

A PRELIMINARY RESPONSE TO ELLIS W. DEIBLER: THE REAL PROBLEM WITH GENDER-NEUTRAL TRANSLATIONS

By Vern S. Poythress, Ph.D., Th.D.

Political correctness can, I believe, influence Bible translation in spite of good intentions in the opposite direction on the part of Bible translators. How can this be? I would like show how in responding to an essay by Dr. Ellis W. Deibler, Jr. This response is preliminary in nature. I have already benefited from corrections and criticisms, and would appreciate anything further.

Dr. Deibler, has written “An Evaluation of the ‘Colorado Springs Guidelines,’” an essay that appears on the official website for the TNIV (*Today’s New International Version*; website <www.tniv.info>, as of June 13, 2002). Dr. Deibler identifies himself as one with “a Ph.D. in linguistics and who has taught graduate level courses in principles of translation for many years on various campuses.” One might therefore think that Dr. Deibler has presented the definitive word on the subject. But I believe that the essay is less helpful than one might have hoped.

There are many things on which one might comment. But let me focus on the issue that I believe to be most revealing, namely Dr. Deibler’s discussion of Hebrews 12:7.

Hebrews 12:7

Dr. Deibler discusses Hebrews 12:7 in the middle of his essay. The issue concerns changes that the TNIV made to the NIV (*New International Version*), the earlier version on which it is based. Let us compare the two versions in Hebrews 12:7:

NIV: Endure hardship as discipline;
TNIV: Endure hardship as discipline;

NIV: God is treating you as **sons**.
TNIV: God is treating you as **his children**.

NIV: For what **son** is not disciplined by **his father**?
TNIV: For what **children** are not disciplined by **their parents**?

We focus particularly on the last part of the verse, where the TNIV changes “son” to “children” and “his father” to “their parents.” Are these changes justified? Do they increase accuracy?

Among other things, Dr. Deibler says, “the original writer used ‘son’ and ‘father’ just as representatives of children and parents.” He thereby admits that, in terms of a precise lexical analysis, the underlying Greek words in this verse (that is, the last part of the verse) mean “son” and “father” in this context. I agree. (Those who have doubts may see <<http://www.keptthefaithe.org/Below%20the%20Surface.htm>> or <<http://www.cbmw.org/tniv/analyzingTNIV.pdf>>)

Dr. Deibler also says that “son” and “father” are “representatives.” That is, they are representative of a broader principle. At the level of general principle, family discipline includes mothers and fathers disciplining sons and daughters. So what the verse is talking about is an embodiment of this broader principle.

But one must note that the context in Hebrews 12 does not focus on instructing parents in general on how to discipline their children in general. Rather, it compares God’s fatherly discipline of his people with an earthly father’s discipline of a son. (“Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?” Heb. 12:9 ESV.) The discussion of God’s discipline begins in verse 5. God “chastises every son whom he receives” (verse 6 ESV). Since the Christian plays a role like a son, God clearly plays the role of Father. Commentaries on Hebrews contain much fuller discussion of this point.

It is then particularly appropriate in verse 7 for the writer to make a comparison between God the Father and a human *father*—not *just* a human parent of unspecified gender. And this is what the verse does. In the original language the designation for the human father (Greek *pater*) contains a male meaning component, and is not just neutral with respect to male and female. Deibler himself recognizes this by saying that “the original writer used... ‘father’” (actually, the writer used a Greek word with this meaning).

So one should convey this meaning in English. And the appropriate way is to use “father” in English, including the male meaning component. One loses this element of meaning if one translates it as the TNIV does, “For what children are not disciplined by their parents?”

Avoiding wrong implications

Nevertheless, Dr. Deibler actually expresses a preference for the new TNIV translation: “The TNIV is a better translation than the NIV because it conveys the right meaning and avoids wrong meaning.” In what way? The only real reason given is that it heads off misunderstanding. “Was he [the author of Hebrews] suggesting that girls never need disciplining? Or that a mother never should discipline one of her children, male or female, under any circumstances? These would be the clear implications of a literal translation.”

