

GENDER NEUTRAL ISSUES
IN THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION OF 2011

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The appearance of a new 2011 edition of the *New International Version* (NIV) represents a major milestone. It would be appropriate to undertake a major review, but we will focus on only one issue, the issue of gender-neutral language. In brief, the NIV 2011 backs away from some of the inaccuracies produced by gender-neutral language in *Today's New International Version* (TNIV 2005), but unfortunately still retains many more.

I. *History of the NIV*

The *New International Version* (NIV) and sister translations have appeared in a number of editions through the years. The NIV New Testament first appeared in 1973. The whole NIV Bible was published for the first time in 1978, and a minor revision appeared in 1984. A new British edition, the *New International Version Inclusive Language Edition* (NIVI), appeared in 1996. As the descriptive title "Inclusive Language Edition" suggests, this edition widely adopted "gender-neutral" language: it tended to avoid male-marked terms like "father," "son," "man," and generic "he."¹ (The expression *generic "he"* describes the use of "he/him/his/himself" with a generic antecedent such as "anyone" or "whoever.") The NIVI retained male-marked terms to refer to God.

On March 29, 1997, news surfaced that scholars were working on a revision of the American edition of the NIV, and that this revision would go gender-neutral.²

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¹ For a more precise discussion of "gender neutral" usage, and examples from the TNIV and other gender-neutral translations, see Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004); Poythress and Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000). The later of these two books (2004) includes all the material in the first (2000), and adds additional chapters on the TNIV 2002 (which included the NT only). These two books are the most prominent critiques of gender-neutral policy. For a defense, see D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); and Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation & Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998). See also Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, eds., *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World; Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). See also Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London: Routledge, 2009).

² Susan Olasky, "The Stealth Bible: The Popular *New International Version* Is Quietly Going 'Gender-Neutral,'" *World Magazine*, March 29, 1997, cover story.

A storm of protest ensued, and the International Bible Society (now renamed Biblica) and Zondervan Publishing Company backed away from their plans.³ But in 2002 a new edition of the New Testament appeared, named *Today's New International Version* (TNIV). This edition largely retained the gender-neutral usage of the NIV. An edition of the TNIV that included the whole Bible appeared in 2005.⁴ The NIV 1984 edition remained in print for those who preferred it.

As of November 1, 2010, the 2011 edition of the *New International Version* (NIV 2011) has been available online.⁵ By the time this article is in print, this new edition will be for sale in printed form.

The publicly available translation notes indicate that gender language in the TNIV was reviewed in preparation for the 2011 edition of the NIV.⁶ What are the results?⁷

II. *Improvements*

The NIV 2011 regularly uses masculine pronouns in referring to God and to Christ—as did the TNIV and the NIV 1984/1978. The controversy has centered on the use of masculine terms in referring to human beings. In comparison with

³ For a history of the controversy, see Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, ch. 8. The controversy also included the *New International Reader's Version* (NIrV 1995), which was based on the NIV but used simplified English to help beginning readers. The 1995 edition adopted gender-neutral language, but the NIrV was reissued in 1998 with this language removed (Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 147).

⁴ Vern S. Poythress, "Small Changes in Meaning Can Matter: The Unacceptability of the TNIV," *The Journal for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* 10/2 (2005): 28-34, at <<http://www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-10-No-2/Small-Changes-in-Meaning-Can-Matter>> (accessed Nov. 19, 2010), and <http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2005Small.htm> (accessed Nov. 19, 2010); Poythress, "TNIV's Altered Meanings: An Evaluation of the TNIV," internal article at <<https://www.cbmw.org/Resources/Articles/TNIV-s-Altered-Meanings>> (accessed Nov. 19, 2010), and <http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2005Tniv.htm> (accessed Nov. 19, 2010); Peter Schemm and Michael Travers, "Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve: How the TNIV Cuts off the Ancient Conversation," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 10/2 (2005): 51-55, at <<https://www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-10-No-2/Sons-of-Adam-and-Daughters-of-Eve>> (accessed Dec. 7, 2010). Issue 10/2 (2005) of the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* is devoted mostly to the TNIV. See also John F. Brug, "The TNIV—Some Preliminary Observations," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 103/2 (2006): 138-51; James R. Wicker, "The TNIV and the Gender-neutral Bible Controversy," *SwJT* 49 (2006): 112-14.

⁵ See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/> (accessed Nov. 18, 2010).

⁶ "Updating the New International Version of the Bible: Notes from the Committee on Bible Translation," 4-7, from <http://www.biblegateway.com/niv/Translators-Notes.pdf> (accessed Nov. 17, 2010).

⁷ The principle of "full disclosure" suggests that I should mention the fact that I have participated in the work on the English Standard Version (ESV), which is sometimes seen as an alternative to the NIV. But I would also point out that this article is not about comparing the NIV to the ESV, but about comparing the NIV 2011 to its predecessors, and especially evaluating the issue of gender-neutral language in the NIV 2011. I have been involved in the debate about gender-neutral language since 1997, before any involvement with the ESV project.

the TNIV, the NIV 2011 has reintroduced masculine terms in a number of verses about which there was earlier complaint.

Here are some instances where masculines occur effectively.

