

Correcting Misleading Translations in the Bible About Gender Equality

Over the years, countless God-loving, Bible-reading evangelicals have embraced the belief that God requires gender hierarchy, advocating for men to lead and women to submit in both the church and the home.

This perspective has been further extended to assert that only men should assume leadership roles in business, government and parachurch organizations. But why is this the case?

Many devoted Christians have studied their English Bibles and encountered what John Piper referred to as “Christianity with a masculine feel” during the Desiring God 2012 Conference, emphasizing the concept of “godly male leadership.” However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that this “masculine feel” is a consequence of misleading translations. Several passages in Bible translations such as the ESV and NASB distort the meaning of God’s inspired Word by introducing words, altering word meanings, changing sentence structures and obscuring vital evidence that supports a message of gender equality present throughout the Bible. Although Scripture accurately portrays male-dominant cultures, it does not prescribe them.

To shed light on this issue, let us consider a few examples from the writings of the apostle Paul. In Romans 16:1–2, Phoebe is described as the “deacon of the church of Cenchreae.” However, several translations, including the CSB, ESV, HCSB, KJV, MOUNCE and NASB, demote her to “a servant” or “helper” of the church.

In reality, the Greek word used here, “diakonos,” denotes a position of church leadership and is the same term employed

for “deacons” in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12, referring to women deacons. It is essential to note that local churches did not have “servants” during that time.

. Cranfield, in his commentary on Romans, argues that the language used in Romans 16:1 strongly supports the understanding of “deacon” as a definite office. Phoebe’s commendation by Paul, along with his request to support her, implies that she held a position of great importance. Moreover, Paul refers to Phoebe as a “prostatis,” a term derived from the verb “proistēmi,” which signifies “to exercise a position of leadership.” This word combines elements meaning “in rank before” and “standing,” emphasizing the respect she deserves. In fact, “prostatis” is the feminine form of the word for “president” of a society, including synagogues.

Several words in the New Testament combine the expressions “in rank before” and “standing.” The only meanings conveyed by these words that align with Romans 16:2 indicate leadership. Paul acknowledges Phoebe as a “‘prostatis’ of many, including myself also” (Rom. 16:2), suggesting that Paul submitted to her leadership, presumably during his time in her church at Cenchreae.

It is important to remember that Paul commands all believers to submit to one another in Ephesians 5:21. By affirming Phoebe, Paul encourages his audience to trust her as his representative. Unfortunately, many Bible translations have effectively diminished Phoebe’s role due to the assumption that a woman could not have held such a significant leadership position.

Another example of poor translation and misunderstanding is found in the passage concerning the “head covering” in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Verse 10 states that “a woman ought to have authority over her own head.” However, some versions add the words “symbol of” or “sign of” (ASV, AMP, CSV, ESV, HSCB,

TLB, MOUNCE, NASB, NET, TLV)), thereby detracting from what Scripture explicitly states women ought to have: authority over their own heads!

The situation worsens in verse 16, where the Greek reads, "We have no such custom." However, some translations render this verse to mean the exact opposite—"we have no other custom" (HCSB, NASB 1995, NET). This alteration is made based on the assumption that veiling women was a universal church custom symbolizing woman's subordination to man, and therefore, the text cannot mean what it actually says.

Furthermore, some translators impose male pronouns onto passages discussing overseers and elders. For instance, the ASV, AMP, Phillips and NASB translate the gender-inclusive "whoever" ("ei tis") in 1 Timothy 3:1 and Titus 1:6 as the gender-exclusive "any man ... he ..." They also insert a dozen or more "he," "him" or "his" pronouns into these passages, despite the absence of a single "he," "him" or "his" within the qualifications for overseer, deacon or elder in either passage. Throughout the New Testament, the term "ei tis" includes women unless specifically restricted to men.

Piper's assertion in 2012 that "the apostles tell the churches that all the overseers ... should be men" relies on Bible translations that add a "masculine feel" not found in Scripture as God revealed it.

Translations such as the CSB, ESV, GNT, HCSB, PHILLIPS, KJV, TLB, MOUNCE, NET and NLT also undermine female church leadership by translating a passage clearly referring to women deacons, 1 Timothy 3:11, as if it were referring to "wives of deacons."

Considering the surrounding qualifications for deacons and the inclusion of identical requirements for women in verse 8, it seems strange to require women who do not hold any office to meet practically the same qualifications. Therefore, it is

more reasonable to conclude that these qualifications pertain to women deacons.

These examples provide a glimpse into how certain Bible interpretations distort God's Word, concealing the message of gender equality that permeates the Bible. It is no surprise that many evangelicals believe in the Bible's teachings of gender hierarchy.

However, change is possible. The responsibility largely rests with the chairmen of translation revision committees.

By presenting compelling evidence to these committees and encouraging unbiased examination, we can work toward correcting misleading translations and rediscovering the true message of gender equality in Scripture. {eoa}

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