

## Consensus

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Volume 14

Issue 2 *Issues and Concerns in Ethics*

Article 3

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11-1-1988

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### Recommended Citation

Schlueter, Carol J. (1988) "The Bible and inclusive language," *Consensus*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol14/iss2/3>

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# The Bible and Inclusive Language

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“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”<sup>1</sup>

The debate between Humpty Dumpty and Alice parallels the current debate about the use of inclusive language. Was Humpty Dumpty really correct? Do words mean whatever we want them to mean? As Humpty Dumpty acknowledges, language is powerful. We need only to reflect upon the last few decades in which words like “solidarity,” “liberation,” and “terrorism” have had a powerful effect on groups of people.

The word “terrorism” means something different to Jews and Palestinians. These words have political effect. Of political effect also, say women, are words which describe persons. One need only refer to studies of human development in which the criteria for maturity were defined by male moral<sup>2</sup> or psychological development.<sup>3</sup> It is now generally accepted that “the personal is political” and that inclusive language will enhance the possibility for women and men to interact at a level of mutuality and equivalent respect which is impossible as long as women must read themselves into the so-called generic “man” or “he” or “sons of God.” As words build bridges or create walls between people, decisions about the use of language are ethical issues.

This paper is addressed to the problem of how it is that one might use inclusive language in the biblical text. I assume

that inclusive language is essential to the full personhood of people. It acknowledges that women are visible and that their experience as females differs from men's experience as males. If this is so, then there are serious implications for Christians who designate as scripture the Bible which largely excludes women in its androcentric language.

While some have proposed that we should operate on the basis of excising the offending words from the text and adding ones which we wish were there<sup>4</sup> most scholars would agree that the Bible ought to be respected as an historical document. In fact, this is essential for women to have a sense of their own history. Part of that history is the invisibility of women from the text and the story of the recovery of women's history through feminist hermeneutics. This pioneering work has led to social/historical knowledge of the role of women in the early church.<sup>5</sup> The retelling of these discoveries must take place in order for there to be a history women can build on so that the wheel need not be reinvented each century.<sup>6</sup>

If it is important to maintain the integrity of the text then we must turn our attention to translation. It seems that three main positions have been taken: 1) the text should stay as it is, or 2) the text should be altered to feminine pronouns and nouns, or 3) a combination of 1 and 2: the text should be altered to both masculine and feminine pronouns and nouns. The problem with these solutions is that they are all reductionist. They can only prescribe one of the two polar opposites or a precise combination of polar opposites.

In contrast I believe a more creative solution ought to be sought, one which envisages the complexity of the problems and works toward a solution which is achieved not by prescription but by the careful consideration and balance of two important ingredients: an accurate translation, and attention to the worshipping community.

## Questions of Translation

Some difficulties of translation have to do with the text itself, the biases of the translator, and the reading of Scripture.

### *The Text Itself*

The view that the biblical text itself is a reconstruction of historical events is commonly accepted since the advent of his-

torical criticism. Although the text reveals the presence of alternate worldviews,<sup>7</sup> it is the androcentric view which has predominated in theology<sup>8</sup> and in the interpretation of Scripture<sup>9</sup>. This fact has been well documented so I will not take time to demonstrate that point here.<sup>10</sup> Because of the predominance of androcentrism problems of translation emerge which are thorny. There are problems of how to translate nouns and pronouns which refer to both males and people in general, problems of God language, and problems of the biases of translators.

There are two words in Greek which are translated as "man": One is *andros* which refers to the male gender and the other is *anthropos* which often refers to humanity (Romans 1:18). One might think that it is easy enough always to translate the former as "man" and the latter as "humanity" or "people." Unfortunately, the biblical text is not consistent in designating actual men as *andros*. For example, the reference in Mark 10:7 "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife..." is *anthropos* and obviously refers to actual men. The lack of consistency in the meaning of *anthropos* complicates the difficulty.