1. *1 Corinthians 14:28*⁸

NIV 2011/1984/1978: If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to *himself* and to God.

TNIV 2005: If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church; let *them* speak to *themselves* and to God.

TNIV 2002: If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to God *when alone*.

By returning to the language of NIV 1978 and 1984, which uses generic “he” (“himself”), the NIV 2011 has accurately rendered the third masculine singular pronoun in Greek. It has also avoided the possible misunderstandings in which a reader might think that tongue speakers are being encouraged to form a private group (TNIV 2005, “themselves”) or that Paul is prohibiting even inaudible use of tongues in the public meeting (TNIV 2002, “when alone”).

2. *Acts 20:30*⁹

NIV 2011/1984/1978: Even from your own number *men* [Greek *aner*] will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

TNIV: Even from your own number *some* will arise . . .

In Acts 20:30 the NIV 2011 has increased accuracy by returning to the language of the NIV 1978 and 1984, which uses the word “men” to translate the male-marked Greek term *aner*. Acts 20:30 is significant because Paul is predicting that even from among the elders at Ephesus some men will arise who will lead the flock astray. The word “men” shows indirectly that Paul is thinking specifically of male elders.

3. *Psalms 34:20*¹⁰

NIV 2011/1984/1978: He protects all *his* bones,
not one of them will be broken.

TNIV: He protects all *their* bones, . . .

The context of the previous v. 19 talks about the troubles of the righteous. The Hebrew behind vv. 19 and 20 uses the masculine singular in reference to the righteous. By preserving the singular in English, the NIV 2011 not only increases accuracy but allows readers to see more effectively the fulfillment of this verse in Christ, who is the uniquely righteous person.

⁸ For the previous discussion of this verse see Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 2, 28-29, 91-92.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 115-16, 214.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 47-48, 236-37.

John 19:33-36 indicates that after Jesus' death on the cross, his bones were not broken: "These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken,' . . ." (John 19:36). Scholars debate whether John 19:36 is referring back to Ps 34:20 or to Exod 12:46 or to both. Whichever might be the most direct allusion, both OT verses from a theological point of view point forward to Christ. The NIV 2011, like the NIV 1984 and 1978, allows readers to appreciate this relationship.

4. *Hebrews 2:6*¹¹

NIV 2011: What is *mankind* that you are mindful of them,
a *son of man* that you care for *him*?

TNIV: What are *mere mortals* that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

Hebrews 2:6 is significant because of the theological connection between Jesus and Ps 8, from which Heb 2:6 quotes.¹² We cannot engage in an extended exposition of Heb 2, but we may briefly explain a few points about the passage. Hebrews 2:8-9 expounds how Ps 8 is fulfilled in Jesus and his work.¹³ Specifically, Heb 2:7-8a continues the quotation from Ps 8:4-6 that begins in Heb 2:6:

- 7 "You made him a little lower than the angels;
you crowned him with glory and honor
8 and put everything under his feet." (NIV 1984)

Hebrews then interprets this quotation with reference to Jesus' work: "But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death . . ." (Heb 2:9 NIV 2011). The "son of man" language in Heb 2:6 helps to underline the connection between Ps 8 and Jesus the son of man.¹⁴ By restoring "son of man" language to Heb 2:6, the NIV 2011 creates a more accurate representation of the meaning of the Greek and the nature of the exposition in Heb 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3, 58-60, 355.

¹² See the discussion of Heb 2:6 in Poythress, "Small Changes," 30-32.

¹³ See, e.g., George H. Guthrie, "Hebrews," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 944-47; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1993), 148-57.

¹⁴ Commentators debate whether the author of Hebrews specifically intended a connection between the expression "son of man" in Ps 8:4 and Jesus' title "the Son of Man" (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 150-52). But (1) theologically speaking, the role of Jesus as the last Adam invites such a connection, even if Hebrews does not make it explicit; and (2) ideally an English translation will make visible to readers the challenge with respect to meaning, rather than decide the issue for them by burying one of the possible connections.

III. *Problems with Plurals*

But the NIV 2011 text in Heb 2:7-8 also illustrates how the NIV 2011 still has tendencies to prefer gender-neutral language, in accord with the practice of the TNIV but not the NIV 1984. In Heb 2:7-8 the NIV 2011 uses plurals:

- 7 “You made *them* a little lower than the angels;
 you crowned *them* with glory and honor
 8 and put everything under *their* feet.”
 In putting everything under *them*, God left nothing that is not subject to *them*. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to *them*.

But in these verses the underlying pronouns in Greek are all third person masculine singular (“his,” “him”), as are the pronouns in 2:6. Hebrews 2:9, as we have seen, indicates that these verses from Ps 8 have been fulfilled in Jesus. In other words, the fulfillment takes place in “him,” that is in *Jesus*, not in “them,” that is, mankind in general. The use of the singular in vv. 7-8 would have provided a smooth transition to the point made in 2:9. But the NIV 2011 has plurals instead. The NIV 2011 tries to patch up the damage by including four footnotes on 2:8, indicating that the English translation could also be singular (“him”). But no such notes are attached in v. 7 or v. 6a. The effect of all the verses when read together has been damaged by the plurals. By contrast, a use of the singular “him,” picking up on the singular “son of man” and “him” in 6b, would have represented the Greek more exactly and would have made the total argument of Heb 2 more visible to English readers.