“Clear implications,” he says. I find these words mind-boggling. I invite readers to sit down and read the entirety of Hebrews 12:1-11 in the NIV or the ESV (both of which are more “literal” translations at this point in the text of Hebrews), and see for themselves. Here is the NIV of Hebrews 12:7:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

This clearly implies, he says, that “girls never need disciplining.” It clearly implies that “mothers should not discipline .” How then is it that these “clear implications” never dawned on readers in more than 350 years since the publication of the King James Version? According to Deibler’s reasoning, the mere omission of mention of girls implies that girls *never* need discipline. The mere omission of mention of mothers implies that mothers *never* should discipline.

Need I say that this reasoning is absurd? But Dr. Deibler apparently thinks it is so plain that it needs no further argument. Just in case someone has missed the point, let us show its absurdity with painful explicitness. The TNIV of Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” This wording “clearly implies” that mothers never exasperate their children, and that mothers ought not to bring children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (I thank Rob Hooper for bringing my attention to this verse.) The TNIV of Matthew 5:28 says, “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully

has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” It omits mentioning a woman looking lustfully at a man. By Deibler’s reasoning, it “clearly implies” that it is all right for a woman to lust. TNIV of Matthew 5:32 talks about “anyone who divorces his wife,” but does not mention a wife divorcing her husband. It “clearly implies” that wives are free to divorce their husbands.

In fact, there will be no end to these “clear implications.” Every time a sentence fails to include some subgroup explicitly, it “clearly implies” the absolute exclusion of that subgroup. “Jews demand signs” (1 Cor. 1:22a), so by “implication” no Greeks ever demand signs. “Greeks look for wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:22b), which “clearly implies” that no Jews ever seek wisdom. Paul says to the Corinthian church, “You are still worldly” (1 Cor. 3:3). This “clearly implies” that all the other churches have no problems with being worldly.

No, in actual fact these are *not* “clear implications.” Dr. Deibler let himself get carried away when he used that phrase.

Now Bible translation theory includes a principle of trying to head off misunderstandings and false inferences. This principle is in the background of what Dr. Deibler is saying. But he has taken this principle and stretched it to an unfortunate, even laughable extreme.

And one can see in this extreme an affinity with political correctness and the modern culture wars. Political correctness includes an extreme, unnatural fear that someone, somewhere, sometime, for the flimsiest of reasons, might feel “excluded” or might misunderstand. It then distorts sound reasoning, sane communication, and other social realities for the sake of the triumph of its own vision of correctness. A person who has this fear will, as a matter of a general principle, remove the maleness in cases like Hebrews 12:7, for fear that females feel “excluded.” And of course this is exactly what the TNIV appears to be doing, when it engages in programmatic alterations of gender about which its preface speaks:

Among the more programmatic changes in the TNIV is the elimination of most instances of the generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns. (“A Word to the Reader,” p. vii)

Vulnerability in Bible translations

Anyone can make a mistake or write a misstatement. Dr. Deibler can, I can, anyone can. On one level, all that Dr. Deibler has to do is say, “I misstated what I wanted to say.” O.K. That solves the immediate problem. But because a broader lesson can be learned, I am afraid that I cannot leave it at that. We have some other matters to look at, using this mistake as a window.

First, the mistake is crucial to the argument about Hebrews 12:7. If one drops the appeal to “clear implications,” Dr. Deibler has no remaining reasons why “parents” should replace “father.” He admits that “father” more exactly represents the lexical meaning of the original, in this half verse. At least with respect to this half verse, his defense of the TNIV’s word “parents” stands or falls with his fallacious appeal to the dreaded “clear implications.” So in this verse the mistake is fatal to his defense of the TNIV.

Second, Dr. Deibler’s mistake shows that, in principle, it is possible for others to make a similar mistake. A great amount of training in linguistics and translation does not magically insulate anyone.

Third, the mistake builds on a legitimate principle of translation theory, namely the principle of heading off misunderstanding. This principle is an important one. Even without realizing it, translators can sometimes accidentally produce a verse that they understand in one way (the correct way), but that naïve readers regularly and

consistently misunderstand. Clearly something must be done. The translators need to reword the verse so that readers do not regularly (or even commonly) fall into this misunderstanding. (For one example, see Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000], pp. 61-63; such examples could be multiplied.)

