

Committee for Bible Translation: Interim Report December 2011

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1. Mandate

The Committee for Bible Translation (CBT), appointed by Synod Burlington 2010, received the following mandate (*Acts*, Article 72, p. 99-100):

- 4.2.1 To thoroughly evaluate the updated NIV translation when it is released in 2011 and to produce and send a report to the churches within nine months of the release date.
- 4.2.2 To investigate the feasibility of obtaining access to the printing rights of the 1984 edition of the NIV.
- 4.2.3 To investigate further whether the ESV or the NKJV or the NASB could become the recommended translation for the churches.
- 4.2.4 To investigate the possibility and feasibility of publishing an ecclesiastically-produced and owned Bible translation with the cooperation of English-speaking churches which are members of NAPARC and/or ICRC.

2. The Committee

The committee members are the Revs. P. Aasman, R. Bredenhof, W. Bredenhof, D. DeBoer, S.C. VanDam, and M.H. VanLuik (convenor).

3. The Subject and Nature of this Report

As can be noted above, Synod mandated this committee to thoroughly evaluate the updated NIV and to produce and send a report directly to the churches concerning the same (4.2.1). The 2011 NIV is the chief subject of this report; in light of the unavailability of the 1984 edition of the NIV (see 4.1 below) this report is shared with the churches for their due consideration in this interim period. A full and final CBT report on the other matters of our mandate will be released in the months leading up to Synod 2013, the Lord willing.

4. Introduction to the 2011 NIV

4.1 Background to the Issue

In its report to Synod 2010 the CBT noted that Biblica would be releasing a new NIV in 2011. The Biblica press release cited continuing changes of the English language as the primary motivation, while mentioning also the ongoing contributions of Biblical scholarship. The need for the CBT to evaluate the 2011 NIV was made more urgent by the fact that no new Bible products based on the 1984 version of the NIV—currently in use in many of the CanRC congregations—would be developed or published.

While through their press releases Biblica provided little indication of the nature of the changes to the NIV being contemplated, it was widely suspected—and confirmed in published interviews with members of the body that is responsible for the translation (note: also called the Committee for Bible Translation)—that the 2011 NIV would certainly include gender-inclusive language; it was only a question of how much and to what degree.

The electronic edition of the updated NIV was released in November 2010, and the print edition in March 2011. The CanRC CBT issued a press release to the churches in April 2011. This was to highlight that Zondervan, who holds the printing rights to the NIV (both 1984 and 2011), was indeed replacing all 1984-based product with 2011-based, while calling both simply the “NIV”. The press release informed the churches of this fact so that members would know to exercise caution when purchasing NIV Bibles, as they may be purchasing a “new” NIV unawares—an edition that had not yet been evaluated by the CanRC CBT and/or recommended by Synod for use in the churches.

Even a cursory look at the 2011 NIV reveals that many changes were made to the 1984 text.¹ The committee behind the NIV revision released a document entitled “Updating the New International Version of the Bible: Notes from the Committee on Bible Translation,” which is available on the NIV CBT website, www.niv-cbt.org. Our correspondence with Dr. Douglas Moo, chair of the NIV committee, confirmed that the principles included in this document functioned as the committee’s “set of guidelines” for revision. In this document, the NIV committee helpfully highlighted three basic categories of changes made to the 1984 text: 1) Changes in English; 2) Progress in scholarship; 3) Concern for clarity. A later category in the Notes includes

a miscellany of “other” improvements, based on the translation decisions of the NIV committee.

It became obvious to the CBT that we would need to focus particularly on those changes belonging to the first category, that of English usage. For as the aforementioned NIV Translation Notes elucidate, the 2011 NIV has been made with careful consideration of the contemporary use of gender language. Indeed, in the preparation for their work of updating, the committee for the NIV mandated Collins Dictionaries to make a major study of changes in language related to gender, a study subsequently called the “Collins Report” (also available on the NIV CBT website). Working out of the Collins Bank of English, “a database of more than 4.4. billion words drawn from text publications and spoken word recordings from all over the world,” the Collins Report tracked such things as the usage and acceptability of terms for the human race, pronoun selections, the use of “man” as a singular generic, the use of “father(s)” and “forefather(s)” as compared to “ancestor(s),” etc.

From this report, the committee for the NIV identified various trends that in turn would have a bearing on their translation decisions in the update. They noted that such linguistic research is but one tool employed by the translator, yet it is an important aid in expressing the truths of the Bible “in forms of language that modern English speakers find natural and easy to comprehend.” In the NIV Translation Notes it is stated emphatically that nowhere in the updated NIV is there the remotest hint of any inclusive language for God, but that revisions were made which relate only to the language for mankind. Various examples of the changes to the 2011 NIV text are provided in the Translation Notes:

- the gender-neutral “they” (instead of “he”) is regularly employed to refer back to singular antecedents;
- “people” and “humans” often render the Greek and Hebrews words referring to both men and women;
- “ancestors” is regularly preferred to “forefathers”;
- “brothers and sisters” is frequently used to translate Greek *adelphoi*;
- “person” or “people” is sometimes used to translate Greek *aner*.

In our work as committee we have surveyed several books of the Bible in the 2011 NIV where these changes are in ample evidence (see below, under “Evaluation”).

4.2 The Legitimacy of a Gender-Inclusive Translation

The foregoing information makes clear the need for at least three things to be judged by the CBT: first, to determine in general terms the legitimacy of a gender-inclusive translation; second, to reflect on the necessity or desirability of using such a translation in our churches; and third, to investigate how the 2011 NIV has implemented its policy of gender-inclusiveness, and if it can thereby be considered a faithful translation of the Scriptures and be recommended to the churches.

It may be helpful to begin with a definition of what is an inclusive language translation of the Scriptures. Strauss writes, “[It is] a translation that seeks to avoid masculine terminology when the original author was referring to members of both sexes”, or more positively: “one that seeks to capture the inclusive sense intended by the original author”.² While this definition appears relatively straightforward, it must be noted that there is a wide spectrum of inclusive language editions, where the avoidance of masculine terminology ranges from the occasional in incidence to the universal (such as in the feminist versions of the Bible). It is likely for this reason that the committee for the updated NIV was careful to emphasize that no inclusive language for God was used.

