAM in verse 22 a reference to the male or to both the male and female together? On the one hand, there would be a rather abrupt switch between verses 21 and 22 if ADAM in verse 21 refers to the male alone (which it does) but in verse 22 refers to the male and female together. On the other hand, the Lord could be referring to both the man and the woman. The English masculine pronouns “he,” “his,” and “him,” might lead us to think that the Lord is only referring
to the man. But in the Hebrew, the masculine verb endings, the ones translated “he,” “his,” and “him,” can also refer to ADAM as the male or ADAM in the sense of “mankind.”

**Genesis 4:1,25**

ADAM lay with his ISHAH EVE, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth an ISH.”

ADAM lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth.

Here ADAM is clearly distinguished from Eve, who is called “his ISHAH.” ADAM is a proper name since it is set back-to-back with EVE. Eve’s son is called ISH, not ADAM, probably because his gender is being referred to.

**Genesis 5:1**

This is the written account of ADAM’s line.

Here ADAM clearly refers to Adam, the personal name of the male. It is the beginning of a list of names.

**Genesis 5:1,2**

When God created ADAM, he made him in the likeness of God.
He created them male and female and blessed them.

These verses are a restatement of Genesis 1:27. Genesis 1:27 and 5:1,2 seem to be a set of parentheses, between which the meaning of ADAM has been laid out.

And when they were created, he called them “ADAM.”

ADAM had named all the other kinds of living beings that God had made. But God reserved for himself the right to name the male and female he had created; he called them ADAM. So ADAM here is a plural idea. It is the name for the human race, as we call it—men and women. This statement is important. It concludes the entire account of the creation of this special “kind” of being. The parentheses have grouped all the elements of the meaning of ADAM into a unit and to that unit the Lord assigns the word ADAM. God himself has given the male and female their name. It is the name ADAM, which is the same name he had assigned to the male alone.

**Genesis 5:3-5**

When ADAM had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. After Seth
was born, ADAM lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, ADAM lived 930 years, and then he died.

It is clear that here ADAM is the male alone. It is his personal name.

Our study of chapters 3 to 5 add the following elements of meaning to ADAM:

- ADAM and his ISHAH fell into sin. God cursed the serpent and told him that someone born from the ISHAH would destroy him. The curse God put on ISHAH affected her role of giving life to the human race and it also affected the relationship she shared with the ADAM. Her “desire” would also make her husband’s life more difficult.

- God cursed the ADAM and said he would work the ground with difficulty, and he would die. ISHAH would suffer along with ADAM in caring for the earth. But it was *in ADAM* that the ISHAH would die. In other words, the ISHAH was represented in God’s curse on the ADAM.

- The line of the Savior was traced from ADAM onward. He was the father of the pre-flood patriarchs. Yet ADAM was not just the man, but the woman as well. Both of them together were called ADAM, the name by which God himself called them, giving ADAM the meaning we attach to it.

ADAM is a complex word, but it contains a wealth of meaning. Summarizing and reviewing our word study on ADAM, we find that ADAM refers to the man and woman together. It refers to the first male, ADAM, who, after he was created from the dust of the earth, received responsibility for caring for the garden and for conveying to others the truth about how to worship the Lord. God gave ADAM his ISHAH, and ADAM rejoiced in receiving a person like him—bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh—to help him carry out the work God had given him. We see ADAM as the male and then as male and female, who in marriage were united again to become one flesh. It was ADAM’s duty to forsake other earthly ties and join together with his wife.

On the tragic side, we see the ISHAH taking on herself the responsibility for charting her and her husband’s spiritual path in life. We see ADAM following his wife and deliberately sinning against God. We see the Lord putting a curse on ISHAH in line with her role and purpose in life. We see the Lord punishing ADAM in a way appropriate to his origin from the dust of the ground (ADAMAH) and appropriate to the one who had first been given responsibility to care for the earth and to help people worship the Lord. We see the Lord cursing ADAM with death and
realize that that in the process he was also cursing ISHAH because of her relationship with the male. ADAM is the male’s personal name, but both ADAM and EVE are named ADAM.

As we did this study, you were no doubt tempted in your mind to find English words to use with each occurrence of ADAM—“Adam,” “man,” “mankind,” “human being,” etc. But if you were a Hebrew reading Genesis chapters 1–5, you would not be looking for a distinct word to translate it in each case. You would see only a single word, ADAM. The context would lead your mind to shift a bit as you read each verse in which ADAM occurs, but you would be hearing only a single word and could easily trace the development of its meaning. The various ways that word was used in this tightly knit section of Scripture would determine what you thought of when you heard it.

A Hebrew person would carry that meaning with them as they came across the word throughout the Old Testament, in the same way, for example, that a flood of thoughts would enter a Hebrew person’s mind in Joshua’s day when that person heard the word Jericho. To rephrase that in the language of our current discussion, they would hear a word that was always gender-inclusive—male and female—but which at the same time carried gender-specific male overtones.

Genesis chapters 1–5 presents the development and definition of the word God himself assigned to mankind. These chapters set the context for the rest of Scripture not only in regard to creation and the fall into sin, and also in regard to the meaning of the Hebrew word ADAM. First, ADAM was the male to whom God gave instructions and the responsibility for caring for the garden and for obeying God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Although both men and women were responsible for caring for the earth, the male was given the primary responsibility to do this with the female helping him. Second, the Lord gave the male the personal name ADAM, which is also the name he gave mankind as a whole in Genesis 5:2, establishing a certain connection between ADAM and the human race that the woman did not have. Third, ADAM, the male, was also the representative of the human race when he received on himself God’s sentence of death. Death came to the woman and to all her offspring through the man and the curse God put on him.

These points are important because those who favor gender-neutral translating sometimes claim that mankind as a whole—men and women together in the same group—cannot be addressed as “man” or by means of any gender-specific (male) word. Yet this is how the word ADAM is used in these chapters of Scripture. The concept of women being represented in a reference to males, which is not acceptable in our modern world, is present in Scripture.
Please keep this in mind as we continue to reflect on ADAM by looking in on a hypothetical team commissioned to create a new Hebrew-English dictionary. They have been assigned the word ADAM and the other key male words. Through this little story, you will get a better sense of working with the idea of gender-neutrality.

**Trying to Determine English Equivalents for ADAM**

ADAM refers to the human race, but in a special way, namely, as the Lord defined it in the first chapters of Genesis. So how do we translate this word into English, this word that is so packed full of meaning and even mystery?

When we want to know the meaning of a word, we open a dictionary and look it up. But where do people who write dictionaries, in our case Hebrew to English dictionaries, get their information?

People who prepare dictionary “entries” do a detailed word study on the word they are interested in (similar to the word study we just did, but including every time the word occurs in Scripture), examining each occurrence of the word in context. They also pay attention to how words were translated in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), and they may also glean information from non-biblical writings. Then they organize their findings, summarize them, and write an entry for the dictionary they are creating. The entry is made up of possible words English translators can use in their translations.

Dictionary writers usually discover that a word has a “range of meanings.” That is, there is usually a basic, common meaning—the default meaning, if you will—and an English word or two that will carry that meaning over into English. That’s the word translators will use unless they find compelling reasons from the context to use a different word. Often there are a number of secondary (but usually related) meanings. In a dictionary entry, words that express the default meaning are listed first, followed by words that convey the less common meanings. Translators usually try the first word. More often than not, that will work. If not, they work their way down the list until they find an English word that will work well in the context of the verse they are translating.

Returning to our picture of two hands grasping each other, people who create dictionaries have the job of offering suggestions to match up the “word fingers” of the original language with the “word fingers” of the language into which the document will be translated. And they have the responsibility for keeping the “hand” of the original language completely inflexible as they
suggest words for how translators can fit the flexible hand, the English language in our case, around it.

This is an ongoing task. When the English language changes, new English words may have to be suggested as possible options for translators to use. But dictionary writers must be careful of two things. First, they must be sure that the English language has changed so that new words are necessary, and second, suggested replacement words must do a good job of conveying the meaning of the original.

The desire for gender-neutral translations is fueled by the claim that English speakers do not understand certain gender-specific words today in the same way those words used to be understood even 30 years ago. In this paper I am not debating to what extent this is true. If dictionary writers are not careful with the replacement words they suggest, in a subtle way they may be adjusting and reshaping the hand of the original Hebrew and Greek so the English hand can more easily fit into it. If this is done, the result will be an inaccurate translation no matter what word options the dictionary offers.

Here’s how this relates to the gender-neutral debate. In this discussion there are two basic ways of arriving at a meaning for male words in Scripture. Those who argue for gender-neutral language, because they are not allowed to use gender-specific male words, try to prove that the key words in the original language were, in fact, understood by ancient readers in a gender-neutral way. Most often they attempt to do this by arguing that if a Hebrew word, for example, in the original context can be understood as referring to both men and women, then it actually is gender-neutral and only a gender-neutral word will handle that meaning. For example, if the Hebrew word AV, which means father, is used to refer to deceased relatives (who include men and women), then it can be translated in a gender-neutral way, “ancestors.”

Those who argue against gender-neutral language argue that the key words in the original language, even when they are or could be referring to both males and females, were not truly gender-neutral and were not heard as gender-neutral words by the ancient Hebrews and Greeks. They believe other English words, words that carry a gender-specific meaning, should be used to convey what the original Hebrew or Greek person was hearing. For example, AV should be translated as “fathers,” even when it refers to deceased relatives. Why? Because the predominant meaning of AV is “father” and since people can extend that term to include females, nothing prohibits that translation.
Let’s illustrate the dictionary creation process. As we do this, we will try to illustrate the tension between these two positions, especially in creating an entry for the important word ADAM. The story that follows is fictional, but it illustrates the kind of discussion that is, in fact, going on in regard to gender-neutral translating.

We are visiting a large university whose department of biblical languages is working on a new standard Hebrew to English dictionary. The word ADAM, as well as the other key words, has been assigned to Dr. Smith and his team of students. Dr. Smith and his students have independently studied every time the word ADAM is found in the Old Testament. They are gathered to compare notes and write their entry.

The team meets in a room with a large round table in it. Dr. Smith has a pail of very large steel ball bearings. Each one will represent one time the word ADAM is found in the Old Testament. The bearings will help his team keep track of the number of times ADAM carries this or that meaning.