Fourth, Dr. Deibler's mistake illustrates that this key translation principle is open to abuse. People can abuse it by introducing all kinds of outlandish "misunderstandings." They artificially multiply possible "misunderstandings" of a verse and then require the verse to be rewritten.

And political correctness creates a political atmosphere where people have a powerful motive to produce just such wild and outlandish "misunderstandings." For example, political correctness says that it is unfair for male examples to outnumber female examples. And it is unfair for a male to be used as an illustration when the illustration could just as easily be neutral between male and female. Why use "father" when you can use the more politically correct "parent(s)"? Political correctness does not like Hebrews 12:7, where it says, "For what son is not disciplined by his father?" It finds both "son" and "father" unacceptable because they include maleness—whereas "child" and "parent" do not.

Now, suppose that Bob is an advocate of political correctness. How does he change things? He argues that an expression like this one in Hebrews 12:7 will be misunderstood as excluding girls and mothers. Suppose that the translators disagree with Bob. Bob then says, "But you *must* head off the misunderstanding. Look at your own principle. You have to make it clear." The translators then *must* change verse, whatever their personal feelings may be, because they must protect the correct meaning of the verse, which (we all know) does not in fact exclude women.

So now Bob has found a way to force a victory for his own cause onto any verse about which he cares. The recipe is simple. Bob threatens the Bible translators with the specter of misunderstanding or exclusion or offense. (The label varies, but the strategy does not.) This specter will so terrify them that they will exclude whatever male meaning components are there in the original. They must exclude them, or else a far more "serious" misunderstanding would take place.

One must note here an important reality about translation. Human language is so complicated, and expressions of meaning contain so many nuances, that translation inevitably involves *some* small loss of meaning. One expresses as much meaning as possible in the target language, but one does not succeed in conveying every bit of every nuance. In such cases, one weighs alternatives in order to decide which is best. The best translation in practice does not match the absolutely perfect ideal of conveying every nuance (because that is impossible in practice). Rather, a good translation does its best in the given circumstances: it sets forth a maximal reproduction of meaning in the target language (see *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 70-74).

But now, Bob will argue, the misunderstanding that excludes women is a serious distortion of the meaning. Such serious distortion is unacceptable. By contrast, a rewording that uses "parent" instead of "father" is much superior. Even if it drops the male meaning component in the original, it preserves the main point. Clearly, Bob argues, one must avoid the more serious distortion. One must use "parent." And Bob is right, *provided* that one grants his key assumption. Namely, he assumes or pretends that the serious misunderstanding he envisions is a common reality among innocent readers of the Bible. (See *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 223, 116-175.)

As a result, in any verse one may care to choose, Bob maintains that the TNIV is actually *superior* to previous non-gender-neutral translations, because it takes care to head off these terrible misunderstandings. In this way, Bob can use the principle of avoiding misunderstanding as an opening wedge to force his agenda on Bible translations. He can achieve virtually complete triumph for his program for making general statements in English com-

pletely balanced as to male and female.

But the same principle can now be extended to other areas. If God is said to be “Father,” that will be misunderstood as meaning that he is biologically male. One must therefore change all these occurrences to something else, either “Parent” or “Provider” or “Originator.” In protest, the translators say, “No, we cannot. ‘Father’ is important to communicating the meaning.” Bob’s reply can be two-fold. First, Bob attacks the idea that the male meaning component of the primary sense of the word “father” (or the underlying Greek or Hebrew) is essential or central in speaking about God. He may put it this way,

Remember, only “basic” meaning is important. “Provider” or “Parent” captures “basic meaning” and is therefore acceptable. Also, the word *pater* (“father”) as applied to God is an extended meaning, and is not identical with the primary meaning (for father in a literal family). Maleness is not important to this extended meaning.

Second, Bob uses the specter of “misunderstanding” with full force.