It can also be pointed out that in one form or another, whether explicit or not, “inclusive language” has been a component of the translation policy behind every English version of the Bible since Wycliffe.³ As one example, the much-loved and trusted King James Version translated many instances of the masculine plural terms *banim* (Hebrew) or *huioi* (Greek) not as “sons” but with the gender-neutral “children.” But particularly by the mid-1980s, Bible translators were taking steps to introduce gender-inclusive language in a more consistent and systematic manner. In so doing, translators were trying to be mindful of the changing nature of the English language, where what was understandable in a previous generation might not necessarily be so anymore. A contemporary example of this policy in practice is the English Standard Version, a 2001 revision of the RSV, and a translation that was determined by Synod Smithers 2007 to be acceptable for use in the churches. In the ESV more than 700 occurrences of the word “man” or “men” found in the RSV have been replaced with more inclusive terms. As indicated already, this general translation trend has been continued in the 2011 NIV.

All of this raises a deeper question, however. It is a question of translation policy, but not unconnected to our view of Scripture: Is the Bible understandable “on its own?” That is, are we to consider the Scriptures (even in translation) an ancient document that needs to be interpreted or perhaps even corrected, for a 21st century reader? In particular, must some of the “patriarchal” language that is employed in Scripture (for example, the use of the term “forefathers”) be changed and updated before it is able to be comprehended by a modern audience? In answer, we can say that every translation of the Bible involves the activity of interpretation to some degree. This does not need to undermine the principle of the clarity of Scripture, for it is a fact that every translator must make decisions about how to render the words and phrases of the text. He does this as he aims to best convey the author’s intended meaning in clear and accurate language for the contemporary reader.

Proponents of gender-inclusive language argue that such a translation policy is a further application of that same aim: finding the appropriate English word or idiom that accurately captures the sense of the original. That is, if the author was originally referring to persons of both genders (or if he was unspecific in his reference), then a term should be found that properly communicates this intent. For example, when Paul writes in Rom 3:28 (1984 NIV), “We

maintain that *a man* is justified by faith apart from observing the law,” the apostle clearly does not mean to say this only with reference to males, but to all people; in this passage, “man” has a generic sense. Or when Peter says in 2 Pet 1:10 (1984 NIV), “Therefore, *my brothers*, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure,” it can be agreed that he is addressing not just the brothers of the congregation, but the sisters as well (further instances where the English term “brothers” includes the women can be seen in Rom 8:29, Eph 6:23, Heb 2:12 and Rev 12:10).

Herein lies the suggested relevance of the previously mentioned Collins Report. For if a Biblical author was referring in a particular verse to persons of both genders (or to neither gender specifically), can words like “man” or “brothers” or pronouns like “he” still be employed in a translation as acceptable generic terms? The Collins Report, as well as other previous linguistic studies,⁴ indicated that the usage of masculine generic terms is on the decline and that they are being replaced by more inclusive terms. This is not to say that masculine generics *cannot* be understood as such by contemporary readers. Rather, it is suggested that such terms are not the *best* rendering, insofar as they might hinder the comprehension of Scripture by some readers who think that males exclusively are being referred to. Strauss notes, “The simple fact is that language changes over time, and translations must be updated to reflect these changes.”⁵ In this way, it has been argued that the movement toward gender-inclusive language has in fact made our Bible translations more precise, and thus more accurate in representing the author’s intent.⁶

As we consider the legitimacy of a more comprehensively inclusive language translation of Scripture, we should note that the CanRC CBT has previously dealt with this matter. The CBT report to Synod 1992 addressed it in connection with the New Revised Standard Version, an updated version of the RSV which was widely used in the federation at the time. The committee recommended—and Synod 1992 agreed—rejecting the NRSV, based primarily on the policy of inclusive language that its translators had adopted and implemented. The report detailed numerous examples where “precision of translation is sacrificed for the policy of inclusive language.”⁷ The committee noted further the influence of the feminist agenda on the movement toward inclusive language in the NRSV: “The translation is no longer determined by what the text says, but by what certain people like to hear. Apparently feminists no longer want to listen to language that they perceive as male dominated and so the Word has to be purged from what is considered a male bias.”⁸

Certainly one would not want to be naïve about the political and social agendas that are still at play in matters of language; as Strauss notes, “Language not only reflects culture but creates culture. The feminist push for inclusive language is not intended simply to mirror the current state of the English language but to transform the language.”⁹ The influence of the feminist ideology aside, the legitimacy of inclusive language is not automatically negated. As we have already noted, if a gender-inclusive rendering of a passage more accurately conveys the author’s intended meaning, then that rendering should be embraced. Such was a stated motive

for the NIV committee's work, "to bring the translation into line... with shifts in English idiom and usage." The truth surely remains that language usage has continued to undergo change in the twenty years since the CanRC CBT issued their report on the NRSV. As CBT, we may be hesitant about the "cutting-edge techniques" behind the Collins Report, and about the committee for the NIV's claims that this report provides an "authoritative perspective on the contemporary use of gender language."¹⁰ But even without accepting every conclusion of the Collins Report or agreeing fully with the analysis of it provided by the committee for the NIV, it can be granted that in North American or Western culture, masculine terms previously understandable as generic in reference are no longer always so.

4.3 The Desirability of a Gender-Inclusive Translation

So what about us? Is it possible that our churches have largely been unaffected by this shift in the English language? To an extent, one may probably speak of a Canadian Reformed "sub-culture," where not all the same trends and patterns from the wider culture are mirrored exactly. Years of regular preaching and teaching of God's Word in the church, coupled with instruction in the home and Christian day schools, may mean that our members are generally capable of navigating through the language and culture of Scripture. We may be able to comprehend with relative ease when a text is gender-specific in intent, and when it is gender-inclusive; for example, when Ps 1:1 (1984 NIV) says "Blessed is *the man* who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked," there is probably an informed understanding that this verse has universal application, to males and females alike.