The difficulty is increased when we compare Heb 2 with Ps 8 in the NIV 2011. After the introductory word “mankind,” the NIV 2011 rendering of Ps 8:4-6 has plurals all the way through, in comparison to the singulars that occur in the NIV 1984 and in the original Hebrew text:

- 4 what is mankind [1984 man] that you are mindful of them [1984 him],
 human beings [1984 the son of man] that you care for them [1984 him]?
 5 You have made them [1984 him] a little lower than the angels
 and crowned them [1984 him] with glory and honor.
 6 You made them [1984 him] rulers [1984 ruler] over the works of your hands;
 you put everything under their [1984 his] feet:

Not only do plurals run all the way through, but in v. 4b the NIV 2011 has put in “human beings” rather than “son of man.” Unfortunately, the NIV 2011 wording *disagrees* with what the NIV 2011 has in Heb 2:6, because in the latter verse it has “son of man.” Needless to say, the lack of agreement makes it more difficult for any reader who happens to compare the two verses, one of which is quoting the other.¹⁵

¹⁵ Note, however, that Ps 8:4 in the NIV 2011 includes a footnote that offers “son of man” as an alternative translation.

In a manner similar to Heb 2:8, footnotes in the 2011 edition attempt to repair the damage left in the text of Ps 8:4-6 by pluralization. But the passage is complex enough that it is difficult for readers to follow through all the footnotes, and then fully grasp the meaning of the *whole passage* when the singular terms (“him”) offered in the footnotes are substituted one by one back into the passage. It would have been easier for readers to have these singular terms *in the text*. Then the text could be read cohesively through all three verses.

When taken together, these verses, when rendered in the singular, open the way to observe an allusion to Adam as the first singular representative for the human race, and a movement forward to Christ as the final representative. According to Eph 1:22 Christ has become the final ruler: “God placed all things under his feet” (NIV 1984).¹⁶ The expression “all things under his feet” probably alludes to Ps 8:6. But it becomes more difficult for readers to see this allusion when the NIV 2011 changes “his feet” to “their feet” in Ps 8:6. No doubt redeemed human beings will participate with Christ in his rule (Eph 2:6; Rev 3:21) so there is a genuinely collective aspect to human dominion. But for the final realization of human dominion, Christ’s achievement must first lay the foundation for the participation of other human beings. This unique representative achievement on the part of Christ is more difficult to understand when plurals fill up the text of Ps 8:4-6.

IV. Other Examples

The use of male-marked expressions like “man” (in the generic sense), “mankind,” “son,” and generic “he” in texts here and there has relieved other difficulties and inaccuracies in a number of passages when we compare the NIV 2011 to the TNIV. Yet many more difficulties remain. Here is a sample:

1. *John 14:23*¹⁷

NIV 2011/TNIV: Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love *them* [1984 him], and we will come to *them* [1984 him] and make our home with *them* [1984 him].”

In John 14:23 the underlying Greek has masculine singular pronouns. The use of plurals in English (“them”) damages the meaning of the verse, because the plurals can be construed in a collective sense, namely that the Father and the Son will dwell with believers *collectively* rather than *individually*.

How does a collective meaning creep in? The singular word “anyone” begins the verse; “anyone” focuses on a singular representative for a general principle.

¹⁶ Note the more fully developed parallel between Adam and Christ in Rom 5:12-21 and 1 Cor 15:45-49. See Dan G. McCartney, “*Ecce Homo: The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Vicegerency*,” *WTJ* 56 (1994): 1-21.

¹⁷ See Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 70, 92-93, 114, 117-18, 229-32, 266-68, 403, 447, 457, 464.

If we continue the verse using singular terms (“him”), we see that the verse as a whole promises to each individual that the Father and the Son will make their home “with him”—with him individually. The principle can then be seen to apply to many people. So far so good. However, when the NIV 2011 chooses to introduce plurals in its second sentence, a collective interpretation arises as a second possibility. According to this interpretation, the Father and the Son make *one* home among plural people, all of whom fit the criteria for “anyone.” Other passages in the Bible make it clear that God dwells in the church corporately (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21). But such a corporate indwelling is not the point of *this passage* in John 14:23, and language opening the door to a collective interpretation decreases accuracy.

2. Proverbs 11:9

NIV 2011/TNIV: With *their* mouths [1984 his mouth] the godless destroy *their* neighbors [1984 destroys his neighbor],
but through knowledge the righteous escape.

The Hebrew of Prov 11:9 has singulars in the first line. The NIV 2011 has changed these to plurals. The plurals can again be construed in a collective sense. Do the godless through their *collective* propagation of gossip, rumors, and slander destroy their neighbors? Or does even one godless person acting alone do it?

3. Proverbs 12:15

NIV 2011/TNIV: The way of *fools* [1984 a fool] seems right to *them* [1984 him],
but the wise listen [1984 a wise man listens] to advice.