Some people will be offended, you know. Some people will misunderstand. In our society, some people have had sinful, oppressive fathers, or no fathers at all. Some people will feel that women are excluded or slighted. Some will feel that you are claiming that God is just a male human being writ large, the ultimate chauvinist. They will think that we are saying that God belongs literally to the male sex. Or even if they do not, the feeling and connotation of it will remain beneath the surface. It is a subtle turn-off. Our culture does not associate with the word “father” the same exact things that ancient culture associated with the words *pater* and *'ab* in Greek and Hebrew. Language and culture have changed, and we must change too. Admittedly, we lose some nuances. But we gain enormously: we gain clarity and head off all these odious misunderstandings and distortions. We may submit to a tiny loss of nuance for the sake of avoiding the big distortion, the one that will keep people from coming to God or listening to the Bible at all.

Surely the *main point* in the Bible’s language about God as Father is that God loves us, protects us, cares for us, gives us wise guidance. Surely we do not want to claim that God is literally of the male sex. Wouldn’t we make the point even clearer, and so be more accurate, if we translated with “parent”? “Our Parent, who is in heaven, let your name be precious. ...” (*Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 186-187, envisioning the arguments that will be used in order illicitly to drive out the word “Father.”)

The book *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* then looks further ahead:

Similar reasoning applies to the use of a masculine pronoun “he” to refer to God or to Christ. Granted, Christ is a male human being. But why continually draw attention to his maleness, in a culture that finds this fact difficult?

If we allow these concessions, others will enter from the wings, seducing us into an indefinite series of modifications of the Bible for the sake of not “unnecessarily offending” modern readers. We cannot call God a warrior, because our culture sees war as ugly, vicious, uncivilized. We cannot call God king. “King” is male and connotes oppression under arbitrary orders. God cannot be wrathful, because it connotes that he has lost control of himself and harbors destructive emotions. God cannot threaten us with hell, because that connotes cruelty.

Thus, the gender issue will not be the only place where trends in the culture bring pressure to bear on the language and pressure to bear on Bible translation. (p. 187)

Now we come to the main point. Bible translators remain vulnerable to this pressure, because of their principle of heading off misunderstanding. Deibler's mistake is similar to the mistake that other translators can make. If we allow space for an unnatural fear of "clear implications," the whole Bible in the end becomes subject to manipulation. Bob simply frightens translators with the specter that people will be offended by what the Bible says, or will misunderstand it in an unfavorable way.

The Bible indicates that it will offend and be misunderstood

Let's face it. The Bible *is* offensive. It is offensive because it demands total submission to God, to his ways, and to his words. Sinful human beings do not like this. And if they can find a way to manipulate and misunderstand its words, they will. Shall we then make concessions to these kinds of offense and misunderstanding? Avoiding misunderstanding due to an obvious linguistic deficiency in a translation is one thing. Avoiding misunderstanding due to the mindset of the target culture is another. Linguistic defects and cultural resistance are different. Yes, language and culture are intertwined, but some distinction must be made or we will end up giving away the whole Bible in order to remove from it anything that is "misunderstood." (See the discussion of kinds of misunderstanding in the *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 169-175).

Indeed, the Bible testifies at a number of points that people misunderstand the word of God or take offense at it or otherwise reject it. Here is a sample from a much larger list that one might compile:

But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe. (John 6:61-64 ESV)

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. (John 8:43-44 ESV)

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14 ESV)

But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they [Jews in the synagogue] read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. (2 Cor. 3:14-15 ESV)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor. 4:3-4 ESV)

There are some things in them [Paul's writings] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Pet. 3:16 ESV)

There is, then, a kind of misunderstanding and a kind of offense that the word of God generates among those who are resisting some aspect of its message. And who among us has not resisted at some point! If we try to remove this kind of misunderstanding, we are simply tampering with the Bible in order to make it more palatable to people who resist it.

Being discerning about misunderstandings

How do we tell, then, whether a particular misunderstanding is a real and serious possibility, rather than something outlandish thrown up by Bob, and those like him, in order to manipulate translators? And even if the misunderstanding is real, how do we tell whether it is a misunderstanding generated by hardness of heart, rather than some flaw in translation?