However, without the commissioning of a Collins-like report on Canadian Reformed sermons, articles, bulletins, and day school and Catechism lesson plans, the best we can do is base ourselves on experience and anecdotal evidence, where someone might claim: "Everyone *knows* that the address 'brothers' includes the sisters, too," or "Everyone *understands* that Ps 1:1 is universal in reference." Perhaps these assertions are true, and they may make adopting a gender-inclusive translation of the Bible less necessary or even less desirable in our churches than in some churches where there is a lesser degree of Biblical literacy. But again, such a reality of how language is being understood in our churches is hard to quantify. It must also be recognized that our North American and Western culture will almost certainly continue to go in the direction of gender-inclusive language, meaning that we as churches will need to interact in some way with this trend. The release of the 2011 NIV confronts us with the issue head-on. Can we say then, that it is a faithful translation of the Scriptures, and that it can be recommended to the churches?

4.4 The Implementation of a Gender-Inclusive Translation Policy in the 2011 NIV

Even if forms of "gender-inclusive" language have been in evidence in many translations of Scripture from the time of Wycliffe to today, there can be little question that the degree to which the 2011 NIV followed this policy is pronounced. For example, a concordance analysis reveals that the 2011 NIV compared to the 1984 employs the word "man" 913 times less; the word "father" has been removed 264 times, and "brothers" has been removed 117 times. We

turn then, to specific examples of these (and other) changes and our committee's evaluation of them, beginning with a selection of passages that concern gender and gender-roles, particularly in the church.

5. Evaluation of the 2011 NIV

5.1 Changes in Texts on Gender and Gender-Roles

Romans 16:1

- 1984: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreae."
- 2011: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae."

In the 1984 NIV, there was a footnote to this verse for the word "servant" as follows: "Or *deaconness*." The 2011 NIV has two footnotes with this word. The first reads, "Or *servant*." The second reads, "The word *deacon* here refers to a Christian designated to serve with the overseers/elders of the church in a variety of ways; similarly in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8,12."

At issue here is the Greek word *diakonos*. This word can have a range of meanings and can describe both men and women. It can refer to ordained office bearers in the church or simply to those who serve as unofficial helpers. Because of what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2-3, we are compelled to rule out the first option. "Servant" is the preferable translation, though "deaconness" could also be acceptable if it is understood simply as a woman assisting others in the church. By placing "deacon" in the text, "servant" in the footnote and also adding a second footnote, the potential now exists for identification between what is said here about Phoebe and what Paul says about deacons in 1 Timothy 3. Our judgment is that the 2011 NIV does not present an improvement here.

Philippians 1:14

- 1984: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."
- 2011: "And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

This verse illustrates one of the translation guidelines behind the 2011 NIV noted above, that the Greek plural *adelphoi* is to be translated as "brothers and sisters" when it is presumed that both genders were in view. As the committee's Translation Notes explain on p. 6, "This decision reflects the consensus view among scholars (and with basis in the dictionaries) that plural *adelphoi* refers to both men and women equally." Accordingly, the following footnote is added in the 2011 NIV at the first occurrence in each New Testament book, "The Greek word for brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family." Examples of this footnote can be seen at Acts 1:6, 1 Cor 1:10, 2 Cor 1:8, and Gal 1:2.

The legitimacy of this translation in general is confirmed by Greek dictionaries such as BDAG.¹¹ An obvious example of where Paul intends to address not just the “brothers” with *adelphoi* but the “brothers and sisters” is in Phil 4:1-2. In verse 1, he addresses his audience as *adelphoi* (translated in the 1984 NIV simply as “brothers”), but in verse 2 he goes on to plead with Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the Philippian congregation. This context makes it apparent that they were included in Paul’s preceding *adelphoi*.

However, as far as the translation of *adelphoi* in Phil 1:14 is concerned, the CBT has serious reservations, for here the 2011 NIV represents “the brothers *and sisters*” as being involved in the work of proclaiming the gospel. We note that in the rest of the 2011 NIV, the English phrase “proclaim the gospel” is always found in the context of the work of the apostles’ preaching; see e.g., Rom 15:16,19 and Col 1:23. More weighty than English usage, a close variation of the Greek phrase translated “proclaim the gospel” in Phil 1:14 (*ton logon lalein*) is found in the context of the official preaching of the word in Acts 8:25, “After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem.” Indeed, *ton logon lalein* is used in the New Testament as a technical phrase for the proclamation of the Word by Christ’s special office bearers. That it has this meaning in Phil 1:14 is confirmed by the subsequent use of *kerussein* (to announce, proclaim aloud) in verse 15. We consider that the 2011 NIV does not present an improvement here; rather, the translation of Phil 1:14 is confusing, does not do justice to the technical terminology involved and undermines the proper understanding of who is eligible to serve as minister in the church.

1 Timothy 2:12

- 1984: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”
- 2011: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”

In its comments on this amended verse, the committee for the NIV says that “assume authority” is “a particularly nice English rendering because it leaves the question open” whether the Greek *authentein* means to “exercise authority” or “usurp authority.” That the precise meaning of *authentein* is not settled can be confirmed by consulting NIDNTT,¹² where with respect to this verse it observes: “[It] might be interpreted not as an absolute prohibition of women teaching but as a repudiation of allowing them to domineer and lay down the law. The hapax legomenon [a word only occurring once in the NT] *authentein* can mean both to have authority over and to domineer” (3:1066). Similarly, BDAG gives as definition of *authentein*, “to assume a stance of independent authority, give orders to, dictate to.”