In his own mind, Dr. Smith already has a pretty good idea of the English word his team will list as their default word to express the meaning of ADAM. He has chosen the word “man.” He writes “man” in the middle of the table and attaches a large magnet under the table so that by default, the ball bearings will roll over “man.” When the team comes to passages in which “man” will not work very well, they suggest other words translators could use in those passages. Dr. Smith positions his students around the table, and they will write these alternate English words on the table in front of them. When the team comes across instances of ADAM that they believe will best be translated by one of these alternate words, the student with that word in front of him or her will get a ball bearing. The students will hold on to their ball bearings to keep them from rolling into the center of the table. The group anticipates that by day’s end there will be a large pool of ball bearings in the middle of the table over “man” and that each student will be holding on to a small group of ball bearings in front of them over the various alternate words.

Dr. Smith reviews this for his students: “Every time we come across ADAM, I’m going to take one of these ball bearings and put it on the table. It will naturally roll to the center of the table where I’ve written ‘man.’ That’s the natural place for it to be. Of all English words, ‘man’ will most easily hold all the complexities of the meaning of ADAM. It is my choice for at least three reasons. First, it is a collective like mankind and can refer to both men and women together. Second, it has male overtones, which ADAM certainly has. And third, it can be used in translating ADAM in the vast majority of passages in which ADAM occurs.
“But when we find a place in the Bible where “man” will be hard to use in translation, we will suggest other English words translators can use. When that happens, one of you will write that word on the table in front of you. Whenever we find a time when your word is better than ‘man,’ you’ll get another ball bearing. Hold on to them and keep them from rolling into the middle of the table.”

As the day wore on, the pool of ball bearings in the center of the table grew large. “Man” worked in the large majority of places where the team found ADAM in the Bible. The students had also written words—just a few—in front of them on the table. Sometimes “man” just would not work in English. This often happened where using “man” would make it appear to the reader that only males were being referred to. Dr. Smith wanted to help translators avoid that.

During the course of the day, one of the students, Sharon, became confused. She said, “But can’t ADAM refer to a specific man, that is, a male person or a group of them? That’s the way is it used in my Bible.”

Dr. Smith asked Sharon, “Which Bible are you using?”


“Oh, yes,” said Dr. Smith. “Let’s talk about that, but I can’t give a short answer. Your question is important for our word entry on ADAM. It is also important for the whole issue of gender-specific language in Scripture.” He excused the group and said they would begin the next day with a discussion of how the 1984 NIV translated ADAM.

By the next day, Dr. Smith had prepared some notes. He started, “Students, as we have seen, ADAM is gender-neutral and refers to both men and women. But at the same time it is gender-specific and has a male aspect to it. In the vast majority of cases ADAM refers to people, the human race, one of mankind. Sometimes English translators—and 1984 NIV translators did this a lot—translate ADAM as ‘a man’ or ‘men,’ when there was no reason to. These words conjure up in my mind a male person or a group of males. This gives readers the idea that many Bible verses are only talking about men. Here are some notes. I realize our focus is on the Hebrew word ADAM. But we’ll expand on this a bit and talk in more general terms about how the 1984 NIV used ‘man.’ Hopefully this will help us in choosing the right English words for ADAM.”

[Dr. Smith’s notes:]

Subject: The Problem With How the 1984 NIV Translated ADAM
The 1984 NIV often gives the impression that ADAM means male people. By doing this, the NIV translators misrepresented Scripture and may have given people today the impression that the Bible is a very male-oriented book—far beyond the maleness that is actually there. They did this in at least three ways.

First, they translated some words “man” where “people” would have worked better. For example, the 1984 NIV translated 1 Timothy 2:4, “[God] wants all *men* to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” A much better translation would have been, “[God] wants all *people* to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” Even in the 1970s when the 1984 NIV was translated and when English could use the word “men” to refer to men and women, in my opinion “people” would have been more clear. Even back then when I read this passage in church, I would always feel it necessary to add “and, of course, this means men and women.” But without a doubt, it is a better and more accurate translation into today’s English.

Second, the 1984 NIV translators were very free in their use of the word “man” and included it in their translation even when it wasn’t there in the original languages, no doubt, to make some sentences easier to read. When a Hebrew or Greek sentence had no subject, they added one, most often the word “man.” And when they inserted “man,” they had to add a “he” every time the sentence called for a pronoun referring back to “man.” To modern ears, this gives Scripture a needlessly male orientation.

I am currently teaching a Bible study on spiritual gifts as taught in Romans 12:6-8. Here is how the 1984 NIV reads:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a *man’s* gift is prophesying, let *him* use it in proportion to *his* faith. If it is serving, let *him* serve; if it is teaching, let *him* teach; if it is encouraging, let *him* encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let *him* give generously; if it is leadership, let *him* govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let *him* do it cheerfully.

Unknown to the reader, the word “man” is not found in the original. In fact, the subject is “we,” and Paul depends on his readers to keep “we” in mind as he lists each spiritual gift. Of the translations I checked, the Holman translation reads closest to the Greek:

According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the standard of one’s faith; if service, in service; if teaching, in teaching; if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness.

This is much more accurate.
Third, there is another even more subtle way that 1984 NIV gave their translation an overly masculine feel. This is important for us as we create a dictionary entry for ADAM. We must help translators keep the male aspect of ADAM but not give English readers the impression that passages in which ADAM occurs apply only to men. The Hebrew already has a good supply of other words that refer to men. In the Bible, ADAM only occurs in the singular and it never has an ‘of’ after it. It’s like our English word ‘mankind.’ We never say ‘mankinds’ or ‘a mankind of God,’ for example. I’m going to suggest adding this note to our primary entry on ADAM: “‘Man,’ but not ‘men’ or ‘a man.’”

Sadly, the 1984 NIV did not observe this distinction. They very often translated ADAM “men” or “a man,” which sounds like a male person or a group of males—even to someone like me who grew up in the previous generation. For example, in 2 Chronicles 6:18 Solomon prayed, “But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you” (1984 NIV). Contrast that translation with how the Holman Bible translates that verse: “But will God indeed live on earth with man? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain You.” Here it is easier for modern ears—and, I would argue, the ears of people from previous generations—to realize that “man” is talking about both men and women.

Or take this example. When Nathan spoke to David about the great king who would come from his line, the Lord said, “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men” (2 Samuel 7:14, 1984NIV). Unless the reader is really attuned to “men” having a gender-neutral meaning, you will likely take it as a parallel to “rod of men.” “Rod of men” uses another Hebrew word that normally refers to males. But “sons of man,” ADAM, refers to the offspring of human beings, which tells us that the affliction Jesus endured came from men and women alike—perhaps not the floggings Jesus endured in Pilate’s court—but the emotional and spiritual “floggings” he endured from unbelieving men and women throughout his ministry. ADAM makes this a very gender-neutral passage.

Here’s another example. David wrote: “The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them” (Psalm 11:4, 1984 NIV). “Sons of men” makes it sound as if Solomon is only speaking about males. But the original has “sons of ADAM.” This changes the idea from “sons of male people” to “the sons of the men and women who make up mankind.” The plural idea is found in “sons,” and there is no reason to duplicate the plural idea by translating ADAM as “men.” This way of translating occurs repeatedly in the 1984 NIV. And, I might add, on occasion other translations do the same.
The 1984 translators, I am sure, did not realize how this would come back to bite them and make their translation grate on the ears of the next generation of English readers. The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are actually much less gender-specific than the 1984 NIV leads readers to think. How the Hebrew Scriptures used ADAM is completely consistent with the understanding of ADAM that the Lord laid down in the first chapters of Genesis.

[End of Dr. Smith’s notes.]

The group understood and was ready to get back to work on its dictionary entry. By the end of the day, the members were ready to write their dictionary entry for ADAM.

ADAM

(1) Man, a collective like mankind, but not men (a group of males) or a man. (2) Person (a male or a female). (3) Mankind or human beings. (4) Name of the first man, Adam. [End of entry.]

At that point they sent the entry to the director for review. They awaited his reply. An hour later he came into the room. He said slowly, “I understand your entry. But I’m sorry. You’ll have to revise it. You cannot use the word ‘man’ as your basic meaning of ADAM. In fact, you can’t use ‘man’ at all unless you are talking about someone you are sure is a male person, like Abraham or Moses. How people in our society use ‘man’ has changed. It has come to mean only a male person. In fact, we cannot offer any word that will force translators to use ‘he’ or ‘him’ as a pronoun. You must redo your dictionary entry without ‘man.’

“How this came about is irrelevant,” added the director. “It has happened, and we must work with it. How can we expect people to read God’s Word if they can’t understand it? It is your work to give faithful translators a dictionary they can use. And we both know that most of the time ADAM means men and women together. So pick modern English words that express that. Accuracy demands it.”

Dr. Smith gasped. His students looked at one another. “This means we will have to start over,” they said.

The team met the next day. At first they vented their frustrations. Sharon asked, “What is our job? To be faithful to the meaning of the original Hebrew or to provide translators with word options that can be understood by their readers?”

“I agree,” said Tim, “But actually we are getting paid to do both, and that’s what a dictionary is supposed to do.”
“We’ve dealt before with other words whose meanings have changed,” said Joe, “but this seems different. I understand where the director is coming from, and I agree with him completely that we cannot suggest words that modern people cannot understand. But we cannot divert from our chief work, which is to suggest words that convey as much of the original meaning as possible. In this case, we have chosen a word that works, but we are being told we cannot use it. With other English words whose meanings have changed, we could always find a substitute. But what English word can we substitute for ‘man’?”

“You are all sensing the frustration,” Dr. Smith interjected, “but, Joe, you have touched on the real issue. There is no substitute; nor will there likely ever be one. The very nature of the dispute is—you all know—gender-neutrality. By its very definition that means there will never be a true substitute for ‘man.’ The substitutes, with the possible exception of ‘mankind’ all lose the male aspect found in ADAM. But the very nature of the word ‘mankind’ makes it hard for translators to use it in many passages. ”

Sharon wondered, “But what is the relationship between a word being accurate and a word being easily understood? I understand where gender-neutral people are coming from. If a word cannot be understood or gives the reader the wrong meaning, then it is not really accurate, is it?”