The pluralization in Prov 12:15 loses particularity. With the plural *fools*, together with the singular form of “way,” the expression “the way of fools” can easily be construed as designating what is common to the practice of all fools—the single way characterizing all fools. The expression “the way of a fool” may have such a thing in mind, but may also include any particular plan cooked up by a particular fool. Such a particular plan seems right to the fool who makes it. Thus, the singular suggests more directly the possibility of a particularized application. There is a difference in meaning.

4. Proverbs 10:26

NIV 2011/TNIV: As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so are *sluggards* [1984 is a sluggard] to those who send *them* [1984 him].

The pluralization to “sluggards” creates vagueness, since we do not know whether a group of sluggards are sent on a joint mission, or each sluggard goes on his own mission.

5. *Proverbs 12:11*

NIV 2011/TNIV: *Those* [1984 He] who work *their* [1984 works his] land will have abundant food,
but *those* who chase [1984 he who chases] fantasies have no sense [1984 lacks judgment].

“Whoever” would be an acceptable substitute for “he who.” But the NIV 2011 has gone further by pluralizing the whole verse. The pluralization again introduces ambiguity that allows for a collective interpretation. Is each person working his own land (individual interpretation), or are they collectively working jointly owned land, since “land” is singular? The avoidance of generic “he” in this case is more regrettable because, in the social and historical context in which Proverbs was written, men rather than women were overwhelmingly the ones engaged in “working the land.”

6. *Proverbs 16:17*

NIV 2011/TNIV: The highway of the upright avoids evil;
those [1984 he] who guard *their ways* [1984 guards his way] preserve *their lives* [1984 his life].

The plurals can again be construed in a collective sense. Do we have a group who collectively preserve their lives, or does each one preserve his life?

7. *Luke 16:13*¹⁸

NIV 2011/TNIV: “No one can serve two masters. Either *you* [1984 he] will hate the one and love the other, or *you* [1984 he] will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

In the NIV 2011, the change from “he” to “you” is one sentence too early in comparison to the NIV 1984 and the Greek text. The use of the third person in the first and second sentence has the effect of placing the principle of serving masters at a step more remote from the hearer. The formulations remain at the level of general principle: “no one.” In Greek the final sentence, and the final sentence alone, shifts to the second person (“you”), thereby making a personal application. The final sentence has the effect of a “punch line” or an emphatic ending, because it personalizes the general principle expressed in the previous sentences. The NIV 2011 has damaged the unique function of the final sentence by shifting to second person pronouns one sentence too early. Why? The obvious reason is in order to avoid generic “he” in the second sentence.

We could multiply passages like these. In some passages the NIV 2011 shows that it is willing to use generic “he” and generic “man.” In other cases, however, it has failed to improve the TNIV where the TNIV is gender-neutral and needs improvement.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

V. *The Translation Notes*

The translation notes for the NIV 2011 say that certain kinds of change were avoided:

Using plurals instead of singulars to deal with generic forms was avoided. Except for some instances where all alternatives proved awkward or potentially misleading, singular nouns or substantive participles in the biblical languages were translated with singular nouns or noun equivalents in English.¹⁹

Yet all the verses from Proverbs that we have cited above involve exactly the kind of change that this quote describes and that it claims the NIV 2011 avoided. My own spot check turns up many more verses in Proverbs that could have been added to the list. There are also verses of the same kind in Ecclesiastes (e.g., Eccl 3:9; 10:12, 13, 15) and Job (e.g., Job 17:9; 23:7a). Either the translators overlooked a large number of passages, or they decided that “all alternatives proved awkward.” They might better have said that all alternatives *except generic “he”* proved awkward. Remember that the NIV 1984 uses generic “he” and shows no awkwardness. Nor is it easy to see any way in which the NIV 1984 in such verses might be “misleading.” In my judgment, the NIV 2011 should have used generic “he.” Its failure is all the more serious because it appears to promise otherwise.

The translation notes also make a claim with respect to the use of “you”:

Using second person forms instead of third person forms to deal with generics was avoided.²⁰

Just this kind of introduction of the second person—which the notes say “was avoided”—can be observed in Luke 16:13. The claim in the notes does not fully match the reality. The notes do include an exception:

The exception to this rule was when a second person form was already present in the immediate context and it would be poor English style not to preserve it throughout.

The second person (“you”) does occur in the third sentence of Luke 16:13, as we observed in discussing Luke 16:13 above. The use of second person (“you”) adds to the third sentence the extra “punch” of immediate application to the hearer. The shift in person at the beginning of the third sentence is hardly a case of “poor English style,” but the opposite: it is good style, and in addition is necessary in English as it is in Greek to render the full force of the original saying of Jesus. So it is difficult to square the 2011 wording in Luke 16:13 with the claim in the translation notes.²¹

¹⁹ “Updating the New International Version,” 5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The verses from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Luke 16:13 that we have cataloged would fit under the exceptions that are acknowledged in the translation notes if generic “he” is *automatically*

The pattern seen in the sample cases above repeats itself in many other cases. Though the NIV 2011 uses generic “he” in some verses, it avoids generic “he” in many other cases where generic “he” is needed for maximal accuracy in English expression. The avoidance is surely no accident, because the earlier TNIV avoided generic “he” even more systematically.