To the CBT, it seems that some may have difficulty with this new rendering because of the meaning of the English phrase “assume authority.” Does this phrase refer to taking up of authority in general? Or is Paul simply forbidding women from entering office outside of the proper avenues—that if they do enter office, this authority must be *given* them? For the sake of

comparison, we note that in the 2011 NIV, the word “assume” (with respect to taking on authoritative office) does have a positive connotation; see e.g., 1 Sam 14:47, “After Saul had *assumed* rule over Israel, he fought against their enemies on every side.” For Saul as the anointed king, this was a lawful taking up of office. An English dictionary confirms that “assume” can have the sense of “undertaking” an office or duty without the negative overtones of usurping it or claiming it unduly. Therefore the 2011 NIV rendering could still be read as a prohibition of women being in positions of ecclesiastical authority.

However, the question must still be asked of the 2011 NIV’s rendering of 1 Tim 2:12: Did Paul really intend for his words to be understood ambiguously? As already noted, because it occurs but once in the New Testament, a conclusive translation of *authenthein* cannot be given based on the lexical data alone. But from the rest of the verse (“I do not permit a woman to teach,” and “she must be silent”), together with other passages on the matter of authority in the church (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34), we know that Paul’s intent was not ambiguous at all: he forbade women from being in positions of ecclesiastical authority. While the committee for the NIV wanted to “leave the question open,” the result is a translation that suggests ambiguity on a matter where Paul’s teaching was clear, and as such it must be judged objectionable.

1 Timothy 3:2

- 1984: “The overseer must be... the husband of but one wife.”
- 2011: “The overseer is to be... faithful to his wife”

These verses deal with a Greek expression that literally reads, “a one woman man.” It has been suggested that this expression requires that an elder: 1) be married; or 2) have only one wife for his entire life; or 3) be monogamous; or 4) be faithful in the marital and sexual realm.¹³ Besides occurring in 1 Tim 3:2 and 3:12 (in connection with the deacons), the expression is used again in connection with the overseers in Titus 1:6. An essentially parallel phrase is found in 1 Tim 5:9 with regard to the widows of the church.

The 1984 NIV translated the phrase as a prohibition of polygamy. The Greek phrase used in 1 Tim 5:9 in connection to a widow’s previous marital conduct makes this translation unlikely. It is also unlikely that the reference is to someone who has been married more than once, since Paul counsels widows to remarry in 1 Tim 5:14. In our consideration, the 2011 NIV best conveys Paul’s intent that an elder (or deacon) is to be faithful to his wife.

1 Timothy 3:11

- 1984: “In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect”
- 2011: “In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect”

The central question here involves the Greek word *gune*, which can be translated as either an adult female person; a married woman; or a newly married woman. The identification of these women in 1 Tim 3:11 is an open question. Essentially four interpretive positions have been

taken, namely: 1) the women are inherently part of the deacons; or 2) they are “deaconesses,” distinguished from but comparable with the deacons; or 3) they are female assistants to the deacons; or 4) they are wives of the deacons.¹⁴

In our judgment, “the women” is an accurate translation. That these women are inherently part of the deacons is exegetically unlikely since as a group these women are being distinguished from the deacons already mentioned in verse 8. In the 1984 rendering (“their wives”), the word “their” is an addition to the Greek text. Whether these “women” are the wives of the deacons, or women who assisted the deacons, is a matter of interpretation. From the perspective of translation, the 2011 NIV is legitimate for it leaves open the interpretive possibilities that the 1984 NIV does not.

As for the footnote to this verse, the 1984 NIV suggests “deaconesses” as an alternative translation for “their wives.” In the 2011 NIV the footnote gives two possible interpretations: “Possibly deacons’ wives or women who are deacons.” We note that the 1984 footnote makes a suggestion that is not a legitimate translation for the Greek *gune* (women or wives). Again the 2011 NIV is preferable for it no longer suggests “deaconesses” as a possible translation, but simply gives it as a possible interpretation.

2 Timothy 2:2

- 1984: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”
- 2011: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.”

“Reliable people” is a translation of the Greek *pistoi anthropois*. This translation is consistent with the 2011 NIV’s general practice of neutralizing the rendering of the Greek word *anthropos* (singular: man, person; plural: men, people) when they consider that the gender of the intended referent is unspecified by the Biblical author. However, in this case we note that the referent of *anthropois* is clear, for the immediate context concerns the task of the teachers of the church. In the New Testament, “teaching” (*didaskhein*) is used with reference to the work of the male office bearers. Particularly in the Pastoral Epistles, “teaching” is repeatedly described as the work of the apostles and overseers (e.g., 1 Tim 3:2, 4:11, 5:17), while women are prohibited from assuming such positions (1 Tim 2:12; see also 1 Cor 14:34). In our view then, this is an unwarranted neutralizing of a text that ought to be gender-specific. The use of “people” in this verse has the potential to be misleading in a consideration of the special offices of the church.

James 3:1

- 1984: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”
- 2011: “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

Along the same lines as 2 Tim 2:2, we consider this to be an example of unwarranted neutralizing. The question in this passage is whether James is thinking strictly of teaching in an ecclesiastical context or is speaking more generally. To answer that, attention needs to be given to the way in which the word *didaskaloi* is used in the New Testament. In passages such as Acts 13:1, 1 Cor 12:28, Eph 4:11, 1 Tim 2:7, and 2 Tim 1:11, we find that this word is used in conjunction with authoritative instruction in the church related to the holding of an office. By rendering *adelphoi* as “fellow believers,” the 2011 NIV not only mistranslates the Greek, but also leaves open the possibility that both men and women can become teaching office bearers in the church. Like 2 Tim 2:2, this passage ought to be translated in a gender-specific manner.

5.2 Other Changes in the 2011 NIV

As noted in 4.1 of this report, besides accounting for trends in English usage, the committee for the 2011 NIV made numerous other changes to the 1984 text. These were categorized under the rubrics “progress in scholarship” and “concern for clarity.” In addition the committee for the NIV noted a miscellany of further alterations. While time and space constraints prevent us from evaluating many of these changes, by way of illustration we may draw your attention to several. We first note changes of a “global” nature, those translation choices that have affected a number of texts, sometimes in a range of Bible books (5.2.1); then we note changes to individual passages, both negative and positive (5.2.2-3).