Consider Hebrews 12:7 again. The original Greek has the meaning “father,” not simply “parent.” “Father” exemplifies a principle of discipline that applies to mothers. But the terms used in Greek include a male meaning component. By Bob’s reasoning, this use of the male “father” opens the way to misunderstanding in Greek as well as in English. Would not a native speaker of Greek reading the verse see the “clear implications” of the fact that it omits mention of mothers? He would then conclude that mothers should never discipline their children. The verse needs to be changed in Greek, in order to head off these “clear implications,” these dreadful misunderstandings. The Greek should have used the Greek equivalent of “father and mother,” or some expression that was clearly inclusive. Just as the TNIV is “superior” through using “parents” and heading off misunderstanding, so a neutral Greek expression would be superior through heading off misunderstanding.

But now Bob’s reasoning has succeeded in “correcting” what God said. Bob presumes to instruct God about what he should have said if he was to head off the dreaded misunderstanding. According to Bob, God has failed to do it right, and Bob comes in to “save” God from his mistaken wording.

Need I say that the attempt to “correct” God is blasphemous? Bob is trying to be wiser than God. And that, in the end, is supremely foolish. Moreover, Bob is emblematic of the political correctness movement as a whole. Political correctness and egalitarian “correction” of language do not stop with English, but want in principle to dominate the whole world with all its languages, including the language of the Bible. (See *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 184-187, 158.)

Suppose then that we resist the attempt to criticize what God caused to be written in the original languages. Why not also resist the attempt to criticize or “correct” similar wording in English? Here is the English wording: “For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Heb. 12:7 NIV). Why criticize this expression, which is a pretty close English equivalent to the Greek? If the Greek is all right, is not the English also all right? The only way of evading this reasoning is to appeal to a change of culture. The culture has made it “unacceptable” to talk in this way. It now seems to be insensitive to women, or subtly to put them down. It has bad connotations. The book *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* addresses this objection at some length (pp. 166-179).

But note that these are cultural reactions, not narrow reactions to linguistically awkward or grammatically flawed English. So now the question remains. Are these reactions innocent? Or are they in fact critical of the way in which God chooses to express himself? And if we give way on this issue, what will we do about calling God “Father”? Does not that also have extremely bad connotations for a portion of our present-day culture? A slippery slope of compromise looms ahead.

The issue of clarity in translation

In fact, the issue at hand can be viewed even more broadly. It is an issue of clarity as well as outright misunderstanding. Bob can exploit and twist a desire for clarity, just as he can twist a desire to avoid misunderstanding. Let me explain. In modern translation theory, clarity is an important goal. The Forum of Bible Agencies includes as one of its translation principles the following:

11. To test the translation as extensively as possible in the receptor community to ensure that it communicates accurately, clearly and naturally, keeping in mind the sensitivities and experience of the receptor audience.

In some respects, clarity is the opposite of misunderstanding. One heads off misunderstanding by making the translation as clear as possible. Suppose Hebrews 12:7 has been translated into the Zulu language (South Africa). If Zulu readers regularly misunderstand the verse, it is presumably because the verse has not expressed the correct meaning clearly enough. A clear expression of the correct meaning eliminates misunderstanding. And there are other reasons for striving for clarity. If Hebrews 12:7 were expressed obscurely, the Zulu reader might just give up: “I don’t know what it means.” In that case he does not produce a false understanding, a misinterpretation. But neither does he understand. Or perhaps he struggles to understand, and at last comes to discern the meaning. But if he has to make a similar effort for every verse, it wears him and may discourage him from reading. “This book is just too hard to understand.”

The principle of clarity is particularly important in doing a translation into a new tribal language for the first time. (See *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 64-65.) The people may have little or no previous acquaintance with the Christian faith. Much in the Bible will be spiritually new to them. They need the Holy Spirit to teach them. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14 ESV). Spiritual understanding is a hard enough challenge—indeed, impossible for a person unaided by the Spirit (Luke 18:27). The translator must then try to make sure that there are no unnecessary *linguistic* barriers in addition to the spiritual barriers. Make the translation *linguistically* natural, so that the Zulu can devote his energy to wrestling with the spiritual truths of the Bible, rather than consuming half his energy just trying to puzzle through wording that is linguistically unnatural (or even ungrammatical).