Let us examine another example. In Romans 3:28 we read "For we hold that *anthropos* is justified by faith apart from works of the law." Clearly, a modern female listener to this text understands herself to be included in this verse which has been so important to the Lutheran tradition for centuries. However, one might correctly ask whether Paul really meant to include women in his language of justification? I am not suggesting that Paul meant to exclude them. Rather, the modern question likely never occurred to a first century male. For within the Jewish tradition, the male was required to be the formal participant in the covenant and thus engage in formal discussions of theology. I do not mean to suggest that women had no role in the religious life of Israel. I mean that Paul's language regarding justification in Romans could well have been directed to males, in the same way that his letters are directed to "brethren." Thus we see that in working toward an accurate translation there are two different problems: 1) maintaining the integrity of the text as a first century document, 2) maintaining the intention of the author (to move worshippers to transformation).

### *The Biases of the Translator*

It is important to recognize the extent to which the biases of the translator are operative in the resulting translation. For example, Phoebe in Romans 16:1 is known as a *diakonos* in the text as are Paul and Timothy in Philippians 1:1. Translators, in a context in which women in professional church leadership roles were only occupied as “deaconesses,” not only translated the word *diakonos* as “deaconess” when it referred to women and “servant or minister”<sup>11</sup> when it referred to men, but prescribed the roles of these first century women according to the roles of women within the modern context. One translator says of Phoebe that there had been women deacons in the Christian church who “when their sex made them especially suitable, came forward and gave signal help in caring for the poor and sick, and at the baptism of women.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus we see that there are many difficulties in translating the text itself. We should not, therefore, neglect the task of finding the best translation. Too often “respect for the text” has been given as a justification for not struggling with the difficulties and, in some cases, for keeping women “in their place.”

In the RSV of Luke 24:9, we read that after the women had visited the empty tomb and had been told by an angel that Jesus was risen from the tomb, they ran and told the eleven and the rest. The verb, translated as *told*, is from *apangello* which has a range of meanings: “to report, announce, tell, proclaim.” The translators of the RSV chose to translate this verb in the most bland way. This translation was also accepted by the Phillips, Living Good News, and King James versions. The NAS, NEB, AmTr versions didn’t do much better. They used “reported.” However, when translating the same verb in the Isaiah portion cited in Matthew 12:18, the translators of RSV and others chose “proclaim.” No translation that I know of used the bland “tell.”<sup>13</sup> Surely the context of the resurrection stories (Luke 24:9; Mark 16:13; Matthew 28:10; John 20:18) requires a more dynamic translation than “the women *told*....” The discrepancy between translations for the same word in similar contexts (the announcing of God’s activity to others) suggests that the selection of words stems from an evaluation made by a translator as to the importance of an act by individuals. This evaluation is subject to subtle, perhaps unconscious, cultural influence upon the translator.



*The Text as Scripture*

The Bible is Scripture for Christians who as both women and men depend upon it for the spiritual well-being of their lives. As such, the use of exclusively masculine pronouns, nouns, and metaphors for God is increasingly alienating.<sup>14</sup> No longer are men the only public religious participants. No longer are people content with attempts to make the first century the “archetype” for all time. Rather, some have suggested the image of “prototype”<sup>15</sup> in dealing with Scripture. This image points to the biblical tradition as the “root model” from which theological reflection takes place. Paul, too, saw himself as reflecting theologically from the root model. In I Corinthians 15:5–8, Paul lists those to whom Jesus appeared, those at the heart of what was the “prototype” for Paul: Cephas, the twelve, 500 brethren, James, and the apostles. Then Paul adds himself to that list.

It is helpful for us to note that Paul saw himself within the tradition he had received but was able to struggle with the new situation in which he found himself: that salvation was on the basis of faith in Christ and not by the law. According to Paul’s letters, he often had to argue his case for this view (Galatians and Romans). In no place does Paul, to strengthen his own case, cite Jesus as being against the Jewish law. If Jesus had clearly been opposed to the Jewish law, his followers would surely have appealed to his pronouncements to settle disputes in the early church (Galatians 2).

The point of this illustration is to demonstrate that Christians, from the beginning, had to think through new situations. Paul kept to the root model of the kerygma (I Corinthians 15:3–4) and strove to make sure that all were on equal footing through faith in Christ. In Antioch, Jews from Jerusalem (the dominant group) were expected to cease keeping kosher when eating with Gentiles for the sake of inclusiveness. I think this model is helpful in questions of inclusiveness today.