5.2.1 Changes of a “Global” Nature

Regarding “Alien” and “Foreigner”

The dictionary definition of an alien as an “outsider” or as a person owing allegiance to another country or government makes “alien” an acceptable translation for the Hebrew *ger* (such as in Ex 2:22, 20:10). However, the popular conception of an alien as a creature from outer space makes the 2011 NIV rendering of “foreigner” a better choice.

Regarding “Tablets of the Covenant Law”

The NIV 2011 chooses to render the Hebrew *eyduth* as “tablets of the covenant law” instead of “testimony,” which is the rendering of the 1984 NIV, as well as the ESV. In the context *eyduth*, which has the literal meaning of testimony, refers to the tablets containing the law God gave Moses (cf. 31:18). However, when we translate *eyduth* with the phrase “tablets of the covenant law” (such as in 16:34, 25:21, 27:21) we lose the sense of the tablets being a witness or a testimony between God and his people. While the 2011 NIV’s desire to communicate this term in a more understandable way is commendable, we feel it would be preferable to maintain the

more literal translation of “testimony” and let the reader wrestle with the author’s intent in choosing that word to describe the tablets.

Regarding “Lover” and “Beloved” in Song of Solomon

The expression “my lover” (Hebrew *dodi*) in the 1984 NIV has consistently been changed to “my beloved” in the 2011 NIV (e.g., 1:13,16; 2:3). We consider this to be an improvement in light of the modern use of the word “lover.”

Regarding “Son of Man”

A global change resulting from the adoption of inclusive language in the 2011 NIV concerns the phrase “son of man.” In the 2011 edition, the Hebrew phrase *ben adam* is sometimes translated with “son of man” and sometimes with “human being.” When *ben adam* is used to refer to a specific person, then the translation “son of man” is used, notably in the many occurrences of this phrase in Ezekiel (e.g., 2:1,3,6,8) when the phrase refers to Ezekiel himself (see also Ps 80:17; Dan 8:17). Probably the most well known occurrence of the phrase occurs in Daniel 7:13 in its Aramaic equivalent. Here the phrase is interpreted to refer prophetically to the coming Messiah Jesus Christ and is translated as “son of man.” The 2011 NIV explains in a note: “The Aramaic phrase *bar enash* means *human being*. The phrase *son of man* is retained here because of its use in the New Testament as a title of Jesus, probably based largely on this verse.” However, when the phrase *ben adam* is used to refer to an indefinite person or to mankind in general, then the phrase is usually translated in a gender inclusive manner, such as “human being” (e.g., Num 23:19; Job 25:6; Ps 146:3), or “one” (e.g., Job 16:21), or “other people” (e.g., Job 35:8). The 1984 NIV usually translated this phrase as “son of man” (e.g., Num 23:19) or “man” (e.g., Job 16:21). In general, we can agree with how this phrase has been translated in the 2011 NIV.

Regarding “Christ” and “Messiah”

Some instances of the word “Christ” in the 1984 NIV have been changed to “Messiah” in the 2011 NIV. In its Translation Notes, the committee for the NIV offered the following rationale for this change: “Particularly in the Gospels and Acts... the word [Christ] seemed to retain its titular sense of the coming deliverer of the Jews rather than its more common New Testament usage, in which it seems to be virtually equivalent to a second name for Jesus.” In an explanatory email received by our committee from Douglas J. Moo, the chair of the NIV committee (CBT), this point is elucidated further: “Most scholars think that in certain contexts the NT authors are using the word with deliberate reference to the OT/Jewish predictions about a Messiah to come. In these contexts, CBT felt that the translation ‘Messiah’ more effectively conveyed this sense.” In practice, the word “Messiah” now occurs 74 times in 2011 NIV, compared to only two times in the 1984 edition. For examples of where the Greek *Christos* is now translated as “Messiah,” one may refer to Matt 1:1, 16:20, Mark 9:41, Luke 23:39, Acts 17:3 and Rev 11:15.

We find the rationale provided for this change to be questionable. While the desire to make a connection to the original terminology of the Hebrew Bible is commendable, this

change can be seen as inaccurately representing what was actually said and recorded by the authors of the Gospels and Acts. There is general agreement that the Jews of Jesus' time, consistent with the usage in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) did not commonly use the "foreign word" Messiah, but rather the corresponding Greek word (cf. NIDNTT 2:334). This point is clearly illustrated in John 1:41 and 4:25, where John translates a person's reference to "the Messiah" as "Christ" for the reader, presumably because the latter Greek term would be more understandable. In sum, we are not persuaded that this change in the 2011 NIV is necessary.

Regarding the "Jews" in John

Some occurrences of "Jews," especially in the gospel of John, have become "Jewish leaders" or something similar in the 2011 NIV. In its Translation Notes, the committee for the NIV offered the following rationale for this change: "Since Jesus' first followers were Jewish, the negative statements made about groups of Jews in the New Testament were clearly never intended to refer to every living Jew at that time but, at most, to those who rejected Jesus. In many contexts, especially in John, 'Jews' appears as a shorthand reference to the particular Jewish leaders who rejected what Jesus did and said, so the updated NIV spells this out in a number of places." One can refer to John 1:19, 5:10, 5:15, 18:14, as well as Acts 13:50 and 21:11 as instances of where the Greek term *Ioudaioi* has now been translated as "Jewish leaders." We regard this as an overly interpretive translation of the term *Ioudaioi*. While the context of individual verses will indicate if it is particularly the Jewish leaders or the Jews as a nation who are intended, the term itself does not carry the sense of leadership.

Regarding "Saints"

The word "saints" has been removed from the 2011 NIV, being substituted for "God's people," or "the Lord's people," or "the Lord's holy people." In the Translation Notes, the committee for the NIV offered the following rationale for this change: "People today think of a particularly good person when they hear the word 'saint,' whereas in the Bible it translates terminology that regularly refers to all believers." Consequently, there is no occurrence of the word "saints" in the 2011 NIV, compared to 68 occurrences in the 1984 edition. For examples of how the Hebrew *chasidim* or the Greek *hagioi* is now variously translated, one may refer to 1 Sam 2:9, 2 Chron 6:41, Ps 34:9, Dan 8:12, Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 16:15, 1 Tim 5:10, and Rev 19:8.

