



ἄνθρωπος • anthropos • man / person

Colossians 1:24-29

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In these first couple months of 2020, we are going back in time to study some of the ancient words of the Hebrew and Greek text. The original manuscripts of the Bible were written in these ancient languages, and through centuries of interpretive translations, we have lost some of the intent of the original words. I know that there are many faithful Christians who believe that Biblical text is simply black and white, and that all you need to do is read the text to know exactly what God intended the Bible to say. This idealistic understanding is hopeful, and yet, it fails to answer a number of questions regarding the “black and whiteness” of the Bible. For example, which translation of the Bible is the authentic “black and white” version we should be reading? There are over 450 English translations in print today, and another couple thousand non-English translations. Each of these translations, in their faithful attempt to capture the Biblical text, made translating decisions that vary – which one is “right”?

When considering these varying translations, I know many people wonder why Biblical translations differ so much from one another? Are they all based on the same original manuscripts? Why do the King James and the Common English versions have so many inconsistencies in wording? Why do the Revised Standard Version and the New International Version use different words when interpreting the same verses?

There are a number of reasons why the texts vary – both within the English language, and across multiple-language translations. One major reason why translations differ is advancements in linguistic theory. ... Have you ever talked with a parent about the changes they made in parenting from child one to child two ... to child three? I’m always fascinated in sharing stories with other parents about how, over time, parents adapt their parenting style. From child one, who is often micro-controlled to ensure they never receive a bump or bruise ... to child three, who is often spoiled with freedoms, luxuries, and a relaxed reign of the house their older siblings never enjoyed ... parents often, even unintentionally, alter their parenting style as they become more informed as parents. (Perhaps that’s just how it was in my house, with my little sister getting the freedoms associated with being daddy’s little girl. Or perhaps that’s just my view of the family dynamics as the middle child.)

Advancements in linguistic theory have offered a similar growth in understanding language. We’ve learned through advanced engagement with the ancient texts some of the more nuanced meanings of the ancient Hebrew and Greek. With experience and engagement, our knowledge of the Biblical Word has become more informed.

The nuances of language in general have also made a significant impact on how we interpret the Biblical text. Every language has nuances that are unique to that language. Even within a

language, there are unique nuances that vary by accent or dialect. For example, being from Atlanta, home of Coca-cola, when I go to a restaurant and order a Coke, I expect to get a Coke. I don't want a Pepsi, or any other dark-colored soda. If you don't have Coke, bring me a sweet tea. Yet, for a large portion of American-English speakers, when they order a coke, they're happy to receive any non-descript dark-colored soda. While it doesn't make sense to me, we're speaking the same language, using the same words, and yet, we still have very different intentions when using those words.

Nuances in language also vary by time. At the end of 2019, Merriam-Webster announced their *Word of the Year*. This has been a practice of the dictionary publisher for many years now, where they highlight a word that stands out as having significant use over the past year. The *Word of the Year* for 2019 is the singular use of the pronoun *they*. "They" has long been used as a pronoun to describe gender-neutral groups – for example, "they" can take the place of words such as "everyone." (That group – *they* are coming to my party.) The word "they" has also long been used to describe a singular person whose gender is either unknown, or inconsequential, like in place of the word "someone." (Is someone coming to the house today? Yes, *they* are.) In recent years, we have seen the rise of the word "they" as a pronoun for someone whose gender identity is nonbinary – someone who identifies neither as singularly male nor female, and thus chooses not to use masculine or feminine pronouns such as "she," "her," "him," or "his." I'm not here to debate whether such a change should be, but instead to name that such a change is. ... When changes in a language happen, it effects how we understand translations of ancient texts that were translated prior to more recent changes in the language itself.

When we consider the nuances of language over any length of time, or even within a language at any time, we are faced with the reality that, "it is *impossible* to capture all of the nuances of meaning. Translators must constantly make hard decisions and compromises. The questions in each case are, *What nuances are present? Which should be retained and how do we retain them? Which must be sacrificed because of the inexactitude of the language?*"ⁱ Dr. Mark Strauss, a professor of New Testament and Bible Translation, says that when translations are happening, the editing agency must decide if they want to stick with a "formal" translation, or it's "functional equivalent."

To aid in understanding the difference between "formal" and "functional" translations, Dr. Strauss lifts up Matthew 9:10. He offers different English translations of this text to highlight how and why translations vary. For example, the New American Standard Bible translates this text, "as He was reclining at the table in the house." This is a fairly formal translation, adding very little to the text to assist the reader to understand its functional purpose. Adding a bit of nuanced support, the Today's English Version translates the text, "While Jesus was having a meal in Matthew's house." Here, the editors tell us who "he" is, tell us about the house, and tell us that Jesus was eating a meal, not just reclining at a table. The New Living Translation adds even a bit more to the text, writing, "That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests." This is a bit far from a formal – or direct – translation, but it does help us in 2020 understand what might have been more obvious to first-century readers. The New Living Translation adds a bit of a contextual framing to the event that might be lost if just reading, "as He was reclining at the table in the house."

Given editorial changes for formal and functional purposes, the reality is, no Biblical translation is perfect. When we read *any* translation as perfect, we are likely to fail to understand the intent of the text as first published in its Greek or Hebrew form. As soon as we translate to English, we have lost some meaning from the original ancient Greek or Hebrew, because the ancient language has specific and nuanced differences from English. To this regard, reading a variety of translations is always more helpful than reading any one version, because it allows us to examine the text in greater detail through the lens of different interpretations that use both formal and functional purposes.

For as challenging as translating the Bible is, when we take any one translation as “perfect” or “final,” we are likely to cling to certain words and phrases that do not accurately reflect the intent of the Biblical text. Some words that have been read as “inerrant” or “infallible” have proven to be more detrimental to God’s will for humanity than others. Today, we’re dealing with one of these challenging and restrictive words.

