

The TNIV Controversy

Some people feel the IBS went too far in updating the NIV.

The controversy over the Today's New International Version of the Bible (TNIV) pales in comparison to the conflicts that occurred when early Bible translators experienced opposition from the established church.

Theologian and reformer John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384), who completed the first English translation of the Vulgate, or Latin Bible, around 1392, was removed from his teaching post at Oxford, and some years after he died the pope ordered his bones exhumed and burned. William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) was tied to a stake, strangled and then burned for translating the New Testament and a portion of the Old Testament into English from the original Greek and Hebrew sources.

I have a particular interest in one of Tyndale's younger associates named John Rogers, who worked with Tyndale on a translation that was published under the pseudonym Thomas Matthews in 1537. Rogers, an ancestor of mine, was burned at the stake on February 4, 1555, refusing to renounce his work in spite of the pitiful sight of his wife and 11 children contemplating the loss of a husband and father.

The legacy of those who made the Bible available to the common man is a great one. Today, groups such as the International Bible Society (IBS) continue to bring out new translations to help modern readers understand God's Word.

When the New International Version (NIV) was published in 1978, charismatics were among the first to embrace it. Charisma reported that it was approved by several respected

charismatic leaders, and it is now one of the most popular versions.

But some people feel the IBS recently went too far in updating the NIV to make it “gender neutral.” The controversy has raged mainly among evangelicals, two of whom we invited to express their views in this issue (see p. 82). The crux of the debate is whether or not the TNIV translators erred in replacing male-oriented language with more general terms.

English typically uses masculine words when referring to both men and women. That characteristic rankles many who agree with feminists that we must eliminate male-oriented language. Though generalization may make the translation more friendly to modern readers, TNIV opponents claim the meaning is often changed by this process.

Hebrews 2:6 is a good example. The NIV reads, “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” while the TNIV says, “What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” Wayne Grudem points out that the second translation removes the connection to Jesus, who called Himself “the Son of Man.”

Ted Haggard assures us that the TNIV isn’t even close to being a feminist version. But Grudem believes that if we accept this translation in 2002, by 2010 we’ll be seeing the Lord’s prayer translated, “Our Parent in heaven.”

I have no problem with gender-neutral translations. The New Living Translation is one I personally use. But I also think it’s wise to evaluate changes made to the Bible to cause it to conform to current mores. That’s why I admire those who have

spoken up expressing caution. More than 100 leaders, from pastor Jack Hayford to author Bruce Wilkinson, have signed a "Statement of Concern."

When these leaders tried to run ads in some evangelical magazines, they were turned down because the ads were considered "negative." However, we accepted the ad in Charisma and one of our other publications, despite criticism from Zondervan, the TNIV's publisher. We believe the issue needs to be aired by the church.

What is our stand? We do not condemn the TNIV. That's why we are publishing its proponents' "side." The changes made to the NIV were relatively few, and this translation will speak to many.

But I am wary of tampering with the Word of God. I agree with Hayford, who told me, "It's as if God didn't know when the Bible was written that certain words would be a problem in the 21st century."

Thankfully, we won't be burned at the stake for having differing opinions. And maybe the controversy will prevent later translators from going too far in tampering with words considered by some to be politically incorrect.

Stephen Strang is founder and publisher of Charisma.