“That’s how the matter is most often presented,” replied Dr. Smith. “Let me offer some ideas for you to think about. Accuracy always begins with the original language. You must be accurate in your thinking about what the original word means, and you must never let that be compromised. Accuracy in the translation comes next. Ideally we can satisfy both languages. But in the modern Western world we are, in some ways, caught between a rock and a hard place. In my opinion, translators are being kept from the ideal largely because of how English language usage has changed in some circles. Nevertheless, accuracy begins with the meaning of the words of the original document, and if our English creates a roadblock to expressing that meaning by not supplying suitable substitute words to carry the meaning, it’s our translation that must adjust itself. I myself have no easy answer to that. That’s what I mean by translators today being caught between a rock and hard place.

“So how do we get out from between this rock and hard place, as you put it, Dr. Smith?” asked Sharon.

“There is no easy answer,” replied Dr. Smith. “I do agree with gender-neutral translators that if an English word changes in meaning, then we as dictionary makers must make every effort to suggest words translators can use to make the original document as clear as possible to the
modern reader. If I were a translator, my approach would be—and I realize this is not ideal—to use a word that can carry the meaning of the original even if teachers are forced to explain it, rather than choosing a word that is easy to understand but doesn’t do justice to the meaning of the original.”

Dr. Smith continued, “When you see what actually happens when gender-neutral translators work on certain passages, you get the feeling that behind the scenes the real driving force is not accuracy or even understandability, but gender-neutrality itself, which is billed as being accurate and understandable. They justify gender-neutral language by trying to find examples in Scripture where the key words refer both to men and women. That extends their range of meaning enough so that if a translator is working on a verse with one of the key words in it, he or she in good conscience can use a gender-neutral word.”

Tim said, “In our job of supplying English words it seems that we are being forced, for a very good reason, to do something that is not so good.”

Dr. Smith replied, “Tim, I think you have stumbled on the word I often use in my own thinking—forced. To be sure, there is a good reason why gender-neutral language is being advocated. But I too feel forced. When I am faced with the needs of gender-neutral translators, I feel forced to do my work as a dictionary writer in a different way than I normally would. I have always kept the original languages in mind, paid attention to them first and foremost, really worked to understand what those words meant to the original readers, and only then worked as hard as I could to suggest English words that carry that meaning. Using a picture I once ran across, I have tried to understand completely the fixed and immovable ‘hand’ of the Hebrew or Greek and then have figured out what English words I could suggest so English translators could make a tight grip with the original word. But these days I feel forced to change that order. Some outside requirement has come into play, something that is forcing me to work backward. I feel forced to study the original languages to discover ways to justify the needs of gender-neutrality. As a result, I feel as if the hand of the English language has become rather fixed in this area of gender, and it is forcing me to allow the meaning of the original Hebrew words to flex a bit so the English words that are still available to me will work.”

Joe thought out loud, “But what will happen when we come to words like ISH or AV or BEN [the Hebrew words for a “man” as distinct from a woman, “father,” and “son”]. If we are being told to suggest English words for ADAM which strip the male aspect out of this word that clearly includes men and women, what will happen when we tackle words that to me obviously refer to males?”
Dr. Smith replied, “Joe, I’ll tell you what is going to happen if . . . that is, when we carry out the director’s orders. You and your team members are going to be searching for every instance in the Old Testament where these words could possibly be interpreted as gender-neutral—where they can be interpreted as referring to a group of men and women. And you will offer gender-neutral words based on that.”

Sharon interjected, “But isn’t that our job? To scour every use of a word in the Old Testament to find out how it is used and then determine its meaning?”

“Sharon, you are absolutely right,” answered Dr. Smith, “and that is what we do. But here it gets complicated for us. Consider this: when we do a word study of BEN, the Hebrew word for ‘son,’ or AV, the Hebrew word for ‘father,’ we find they mostly mean a ‘male offspring’ or a ‘male parent’ They are gender-specific words from the start, and they default to gender-specific English words that describe relationships a male has to other people—a ‘son,’ or a ‘father.’”

“True,” said Sharon. “But our word study also reveals that these words are often called upon to do another job, namely, to refer to groups of men and women, such as when BEN refers to the people of a nation like the nation of Israel or AV refers to family members who have passed away. So they also contain a gender-inclusive aspect, don’t they?”

Dr. Smith became serious. “Now we are getting to the heart of the issue. Here is where we start to have problems—and, I might add, where we should have problems if we have done our homework. As dictionary writers we want to suggest words English translators can use. But working with Hebrew male words we are in sort of a no-man’s land. We realize that we can suggest ‘son’ as a translation word for BEN, but we can also suggest ‘children’ when BEN refers to both men and women. We realize that we can suggest ‘father’ as the default use of AV, unless it refers to a group of men and women, and then we can suggest ‘ancestors.’ You see the problem. In English, ‘son’ and ‘father’ are gender-specific and ‘children’ and ‘ancestors’ are gender-neutral. We don’t have in-between words, at least today, that can do double duty, that is, refer to both men and women and also have male overtones. Here is where the English language will not cooperate with us. It is stingy with giving us in-between words to suggest. Here is where it is really difficult to make the hand of the English fit the hand of the Hebrew.

“I don’t think the Hebrew people had this problem. Remember what we discovered in our word study of ADAM. We realized that we had a special word on our hands—a word that was gender-neutral yet masculine at the same time. It seems that right from the start God was teaching the Hebrew people how to think about the relationship between men and women. The account of
the creation of mankind and the way ADAM was used in that context provided a rich teaching tool.

“I believe the Hebrew people had little difficulty transferring what they learned from ADAM to the other key male words of their language. They understood the phrase ‘sons of Israel’ to mean ‘children of Israel.’ Yet they were content with the word ‘son’ even though it had a specific male meaning. After all, they knew the Lord could have used other Hebrew words available to him, like the Hebrew word that specifically means ‘children,’ or the phrase ‘sons and daughters’ which is used repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, or even the Hebrew word for ‘nation.’ But they respected what they had learned from Genesis chapters 1–5, namely, that there is a male aspect to the human race that should be retained when discussing relationships in their society. They could look at our key words as being both gender-specific and gender-neutral at the same time.

Yet we are not so fortunate in English. Our society doesn’t have this sensitivity nor has it been built into our language. Perhaps when the Western world was outwardly more Christian, some of the key male words could be called on to do the double duty we are referring to. But even in the past, in Luther’s day and half a century later when the King James Bible was translated, the key words might not have matched up with their Hebrew counterparts as easily as we might imagine. Luther and the King James translators knew what BEN means, but didn’t feel they could use that word in a gender-specific way. So they chose to translate ‘sons of Israel’ as ‘children of Israel.’ Proponents of modern gender-neutral translating are quick to jump at that as an example of gender-neutral translating. But it could just as easily be argued that these early translators, who knew that BEN is a male word, chose to use ‘children’ as a translation of BEN to assure the women of their day that women were included among God’s people too. So the English language of their day forced them to make a choice and they chose to retain the gender-inclusive aspect of BEN and to allow the male aspect to be lost.

So we seem to be stuck. To some extent we’ve always been stuck, but today we really seem to be stuck. Gender-neutral translating is based on the idea that today there are no in-between words in the English language, words that can refer to men and woman together, yet still retain a male aspect, like there are in the Hebrew language. But here’s the objection I have. If advocates of gender-neutral translating would acknowledge that the Hebrew and Greek key male words, even when used to refer to a mixed group, retained a male aspect to it, perhaps we could work together more easily. We could join hands to help eliminate unnecessary and misleading gender-specific language from Scripture and find a way to express the full meaning of the key male
words in English. Perhaps we could retain in our translations the most likely English in-between word, ‘man.’ That’s what I was trying to do when we worked on our dictionary entry for ADAM. I realize that the fit between the two languages would not be perfect, and something would be lost in the translation. But the loss would be due to a legitimate translation problem, forced on us by the inflexible hand of the Hebrew original and how it differs from modern-day English. And the losses in meaning that we will experience are legitimate losses because we are working drawing out the meaning from the original languages and find we cannot “carry them across” (translate) them perfectly into English. Here, perhaps, is where the use of explanatory footnotes would be a big help.

“But that’s not what today’s gender-neutral translating is about. And here is where I see big difference between the way in which many translations use some amount of gender-neutral language and a modern gender-neutral translation. Today’s gender-neutral translating is about completely removing the male overtone from the Hebrew language, denying that it exists in the original; or if it does exist, implying that it is not important for us; or claiming that it is merely a vestige of an ancient culture that we would do well not to resurrect. Translators—not to mention us dictionary writers—are being forced into a box, which, I believe, limits the number of words translators can use and keeps translators from trying to find creative, yet accurate ways of tackling the meaning found in the Hebrew words. Students, I accept the fact the something will be lost in the translation process, but in today’s gender-neutral translating, in my opinion, the loss is not legitimate.”

The team met to rework their entry for ADAM. They had no choice but to follow the director’s instructions. They tried to settle on a default word for ADAM. They thought of the alternatives. The word “mankind” would work in quite a few cases, and it didn’t do a bad job of preserving the male aspect of the word. But it wouldn’t work that often in translation. “Human beings” would work too, but it did not bring out the male aspect of ADAM as clearly as ‘mankind.’ Someone suggested “humans,” but they all agreed that “humans” was better suited to an anthropology textbook. Someone suggested “person” or “people.” Those words lacked punch; they were completely gender-neutral and too weak to carry the weight of meaning in ADAM. Someone suggested “mortals”—the team could only shudder. But all these words had this going for them: none of them would force translators to use “he” or “him” as a pronoun, and that was a very important part of gender-neutral translating. Translators could simply change verbs and pronouns to plural and end up with a good gender-neutral translation.
That evening Dr. Smith sat in his easy chair in front of the fire, reflecting again on what was happening. “We had a word that came pretty close to expressing how ADAM is used in Scripture. Now we’ll have to settle for words that express only one side—that ADAM is male and female—but fail to retain the male aspect of the word. There is a unity, a oneness, in the word ADAM that the other words don’t capture—male and female united into one being. And the idea that the male was given chief responsibility for seeing that God’s earthly and spiritual will is carried out—all of that will be lost. We have a hard enough time fitting the hand of the English language into the hand of the Hebrew language. Now it’s as if they’ve cut off half a finger from my English hand, the finger that could have wrapped so well around ADAM.”