VI. *The Use of “That Person”*

In some cases general statements that use a third person masculine singular in Greek or Hebrew have received a treatment that introduces the expression “that person,” which differs both from the NIV 1984 and from the TNIV.

1. *Revelation 3:20*²²

NIV 2011: Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with *that person*, and *they* with me.

TNIV: . . . I will come in and eat with *them*, and *they* with me.

NIV 1984/1978: . . . I will come in and eat with *him*, and *he* with me.

The NIV 2011 expressions “that person” and “they” translate third person masculine singular pronouns in Greek. The expression “that person” accurately represents the fact that in this verse Jesus is promising to meet with any individual, not just with a group. Of course, nearly the same meaning is represented more cleanly in the earlier NIV 1984/1978 with generic “he” (“him” and “he”).

Is there any difference in meaning when we substitute “that person” and “they,” as the NIV 2011 has done? There is a slight difference, because “that person” stands out. It draws attention to itself. To my ear, it sounds more emphatic than a simple “him.” To some ears, it may sound more cold or distant. It seems that the unusual character of the expression encourages people to look for some special motivation on the part of the speaker, whether it be emphasis or coldness or something else. Needless to say, in Greek there is no grammatical indication that the Greek pronoun (*autou*, normally with the meaning “him”) is emphatic

judged to be “poor English style” and “awkward or potentially misleading.” I prefer to read the translation notes charitably, so I assume that they are not secretly wedging into their description a principal disapproval of generic “he.”

I can believe that the desire to “avoid” certain kinds of substitution was indeed part of the broad policy of the 2011 translation committee. This kind of policy actually matches the Colorado Springs Guidelines for gender usage (1997). The Guidelines caution against wholesale substitution of plurals for singulars and second person for third person (Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, Appendix 1, p. 412, principle A2). I believe that the inclusion of this principle in the policy for the NIV 2011 is commendable. My point here is that the NIV 2011 contains exceptions that appear to me to go beyond the bounds of the kind of exception explicitly acknowledged in the translation notes. In practice, the NIV 2011 preferred in some cases to create an exception on the spot when the only natural alternative would be to use generic “he.” My check of other verses suggests that the cases involving pluralization are more numerous than readers might suspect from a casual reading of the NIV translation notes.

²² Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 40, 94, 101, 232, 293.

or cold or distant. In addition, the word “they” following “that person” is awkward, and may cause some readers to wonder whether at the end of the sentence the focus is shifting from the individual “that person” more to the corporate implications for the group of people who meet the criteria of “that person.” In other words, the pronoun “they,” even with the singular antecedent “that person,” may still convey a sense of pluralization—unlike the third masculine singular pronoun in Greek.²³

2. *Revelation 22:18*²⁴

NIV 2011: I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to *that person* the plagues described in this scroll.

TNIV: . . . if any one *of you* adds anything to them, God will add to *you* the plagues . . .

NIV 1984: . . . if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to *him* the plagues . . .

In Rev 22:18 the NIV 2011 improves on the TNIV by cleaning out the inaccuracy produced by the unwarranted intrusion of the second person pronoun *you* in the TNIV.²⁵ But as with Rev 3:20, so here, the introduction of the expression “that person” may create an unwanted nuance of meaning: the unusual expression may suggest extra emphasis or coldness. For maximal accuracy, the NIV 2011 should have returned to the wording of the NIV 1984: “him.”

In these cases, the NIV 2011 results in some improvement over the TNIV, but still falls short of the accuracy of the NIV 1984 because of the lack of generic “he.”

VII. *Statistics*

Why does the NIV 2011 use generic “he” in some places, and yet stays away from it in other cases where it is needed for maximal accuracy? We cannot say. We can only make guesses about the internal reasoning of the translators, and guesses are quite likely to be wrong. Moreover, the NIV 2011 was the work of a committee, the Committee on Bible Translation, and different committee members may have voted as they did for different reasons. Their reasons may have varied from passage to passage.

It may nevertheless be worthwhile to point out one influence that the official translation notes for the NIV 2011 do mention, namely data about English usage:

The committee initiated a relationship with Collins Dictionaries to use the Collins Bank of English, one of the world’s foremost English language research tools, to conduct a major new study of changes in gender language. The Bank of English is a database of

²³ See *ibid.*, 39-41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 30.

²⁵ This case does conform to what the translation notes say about the fact that second person *you* would be avoided in translating third person generics (“Updating the New International Version,” 5).

more than 4.4 billion words drawn from text publications and spoken word recordings from all over the world.²⁶

The complete report that the translators received from Collins Dictionaries is now available online.²⁷ It shows a decline over time in the percentage of use of generic “he,” in comparison with total generic pronoun usage. As of 2009, generic “he” occurs 8 percent of the time in general written English. Plurals (“they,” “them”) occur 84 percent of the time.²⁸

Given these statistics, someone might argue that, in order to keep current, the NIV in its language should try to match the percentages in the Collins report. But a reply to this line of thinking is already in print in connection with the earlier gender-neutral Bible controversy.²⁹ Percentages have little to do with either accuracy, intelligibility, or “naturalness” of expression. A percentage of less than .01 percent *may* be an indicator of an unnatural or obsolete usage. But even a very low percentage may sometimes signify only something less common, but nevertheless fully recognizable. It depends very much on the *perceptions* of native speakers rather than mere frequency.