The CBT considers this to be a regrettable change. While it may be true that the understanding of the term is distorted today, it could just as well be argued that people have perpetually misunderstood this term—together with many other uniquely Biblical words. This is a reality which simply emphasizes the value of the ongoing teaching ministry of the church in explaining the unique vocabulary of Scripture. Furthermore, removing "saints" means that the notion of the believer's "holiness" as being derived from and based on God's holiness is obscured in some passages, such as when the original is translated as "the Lord's people." This obscuring does not take place in all instances, such as when the original terms are translated "the Lord's [or his] holy people." However, we note that in only 10 of the 68 occurrences has

this translation been adopted; in the other instances, the more generic terms have been chosen. Finally, we note that valuable confessional connections from Scripture to, for example, the Apostles' Creed ("I believe... the communion of saints") have been lost by eliminating "saints" from the 2011 NIV.

Regarding "Sinful Nature"

In the 2011 NIV, most occurrences of "sinful nature" have become "flesh." In its Translation Notes, the committee for the NIV offered the following rationale for this change: "Especially in Paul, *sarx* can mean either part or all of the human body or the human being under the power of sin. In an effort to capture this latter sense of the word, the original NIV often rendered *sarx* as 'sinful nature.' But this expression can mislead readers into thinking the human person is made up of various compartments, one of which is *sarx*, whereas the biblical writers' point is that humans can choose to yield themselves to a variety of influences or powers, one of which is the sin-producing *sarx*. The updated NIV uses 'flesh' as the translation in many places where it is important for readers to decide for themselves from the context whether one or both of these uses of *sarx* is present." Examples of this change may be seen in Rom 7:5, 8:3, and Gal 6:8, where the translation "sinful nature" (1984 NIV) has been changed to "flesh." In such instances, an explanatory footnote has been added in the updated NIV: "In contexts like this, the Greek word for *flesh* (*sarx*) refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power in opposition to the Spirit." However, we note that in two instances "sinful nature" has still been retained in the 2011 NIV (Rom 7:18 and 7:25).

As CBT, we are favourable toward this change. Because of its wide and nuanced range of meaning, *sarx* is impossible to be translated with one pre-determined English word or phrase.¹⁵ In this case it is a sound translation policy to leave the interpretive options open to the reader, as has been done in the 2011 NIV, through the choice of a less specific word (flesh), and through the inclusion of the aforementioned explanatory footnote in several instances.

5.2.2 *Positive Changes to Specific Texts*

Exodus 20:4

In the second commandment, "idol" has been changed to "image." The Hebrew *pesel* (derived from the verb *psl*, to carve) can refer to either an idol or an image. The translation of *pesel* as "image" is to be preferred in Ex 20:4 because the word "idol" is usually used in reference to the worship of a false god. The second commandment speaks of the worship of the true God in the wrong way, i.e., through the use of an image carved to represent him. The CBT is appreciative of this change in the 2011 NIV.¹⁶

Psalms 1:1

Where the 1984 NIV translated the verse's last phrase as "in the seat of mockers," the 2011 has rendered it "sit in the company of mockers." The Hebrew verb (in the verbal form translated by

the 2011 NIV, “in the company of”) can have the meaning “to associate with.” The 2011 NIV thus offers a better translation since it is not only literal but communicates more clearly.

Psalm 1:6

The 1984 NIV stated “the way of the wicked will perish.” We wonder if this accurately represents what David says, if it is the way (Hebrew *derek*) that perishes or the sinner who perishes. By rendering it “the way of the wicked leads to destruction,” the 2011 NIV gives a clearer translation.

Psalm 22:31

The 2011 NIV translates the Psalm’s final phrase “he has done it!” instead of “for he has done it” in the 1984. We note the Hebrew word *ki* can be used to introduce direct speech, and the translators have opted for this reading. While the sense is basically the same as in the 1984 NIV, this new translation is more lively and to be preferred.

Psalm 51:19

The 2011 NIV has rendered this verse, “Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole,” instead of the 1984: “Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you.” This is a clarifying improvement.

Mark 9:42

This passage uses the Greek words *skandalizo/skandalizon*. The 1984 NIV translated these words “to sin,” while the 2011 NIV has rendered them as “to stumble.” The latter more carefully represents the original and also nicely brings us closer to the English translation tradition of rendering these words as “stumbling blocks.”

Romans 1:9

The 2011 NIV translation of *pneumati* with “spirit” is a good improvement over the 1984 which translated *pneumati* with “heart.”

Romans 2:4

The 2011 NIV translation of *anoches* with “forbearance.” This word captures this attribute of God better than the 1984’s choice of “tolerance” which is a term that has become laden with un-Scriptural associations in recent decades.

Romans 2:17

The 2011 NIV translation of *kauchasai* with “boast” is an improvement over the 1984’s translation “brag” since “brag” is a more pejorative term than “boast”; this pejorative element does not fit well in the context. See also Rom 5:2 where the 1984 translates this term with “rejoice,” when “boast” would be a better translation (as in the 2011 NIV).

Romans 2:20

In this context, the 2011 NIV provides a good translation of *naijon* as “little children.” The 1984 NIV translated this term with “infants” which is problematic in the context because this term is used in connection with “teacher;” it makes more sense to speak about a “teacher of small children” than about a “teacher of infants.”