He and his students met the next day. Dr. Smith turned off his magnet over “man.” The students gathered around the table ready to collect ball bearings and place them over a wider variety of words. After a long discussion, they reworked their definition. It read like this:

**ADAM**

(1) Mankind. (2) Human beings, humans. (3) Person, persons, people. (4) Mortals. (5) Man, but only when referring to a male person. Note: Meaning (5) cannot be used when a passage refers to men and women. If definitions 1-4 will not produce good English, the sentence must be reworked to express the inclusion of men and women. Even if ADAM must remain untranslated, the sentence must not include “man” or the pronouns “he” or “him.” [End of entry.]

The team submitted its dictionary entry. The team wasn’t satisfied, but the director was quite pleased.

*Is All This Important?*

The little story of Dr. Smith and his students helped us see the problems dictionary writers face in suggesting words translators might use to translate the key male words found in Scripture. Next I want to look at two fictional translators who are using the dictionary created by the team and watch how they carry out their assignment to create a new, gender-neutral translation. But to keep the whole discussion relevant and put it into perspective, we should review what is at stake.

We are dealing with God’s Word and we want the translation we use to reflect the Lord’s meaning. That is our basic concern.

But there are others concerns. Maintaining the idea of representation, that is, that women can be included in a male term, is important. For example, this has implications for how we work
with verses such as 1 Corinthians 15:21: “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man” (1 Corinthians 15:21, translated the same in the 1984 NIV and the NIV11). With a thorough knowledge of ADAM, it would not have been difficult for Paul’s Jewish readers—men and women—to understand Paul’s way of speaking in that verse. Nor would it have been difficult for them to see the mystery in the union of husband and wife or to have seen in this relationship a parallel to Christ and his church—two, yet one, with the church being included in Christ.

But can’t the principles contained in ADAM be taught apart from the word “man”? In other words, can we find clear doctrinal passages in Scripture that clearly express the relationship between men and women? Can’t pastors teach their people on the basis of those passages? Yes, they can. But what if God has given us more in Scripture to support those doctrinal passages?

Sometimes we come across the idea that we must base our teachings and our lives only on the passages of Scripture where God specifically tells us what to believe or do, not on the passages that describe ways people in Scripture carried out their lives or on events that underline God’s will. There is a place for this argument. Some Christians have insisted that certain things an Old or New Testament believer did must be part of God’s will for all Christians—when God has given no indication that this or that action is something he wants Christians of all times to copy in their own lives. We should be careful not to do that.

But this argument is sometimes introduced to marginalize the male aspect of Scripture’s language. It is argued that certain aspects of Scripture are incidental parts of Scripture, that is, elements of grammar that are merely part of the way the language is constructed. These elements of grammar are not really meant to convey meaning. Since this is the case, the argument goes, translators should not unduly concern themselves with making sure these elements are reflected in their translations.

But we should be careful not to remove something from Scripture through which God wants to teach us his will. Scripture does not make a clean break between clear doctrinal passages that teach us what God wants us to believe and do, and its descriptions of how God’s people in the past acted and the examples they provided. The Bible teaches us to carefully study the people and events of Scripture and learn from them. For example, Paul did not merely say love one another, hold on to the truth, and be faithful to your calling. He told Timothy (a doctrinal passage, if you will) to live his own life based on what he saw in Paul: “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings” (2 Timothy 3:10,11, 1984 NIV). And the New Testament writers repeatedly urge us not to fall
back into sin by reminding us of what happened to the Israelites when they rebelled. To separate out all the descriptions in Scripture of things that happened in the past or of how people lived their faith, or to put all this into some category that is off limits to Christians to study, learn from, and apply to themselves lessens the teaching power of Scripture and in my opinion keeps us from using a source of instruction God has given us.

Throughout Scripture, God has given us resources that reflect and reinforce what he tells us in the clear doctrinal passages. Could we misuse Paul’s instruction to imitate his example by taking up tent-making or walking across mountain passes in sandals. We could. But we know what he means and we are able to use our reason to fit his clear words together with his example and learn from both.

How the Bible writers expressed themselves also can reflect and reinforce matters taught in doctrinal passages. A word like ADAM can teach us much, for it deals with our life under God. Our concern with ADAM is not just about understanding a word, but about understanding ourselves. And, I believe, how the Lord uses other male words in his revelation to us contributes to the overall picture of Scriptures teaching on the roles of men and women. This doesn’t mean we must use gender-specific language in our own writings. But it does mean that we must listen to how God himself wrote and take that to heart if it reinforces what he clearly teaches us elsewhere. How we reflect in English the Lord’s use of these terms may be a matter of judgment—and sometimes a source of frustration—but we dare not marginalize these expressions or teach people that there is no meaning in them.

We live in a world that lacks a clear understanding of how men and women were created. In today’s world, men and women are often viewed merely as two sides of a two-headed coin—two kinds of people walking together through life with little more to distinguish them than biological features and the strengths and weakness those features impose.

The word ADAM, as defined in Genesis chapters 1–5, gives us a completely different view and a completely accurate understanding of how and why we were created. It pictures order, sequence, and purpose. It lays the foundation for intimacy. It describes the unique burdens that men and women must bear after the fall into sin. Gender-neutral translators have the good goal of making the Bible easier to understand. But I believe that gender-neutral language more readily supports the world’s view, not Scripture’s view, of mankind.

ADAM refers to more than simply the creation of the two halves of the human species. ADAM expresses how men and women are unique yet united into one. This is what gender-
neutrality pushes below our consciousness. No one is saying the NIV11 suppresses this completely. It is hardly a radical feminist document. Yet it is, by its own definition, a gender-neutral document.

As noted previously, to some extent, such changes have been made in other translations. “Sons of Israel” is translated “children of Israel” in older translations like Luther’s Bible and the KJV. We are not criticizing those translations. The translators made judgment calls. But it was never their intention to be gender-neutral as such, or to create a gender-neutral translation. It is one thing to alter the translation of a word so it fits the group the word refers to in a particular context, and another thing to claim that because a word can refer to a more inclusive group, in that context it loses its male meaning and becomes a gender-neutral word. It is one thing to show that in some contexts a certain word might be translated in a more inclusive way—adding it as a lower entry in a dictionary’s range of meanings for that word—and another thing to raise that meaning to the top of the heap and claim it can be translated that way whenever gender-neutral language requires it. There is a big difference between a judicious use of an alternate meaning when the primary meaning could also have been used, and a pre-determined decision across-the-board to forbid certain ways of speaking.

It is one thing to try to prove that “sons” actually means “people,” and “fathers” actually means “ancestors,” and another thing for a translator to say, “We know what the word means in its basic sense, but here we’re going to translate using another word closer to defining the group that may be referred to. We do not claim that a Hebrew person hears nothing more in the expression ‘sons of Israel’ than we hear in ‘children of Israel.’ But in our opinion, ‘children’ is an appropriate translation for our audience.” When their translation choice is expressed like that, they are at least not forcing us to change word meanings that have been clearly established by the broad context of Scripture.

The entire Old Testament is structured with a certain male overtone. It’s not just the vocabulary. Many areas of Old Testament life have these overtones—childbirth, death, inheritance, the census, genealogies, public leadership, defense, the worship life, and the civil code. Simply put, men and women are distinguished, and men are given a place in Old Testament society that women do not have. Did this structure and the words used to express it carry no meaning for God’s Old Testament people? Do they carry no meaning for us?

Or do the words and the structure reflect Scripture’s worldview as it unfolded in the creation of ADAM? Do they reflect the male’s responsibilities and how the woman was graciously given to him as a helper? Do they reflect men and women living together after the fall into sin, living
under the curse God graciously brought into their lives to keep them living in humble reliance on him?

This is not to argue that Christians today must duplicate Hebrew society. And we must be very careful when we apply to ourselves in the New Testament what we find in the Old Testament. But the New Testament is filled with principles and lessons drawn from Old Testament accounts. We are encouraged to learn from Old Testament events about the blessings God brings on faith-created obedience and the curses he brings on those who rebel. We are pointed back to the many pictures found in the Old Testament worship life that symbolize aspects of our life under Christ. Remember, Saint Paul used the events in the early chapters of Genesis to establish God’s teaching on the roles of men and women today. Paul was not simply referring to a specific Old Testament passage—a doctrinal statement, as we might call it—but he was referring to the series of events surrounding the creation of ADAM and using them to establish his clear teaching on the roles of men and women. Recall the passage:

I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Timothy 2:9-14, 1984 NIV).

The foundation for a Christian’s life in the church and home is built on the events surrounding the early life of ADAM. That much, I believe, is clear. But who is to say with certainty that this foundation was not also reflected in how the Old Testament used male terminology in general and in how the Israelites’ lives were structured by the Lord under Moses’ law?

And what a great blessing this was! Back then, the Lord was not making it easier for men or honoring them at the expense of women. Rather, at every turn, God was saying to Old Testament men—and I believe he is still saying this to us today—“I know you would just as soon turn all your responsibilities over to your wives and the women of your congregations. I know you are content to carry out your responsibilities, but only as long as you think there is something in it for you. But that’s not how it is to be. The responsibility I gave to Adam is yours to carry out. You have the responsibility to lead God’s people, not in pride and arrogance, but in humility and a spirit of service. You have the primary responsibility to defend your wives and families, and so I am sending you off to war, not to get glory for yourselves but to fight and even die for the sake of ADAM, whom I have created. You have the responsibility to lead your families in worship. And
it won’t be a Sabbath trip past the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to visit the tree of life, but now it will be in the bloody context of sacrifice and purification from the filth of sin and in hard study and teaching. You will have to organize your household for trips to Jerusalem (or to church on Sunday morning) and provide the proper sacrifices God requires. Men, it’s your responsibility, for the sake of your families, to see that this is done.”

In the face of all these responsibilities, all men share the same sense of relief Adam expressed when he looked at his wife and said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She is worth leaving my parents’ home for. Thank you, Lord, for providing this person—who is one flesh with me—to help me shoulder the responsibilities you have given us.”