But like all good principles, the principle of clarity can be taken to an extreme. At some points in translation, one confronts trade-offs between maximally communicating the meaning of the original, and simplifying that meaning by sticking only to the main point, so it is all very clear and very easy. (See *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 73-81.) For example, consider Acts 13:50:

NIV: ... But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men

TNIV: But the Jewish **leaders** incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men

The context concerns persecution against Paul and Barnabas in the region of Pisidian Antioch. It says that “the Jews” incited others and stirred up persecution. Who exactly did the inciting? The Greek has an expression with the meaning “the Jews.” It might refer to all the Jews who resided in Antioch. But this seems unlikely, since earlier at least some Jews appeared to be responding favorably (Acts 13:42-43). More likely, then, “the Jews” refers to the greater part of them. Or perhaps just a few people did it, but with tacit approval from others. Perhaps the “Jewish leaders” had a particularly prominent role. Perhaps they alone did it, without anyone else’s help. But perhaps not. The fact is that we do not know, and the text does not provide anything more than vague information as to which Jews were involved, and who took the most prominent role. The text of the TNIV is really just guessing that it was “the Jewish leaders” (and they *exclusively*?).

The TNIV is in one respect “clearer” than the NIV. It is clearer in that it does not leave us wondering about exactly who did it. In addition, when we read “Jewish leaders,” we do not need any effort of thought. By contrast, when we read, “The Jews,” perhaps we have to make a bit of effort to arrive at the realization that it may not have been every single Jew in Antioch, with no exceptions. (But surely the context makes it clear enough that the expression “the Jews” is vague, and that we are not supposed to force an overprecise meaning on it.)

So, the TNIV is “clearer” than the NIV, and easier. In fact, it is “clearer” and easier than the Greek text, which leaves things vague. (footnote 1)

But now we can see the danger. Just as with the principle of “avoiding misunderstanding,” the principle of “clarity” can be taken to an extreme. And then the principle ends up by trying to improve on the original. The original itself, it turns out, is “not clear.” The translator is now attempting to be wiser than God, and to advise God as to how he could have improved things by making them clearer.

Let’s look at the ways in which the Bible in the original is “unclear.” The Bible leaves open the door to all kinds of misunderstanding and offense on the part of unsympathetic and sinful readers, as we have already seen from the biblical passages about misunderstanding and offense. But the Bible also includes things that are just plain hard to understand: “There are some things in them [Paul’s writings] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet. 3:16). And Paul observes that there are depths in God’s revelation to us:

None of the rulers of this age understood this [God’s secret wisdom], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:8-10 ESV)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” (Rom. 11:33-34; after expounding on predestination and God’s plan for the Jewish people)

The doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, as well as the doctrine of predestination and God’s plan for the Jews, are innately deep, and not completely “clear.” Indeed, the entire body of Christian teaching is like seeing “in a mirror dimly,” in comparison with the future, when we shall see “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Shall translators then simplify these matters until they are “clear”? Shall they advise God that he made a mistake when he put in all these things that require an effort to understand? No. “Clarity,” rightly understood, means reproducing as accurately as possible all the meanings in the original, including the theological and spiritual *unclearities*, or rather complexities and mysteries of the original. It means leaving readers to grapple with the implications, just as readers or the original had to grapple with implications. It does not mean spelling everything out, even when the original chose not to spell everything out.

Sometimes, of course, the change from one language to another requires us to make explicit in one language what is implicit in another. If a particular language has only a verb, and not a noun, corresponding to the idea of “love,” then we will translate “the love of God” as “God loves you” or “you love God” or whatever most accurately represents the meaning in context. We do what is linguistically necessary. But that is different from distorting the principle of “clarity” into a principle that ends up making everything simple and shallow and one-dimensional.