Romans 6:5

The 2011 NIV provides a more accurate translation of the first clause. The 1984 translation of *to homoiomati* with “like this” does not do proper justice to the term *homoiomati* which means “likeness” (cf. BDAG). Literally the first clause could be translated “for if we have been united in the likeness of his death.” Both NIV translations supply “with him” after “united,” presumably from the beginning of verse 4. Schreiner argues that this is not necessary and that “*homoiomati* naturally follows *sumphutoi* as an associative dative.”¹⁷ It seems as though the 1984 translation identifies the whole phrase *to homoiomati tou thanatou autou* to refer back to the “baptism” of verse 4 but it is generally recognized that the Greek does not support this view.¹⁸ The 2011 NIV correctly interprets this phrase as referring “to the death of Christ and our participation in it.”¹⁹

Romans 8:19

The 2011 NIV translates *gar* with “for” while the 1984 NIV omits translating *gar*. The 2011 version is an improvement here and helps in understanding the flow of thought in the text.

1 Timothy 1:10

The 1984 NIV translated the Greek *arsenokoitais* as “perverts,” and the 2011 NIV has rendered it “those practicing homosexuality.” The 2011 is an improvement for clearly showing that Paul here warns against homosexuality.

Titus 1:7

The 1984 NIV says that the overseer “is entrusted with God’s work.” The 2011 now renders this, “Since an overseer manages God’s household.” This is an improved translation of *oikonomos*. The sense of management or stewardship intrinsic to that word is now communicated.

5.2.3 Negative Changes to Specific Texts

Exodus 32:8

The 2011 NIV continues in the line of the 1984 NIV by translating *elohekah* in the plural as “your gods.” It is legitimate to translate *elohekah* this way (compare the Septuagint translation), but the context suggests that Aaron was thinking of the LORD. In verse 5, Aaron declares that the following day will be a festival dedicated to the LORD. Thus, although the people may have been thinking of “gods” in verse 1, Aaron’s sin is against the second commandment, not the first.

Psalm 1:1

A literal translation of the Psalm's first phrase (as in the 1984 NIV) reads: "who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked." By translating it "who does not walk in step with the wicked," the 2011 NIV removes the idea that evil conduct results from taking counsel with the wicked, but it results from simply following along with wicked people. Hence the word *ba'etzah* usually translated "in counsel" (a standard lexical meaning) is rendered as "in step with." We do not deem this to be a responsible rendering.

Psalm 22:15

The first phrase of the verse is rendered as "my mouth" in the 2011 NIV, instead of "my strength" as in the 1984. A footnote now reads, "Probable reading of the original Hebrew text; Masoretic Text *strength*". The change from "my strength" (*kochi*) to "my mouth" (*chikki*) is a possible conjecture, but it is not persuasive without any textual support. We consider the 1984 NIV to be preferable because it follows the Masoretic Text more closely.

Psalm 22:17

The 1984 NIV translation of this verse is fairly literal: "I can count all my bones," while the 2011 NIV ("all my bones are on display") is unnecessarily dynamic. The Hebrew verb means "to count, register, write." The literal translation presents a graphic image of a man who can count the bones on his emaciated body, and is a translation we judge to be understandable without the change adopted in the 2011 NIV.

Psalm 51:17

The 2011 NIV translation "my sacrifice O God" departs from the pointing of the Masoretic Text, as reflected in the 1984 NIV, "The sacrifices of God." Possible support for this change can be found in the Septuagint which has the word "sacrifice" (singular) but not the pronoun "my." However, this is not sufficient grounds to depart from the Masoretic Text. A footnote is added in the 2011 NIV, "Or *the sacrifices of God are*", but unlike for Ps 22:15 it does not state that this is what the Masoretic Text actually has.

Mark 5:7

In the 1984 NIV, the relevant part of this verse is rendered, "Swear to God that you won't torture me." The 2011 NIV reads, "In God's Name don't torture me." In the Greek we find an oath formula which is obscured by the more colloquial translation in the 2011.

Mark 15:27

In this verse we read of the two men crucified along with our Lord Jesus. The 1984 NIV says that these men were "robbers." This is the traditional translation (see e.g., Vulgate, KJV, NASB, RSV, ESV). However, the 2011 NIV has now changed these men into "rebels." Lexically this is possible. Further, it is true that there was some overlap between robbers and rebels in the New Testament era. Yet the NIV Translation Notes state that we know for certain that *lestes* means

“rebel.” In our judgment this is overstating the case. There should at least be a footnote alerting readers to the other possible translation of this word.

Romans 1:3

The 2011 NIV translates *kata sarka* with “as to his earthly life.” The 1984 version had translated this phrase with “as to his human nature.” The ESV translates it the most literally with “according to the flesh.” The 2011 translation creates the impression that Christ was a descendent of David only while he was living on earth. We find the possibility of this impression to be problematic as it would obscure the meaning of *kata sarka*. It seems best to translate *kata sarka* with “as to his human nature.” The post-resurrection reality of *kata pneuma ayiosunes* (verse 4) does not need to be seen as a strict contrast with *kata sarka* such that *kata sarka* can only apply in the pre-resurrection time period.

Romans 3:22

The 2011 NIV adds the words “between Jew and Gentile.” Although this interpretation may be defensible, the translation is inaccurate since these words are not present nor is there any immediate justification in the context for these categories of Jew and Gentile. The 1984 NIV does not include these words and translates it as “there is no difference,” as in the Greek.

Romans 6:19

The 2011 NIV translates *anthropinos* with “an example from everyday life.” This translation is unnecessarily cumbersome. We consider the 1984 translation “in human terms” to be better.

Romans 7:23

The 2011 NIV translation of *tois melesin mou* with “me” is unnecessarily cryptic. The 1984 translation of “members of my body” is more accurate and retains the imagery of the Greek.

Romans 7:24

The 2011 NIV translates the phrase *tou somatos tou thanatou toutou* with “this body that is subject to death.” This translation lacks the forcefulness and directness of the original which the 1984 translation captures well (“this body of death”). We note that the translation “subject to death” does not convey the sense of great frustration that has been building up as Paul describes his struggle against sin in chapter 7.

Titus 1:13

Our concern here regards the Greek word *marturia*. In the New Testament this word often has a legal flavour; it speaks of the act of witnessing in a courtroom setting. It is regrettable that this is lost with the NIV 2011 rendering, “This saying is true.” The 1984 NIV was better with its translation, “This testimony is true.”