Who is to say that the word “fathers” didn’t remind Israelite men of how their own fathers carried out these responsibilities and then passed them down to them, or that “sons of Israel” did not remind them of their task of helping the next generation remain true Israelites. Who is to say that “brothers” did not point Israelite men to all the other Israelite men around them who were called on to shoulder the same God-given responsibilities. In her song, Deborah certainly underlined what should have been a solidarity among the Hebrew men (Judges 5:12-18). I do not know if the Lord had in mind these specific applications in his choice of gender-specific words, but perhaps they express some part of what those words were meant to convey.

Personally, I would just as soon turn all my responsibilities over to my wife and the women of the church. I would love to have a completely gender-neutral Bible—not just in terminology but in how the church is structured. It would make my life so much easier. But these gender-specific terms and the lessons men learn from how God structured his Old Testament people help me keep my laziness in check.

One more brief comment on the importance of treating the male specific words of Scripture with care. Jesus referred to himself as the ‘son of man.’ Of course, he was telling us that he, the Son of God, became a member of the human race to save us. But I think we should respect his choice of words. He was applying to himself the Old Testament phrase “son of ADAM.”

A Gender-Neutral Translating Sampler

Earlier we watched Dr. Smith and his team discover and define word meanings. We noted they were dissatisfied with the gender-neutral words they finally listed in their dictionary entry for ADAM. Now we will watch two fictional translation experts, Ray and James, put to use these meanings for ADAM and the other key words and work within the parameters of gender-neutral
translating. They will try to create the tightest fit possible between the immovable hand of the original languages and the somewhat flexible hand of the language of their English readers.

Ray is the team leader and makes the final decisions. He is very much in favor of gender-neutral language. James, on the other hand, is not so optimistic. We will listen to them as they attempt to update an older translation.

Ray begins their first session with some basic instructions: “James, here are some techniques we will use. We may have some disagreements, but here’s what I am looking for. Let me make up a sentence to illustrate our principles.

“Here’s my sentence: Man may do the work, but God alone blesses him. Obviously, we have some work to do. ‘Man’ is not gender-neutral. Let’s change that to: A person may do the work, but God alone blesses him. ‘Person’ is gender-neutral, but since it is singular, the writer must use ‘he’ or ‘him’ to refer to it. This will be a common problem for us. Here’s one way of getting around this, and this is becoming common in English: A person may work, but God alone blesses them. That’s good, but sometimes that technique won’t work. Sometimes we must make the whole sentence plural: People (or humans, or human beings, or mortals) may work, but God alone blesses them. Or we could keep the singular ‘person’ and just omit the last word of the sentence: A person may work, but God alone grants the blessing. And sometimes we will simply have to change the whole sentence into the second person: You may work, but God alone blesses you. All of these methods will help us avoid using the word ‘man’ or the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him. And remember: We don’t have to make these changes if the sentence is talking about a specific male or a specific female person. Let’s get started.”

[My comment: I will not include the original Hebrew that Ray and James often referred to. Rather, I’ll write out the translation they were updating, which uses “man” in a more traditional way and in this respect sometimes follows the Hebrew original more closely. We will then listen to Ray and James discuss the translation. Finally, we will look at their translation, the gender-neutral NIV11.]

**Genesis 1:26,27**

> 26 Then God said, “Let us make **man** in our image, in our likeness, and let **them** rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” 27 So God created **man** in his own image, in the image of God he created **him**: male and female he created **them**. (1984 NIV)
Ray: “We’re starting out with a tough one, James. We’ll have to translate ADAM in verse 26 with ‘mankind.’” James: “OK, but remember, the next few chapters of Genesis will have much more to say about ADAM. I would like to keep ‘man.’ That way, we can at least think about Adam’s creation before we think about Eve’s creation. ‘Mankind’ leads us to think about men and women right away.” Ray: “How can you be sure God wasn’t referring to mankind, that is, men and women, in this passage? After all, this is a summary of what took place on the sixth day when God created both the sexes. The Lord also says that ‘they’ are to rule. That sounds more like both Adam and Eve, doesn’t it?” James: “I see your point. But in verse 27 there is a singular and a plural back-to-back—‘him’ and ‘them.’ God created ‘him.’ God created ‘them.’ It makes a nice contrast, and it reflects what we will learn in chapter two.” Ray: “But, James, the singular ‘him’ can refer to mankind and not to the man, Adam. So ‘him’ is actually a plural idea. I think we should use ‘them’—both for ADAM, ‘mankind’ as well as for ‘male and female.’” James: “But the Hebrew seems to be striking a contrast—ADAM is one, but ADAM is also two. And this is what the next chapters will teach us. And another point, in English ‘mankind’ takes the pronoun ‘it.’ If you want to have verse 27 refer to mankind, just use ‘it.’ Or repeat the word ‘mankind’ and have it read ‘in the image of God he created mankind.’ That would help keep the singular-plural contrast of the Hebrew.” Ray: “But you can’t prove all that from the Hebrew, can you?” James: “No, but wouldn’t a consistent use of ‘man’ help us connect the uses of ADAM as its meaning unfolds throughout these important chapters of Scripture? ‘Man’ has the ability to contain many of the nuances of ADAM in one word.” Ray: “Like I said, this is a tough one. Here’s our translation:”

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26,27, NIV11)

Genesis 2:5

No shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground. (1984 NIV)

James: “The text seems to be saying there was no one from that special creation ‘man’ in existence yet to care for the garden.” Ray: “I agree. But if we keep the translation ‘man,’ people will only think of the man, Adam.” James: “But, Ray, if we change it, we’ll lose the connection
of this verse with the whole description of how God created ADAM. I think that’s important.”

Ray: “Well, ‘mankind’ won’t make any sense, and ‘man’ will be heard as gender-specific. I think we’ll have to tone down our translation a bit. How about ‘no one’?” James: “We’re really stripping a lot away with that. This verse is part of the big picture. People will miss the point if we weaken it so much.” Ray: “Perhaps. But you can’t keep everything in a translation. You’ll be happy to know we’ll be translating ADAM ‘man’ for quite a while now since it will refer to the male, ADAM. Here’s our translation:”

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground. (Genesis 2:5, NIV11)

Genesis 5:1-3

1 This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created  
man, he made him in the likeness of God. 2 He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them “man.” 3 When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. (1984 NIV)

Ray: “Here we go again. This verse is a lot like Genesis 1:26,27.” James: “It is.” Ray: “So let’s handle it like we did there.” James: “But what about the end of verse 2? Don’t you think the Hebrew people heard more than ‘mankind’ when they read ADAM in that place? God called them ADAM. In these verses, ADAM is Adam’s personal name as well as a word for ‘mankind.’ What’s wrong with just leaving it ‘man’? That covers both uses.” Ray: “I don’t disagree with you. But if we translate it ‘man’ here, we are using a gender-specific word, and that will come back to haunt us later. Here’s our translation:”

1 This is the written account of Adam’s family line. When God created  
mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. 2 He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” when they were created. 3 When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. (Genesis 5:1-3, NIV11)

Genesis 11:1-6

1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. 3 They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” 5 But the LORD came down to see the
city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."

(1984 NIV)

James: “Ray, this should make things easy for you. The subject of verse 2 is found in verse 1, ‘the whole world.’ There is no word for ‘men’ in verse 2. The 1984 NIV added ‘men’ to make it easier to read. We can just translate ‘they moved eastward.’ Ray: “We could do that, but I like adding a subject. It is easier to read. We can’t use ‘man,’ and there is obviously more than one person, so we will use ‘people.’” James: “But in verse 5 the Hebrew tells us that the tower was being built by the ‘sons of ADAM.’ That reminds me of creation, and it calls to my mind how far ADAM had fallen. I’m not suggesting we use ‘sons of man.’ I’d be happy with ‘children of man,’ or even ‘children of mankind.’” Ray: “You know we can’t use ‘man.’ ‘Children of mankind’ sounds really awkward. Let’s just use ‘people’ again. Here’s our translation:”

1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech
2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. (Genesis 11:1-6, NIV11)

Exodus 4:19

Now the LORD had said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead.” (1984 NIV)

James: “Ray, we’ve got another ‘men’ to deal with. What do you suggest? I can’t imagine women wanting to kill Moses! Do you really think Moses heard God saying that women were trying to kill him?” Ray: “Could have. ‘Man’ has got to go.” James: “But the Hebrew word is not ADAM but ISH. And ISH most often refers to men in contrast to women.” Ray: “We’ll have to leave open the possibility that women were among those seeking Moses’ life, even if the Hebrew word is ISH. A simple pronoun will do the trick nicely. Here’s our translation:”

Now the LORD had said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead.” (Exodus 4:19, NIV11)
Exodus 5:9,10

9 Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.” 10 Then the slave drivers and the overseers went out and said to the people, “This is what Pharaoh says: ‘I will not give you any more straw.’” (1984 NIV)

Ray: “Hmm. . . . James, we’ve got a word that ends in ‘men.’ That’s got to go.” James: “I find it hard to imagine women out there whipping the Israelite slaves into line.” Ray: “Maybe so, but gender-neutral language requires it. We can substitute ‘overseers’ for ‘foremen.’ It means the same.” James: “It means the same in a sense, but the act of making the word gender-neutral sort of flies in the face of what was actually happening there in Egypt, doesn’t it?” Ray: “Anyway, here’s our translation:”

9 “Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.” 10 Then the slave drivers and the overseers went out and said to the people, “This is what Pharaoh says: ‘I will not give you any more straw.’” (Exodus 5:9,10, NIV11)

Leviticus 1:2-6

2 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. 3 If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD. 4 He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. 5 He is to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 6 He is to skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. (1984 NIV)

Ray: James, let’s just go at this verse and get rid of all the male words. After all, we’ve got a gender-neutral “you” in the first verse that sets the pace. How about if we just change all the masculine hes and hims to yous. Plus, we know that women could bring sacrifices to God as well as men.” James: “We have to respect the original words, and we won’t be doing that if we just change them. And ‘you’ and ‘your’ in verse 2 aren’t really gender-neutral words in Hebrew. There is a feminine ‘you’ and a masculine ‘you.’ Here the Lord chose to use the masculine “you.” Ray, I agree that this verse is gender neutral, but not because it has the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ in it. Look, the quotation starts like this: ‘When an ADAM of you. . .’ Here ADAM could be translated ‘person.’ It’s a gender-neutral word. But it has masculine overtones. And all the Hebrew masculine endings that follow are consistent with this.” Ray: “But James, how are
people today supposed to know that women were included in God’s commands about sacrifices—with all those masculine pronouns?”

