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A Brief Response from the Committee on Bible Translation to the Review of the updated NIV by the Committee on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

June 9, 2011

The Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) welcomes informed criticism of our work. Our translation is not perfect, and we are always working to improve it. The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) has recently released a review of the updated NIV on their website. We take this opportunity to offer a brief response.

In evaluating the CBMW review, one point above all others should be kept in mind. CBMW is an advocacy group for one particular view of the role relationships among men and women. In contrast, the Committee on Bible Translation, translators of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, is composed of scholars that mirror the spectrum of evangelicalism. The committee includes both complementarians and egalitarians. CBMW has a self-proclaimed agenda that is not found in the NIV translation committee.

Of course, many evangelicals – including many members of the Committee on Bible Translation – agree with the general complementarian position that CBMW advocates. But CBMW has gone a significant step further, insisting that a complementarian view must result in a certain approach to translation. Their review of the updated NIV reflects this narrow view of translation. The result is a biased review that does not fairly represent the updated NIV. We could note many specific examples of unfair criticism. But we wish to note four general areas of concern.

First, we object very strongly to the accusation that our gender translation decisions were motivated by a desire to avoid causing offense. Our concern is always, in every decision we make, to represent God's Word accurately and naturally in modern English – we have no other agenda. In the pursuit of this agenda, CBT used extensive research into the state of modern English as a basis for our decisions about gender translation. In all our public information about the update, we have stressed the importance of this research, the "Collins Report," for our work. The CBMW review briefly mentions this study but fails to acknowledge its significance or to recognize its importance for our work. Our gender decisions simply reflect what the data are telling us about the state of modern English. Let us say it as emphatically as we can: the NIV translators have never been motivated by a concern to avoid giving offense. We were simply following what wide-ranging, objective research tells us about the state of modern English.

Second, we object to the "guilt-by-association" labeling of some of our translations. The review notes some renderings in the updated NIV that are adopted also by "feminist" interpreters. Yet they fail to note that many of these same renderings are also adopted by complementarian interpreters. (For instance, "assume authority" in 1 Tim. 2:12 is Calvin's rendering.) The fact that egalitarians and complementarians alike adopt many of these translations suggests that, in fact, there is broad scholarly support in favor of these conclusions. It is the scholarship that has influenced the decisions of CBT in these texts – not a modern agenda of any kind.



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Third, the CBMW review betrays a simplistic understanding of word meaning. They accuse the updated NIV again and again of translating Greek and Hebrew words "incorrectly." But their reason for this charge often appears to be the notion that words have only one meaning. In fact, in every language, words have many meanings and shades of meaning – and a good translation must represent this variety. At several points the CBMW review accuses the NIV of an "incorrect" translation when the best dictionaries of the ancient languages give the very same meaning that we have adopted.

Fourth, the CBMW review criticizes the updated NIV for avoiding certain masculine terms. The review notes, for instance, that the updated NIV often makes changes to "avoid the word 'man.'" It would be only fair to note that almost all modern English translations do the same thing. The English Standard Version, for instance, is based on the Revised Standard Version. Yet over 700 occurrences of the word "man" or "men" found in the RSV are dropped in the ESV. If the NIV can be accused of "avoiding" certain masculine terms, then the same charge can be made against the ESV, along with almost all modern versions. Why single out the NIV for criticism for translation decisions that, to some degree, are being widely adopted by modern translators? CBT, along with translators of other modern versions, are not trying to "avoid" certain words. Rather, positively, we are trying to find the right word in contemporary English to represent the meaning of ancient Hebrew and Greek words. (Every modern version uses "you" for the second-person singular – not to "avoid" "thee" and "thou," but to communicate God's Word in modern English.)

We are grateful to live in a time when so many good translations of the Bible are available in English. These Bibles are based on different philosophies of translation and make different decisions about how to render words from the original languages into English. This diversity gives readers unparalleled access to the meaning of God's eternal Word. The updated NIV, following the philosophy of balancing transparency to the original documents and comprehensibility for a broad audience that has made the NIV so well-loved, has an important place in this mix of translations. We are disappointed that our brothers and sisters at CBMW have not communicated more evenhandedly about our work.