What about higher percentages? A percentage of 1 percent or higher shows in normal circumstances³⁰ that the usage in question is still current. Most people have some continued experience with such a usage, and the continued experience buttresses the inference that the usage is both intelligible and natural. The figure of 8 percent cited for generic “he” is low as a percentage in comparison with 84 percent for plural generic pronouns; but it still is quite respectable, and shows that generic “he” is still in current use. In such a situation, translators do not have the same flexibility as is available to authors who produce fresh, new texts of their own making. The translators are constrained by the meanings of the original document being translated. Their job is to render meanings as faithfully as possible, and this faithfulness constrains them to use less common English when it is needed.

The argument for generic “he” is further strengthened when we observe that we can distinguish between active and passive language competence. Active and passive competence have to do with language production and reception, respectively. *Active* competence means ability to *produce* sentences and *use* vocabulary and grammatical constructions of particular types. *Passive* competence means ability to *understand* sentences and vocabulary and grammatical constructions,

²⁶ “Updating the New International Version,” 4.

²⁷ “The Development and Use of Gender Language in Contemporary English—A Corpus Linguistic Analysis,” at <http://www.niv-cbt.org/information/collins-language-study-full-report/> (accessed Nov. 17, 2010).

²⁸ <http://www.niv-cbt.org/information/collins-corpus-report/> (accessed Nov. 17, 2010). These percentages compare with 22% generic “he” and 65% plurals in 1990. The full Collins report (“Development and Use”) also includes the use of “he or she” and the use of generic “she,” and contains further breakdowns according to the nature of the antecedent and according to time period.

²⁹ Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 315-33, 474-76.

³⁰ Might there be exceptions? Perhaps a percentage as high as 1% could be generated exclusively by a very high rate of usage in some specialized form of speech or writing. The possibility of exceptions only shows that statistical data need careful interpretation.

when *other people* present such pieces of language to someone's eye or ear. Passive competence is the broader category. People can *recognize* vocabulary items that they never use in their own speech. They can read and understand sentences that they themselves would never think of producing. Similarly, people can recognize and understand generic "he" even if they do not use it themselves.

In Bible translation, passive competence on the part of potential readers is the important factor. The translators must consider whether readers will understand what the translators write, not primarily whether readers use the very same language in their own speech. Constructions that are less common, but still natural and intelligible, can safely be employed in communication. And then the conclusion follows: these less common constructions *need* to be employed whenever their employment results in greater accuracy.

VIII. *Possible Difficulties with Statistical Data*

We might also point out that it is always possible for a statistical analysis to contain subtle flaws that influence the results. In the case of the Collins report, the credentials behind the analysis are most impressive. The analysis was undertaken by an independent agency, Collins Dictionaries, who were not themselves engaged in Bible translation. The database was huge, comprising 4.4 billion words of English, and it included spoken and written English from both the USA and other countries. The analysis used sophisticated computer software, and the results were crosschecked by comparing results from more than one team of analysts. Much thought went into assuring the unbiased character of the results.

And yet the analysis still shows a difficulty with respect to generic "he." The detailed description of the search says:

The following 17 pronouns, determiners and nouns—someone, somebody, everyone, everybody, anyone, anybody, no-one/no one, nobody, each, any, every, no, whoever, one, person, human and individual—were searched where one of the following pronouns/determiners, or a combination of them, appeared within 10 words—he, she, his, her, him, hers, himself, herself, they, them, their, theirs, themselves, theirselves, theirself, themself, one, one's, oneself.³¹

This search covers many of the usages that are the most pertinent. But it does not cover every occurrence of generic "he" or its alternatives. To begin with, the search would not have detected occurrences of the expression "he who," which occurs, for example, in Prov 12:11 and 16:17 NIV 1984. The absence of these occurrences artificially lowers the percentage of generic "he."³² In addition, the search would not have detected any of the other passages cited above from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Job, because none of these passages contains any of the key

³¹ "Development and Use," 11.

³² My personal subjective perception is that the usage of "he who" has been dropping over time. If I am right, the inclusion of data on "he who" would also affect the comparison of percentages between two time points.

words like “everyone” or “any” that the computer was told to search. Instead of the key words, the verses in question (in the NIV 1984) contain expressions like “a sluggard” or “the godless” or “a fool.”

The computer search did not include such expressions. Why not? The Collins report does not say, but there is probably a simple explanation. It would be almost impossible to include all such expressions and at the same time screen out only the instances that appear within generic statements.³³

In addition, as was pointed out in the earlier gender-neutral Bible controversy, statements that are obviously generic lie at one end of a *spectrum*, rather than being a rigidly isolated category. Such general statements “fade off” into general statements using particular examples, and from there we go to examples (such as parables and other narratives) from which people are invited to draw general conclusions.³⁴ It is difficult to draw a clear line between what is and is not “generic,” in a broad sense. Statements can be more or less focused on a general principle or on a particular example of a principle. The difference between “generic” and “specific” formulations has no sharp boundary. And that in turn means that so-called “generic ‘he’” is part of a spectrum that includes at its other end “he” in all the breadth of its usage. There is no obvious way to produce firm statistics without drawing a line in a way similar to what the Collins research has done, namely by including only certain specific introductory expressions like “everyone” and “whoever.”