James: “Ray, how were the people back then supposed to know that women were included? The words sounded just as gender-specific to them as they do to us! I’ll tell you how they knew: they understood the meaning of ADAM. Women knew ADAM included them. They also understood the male aspect of that word and the masculine endings didn’t bother them.”

Ray: “But James, we must be clear.”

James: “Ray, we are being clear, as clear as the Hebrew is. If you tamper with these verb and noun endings, you will be removing some of what a Hebrew woman heard and understood very clearly.”

Ray: “But we can’t put that meaning into good English.”

James: “We certainly can. People understand perfectly well what ‘he’ means. In this respect the Hebrew original is not that different from our English. Their masculine endings are easily converted to our masculine pronouns. The Lord could have chosen feminine noun and verb endings, but he didn’t.”

Ray: “But the Hebrew words for “you” and “they/them” are always gender specific. Their ending can make them feminine or masculine. The Lord had to pick something, so he picked masculine endings. But let’s not try to pull too much meaning out of that. In English, ‘yours’ and “they/them” are gender neutral. We’ve got these wonderful gender-neutral words. Let’s use them!”

James: “I know what you mean, Ray, but you will have to prove that the Lord has given us the freedom to translate that way. He could have used ‘you’ and ‘they/them,’ even though the Hebrew is gender-specific. But he chose the third person masculine singular. So should we. And the Lord could have used a variety of methods to make Old Testament society gender-neutral, but he didn’t. Neither should we. I don’t think you’re as concerned about accuracy as with making our translation gender-neutral.”

Ray: “This is getting a little deep for me, James. ‘You’ sounds good. Here’s our translation. Oh, and by the way, James, this will come up a lot. Let’s not waste all our time discussing this every time it does.”

James: “Ray, before you give our translation, let me say just one thing. I know translation is tough. But unless we struggle a little more, I don’t think we’re doing our job. Okay, go ahead:”

2 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When anyone among you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. 3 “If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you are to offer a male without defect. You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD. 4 You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. 5 You are to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and splash it against the sides of the altar at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 6 You are to skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces.” (Leviticus 1:2-6, NIV11)
Leviticus 4:32,33,35

32 “If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he is to bring a female without defect. 33 He is to lay his hand on its head and slaughter it for a sin offering at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered. 35 . . . He shall remove all the fat, just as the fat is removed from the lamb of the fellowship offering, and the priest shall burn it on the altar on top of the offerings made to the LORD by fire. In this way the priest will make atonement for him for the sin he has committed, and he will be forgiven.” (Leviticus 4:32, 34,35, NIV11)

James: “Ray, there are a lot of hes in this section. And that’s what the Hebrew uses—masculine singular endings. ‘You’ is going to be tough here. Let me see you get out of this one.”

Ray: “No problem. You had better get used to this gender-neutral technique. We’ll be using this a lot. We’ll change the whole sentence from singular to plural.” James: “Using that technique, the passage makes sense at the beginning, but by the time we get to the end, it almost sounds like the sins are a joint effort between the two of them and the Lord’s forgiveness is for a sin they both committed.” Ray: “Well, James, I hope the readers are brighter than you. Here’s what we’ll translate:”

32 “If someone brings a lamb as their sin offering, they are to bring a female without defect. 33 They are to lay their hand on its head and slaughter it for a sin offering at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered. 35 . . . They shall remove all the fat, just as the fat is removed from the lamb of the fellowship offering, and the priest shall burn it on the altar on top of the food offerings presented to the LORD. In this way the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.” (Leviticus 4:32, 34,35, NIV11)

[Note: The NIV11 seems to have pulled back from using this technique as often as the TNIV did. In Leviticus 13:8 the TNIV reads: “The priest is to examine them, and if the rash has spread in the skin, he shall pronounce them unclean; it is a defiling skin disease.” The NIV11 helps us keep the individual Israelite in mind: “The priest is to examine that person, and if the rash has spread in the skin, he shall pronounce them unclean; it is a defiling skin disease.” But note the difficulty the NIV11 gets itself into in Leviticus 14:1-9, the description of God’s law for a leper. The description of the law begins in 14:2, where the Hebrew uses the masculine singular. The NIV11 immediately turns the singular into a plural. In Leviticus 14:8, eight verses later, the instructions conclude like this: “On the seventh day they must shave off all their hair; they must shave their head, their beard, their eyebrows and the rest of their hair. They must wash their clothes and bathe themselves with water, and they will be clean.” Women were lepers too. But in]
choosing between clearly including women in the instructions by using the plural, or just translating the section in the masculine singular and asking readers to include the women in their minds [and adjust accordingly for the beards], the NIV11 translators should have chosen the latter. But consistency likely led them to use all plurals.]

Isaiah 19:16; Jeremiah 51:30; Nahum 3:13

Isaiah 19:16 In that day the Egyptians will be like women. They will shudder with fear at the uplifted hand that the LORD Almighty raises against them. (1984 NIV)

Jeremiah 51:30 Babylon’s warriors have stopped fighting; they remain in their strongholds. Their strength is exhausted; they have become like women. Her dwellings are set on fire; the bars of her gates are broken. (1984 NIV)

Nahum 3:13 Look at your troops—they are all women! The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed their bars. (1984 NIV)

Ray: “James, we have to do something with the Hebrew word ‘women’ in this sentence. It sounds insulting.” James: “What’s wrong with saying the soldiers became like women? Everyone understands that.” Ray: “But today we can’t imply that women can’t fight in combat.”

James: “The context of these verses isn’t talking about the inability to fight, but about being defenseless in the face of an approaching army. At least the men were armed and could defend themselves. But without weapons and training, it’s quite natural to be afraid. I would be.” Ray: “No, James, it’s no compliment to women. We have to change it. How about ‘weakling’?”

James: “How can you call that accurate?” Ray: “If I were a woman, not knowing that the original said ‘women,’ I would prefer to hear ‘weakling.’ That way, the subject of women doesn’t even come up.” James: “But if you know the Hebrew, the translation ‘weakling’ is a terrible insult to women. Ray, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll take care of explaining to the women in the Bible study you lead why the Hebrew used ‘women’ in those passages. And when you get to heaven, you can explain to Ruth and Deborah and the other Hebrew women there why we translated ‘women’ as ‘weaklings.’” Ray: “James, it’s not that bad. Here’s our translation:”

16 In that day the Egyptians will become weaklings. They will shudder with fear at the uplifted hand that the LORD Almighty raises against them. (Isaiah 19:16, NIV11)

30 Babylon’s warriors have stopped fighting; they remain in their strongholds. Their strength is exhausted; they have become weaklings. Her dwellings are set on fire; the bars of her gates are broken. (Jeremiah 51:30, NIV11)
13 Look at your troops—they are all weaklings. The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed the bars of your gates. (Nahum 3:13, NIV11)

Deuteronomy 10:22

Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky. (1984 NIV)

James: “The Hebrew reads, ‘With seventy people your fathers went down to Egypt.’ And then there is a list of the men—fathers—male people.” Ray: “We can’t use the word ‘fathers.’ It’s not gender-neutral.” James: “But they were men—all seventy of them.” Ray: “We will have to change fathers to ancestors.”

Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky. (Deuteronomy 10:22, NIV11)

Deuteronomy 1:34,35; Deuteronomy 21:5; 1 Chronicles 9:17-19

Deuteronomy 1:34,35 When the LORD heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore: 35 “Not a man of this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your forefathers.” (1984 NIV)

Deuteronomy 21:5 The priests, the sons of Levi, shall step forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD and to decide all cases of dispute and assault. (1984 NIV)

1 Chronicles 9:17-19 The gatekeepers: Shallum, Akkub, Talmon, Ahiman and their brothers, Shallum their chief 18 being stationed at the King’s Gate on the east, up to the present time. These were the gatekeepers belonging to the camp of the Levites. 19 Shallum son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his fellow gatekeepers from his family (the Korahites) were responsible for guarding the thresholds of the Tent just as their fathers had been responsible for guarding the entrance to the dwelling of the LORD. (1984 NIV)

James: “I have a bad feeling about what you’re going to do with these three passages. ‘Man,’ ‘forefathers,’ ‘brothers,’ ‘fathers’—they are all going to have to be retranslated, right?” Ray: “Right you are, James.” James: “But the people in the census were all males—those 20 years old and older. And the ‘sons’ of Levi were just that, his sons. And the gatekeepers were all ‘brothers,’ sons of their ‘fathers,’ who were gatekeepers before them. That’s just historical fact, and it was God’s way of doing things. You’re not translating to help people’s understanding; you’re
translating to keep it gender-neutral. People today, no matter how much they misunderstand the historic meaning of ‘man,’ realize these passages refer to males and will understand ‘sons,’ ‘brothers,’ and ‘fathers’ in their natural sense. Where does gender-neutral language end and changing history start? I too want to make the Bible understandable to people, but it’s not our job to make it palatable to those with a different idea of how things should be or should have been!”