6. Conclusions on the 2011 NIV

We now turn to our conclusions on the suitability of the 2011 NIV for use in the churches. In evaluating the 2011 NIV, the CBT faced the difficult task of weighing the multitude of changes that were made to the familiar text of the 1984 NIV. As we have noted with the above examples, some of these changes are positive for how they better capture the intent of a given passage and also clearly communicate it to a 21st century audience. Other changes in the 2011 NIV we found to be regrettable, though in the final analysis some of them could be considered tolerable. We recognize that there is no perfect translation of Scripture, and that every version has its own particular strengths and weaknesses.

However, though we found much of the 2011 NIV to be acceptable—also in that the 1984 text was left unchanged in many instances—our scales of judgment were tipped in the opposite direction particularly by those passages that concern the special offices in the church. Numerically speaking these passages are few, yet we recognize that they have a weighty effect on the life of the church in practical terms. Indeed, it may be fully expected that the attention would fall on such passages in a translation that seeks to be more comprehensively gender-inclusive than some previous versions. That the committee for the NIV was well aware that scrutiny would be given especially to such passages is clear from the section of their Translation Notes entitled “What Happened to Some of the Most Famous Texts on Gender Roles?” In the foregoing, we have interacted with some of the texts that are highlighted in this section (e.g., Rom 16:1-2, 1 Tim 2:12, 1 Tim 3:11).

Though it was noted that we could accept the rendering of 1 Tim 3:11, the 2011 NIV translation of Rom 16:1-2 and 1 Tim 2:12, as well as the translation of Phil 1:14, 2 Tim 2:2 and James 3:1 were deemed to be problematic. These passages are now either unnecessarily ambiguous or they are misleading in their presentation of who may participate in the special offices of the church. The CBT is concerned that if this new translation was approved for use in the churches, in time there could result among the membership a detrimental confusion in the view of the offices. It can be granted that the matter of gender roles in the church has been, and will continue to be, a point of discussion and even contention in our federation. In our judgment this makes it all the more important that we use a Bible translation that clearly expresses the will of God on this matter. The 2011 NIV is simply not accurate enough on this point, and for this reason we cannot recommend it to the churches.

As CBT we believe that it is not helpful to change regularly the recommended translation of Scripture for use in the churches. We are thankful for how well the 1984 NIV has been received in many of the congregations and would certainly have preferred to see its use continued for another generation or more. But the reality of the 1984 text’s commercial unavailability has forced us into our present situation of either having to recommend this new translation, or to reiterate a previous CBT recommendation. Unable to do the former, we are grateful that there are three alternatives. In the NASB, NKJV, and ESV, all previously approved

by General Synods, the churches have trustworthy—and also readily available—translations for use. In the words of Synod 2007, it was decided “to leave it in the freedom of the churches should they feel compelled to use other translations that have received favourable reviews in the reports of the CBT, namely, the NKJV, the NASB or the ESV.”²⁰

As noted at the beginning of this report, it is part of the CBT’s current mandate “to investigate further whether the ESV or the NKJV or the NASB could become the recommended translation for the churches.” To repeat, each of these translations has already been approved. Without having evaluated them more than the CBT has done previously, we cannot make a more specific recommendation to those churches (and schools and families and individuals) who are perhaps now contemplating making a change in their adopted Bible translation. However, we would note for consideration the wide-spread acceptance of the ESV and the NKJV in our English-speaking sister churches. The final CBT report will address such matters further, the Lord willing. In the meantime, it is our prayer that with this interim report the churches will be well served with some guidance in the matter of Bible translation.

In Christ’s service,
The Committee for Bible Translation

¹ For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the NIV Committee’s Translation Notes state that the 2011 NIV “builds on both the original NIV and the TNIV” (p. 2). The TNIV was a previous revision of the 1984 NIV, released in 2005 but poorly received by many Christian churches for being too “gender-inclusive” in its approach to translation.

² Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 14 and 60.

³ Strauss, *Distorting Scripture*, p. 17.

⁴ See excursus in Strauss, *Distorting Scripture*, p. 140-6.

⁵ Strauss, *Distorting Scripture*, p. 145.

⁶ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Bible Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 97.

⁷ *Acts Synod Lincoln 1992*, p. 251.

⁸ *Acts 1992*, p. 251.

⁹ Strauss, *Distorting Scripture*, p. 203.

¹⁰ See Vern S. Poythress, "Gender Neutral Issues in the New International Version of 2011," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011), p. 91-5. He observes the difficulty of gaining a true statistical picture of how many pronouns in such a database are truly intended as generic in reference.

¹¹ Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3d ed., rev. and tr. Frederick William Danker; Chicago: University Press, 2000).

¹² *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vols. 1-4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

¹³ G.W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 157.

¹⁴ Knight, *Epistles*, p. 171.

¹⁵ It may be observed that the CanRC CBT's *Report to General Synod 1995* addressed the translation of *sarx* in the NIV (1984), comparing it to the NKJV (see p. 149-52). With respect to 1 Cor 5:5, the committee preferred the NIV's translation "the sinful nature" (instead of "the flesh") and with respect to 1 Timothy 3:16, the committee preferred the NKJV's translation "in the flesh" (instead of "in a body"). In the 2011 NIV, *sarx* in both of these passages is now translated as "flesh." This is illustrative of the difficulty in translating *sarx* consistently.

¹⁶ We note that this was a recommendation that the CanRC Committee for Bible Translation previously made to the NIV committee; see *Report to General Synod 1998*, appendix 9, section a, "We feel that there is an epistemological error in the NIV's decision to translate the Hebrew word *pesel* as *idol*. [...] We recommend the translation of *pesel* in Exodus 20:4 (and in parallel passages) as 'image'."

¹⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 314-5.

¹⁸ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1975), p. 307-8

¹⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 314.

²⁰ *Acts Synod Smithers 2007*, Article 134, Recommendation 4.1.