So let us return to the issue of Hebrews 12:7. Suppose that we translate it, “For what son is not disciplined by his father?” Suppose also that we grant what is true, namely, that there is no *serious* possibility that ordinary,

innocent readers will misinterpret it as implying that mothers should never discipline children. That is, we reject Bob's attempt to manipulate translators by threatening them with misunderstanding. Is everything then O.K.? Unfortunately, the same issues can still re-enter through an appeal to "clarity."

Is this translation with "father" as "clear" as it can possibly be? In particular, does it make it absolutely "clear," without any possible doubt, that mothers may engage in disciplining? No, it does not make it as clear as it could possibly be, because that is not its purpose. If that is not its purpose in the original, neither should it be the purpose of translators in the translation. But if we allow it, Bob will abuse the principle of "clarity" in order to manipulate translators. Bob latches onto the recipe, "Make it clear." According to Bob's agenda, this recipe means "make clear and explicit the inclusion of women in every verse where it is at all relevant." Make it as clear as possible even when the original does not choose to do so. In other words, "improve" on the original.

Adjustment to modern culture?

Once again, the question of cultural adjustments arises. Our modern cultures are different from ancient cultures. Many modern people *expect* modern writers to make very clear the inclusion and the equality of women. Even though the original did not make this as clear and as explicit as it could possibly have done, should we do it now out of deference to modern sensibilities? Otherwise, it is not so "easy" for them to read the Bible.

But what kind of "ease" is this? Is it merely the ease of grammatical English? Or is it the "ease" of not having to make any cultural adjustments to the differences between the Bible and the modern mindset? Or worse, is it the "ease" of not having to confront language that might trouble egalitarian ideology? (*Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, chap. 8, pp. 135-161.) Is it the "clarity" of having a Bible that clearly harmonizes with modern expectations for how sensitive people will speak, and that does not trouble modern cultural preferences? (See *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, pp. 175-179.)

Who decides?

And who is to decide these questions? Are we to leave it merely in the hands of experts in translation or experts in biblical studies? No, these are really questions about modern culture as well. And they are also questions about the ways in which people may resist God's word, and how God chooses to communicate himself to resistant cultures—and every culture is resistant, albeit in different ways. They are difficult questions, to be sure, but not questions on which translation experts have a monopoly.

It is unfortunate, then, that Dr. Deibler near the end of his essay conceives of the issues as merely technical. He rebukes many of the critics of the TNIV because

... their ministries have not been in Bible translation. They were not trained in principles of Bible translation. They have simply put their names to a document that was formulated by someone who was writing out of the vast wealth of his ignorance of how languages actually operate and of sound principles of Bible translation.

But let us pause. Dr. Deibler's discussion of Hebrews 12:7, as we have seen, depends on his judgment about its "clear implications." Might not pastors and other Christian workers have some idea about these alleged "clear implications"? They work professionally to communicate the Bible, and to deal with people's problems in understanding and applying the Bible. Surely some of these people may have some idea as to what is or is not a real problem of misunderstanding. Surely they are worth listening to. Ironically, it is they who are "experts," if anyone

is, about the realities of misunderstanding within various parts of American culture.

In fact, it is at least possible that a professional translator may be more vulnerable to being ensnared by Bob's attempt to manipulate and distort the principle of clarity, because this principle is well-known to professional translators. People who do not have the principle of "clarity" constantly before their minds might conceivably be better able to see ideological manipulation of language for what it is.

Moreover, people who look at Hebrews 12:7 do have resources. With even a smattering of Greek (and many have much more than that) or information from someone else who knows Greek, they can look at Hebrews 12:7 in Greek. They can see very well that *in this verse* the issue about the TNIV translation "parents" is not really about faithfulness to the original linguistic meaning, but adaptation to modern culture. (See <<http://www.keptthefaitth.org/Below%20the%20Surface.htm>>.) And perhaps they may also have a theologically informed opinion as to what in our culture is innocent and what is not so innocent, when it comes to evaluating the claims that certain types of wording are "offensive" or "insensitive."

These pastors and Christian workers may, then, be disapproving of the TNIV not because of narrowly linguistic concerns, but because they think it gives in to political pressure generated by people like Bob. Bob has "forced" the TNIV translators to compromise the meaning of the Bible. Is this kind of compromise a compromise with sinful elements in modern culture? Or is it just a legitimate way of avoiding alleged "misunderstandings" that would be "clear implications" if English used more literal representations of Greek meanings?