Ray: “Sorry, James, I’m going to have to overrule you on this. Here’s our translation:”

34 When the LORD heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore: 35 “No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors.” (Deuteronomy 1:34,35, NIV11)

The Levitical priests shall step forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD and to decide all cases of dispute and assault. (Deuteronomy 21:5, NIV11)

17 The gatekeepers: Shallum, Akkub, Talmon, Ahiman and their fellow Levites, Shallum their chief 18 being stationed at the King’s Gate on the east, up to the present time. These were the gatekeepers belonging to the camp of the Levites 19 Shallum son of Kore, the son of Ebiasaph, the son of Korah, and his fellow gatekeepers from his family (the Korahites) were responsible for guarding the thresholds of the tent just as their ancestors had been responsible for guarding the entrance to the dwelling of the LORD. (1 Chronicles 9:17-19, NIV11)

Psalm 8:3,4

3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (1984 NIV)

James: “Here we are at a very important messianic prophecy. The New Testament links this passage to Jesus. But I guess we have a problem, Ray. We can’t use ‘man,’ and we can’t use ‘son.’” Ray: “Making it plural is accurate. That’s what ‘man’ and ‘son of man’ mean. You can’t prove from the Psalm that these words refer directly to Jesus. We must leave it to the New Testament to make the connection.” [See Hebrews 2:5-8.] James: “But, Ray, I’ll admit the first phrase is plural. The Hebrew is ENOSH, not ADAM. But ‘son of man’ is a singular idea, even if we translate ADAM as ‘mankind.’ The singular idea lies in ‘son.’ That can refer to the Messiah, even if the first phrase refers to the human race. At least let’s translate it more literally so people can see the Hebrew words more clearly and pastors can easily connect it with the New Testament. That’s how it should be translated.” Ray: “We have no choice.”
3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3,4, NIV11)

Proverbs 17:6

Sons’ sons are the crown of old men. And the glory of sons are their fathers. (Proverbs 17:6, Young’s Literal Translation, an extremely literal translation. It is used here because the 1984 NIV translates the verse gender-neutral.)

Ray: “James, this is another tough one. The words are clear. A ‘son’ is a male offspring. It is used that way throughout the Old Testament. In fact, the whole verse is made up of male words: ‘son of a son,’ ‘old men,’ ‘sons,’ and ‘fathers.’” James: “Perhaps we should just translate the words as they stand.” Ray: “But it’s clear they refer to women too.” James: “Certainly, but in the Old Testament male words are often used to refer to a mixed group, and the readers know that women are included. We don’t need our translation to state the obvious.” Ray: “Obvious to you, perhaps. But what if we are misunderstood and some women feel left out. Would that be right?” James: “But is it right for translators to make the changes you have in mind?” Ray: “But if these male words include females, then we are not overstepping our bounds to translate them in a gender-neutral way.” James: “From the rest of Scripture, ‘sons’ means ‘sons,’ and ‘fathers’ means ‘fathers.’ That’s by far their most common meaning. The Hebrew language has a couple perfectly good ways of speaking about ‘children.’ It has a word for ‘children,’ and it often says ‘sons and daughters.’ I think there was a reason they kept the word ‘sons’ to refer to a mixed group. Ray: “Yes, that’s how they spoke in their culture. If the writer was alive today, he would just use ‘children.’” James: “Ray, that’s your opinion. But, you know, making a translation gender-neutral is actually small potatoes. More difficult for new readers is not the vocabulary of the Bible writers, but their entire worldview. If a modern reader starts at the beginning of Scripture and can get past God’s words to women: ‘Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you’ (Genesis 3:16, NIV11), that reader will likely be able to handle some gender-specific language. And who knows, maybe if they come to faith, they will be happy to have a translation that gets them closer to the original Hebrew. Just my opinion, of course.” Ray: “Sorry, James, even the translation we’re basing ours on has gender-neutral language here. Here’s our translation:”

Children’s children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children. (Proverbs 17:6, NIV11)

Deuteronomy 8:3
He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (1984 NIV)

James: “OK, Ray, I give up. I’ll just change ‘man’ to ‘people’ and we can move on.” Ray: “Not so quick, James. This passage is too familiar. We have to leave it ‘man’ so people will feel at home.” James: “But I thought a plural noun was the only accurate way to translate ‘man.’ How can you honestly claim that using a plural is accurate if you are willing to go back to the singular when you personally deem it necessary?” Ray: “In any case, here’s our translation—no change.”

He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8:3, NIV11)

Ray and James continued their translation. Much of their work was relatively easy and readers would find few changes between their new translation and the older one they were basing it on. They would go home on friendly terms. But some days were more difficult for James, who often felt forced to make changes he knew he should not make.

The Danger of the Culture-Shift Mentality

Many people see the gender-specific nature of the life and language of Scripture to be problematic in today’s society. There are two general ways to resolve this problem. Here is a summary of those two ways. We will expand on them in the following:

1. The first way is to argue that the male language of Scripture is largely gender-neutral and therefore gender-neutral translating accurately retains the meaning of those words.

2. The second way is to acknowledge that the language of Scripture is gender-specific, and that it gives men a role and a responsibility that is not given to women. This “maleness,” it is claimed, is there because the culture of that day was dominated by men, and that this aspect of their culture came through in how they wrote.

Although some try to argue on both sides of the fence, it is not really logical to do so. If the key words are actually gender-neutral, and gender-neutral translation practices accurately reflect what the people in Bible times were hearing, there is no need to find more reasons to justify
gender-neutral translating. It is accurate and the original writers’ meaning is being accurately conveyed. Case closed.

But in the minds of many—and among them are many gender-neutral translators—the case is not closed. They realize that the male nouns and pronouns in Scripture that we have been referring to all have clear male meanings. They believe this cannot be stripped out of the words so easily, even when these words refer to a mixed group. They accept the fact that ADAM, although a gender-neutral word, contains male connotations, and that the Hebrew words for “father,” “brother,” and “son,” although they might refer to mixed groups, are, in fact, gender-specific male words. They agree that in reference to mixed groups Scripture uses words that mean “men but not women,” “fathers but not mothers,” “sons but not daughters,” and that the original readers in their own minds would extend those male words to include women.

If the male element cannot be removed from the key words and therefore from Scripture, gender-neutral translators must find another way to justify their method of translating. That way is this: They argue that Scripture was written to people in a different culture and reflects the mentality of that culture. Most often, that view is accompanied by the view that today’s culture is more advanced in its understanding of the relationship between men and women and that it would be wrong to make people think that Scripture’s culture is on a par with ours. This justifies their rewording of Scripture’s gender-specific language to make the Bible more acceptable in our culture. Some offer a variation of this and claim that the gender-neutral language of Scripture is not part of what gives Scripture its meaning for us today—that it is an incidental part of God’s communication.

For the purposes of this paper, we are calling this the “culture-shift argument,” that is, since cultures have shifted between Bible times and ours, we must adjust our translations accordingly and filter out those aspects of God’s Word that reflect the culture in which the Bible writers wrote.

This argument plays an important role in other areas of thinking in many Christian churches. In fact, this argument pervades modern Christianity. Today, the culture-shift argument is being used by many churches to justify believing or doing certain things that seem out of line with the clear words of Scripture.

For example, the astonishing inroads that theistic evolution is making in the Christians church is invariably based on the culture-shift argument. The argument is familiar to anyone who is aware of the creation/evolution debate going on in the Christian church. It goes like this: It is
clear from hard scientific evidence that the world and everything in it came into being through the process of evolution. Christians should realize that people in Moses’ day were not aware of these scientific facts, and so Moses described the origin of the world in a way the people of his day could understand. Using the advanced knowledge with which God has blessed us, they say, we have a more accurate understanding of how the world came into being. And so we have the right and even the responsibility to give Christians a modern explanation to those parts of God’s Word that reflect a pre-scientific worldview. Inevitably God is said to have used some variety of evolution to create the world. In spite of this, they say, the main theological principle remains, namely, that God is powerful and glorious and that we, along with Moses and the Israelites, should praise God for his power and wisdom in creating the world around us.

Biblical feminism (feminism that claims to be based on the Bible) is another case in point. The biblical feminist movement gained steam in the 1960s and 1970s in opposition to the roles of men and women as practiced in many Christian churches. Biblical feminists worked to open the public ministry equally to men and women. At first, biblical feminists tried to put new interpretations on the passages in Scripture that teach the roles of men and women. Adjusting word meanings was part of this attempt. But they had little success. The passages were clear. So they fell back on the culture-shift argument. The Jewish culture in Paul’s day, they argued, was largely conditioned by the Old Testament patriarchal culture, which would not accept women church leaders, and so Paul forbade it also. But since our culture has shifted its understanding about what is appropriate for women to do, and since today’s society, at least in the Western world, has put away the restrictions previously applied to women in the public ministry, we have the right and responsibility to teach differently about the roles of men and women and change church practice. Scripture is clear, but it was written for a less advanced society.

All these cases have one thing in common: People have adopted an ideology—the “fact” of evolution or the rejection of role difference between men and women—and imposed it on Scripture, using it to determine how Scripture can or cannot be understood. These ideologies are held to be absolute and our interpretation of Scripture must be adjusted accordingly.

Some contend that this argument has little or nothing to do with gender-neutral translating. Yet gender-neutral translating has this in common with the previous examples. Gender-neutral translators take something they consider absolute—in this case the debt we owe to people who do not understand the gender-specific language of Scripture—and impose it on the work of translators.
Not all early gender-neutral translators (1980’s and early 1990’s) justified gender-neutrality by arguing that the male words of Scripture were actually devoid of gender-specific meaning (when used for a mixed group of males and females). They accepted the fact that it was there and argued against it by using the culture-shift argument. Shortly before the first true gender-neutral Bible, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), was published, an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* reported that some of NRSV translators had failed to use strictly gender-neutral language:

“The basic principle that the RSV committee uses is that we will remove all masculine-dominated language that has been introduced by the translators,” says George MacRae, who serves on the New Testament panel. Thus, no attempt will be made to disguise the fact that every book of the Bible is the product of a thoroughly male-dominated society. To pretend that the ancient Near Eastern world of the Bible was not radically different from our own world would be to deprive Scripture of its historical context.¹

The NRSV was commissioned by the National Council of Churches, whose members are largely from liberal mainstream churches that reject the Scripture’s teaching on the roles of men and women. The above quotation from the Atlantic monthly is entirely in line with the attitude their member churches have toward the Old Testament.

This position is normally not expressed as strongly in the more conservative mainstream Evangelical world—the main users of the NIV. However, when the CBT, which is in charge of keeping the NIV up to date, began thinking about updating the 1984 NIV—this was in the early 1990s—they drew up a set of translation guidelines. The guidelines, written in 1992, contained instructions for making the NIV gender-neutral. What concerns us here are not the guidelines themselves but the reason stated by the committee as to why they considered a gender-neutral translation important. Principles C and D of part I, “Basic Principles” reads as follows:

C. Authors of Biblical books, even while writing Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit, unconsciously reflected in many ways, the particular cultures in which they wrote. Hence in the manner in which they articulate the Word of God, they sometimes offend modern sensibilities. At such times, translators can and may use non-offending renderings so as not to hinder the message of the Spirit.

