GENDER NEUTRALITY AND BIBLE TRANSLATION

Posted on September 22, 2008 by Eddie

Category: English Bibles

There is an ongoing debate all over the Internet about the issue of gender neutral language in the Bible. A lot of virtual ink has been spilled and a lot of heat (and very little light) generated. I've tried to avoid the issue, not because it isn't important, but because I don't find it very interesting. However, I thought that this post was worth linking to:

> *Which pronoun in English is best to use in order to convey the inclusion of both genders?*
>
> *My answer, as indicated in the first couple of paragraphs above, is that the masculine gender is perfectly capable of conveying the inclusion of both genders. However, if an English translation does indeed use some means of conveying the inclusion of both genders, it does not follow that the genderless translation is inaccurate.*
>
> *If the genderless translation reads, "If any person would follow me, let him OR HER take up his OR HER cross and follow me," it may be cumbersome and pedantic, but it is nonetheless accurate. The same is true for, "If anyone would follow me, let them take up their cross and follow me." (read more)*

So far so good. However the author makes these two interesting statements:

> *First, let it be clear that I think it is silly for us to have to change language in order to appease the squeaky wheel.*
>
> *If we want to criticise NLT, NRSV, TNIV, etc., for something, let us criticise them for being so committed to appealing to the spirit of the day as to produce awkward translations. But we cannot criticise them for producing inaccurate translations.*

In other words, those translations which seek to use gender neutral or inclusive language are 'changing language' and 'appealing to the spirit of the day'. At this point, I have to disagree with the author. Over the last twenty years or so, the English language has changed (as all languages do, whether people like it or not). It is true that at one point it was acceptable to use masculine pronouns (he, him and his) to represent an unspecified person of either sex. However, things have changed and for most speakers of English, male pronouns refer to people of the male gender. So 'he who lives in glass houses shouldn't throw stones' refers, these days, to a man or a boy and cannot (as it once did) refer to a woman or girl.Â When the author of the article writes:

> *I think that if someone says, "If any man would follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me," everyone knows that he is talking generically.*

He is quite simply wrong - at least in the English speaking circles I move in. 'If any man...' refers to a man, and not to a woman.