

How Bible translations distort God's Word regarding gender

By [Philip B. Payne](#), Contributor | Friday, July 07, 2023

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Over the years, I've talked with countless God-loving, Bible-reading Evangelicals who believe that God requires gender hierarchy: that men should lead and women should submit in the church and home.

Growing up, I, too, believed this. Some Christians carry this even further, claiming that only men should take on leadership roles in business, government or parachurch organizations. Why is this?

Many faithful Christians read their English Bibles and see what John Piper at the Desiring God 2012 Conference called "Christianity with a masculine feel," namely "godly male leadership."

But in trying to defend this position, I discovered that this "masculine feel" is the direct result of misleading translations. In a number of passages dealing with men and women, Bible

translations like the ESV and NASB twist the meaning of God's inspired Word by adding words, changing the meanings of words, changing sentence structure, and concealing crucial evidence for a message of gender equality that runs throughout the Bible. Scripture accurately describes male-dominant cultures, but it doesn't prescribe them.

Let's look at a few examples from the Apostle Paul.

Phoebe, "who is deacon of the church of Cenchreae" in [Romans 16:1–2](#), is demoted to "a servant" or "helper" of the church of Cenchreae in several translations, including the CSB, ESV, HCSB, KJV, MOUNCE and NASB. The Greek word here is *diakonos*, a position of church leadership and the same word used for "deacons" in [Philippians 1:1](#) and in [1 Timothy 3:8](#) and [12](#) (regarding women deacons). Local churches then didn't have "servants."

C.E.B. Cranfield (*Romans*, volume 2, page 781) argues that the language of [Romans 16:1](#) makes it "very much more natural ... to understand it [diacon] as referring to a definite office." Everything Paul writes about Phoebe fits a respected church leader. "I commend to you Phoebe" implies that Paul entrusted Phoebe to deliver this, his most comprehensive epistle. "Help her in whatever matter she has need" emphasizes her importance.

Still not convinced that Paul regarded Phoebe as a church leader? He also called her "a *prostatis*." *Prostatis* comes from the verb *proistēmi*, "to exercise a position of leadership." It combines the Greek words for "in rank before" and "standing" and so emphasizes the respect she should be given. This is the feminine form of the word for the "president" of a society, including synagogues.

There are many words in the New Testament that combine these two expressions, "in rank before" and "standing." And the only meanings that those words ever have that fit [Romans 16:2](#) convey leadership. Paul acknowledges Phoebe as "a *prostatis* of many, including myself also" ([Romans 16:2](#)). This implies that Paul submitted to her leadership, presumably when he was in her church in Cenchreae.

Remember, Paul commands all believers to submit to one another in [Ephesians 5:21](#). Paul affirms Phoebe to encourage those hearing or reading the letter to trust her as his representative. Yet, many Bible translations have effectively demoted Phoebe, because the translators assumed that a woman couldn't have actually held such an important leadership role.

Other translations of *prostatis* do not fit [Romans 16:2](#). The NIV's "benefactor" is a doubtful translation because the New Testament uses a different word for "benefactor," *euergetēs*, meaning "one who does good." Secular usage indicates that benefactors preferred the designation *euergetēs* because it highlights generosity rather than power. The ESV's translation, "patron," since *prostatis* can convey *patrona*, an alien's legal representative, does not fit because Paul was a Roman citizen ([Acts 22:28](#); see C.K. Barrett's commentary on Romans).

Some translations have concealed Phoebe's church leadership, but Junia gets maligned even worse. Eldon Epp's *Junia* documents the unanimous credible testimony of the church's first millennium: Junia (a common woman's name) was a woman and an outstanding apostle. But,

against all good evidence, translations like the NASB 1995 give her a sex change by renaming her Junias in [Romans 16:7](#)!

Translations like the ESV, HCSB, MOUNCE and NASB change “outstanding among the apostles” to “noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles,” even though Greek had an idiom for “in the eyes of.” Those added words are not in the inspired text — they were added because the translators thought that the text couldn’t mean what it says.

And Paul named more women leaders besides Deacon Phoebe and Apostle Junia. In [Romans 16](#), seven of the 10 ministry partners whom Paul named were women. After naming Phoebe, Junia, Prisca, Tryphena and Tryphosa as his co-workers in the Gospel, he praised Mary and Persis, “who worked very hard in the Lord” (cf. [1 Corinthians 16:16](#) and [1 Thessalonians 5:12–13](#)).