D. The patriarchalism (like other social patterns) of the ancient cultures in which the Biblical books were composed is pervasively reflected in forms of expression that appear, in the modern context, to deny the common human dignity of all hearers and readers. For these forms, alternative modes of expression can and

may be used, though care must be taken not to distort the intent of the original text.  

This is a fairly strong statement about the culture in Bible times. It also shows that an Evangelical can claim faith in the inspiration of Scripture, yet at the same time criticize God’s Word that instructs people how to live in a “patriarchal” culture.

This statement caused an outcry among conservative Evangelicals, yet, as we noted at the beginning of this paper, the CBT continued their work on a gender-neutral translation. D. A. Carson writes that “market research prompted the American publisher, Zondervan, to proceed slowly.” The new version, called the NIVI, was subsequently sold to a British publisher, who was not allowed to sell the version in the United States.

The following statement about translation principles was used in the preface to the NIVI: “At the same time, it was recognized that it was often appropriate to mute the patriarchalism of the culture of the biblical writers through gender-inclusive language when this could be done without compromising the message of the Spirit.”

Carson, who favors gender-neutral language, after presenting various ideas of what that sentence could mean, wrote: “The statement in the preface to the NIVI is so plastic that with a little effort it could be made to fit almost anywhere along the spectrum I’ve just laid out. . . . At the very least, however, all sides should recognize that the CBT members include both complementarians and egalitarians.” (Complementarians are those who believe in the roles of men and women. They believe men and women are equal under God but have different God-given roles and responsibilities. Egalitarians view Scripture’s teaching of roles to have been influenced by its culture, and that today men and women have an equal right to hold authority in the home and church.)

The CBT is still comprised of a mix of the two. Douglas Moo, current chairman of the CBT, says, “The Committee on Bible Translation, translators of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, is composed of scholars that mirror the spectrum of evangelicalism. The committee includes both complementarians and egalitarians.”

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4 Carson, p. 27.
5 Carson, p. 28.
It is fair to say that anyone holding an egalitarian position must be convinced either that there is no gender-specific language in the Old and New Testaments and must deny the application of the clear passages in Scripture on the roles of men and women (otherwise they wouldn’t be egalitarian), or they must believe in what we are calling the culture-shift argument. To be fair, the language of the first CBT’s guidelines for creating a gender-neutral translation quoted previously was not used in the preface to the TNIV (the third CTB gender-neutral translation, 2002) or the NIV11. But has it been removed from their thinking? There is no sinister side to that question. It’s a legitimate question and has a bearing on future versions of the NIV.

To return to the picture we started with, we are never to form and mold the hand of Scripture so that it fits into the English we have to work with. We must always shape our hand to fit the hand of Scripture. Changing word meanings of the key words does just that—it changes the original to fit more closely with modern thinking. The culture-shift argument does the same. The culture shift argument justifies translators adjusting to a pre-determined set of guidelines—in this case the requirement to not use gender-specific words—rather than seek to put into their translation what naturally comes out of Scripture. In the process, it erodes our confidence in the Lord by claiming that how he expressed gender relationships was determined by the culture of the people to whom he was originally writing.

I know we in the WELS don’t accept the culture-shift argument. But in our WELS discussion about the NIV11 we are using statements that in the context of the history of Bible interpretation should be raising red flags if unaccompanied by a strong effort to make all the necessary qualifications.

There have already been statements that open the door for human reason to make certain judgments it should not make—statements that get in the way of allowing Scripture to interpret itself. There has been talk of the need to determine what is normative in Scripture and what is not, that is, the need to determine which parts of Scripture shape our beliefs and way of life, and which do not necessarily do so. We should rather be saying that everything in Scripture is normative and that we must search the words of Scripture itself to discover what applies to every Christian and what does not.

Also, the “words of Scripture” have been set alongside the “meaning of Scripture.” with the meaning of Scripture deemed most important. Now, this statement can be very comforting for God’s people. We do not have to learn Hebrew and Greek to be sure we have God’s Word. A translation that accurately expresses the meaning of the original is all we need. But beyond that we must question whether this theological distinction has a place in the present discussion. We
are primarily talking about the gender-specific meaning found in the original words, and only secondarily about how we should translate that meaning into English. When studying the original languages, the distinction between the words of Scripture and the meaning of Scripture can only lead to a lack of confidence in the ability of the words of Scripture to express God’s thoughts. Human reason comes to play a much bigger role.

But Jesus put it this way when he described the extent to which God’s Word applied to him, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18, 1984 NIV). It is too easy to gently slip into the idea that “meaning” is the real goal and we, using our reason, can be selective in deciding which words and what elements of grammar merit our close attention because they contribute to the meaning. I am not saying that we are doing this. But it is a fact that many outside our church body approach Scripture like this. At the very least, we need to fully discuss the right way of speaking about these issues and make all the necessary distinctions and qualifications.

How we approach the relationship between Scripture and the culture in which Scripture was written is critical. A church body that handles it wrongly will slowly lose a correct understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. The history of modern Christianity is littered with church bodies who have crashed on these rocks. If this issue is considered wrongly, God will come to be viewed as accommodating himself to an ancient culture, or even worse, helping to create a culture that put women down or suppressed their rights. Scripture will no longer interpret Scripture, because theologians will bring in ideas from outside Scripture and allow them to sit in judgment on Scripture. Human reason will move outside its God-given role of seeking to interpret Scripture by using Scripture alone, and will be able to inject its own ideas into the mix. Perhaps we don’t warrant this caution at this time. But anyone who is aware of church history and yearns to keep our Scriptural heritage pure will not be too hard on me for raising these concerns.

There is truth in the age-old statement, “Beware the beginnings,” and I think the arguments of the CBT as they began their work on a gender-neutral NIV quoted previously should raise a red flag in our minds as we think about adopting the type of translation that grew out of those translation principles. The removal of the male aspect of Scripture in a gender-neutral translation may go unnoticed by readers in their daily use of the Bible. But future seminary students will come face-to-face with it and will have to deal with it. If they cannot deal with it on the basis of the words, they will have to toy around with some version of the culture-shift argument. If I am
being oversensitive in discussing this topic in relation to the WELS, forgive me. But I would rather err on the side of caution.

When speaking about the extent to which God’s Word applied to him, Paul wrote: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God [literally “person” of God] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16,17, 1984 NIV). Those words compel us to make our English hand fit the words Scripture’s original languages and never succumb to the temptation to make Scripture accommodate ours.

In this paper I have argued

- How Scripture expresses gender is consistent with the meaning of ADAM, the basic word that teaches the relationship between men and women as it unfolded in the early chapters of Genesis.
- To include gender-specific language in a translation is completely in line (1) with the male aspect of the gender-neutral word ADAM; (2) with the other key male words even when they do the double duty of referring to mixed groups, and (3) with the general structure of Hebrew religion and society under God in the Old Testament.
- Some translations make ADAM refer only to males and add male words to their translations beyond those found in Scripture. This makes Scripture needlessly gender-specific and may in fact confuse people on such topics as sin, forgiveness, salvation, faith, spiritual gifts, and influence in the growth of God’s kingdom. Scripture has a male orientation for reasons relating to how and why God created men and women. But in regard to God’s grace, it is the most gender-neutral book there is, and translators must struggle to preserve that distinction.
- The male language in Scripture supports men today by clearly reminding us of the responsibilities God has given us and the purpose for which he created us. In that sense the Hebrew and Greek grammatical forms carried meaning the Lord wants to convey to us.
- Because gender-neutral translating tampers with the meaning of Old Testament words, it has the potential to force us into wrong ways of thinking about the inspiration of Scripture.
Gender-neutral translating is relatively new. It is probably safe to say there will be more gender-neutral translations in the future. In my opinion, the biggest issue we face in the WELS is not the choice of a translation, but wrestling with how a gender-neutral approach to translating Scripture affects our understanding of verbal inspiration. The worst that can happen is that we adopt a translation—the NIV11 or another translation—and still remain unaware of the underlying issues or unconvinced that they need discussion. I hope this paper has helped you sort through some of the issues and has helped you realize why the adoption of a gender-neutral translation is a major decision that we all should take very seriously.

Further Reading

If you would like to study this subject in more detail, consider the following:

First, spend as much time as you can on the Web site www.slowley.com. Robert Slowley is a researcher who created a program to help people compare the 1984 NIV, the TNIV, and the NIV11. Go to his Web site and click on “Comprehensive computer comparison of the NIV1984/TNIV/NIV2011.” Then click on “Table of changes within each book.” Choose a book to study. Some contain more changes than others. One of the five books of Moses or the book of Acts will give you a good opportunity to see gender-specific versus gender-neutral translations firsthand. You will see only passages where changes have been made. You will be able to compare them quickly. This will get you right down into the heart of the debate. People throughout the Christian world have been using this site to evaluate the NIV11. In my opinion, there is absolutely nothing more helpful for forming your own conclusions than getting into the actual word choices the NIV11 translators have actually made. Discussions about translating principles and difficulties will only be helpful to a person who has spent time “down in the trenches” of Scripture itself.

Books and articles authored by Carson, Fee, or Strauss will give you the pro-gender–neutral position. Books by Grudem and Poythress will give you the other side. D. A. Carson’s book The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism is out of print but can be purchased used from Amazon.com. This book was written when the debate started in the 1990s and gets the reader closer to the “nitty-gritty” of the debate more than later books. Although Carson favors gender-neutral language, he helps the reader see both sides of the coin.
Wayne Grudem’s book *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* is, perhaps, the best summary of the arguments against gender-neutral translating. This book can be purchased new or used at Amazon.com.

Also, see the WELS Translation Evaluation Committee’s Web site, which can be accessed through the main page of the WELS Web site, www.wels.net. Papers that argue both sides of the case can be found there as free downloads. Note especially the paper by WELS pastor Brian Keller, which contains a detailed evaluation of the NIV11. It also contains numerous links to documents on the Web that are helpful to understanding this topic.

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