I along with these pastors do not approve of this compromise. I *do* think that it involves giving in to a sinful element in modern American culture. But of course, along side the pastors and Christian workers who disapprove of compromising meaning we find others who would welcome it. They think, perhaps, that these changes really do help us in relation to modern culture.

People are divided in their opinion on such matters. The problem is that the TNIV by doing what it does clearly takes sides with one group over against the other. It thereby takes sides on all kinds of complex judgments about modern culture, possible misunderstandings real or alleged, offenses and insensitivities real and alleged, and innocence or hardness of heart on the part of those who resist the older wordings of the NIV. (footnote 2)

These judgments exceed the scope of technical linguistics. All these issues need discussion. But how shall we have a norm to judge that discussion if the Bible itself has been slanted in one direction? A Bible translation, in distinction from an on-going theological and cultural discussion, needs to offer the data from original meanings without alteration. Otherwise, it makes it impossible for the ordinary person using an English translation to have the soundest basis for making the judgments. Precisely because the issues are complex and multidimensional, we need all the evidence from the original that the translators can supply.

The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy puts it this way:

At any point where theological differences are at stake, or where heated arguments are being generated over the implications of biblical texts, translators must avoid prematurely deciding the issue. Let readers battle out the issue for themselves, on the basis of the fullest information and fullest meaning that the translator can give them. One of the more severe problems with gender-neutral translations is at this very point. The translators overstepped their bounds. They took sides on a very debatable issue, namely whether the use of males as representative or as more prominent has any theological implications from which we can learn. And—what is even more remarkable—they did so in an environment where feminism had already drawn attention to this question and made it into a cultural theme. (p. 175)

If we trust in God, and perhaps trust somewhat less in our ingenuity in making the Bible fit our modern listeners, we may in fact meet some pleasant surprises:

Why not believe that God will use these differences between the Bible’s way of talking and that of our modern cultural elite in order subtly to rebuke and reform us, to give us life and healing and peace? Precisely at these points the Bible can enrich us if we stand firm rather than simply caving in to what the world says is now the new standard for “offense” and “sensitivity.” (*Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, p. 186)

A personal note

Dr. Deibler’s essay indicates at its end that he is a member of Wycliffe Bible Translators (retired). But he speaks for himself, not for Wycliffe Bible Translators as a whole. God in his providence has given me a number of learning experiences that have deepened my understanding of the labors of Bible translators—experiences beyond what a detailed resume or a list of publications would indicate. Some of these are personally precious to me. But I will not go into them. I prefer that people judge what I say by its truth, not by my scholarly credentials. I will say only this: my experiences have given me a profound respect and appreciation for Wycliffe Bible Translators and its members, whom I would commend to the Christian public.

Readers who are interested in a more detailed response to Dr. Deibler’s remarks on the Colorado Springs Guidelines should go to the other essay that I have written in response.

Footnotes

Footnote 1. Interestingly, in Acts 28:19 the TNIV writes “the Jews,” a literal translation of the Greek, in a context in which the primary actors were the Jewish leaders (the verse alludes to Acts 24-25, where the court proceedings involved Jewish leaders). Here the *referent* is the Jewish leaders, but the *semantic sense* or meaning of the phrase is still “the Jews.” Though the Jewish leaders are the clear instigators, they represent a broader sentiment, as illustrated by “the Jews” [TNIV!] who “formed a conspiracy” in Acts 23:12. The vaguer meaning “the Jews” may hint at this broader sympathy. Readers of the TNIV in Acts 28:19 quite naturally make a transition from the meaning to understanding the referent, and the TNIV here correctly saw that it need not alter the meaning in order for the referent to be understood.

Footnote 2. Not all the changes from the NIV to the TNIV are of the same kind. Some are legitimate adjustments due to the fact that the words “men” and “a man, the man” have now become more exclusively male than they were decades ago. The Colorado Springs Guidelines and Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, chapter 5, indicate some of the areas of permissible change.