

Gender and the Bible: Evangelicals wrangle over new translations

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

A new translation of the Bible has created a tug of words between camps in the evangelical world. Moderates and conservatives are fighting with ultraconservatives over a gender-inclusive New Testament, part of Today's New International Version Bible, which is based on the best-selling New International Version (NIV). The harshest critics of the TNIV, who say they handle God's Word more faithfully and without secular influences, have in turn been accused of a conflict of interest.

The TNIV adopts generic terms like "person," "people," "anyone" and "brothers and sisters" when the biblical text does not require specific male references. Hardly an avant-garde translation. Indeed, two other new Bibles favored by ultraconservatives also make numerous—though not as many—gender-inclusive changes, a point little-mentioned by the TNIV's critics.

Southern Baptists all but declared the TNIV to be anathema during their June meeting. Delegates expressed "profound disappointment" in the International Bible Society and Zondervan Publishers "for this inaccurate translation" and said they "cannot commend" it to fellow Baptists or "the larger Christian community." The SBC's 109 LifeWay bookstores will not sell the book.

The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, whose current president is Southern Baptist seminary professor Bruce Ware, was delighted. "This action taken by the SBC only further demonstrates the growing evangelical wave of opposition to the TNIV," said Randy Stinson, the council's executive director.

On the other hand, Mimi Haddad, who heads Christians for Biblical Equality, said the launching of the TNIV "is raising the consciousness of moderates and conservatives, and maybe fundamentalists, about what our assumptions are on Bible translations." Officials of the International Bible Society claimed in a news release that "criticism of the TNIV does not reflect the opinion of most evangelical Christians."

The divisions go back to 1997 when it was learned that the IBS had published in England an inclusive-language New Testament. A howl of protest erupted, and plans were scrapped for an updated, North American version of the NIV. When IBS and Zondervan revived the project and unveiled the TNIV, critics raised objections again.

Ardent conservatives are promising a fight, mainly through the Louisville- based Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, using its Web site www.cbmw.org to argue the case in detail. It is backed by James Dobson's Focus on the Family ministry and the 16-million-member Southern Baptist Convention. With the TNIV's Old Testament not due until 2005, the struggle is likely to last a while.

Early this year, Zondervan and IBS lined up endorsements and supplied examples of new translations on their joint Web site at www.tniv.info. On June 11, as Southern Baptists opened their meeting in St. Louis, TNIV sponsors countered the charges of inaccuracy by announcing that their translation guidelines met the standards of the 18-member Forum of Bible Agencies. The FBA, which does some 90 percent of all translation work, includes Wycliffe Bible Translators, the Jesus Film Project and Lutheran Bible Translators. "It is the consensus of the FBA that the TNIV falls within translation principles and procedures," said the brief statement.

The next arena for debate may be more to TNIV's liking. That's the big CBA convention, a showcase for evangelical store retailers and suppliers July 13-18 in Anaheim, California. The only seminar on Bibles, titled "Which translation? Helping the customers find the right Bible," will be led by TNIV proponent John Kohlenberger. Author of numerous concordances and reference works, the Oregon resident with a master's degree from Conservative Baptist-related Western Seminary has led a Bible reference seminar at the CBA convention annually since 1997.

"I intend to promote all English Bibles, not to censure or belittle any," he said in an e-mail. "A major point I try to make is that the TNIV is simply the latest of at least 19 new translations or revisions that have appeared since the mid-1980s.

"The TNIV is no pace-setter," said Kohlenberger. "It is following the trends of the past 20 years in Bible translation," including the academic-favored New Revised Standard Version and the most-used Catholic version, the New American Bible.

Part of that trend, to a degree, are two new Bibles favored by ultraconservatives that coincidentally are among five nominated for an Evangelical Christian Publishers Association award to be given just before the CBA convention. They are the English

Standard Version (ESV), from Crossway, and the New Testament portion of the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), from the Southern Baptists' Broadman & Holman Publishers. The ESV and the HCSB "use inclusive language more frequently than the NIV," noted Kohlenberger.

"Some of the most strident voices demeaning the TNIV are associated with these new versions—a situation many translators and publishers consider a conflict of interest," Kohlenberger wrote in *Priscilla Papers*, a journal of the Christians for Biblical Equality. He said the critics were associated either with the Holman New Testament published in 2000 or "served as advisers, reviewers or 'translators' of the evangelical revision of the RSV," published as the ESV in 2001.

"I don't think there is a conflict of interest," Stinson of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood told the *Century*. "Most of the people who are outspoken against TNIV this year were just as outspoken in 1997 when there were no competing Bible editions."

One vocal adversary of the TNIV is R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. On June 10 he told a breakfast sponsored by the SBC's LifeWay Christian Resources, parent of Holman & Broadman Publishers, that its HCSB (whose complete version will be out in 2004) is one of three Bible translations that he will recommend for use in serious study. The others are the ESV and one that eschews gender-inclusive terms, the New American Standard Bible.

"I'm not saying this because I'm at a LifeWay-sponsored event," said Mohler, according to Baptist Press. "It [HCSB] is a translation I would commend, and there aren't very many I would commend." Mohler said he was not initially excited about the HCSB because of the proliferation of translations. But the new controversy convinced him the Holman Bible was important to do—"if for no other reason than we will have a major translation we can control," he said.

Characterizations of the TNIV as inaccurate and influenced by secular, "politically correct" culture has spurred studies by some pastors. For example, David Stratton, pastor of Brunswick Islands Baptist Church in Supply, North Carolina, received the Holman version in January and was sent a preview copy of the TNIV in February. He made comparisons. In 15 New Testament books, Stratton said he found 306 verses in which there was at least one instance of the Holman Bible (HCSB) using more gender-accurate language than the NIV, whose last edition was published in 1984. "I

felt it was a bit harsh for SBC leaders to be so terribly critical of the TNIV over gender language” since the SBC had published a version “making allowances for recent changes in English gender usage.” Stratton posted his research at www.brunswickislandsbaptist.org.

In southern California, David W. Miller, senior pastor of the nondenominational Church at Rocky Peak, said he cringed at headlines such as *World* magazine’s “NIV’s Twisted Sister.” Comparing the TNIV with Greek texts, Miller said, “I expected to find a liberal mistranslation because of the negative press it had received. To my pleasant surprise, I instead discovered an amazing improvement in gender accuracy over the NIV.” Miller posted his lengthy commentary on his church’s Web site: www.rockypeak.org. (The July newsletter of the Society of Biblical Literature features six articles on Bible translation at www.sbl-site.org/newsletter/index.htm.)

The TNIV goes overboard in its effort to use inclusive words, asserts the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which by June had listed 904 examples of “inaccuracies.” Heading the list was “Changes from singular to plural to avoid the use of he/him/his.” Other complaints included changing male pronouns to you/your/yourself and changing, in 34 instances, “fathers/forefathers” to “ancestors.”

However, the CBMW principles have been challenged too. Ellis W. Deibler Jr. of Wycliffe Bible Translators first said that TNIV, like any other translation, “has its weaknesses.” But, he added, it was “totally misleading” to call the new translation inaccurate. “Every one of the [904] examples cited is a case of difference of opinion on how a certain term ought to be translated in English,” Deibler said.

The most disappointing aspect of the TNIV controversy, Deibler said, is that over 100 “recognized evangelicals” endorsed CBMW positions, among them Charles Colson, Bill McCartney, Pat Robertson and Bruce Wilkinson. “Those individuals have all had outstanding ministries of various kinds,” Deibler said. “But their ministries have not been in Bible translation. They were not trained in principles of Bible translation.”