I think that we should seek to examine the “prototype” (the Scriptures) carefully, reflect theologically upon it and our own experience and then seek to act as inclusively as we are able, for the sake of the gospel, as did Paul.

## The Worshiping Community

The Bible needs not only to be examined for the audience for which Paul intended it, but for language which excludes the contemporary worshippers, composed of men and women. (Note that most congregations have a majority of female worshippers.)

### *The Need for Midrash*

For the most part, the modern reader can easily read Romans 3:28 inclusively by changing “man” to “humanity.” There are other similar cases. I suggest the following changes:<sup>16</sup>

brethren—brothers and sisters

kingdom—realm or reign

fellowship—koinonia

However, there are times when a worship leader might need to explain a text in order to get at difficulties which are not specifically issues of inclusive language but which are related to this topic. I have in mind passages like the ten commandments in which the commands are given to men. This passage requires an explanation of the socio/religious context in which it is found. With regard to what one is not to covet in Exodus 20:17, it is obvious that the commandments are not addressed to women. It is not enough to add “or husband” to the verse. While the addition does make the verse inclusive, it does not address the larger question of what commandments might possibly have been given if the religious participants had been women. Not to ask this question leads to an impoverishment of theological thinking about women’s concerns. The Jewish tradition has long given an explanation or commentary after the reading of a passage of scripture. This is called Midrash. It seems to me that it might be helpful for Christians to adopt this custom of Midrash to make commentary, when appropriate, on the context at the time of the reading of the text.

### *God Language as Metaphor*

God language is another difficult issue. In Matthew 6:8–13 we read that Jesus said, “Do not be like them (the Gentiles), for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven...” The main difficulty is the question, “If Jesus said these words, what right do we have to change them?”

Some have concluded from this biblical text that Jesus was designating "Father" as the only appropriate appellation for God. However, there are several difficulties with this line of thought. First, it does not take into account that there are other images of God in the Bible which differ from this one. For instance, Jesus uses several other images for the Divine. One is a mother hen (Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34), a bakerwoman (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21), the bread of life (John 6:33), and a door (John 10:9). Now no one would propose that the Divine is correctly circumscribed as a door, bakerwoman, bread, or a hen. These are simply images drawn from the experience of people in the first century. In fact the "door of the sheep" (verse 7) is no longer often used in current God talk. The reason is simple. The image is no longer a powerful one for people. Most of us have little contact with sheep anymore and, therefore, few can easily relate to that image of God.

For some, "Father" is, on the whole, still a powerful image for us. It attributes to God a relational quality. It is this quality which must be maintained. But for some, like one male student whose father was harsh and judgmental, "Father" is not a dynamic image which expresses a warm relational quality. For him, the image of "Mother" carried the desired image of approachability and loving acceptance. Similarly, for many women, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" can seem like an all male domain of the Divine. The terms have come to mean "masculinity" rather than "relationship."<sup>17</sup>

The ancient Hebrews were careful to avoid appellations and pictures for God because they knew that these could become idolatrous. When Moses asked God in Exodus 3:13-14 by what name he should say he'd been sent to the people of Israel, God gave him the reply: "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent you'." The emphasis here is on God's activity because the word for God, *YHWH*, is a verbal form of the verb to be. However, the human species is such that talk of relationships, even a relationship with the *Divine* usually is facilitated by metaphors. Even the ancient Israelites had metaphors for God, the great I AM. Some of these metaphors are masculine such as king (Psalms 5:2), warrior (I Samuel 1:3), father (Hosea 11:1). Some of them are feminine wherein God is described as a midwife (Psalms 22:9), a mother bear (Hosea 13:8), a birthing mother (Isaiah 42:14), an eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11).



It has long been the case that people in cultures other than that of white, middle-class, Western society have recast the story of Jesus. For instance, Jesus is sometimes portrayed in art as a Native American or as a Chinese person.<sup>18</sup> Such a creative portrayal recast in various cultural perspectives offends no one. It is through such art that an important and powerful theological message is delivered: The inclusive quality of God's grace through Jesus Christ the Saviour of all.