Does it make any difference? Surely we have plenty of data from the research done by Collins Dictionaries, even if this research omits *other* data that illustrate generic usages. Yes, there is plenty of data. But the data omitted will not necessarily match in statistical measurements the data that are included. For a number of reasons, the data omitted include a considerable number of instances in which reasonable substitutes for generic “he” are hard to obtain, and therefore where the proportion of actual use of generic “he” might be higher than is the case with data included in the Collins analysis.

Let us look at the issue in a little more detail. Why do plural forms (“they”) sometimes occur with singular antecedents (“anyone”)? In the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, English grammar classes typically taught students that “everyone” and “anyone” were grammatically singular, and that therefore by grammatical concord these words ought to be followed by singular pronouns that is, generic “he.” But a more relaxed and less prescriptive approach to English could have observed that matters are more complicated. The word “everyone” is indeed *grammatically* singular, as can be confirmed by the fact that it is followed by a singular verb. We say “everyone *is* going,” not “everyone *are* going.” Nevertheless, the *referent* of “everyone” is pluralistic. It includes, well, “everyone,”

³³ The Collins search criteria also leave out generic pronouns that occur more than ten words distant from their antecedents. This omission is understandable, because computerized analysis of relationships with possible antecedents becomes more difficult the more distant a pronoun is from the possible antecedent. We may hope that this omission did not skew the percentage results.

³⁴ Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, Appendix 4.

that is, all the people belonging to some pertinent group. In its reference, it carries within it a plural dimension. Thus it is not so strange for a native speaker of English to continue with a plural after using “everyone.” “Everyone is going to the party. When *the guests* have arrived . . .” The plural expression “the guests” has the definite article “the,” indicating a reference to a group already defined. Yet there is no plural antecedent. The obvious antecedent is “everyone,” which is singular. The plural expression has picked up on the implied referent behind “everyone.” It is only a small step to shifting from a plural noun “guests” to a plural pronoun “they”: “Everyone is going to the party. When *they* have arrived . . .” Thus we get a use of “they” with singular antecedent “everyone.”

Now consider “anyone.” “Anyone” is more particularizing than “everyone.” The starting point is a single sample person from among the pertinent group. But with the word “anyone” the point is that this single person can be *any* sample person. A statement or question constructed with “anyone” is intended to have a scope that covers the plurality of people in the group. So once again a subsequent noun or pronoun can loosely refer to the implied plurality or possible plurality of people. We get sentences such as, “If anyone wants to go to the party, *they* can go.” Similar reasoning applies to the other expressions that were included in the Collins search list: anybody, any, each, no one, person, individual, and so on. At first glance, “person” and “individual” may appear to be more “singular” in some sense. The expression “a person” or “an individual” is clearly individual! But a second look at these expressions shows that once again it is not quite so simple. The expressions “person” and “individual” are *very* general. If we have some more particular case in mind, many times we would use a more particular expression to describe the people involved: “the teacher,” “a student,” “a reporter,” “a servant,” “a fool,” and so on. By contrast, “person” and “individual,” when used in generic statements, suggest by their generality the presence in the background of the whole company of people to whom the generality applies. So maybe in some cases with more awkwardness than with “everyone” we can understand why “a person” might be followed by a plural: “If *a person* wants to learn chemistry, *they* [or alternatively *he* or *he* or *she*, etc.] should go to Sue’s chemistry class.” There are also cases where “they” is used in a case that applies in the end only to one person: “Whoever left *their* gloves behind yesterday should pick them up in the lost-and-found.” But again in the background one can see the presence of a plurality of persons who *might* be the relevant person. Sometimes the speaker actually knows who it is: “I know who left their gloves behind.” But still, the addressee does not know, and the background for the statement is probably a situation where a question has arisen with respect to a plurality of people who might fit the description.

The plural expressions “they,” “them,” and so forth, tend to work *least* well in the contexts where the introductory expression is more specific. In these contexts we are not talking vaguely about “a person” or “an individual,” but more specifically about “a fool” or “the godless.” The Collins analysis does search for occurrences that use the words “any” or “each” or “every” followed by a noun:

“any teacher,” “each child.”³⁵ But the presence of the key words “any” or “each” in such expressions makes the expressions more generalizing than expressions like “a teacher” or “a child.” So the statistics for the two types of expressions might not come out the same.

Consider again some of the verses in Proverbs over which the NIV 2011 stumbled.

Prov 12:15 NIV 1984: The way of *a fool* seems right to *him*, . . .

The NIV 1984 uses the singular masculine generic “him.” How would we reword this verse so as to leave a singular antecedent, “a fool,” but use the plural “them”? Shall we say, “The way of a fool seems right to *them*, . . .”? That wording is very awkward, because it leaves the reader wondering whether “them” has some antecedent *other than* “a fool”—perhaps the bystanders who observe the fool. Once the sentence has started with a singular form, “a fool,” it becomes difficult to find a clean continuation except with another singular—“him.”³⁶

Here is another example:

Prov 10:26 NIV 1984: As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is *a sluggard* to those who send *him*.