Paul’s affirmation by name of such a high proportion of women leaders is unparalleled in the entire history of ancient Greek literature. This demonstrates a level of female leadership in the early Church that was truly exceptional for that culture.

Another poorly translated and often misunderstood passage is Paul’s “head covering” passage, [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#). Verse 10 states, “For this reason a woman ought to have authority over her own head.” Although “authority” nowhere else means “symbol of authority,” some versions of [1 Corinthians 11:10](#) add the words “symbol of” or “sign of” (ASV, AMP, CSV, ESV, HSCB, TLB, MOUNCE, NASB, NET, TLV), taking away from women what Scripture states “woman ought to have”: authority over her own head!

It gets worse in verse 16. Here, the Greek reads, “We have no such custom.” Some versions translate this verse to mean the exact opposite — “we have no other custom” (HCSB, NASB 1995, NET). The apparent reason for this is that they assume that the veiling of women was a universal church custom symbolizing woman’s subordination to man, and that therefore the text can’t mean what it actually says. My book *Man and Woman, One in Christ* documents 17 statements in [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#) that conflict with that assumption (pages 105–215).

Some translators also force their male pronouns onto passages about overseers and elders. The ASV, AMP, Phillips and NASB translate the gender-inclusive “whoever” (*ei tis*) in [1 Timothy 3:1](#) and [Titus 1:6](#) as the gender-exclusive “any man ... he ...”

Those translations also add a dozen or more “he,” “him” or “his” pronouns into the passages even though there is not a single “he,” “him” or “his” in any of the qualifications for overseer, deacon or elder in either passage. Throughout the New Testament, *ei tis* includes women unless it is specifically restricted to men.

John Piper’s 2012 assertion, “The apostles tell the churches that all the overseers ... should be men” depends on Bible translations that add a “masculine feel” that is not in Scripture as God revealed it.

Translations like the CSB, ESV, GNT, HCSB, PHILLIPS, KJV, TLB, MOUNCE, NET and NLT also subvert female church leadership by translating a passage clearly about women deacons, [1 Timothy 3:11](#), as though it refers to “wives of deacons.”

But it would be strange to require women holding no office to meet practically identical qualifications as those listed for deacons (and listed in the same order) in 3:8. The qualifications for women deacons in verse 11 are surrounded by other qualifications for deacons. So, if this is a reference to the wives of deacons, it is out of place.

At a minimum, an addition of “their” or “the” is needed to express “their wives,” but neither is here. Anyway, why would Paul include qualifications for the wives of deacons but not for the wives of overseers, who have direct oversight? The only obvious explanation is that Paul is describing the qualification for women deacons.

These examples are just a taste of how certain Bible translations distort God’s Word, concealing the message of gender equality throughout the Bible. No wonder so many Evangelicals believe that the Bible teaches gender hierarchy!

So how can this change? Much of the responsibility lies with chairmen of translation revision committees. For example, for the ESV revision, I presented evidence to its committee chairman that the word translated “have authority” regarding women in [1 Timothy 2:12](#) actually means “seize authority.” However, he refused to let his committee see my study. His censorship prevented correction of a misleading translation.

Yet there is hope. When I presented the same evidence to the NIV revision committee chairman, Doug Moo, who supports gender hierarchy, he gave his committee the same evidence. The NIV committee appropriately adopted “assume authority.” Hopefully, one passage at a time, translators will better reflect the gender equality in God’s Word.

Philip B. Payne (Ph.D. The University of Cambridge) has taught New Testament in colleges of the University of Cambridge and has been a Visiting Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Bethel Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary. He is well known for seminal articles on the parables of Jesus, women in the teachings of Paul, textual criticism, and Codex Vaticanus. His books include *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters*, *Why Can’t Women Do That? Breaking Down the Reasons Churches Put Men in Charge*, and (forthcoming April 4, 2023) *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God’s Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality*. He founded Linguist’s Software, which provides fonts and input systems for over 2600 languages, including the fonts used to publish the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* 28th edition, the UBS *The Greek New Testament*, and *HALOT (The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament)*. He and his wife Nancy were missionaries in Japan. Their three children and six grandchildren all love the Lord.