Just as art opens the mind and spirit of the worshipper, metaphors for God are powerful communicators. Attention given to the meaning of metaphors used by writers of the Scriptures will enrich our concepts of the Divine.<sup>19</sup> Aside from the metaphors of God as Father, Male, Female, Mother, Bread, and Door, let us not forget to give consideration to the image of God as Lover put forth by the Song of Solomon, and to the image of God as a Child put forth by the infancy stories of Matthew and Luke. Other Gospel images of God we need to keep in mind are Teacher, Healer, Storyteller, and Suffering Servant.

A richness of metaphors is ours for the embracing in the Scriptures if we will open ourselves to them.

### Conclusion: General Suggestions

1. Begin with the root model (the Scriptures).
2. Determine the context of the passage at the time of its writing.
3. Know the audience for which you are translating.
4. Since no audience is monolithic, be open to experimenting with different translations.
5. Enrich biblical translations for a worshipping community by being in dialogue with a group of people who can provide different perspectives so that a reading of the text becomes meaningful for all.
6. Become aware of your own biases as a translator. Complete objectivity is not possible, nor even desirable, but it is important to own our biases and to become aware that our biases influence the way we translate and interpret texts.
7. If it is possible to involve a group of people in the preparation of the text for worship include a brief Midrash after the reading of the text in order to explain the context of the

historical passage and to make inclusive connections with it for the contemporary worshipping community.

Humpty Dumpty was right and wrong. Words are powerful, but the question is not "which is to be master" but rather "which serves all."

## Notes

- 1 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Donald J. Gray ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971) 163.
- 2 Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 3 I.K. Broverman *et al.*, "Sex Role Stereotypes and Clinical Dimensions of Mental Health," *Journal of Consultation and Clinical Psychology*, 34, 1, 1-17. See also J. Sherman, "Therapist's attitudes and Sex Role Stereotyping," in *Women and Psychotherapy*, by A. Brodsky and R. Hare-Mustin, eds. (New York: Guilford, 1980).
- 4 See *An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for a Year* (John Knox Press, National Council of Churches, 1983).
- 5 Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads, 1983).
- 6 Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 93-115.
- 7 For example see Gal. 3:28 for an egalitarian view. Note also the clear evidence of women's leadership in the early church (Romans 16:1, 3, 7, 13, 15; I Cor. 1:11; Ph. 4:2).
- 8 See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983).
- 9 Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* xi-xiv.
- 10 Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "You are not to be called Father," *Cross Currents* (Fall 1979) 301-323; Joann Wolski Conn, "Women's Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction," *Women's Spirituality: Resources For Christian Development* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 9-30; Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 7-8.
- 11 Phoebe in Romans 16:1—deaconess (RSV, Jer., Phillips), fellow Christian (AmTr), servant of the church (Kg.Jms, NAS), holds office in the church (NEB), Paul and Timothy in 2 Cor. 3:6—administrators (Jer., Phillips), servants (AmTr, NAS), ministers (RSV, Kg.Jms.).
- 12 Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 170.
- 13 NAS, NEB, and RSV used "proclaimed"; AmTr and Good News used "announce; Phillips used "declare" and Living Bible used "judge."
- 14 Sharon Neuffer Emswiler and Thomas Neuffer Emswiler, *Women & Worship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 3-8.
- 15 Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* 10-11.

- 16 Resources helpful in this area are: *Guidelines for Inclusive Language*, ELCIC; Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).
- 17 For excellent discussions of the original meaning of the Trinity, see Tom Driver, *Christ in a Changing World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, "Naming the Trinity: Orthodoxy and Inclusivity," *Worship* 60 (6, 1986) 491-498.
- 18 Sharon Neuffer Emswiler and Thomas Neuffer Emswiler, *Women & Worship* 23.
- 19 Some attempts in this direction have been made by: Mary Schaefer, "Inclusive Language Referring to God," *Canadian Theological Society, Newsletter* (March 1988) 4-7; Joan Englesman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).