Shall we try, “. . . so is a sluggard to those who send *them*”? Horrid. Again, some readers are going to look for another antecedent for “them.”

Consider Prov 16:26 NIV 1984:

The laborer's appetite works for *him*;
his hunger drives *him* on.

How would we put in plural pronouns? Let us try it:

The laborer's appetite works for *them*;
their hunger drives *them* on.

The result is awkward because readers may look for a plural antecedent for “them,” and wonder whether they have missed something. Is the implied reference to the laborer’s *employers*? “The laborer,” in the singular, does not offer itself transparently as the obvious antecedent for “them.”

In translating Prov 16:26 the NIV 2011 gives up on preserving the singular “the laborer”; instead, it pluralizes the whole verse:

The appetite of *laborers* works for them;
their hunger drives them on.

³⁵ “Development and Use,” 4.

³⁶ Or “him or her” or “her,” as some people have tried to do. But “him or her” does not fit the crispness of a proverb; and “her” stands out and has connotations of feminist advocacy—in this case paradoxically, because the feminist does not want to suggest that females are more prone than males to being fools.

The point with all these examples—and many more that might be produced—is that they frustrate the person who wants always to adopt the policy of using plural pronouns (“they,” “them”) after a singular expression at the beginning. These examples invite the use of generic “he,” and discourage or forbid the use of generic “they.” Given the presence of a singular expression like “the laborer” or “a sluggard” in a sentence of this kind, almost the *only* natural continuation is with a singular pronoun. The Collins report has left out all cases of this kind. Their omission may lower artificially the percentage count of occurrences of generic “he.”

Suppose that somehow we were able to include all these cases in a statistical analysis. We might find that, *in this special type of case*, generic “he” occurs a significant amount of the time. Why? Because no plural alternative works. How often would we find generic “he”? 30 percent of the time? 50 percent? 80 percent? It is impossible to say without doing an extensive study. Moreover, such a study would be difficult because it is not clear how we could program a computer to pick out generic sentences from many others that are not generic.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose hypothetically that the percentage came out at 70 percent. A person governed by statistics might well argue that the NIV 2011 should have used generic “he” 70 percent of the time in verses of this type.

What do we conclude? Suddenly the statistics compiled by the Collins report do not look so impressive, because they have not only left out some evidence, but probably left out *crucial* evidence that might have influenced decision making with respect to a considerable number of verses.

In my opinion all these statistics are of limited value. Of course statistics can confirm and quantify general tendencies that we may observe here and there. But a translator must use his head, and not merely be driven by statistics. In some ways each verse represents a unique challenge. Translate all the meanings and the nuances in this verse and in this passage, with all the resources that you can muster from the target language, for the sake of being faithful to the original.³⁷ If generic “he” is needed in a particular case, use it.

³⁷ It is easy to oversimplify the many-dimensional challenges of translation, and then to underestimate the difficulties. Accurate and intelligible translation is very difficult at times. Translation ideally should consider not only all the meaning nuances in one verse, but the presence of uncertainties in all modern interpretation, the expressiveness of whole passages, the representation in the target language of various biblical genres, the effects of concord and cross relationships with other passages, and the connections with previous translations in the same language.

For the sake of Bible memorization and smooth relationships with earlier translations and the literature that quotes from them, a later translation intended for general use should when feasible preserve familiar wording. In the case of the NIV 2011, the difficulty is that it has two main predecessors rather than one, namely the NIV 1984 and the TNIV 2005. The NIV 1984 is far more popular, which suggests that there should be greater concern to preserve continuity with it. But of course such concern has to be balanced by the desire for accuracy and the desire to eliminate expressions that have become obsolete or that have seriously changed their meaning because of changes in English as a whole.

IX. *Conclusion*

Overall, the NIV 2011 translation appears inconsistent or uneven. The NIV 2011 is definitely an improvement in comparison to the TNIV.³⁸ The NIV 2011 corrects a number of difficulties produced in the TNIV. But it could have gone further. If in 2011 generic “he” is allowed (as NIV 2011 does sometimes admit), then it ought to be used whenever it is needed for the sake of accuracy. This kind of thorough revision has not been carried through. The result is a disappointment, and will not please those who want consistent accuracy.

In many respects the observations and arguments that I have presented in short compass repeat discussions undertaken at greater length during the original gender-neutral controversy.³⁹ Not much has changed with respect to the substance of the arguments. It is all the more unfortunate, in my opinion, that too little has changed in the move from the TNIV to the NIV 2011.

³⁸ As would be expected, in some cases the NIV 2011 has also improved over the NIV 1984 in the area of gender. In 1984 the word “men” was often used generically for human beings of both genders. Shifts in meaning since 1984 have made it appropriate in 2011 to use “people” and other equivalents in English when such a rendering accurately represents the meaning of the original languages. So in Rom 1:20, for example, the NIV 1984 has the rendering, “. . . so that *men* are without excuse.” The NIV 2011 increases clarity by translating, “. . . so that *people* are without excuse.”

³⁹ The fullest expression is founded in Poythress and Grudem, *TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*; see also the other literature cited in n. 1.