Today’s word *anthropos* comes from the ancient Greek. It is used 550 times in the New Testament text. It is used in many different ways – to refer to a known individual and to an unknown individual, to a known group and to an unknown group of people. It is translated in just as many ways, including “man,” “person,” and “humanity,” all depending on which translation you want to read. I want to use our scripture this morning in Colossians 1 to highlight the different uses of the word, to consider why the formal and functional translations matter, and to consider why, at times, we must claim a more functional reading of the Bible for a more faithful understanding of God’s love.

In this passage, Paul is writing to the church of Colossae, a city located in modern day Turkey. While we do not have much knowledge of their complaints, Paul’s response seems to be written in defense of his apostolic leadership, even as he is sitting in a jail cell. His defensiveness seems to come from a place of agitation, as if his imprisonment was being used as a sign of his unfaithfulness. He begins by offering, “I am rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” In other words, don’t think that my imprisonment is anything of a detriment, it is something I have taken on to lift up and to aid in the church’s redemption. He continues, “I became [the church’s] servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.” Paul is where he is as a benefit for the church, and the reason he is there is because that is where God has called him to be.

In verses 26 and 27, Paul explains this further, “I was sent to make this mystery of God known, a mystery that was for generations hidden, but has now been made known by the saints. God wanted to make the glorious riches of this mystery known to the Gentiles, that is, Christ living in you, who is the hope of glory.” The Colossians are a church full of Gentiles – people who were not of Jewish lineage. Paul is saying that there is this truth of God that is steeped in the Jewish tradition that the Gentiles did not know before. Yet now, after all these years of keeping this information from the Gentiles, God is making that truth known, even to the Gentiles. And the

riches of that mystery – the glory of that information that had been withheld from you – is that Jesus Christ is living in you, and that Jesus Christ living in you is the hope of glory.

And then we get to verse 28, and in this text, we find the word *anthropos* three times. In the Revised Standard Version, the text reads, “[Christ] we proclaim, warning every *man* and teaching every *man* in all wisdom, that we may present every *man* mature in Christ.” In the New Revised Standard Version, which you’ll find in the pew Bible, it reads, “It is [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* in all wisdom, so that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ.”

To some people this slight edit seems insignificant. All we’ve done is changed the phrase “every man” to the phrase “everyone.” But, when we look at the reality of the church over the course of its history, this slight edit is shown to be a significant and necessary change. There are many clergy and laity through the history of the church who have read the English translation of “every man” to speak specifically of and only about men – those who identify as male. Consider what Paul is saying: “We proclaim Christ, and we are warning every *anthropos* and teaching every *anthropos* in all wisdom, so that we may present every *anthropos* mature in Christ.” If we choose to believe that Paul is referring just to men – to the males in the community – then only the males will be understood to be right and faithful. Only the males in the community will be offered proper education about Christ. Only males will be understood to be capable of being “mature in Christ.” It is this reading of the text that has historically led some Christian schools to allow only male students. It is this reading of the text that still leads some Christian denominations to only allow male pastors in their churches. If only men can be educated in all wisdom, and be presented as mature in Christ, then clearly, we only want men to be teaching and leading our churches.

And these are just three uses of the word *anthropos* in the New Testament – there are 550 total uses. Consider Romans 3:28, which is often taken out of context to praise men over women in the church. The text reads, “Therefore, we conclude that *anthropos* is justified by faith without the works of the law.” Is Paul saying to the church in Rome that only males can be justified by faith? If you read the word *anthropos* to mean men, and only men, then yes.

I know what you might be thinking, “Pastor Thomas, it doesn’t sound like you think the word only means men.” No, no I don’t.

First off, the Greek language is a lot like Spanish. Nouns are either masculine or feminine, but in either form, they can refer to both men and women. “Grammatical gender is different than natural and biological gender.”ⁱⁱ The word *anthropos* is a masculine noun. Even if you are referring to a group of 1 million women without a man in the group, the word would appear as masculine in the text because its grammatical form is masculine. It doesn’t help us know *who* is in the group.

I’ve said this many times in this worship series over the past month, but it bears repeating, for us to know the intent of the word, *context matters*. When the Biblical text is referring to a specific man, or only to men, the use of the English “man” or “men” is absolutely warranted.

However, if the text is not referring to a specific man, or a specific and limited group of men, we have to find a more inclusive word to define the person or group. The context of the greater Biblical story has to aid us in making this determination. Had the simple use of the word “men” or “man” not been used to silence and exclude women in the church’s history, perhaps this wouldn’t be necessary. So what’s the greater context?

It is clear that God empowers and calls women to faithfulness and leadership. We see examples of this in the Old Testament, from Moses’s mother who ensured her son would not be killed by the Egyptians, to Pharaoh’s daughter who defied the Pharaoh and raised Moses as her own child, to Esther who served as royalty over one of the greatest empires in ancient-near east history, to Hannah who prayed with fervent faith and became the mother of Samuel. We see examples of women praised for their faithfulness in the New Testament. From the obvious and well known: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, the first to proclaim the resurrection of Christ; to the often overlooked: the Canaanite woman whom Jesus declared, “You have great faith!”, to Lydia who was a household leader in the early church, to Phoebe who was a deacon in the church.

If there were no examples in the Bible of women called to faithfulness, or given positions of leadership, or witnessed as teachers of God’s word, then perhaps we would be justified in reading *anthropos* as giving unique privilege to men. But in the witness of God throughout the Biblical text, we find time, after time, after time, after time that women are called, empowered, gifted, and exemplified their calling by God as leaders, prophets, teachers, and faithful disciples. Because the greater witness of the Biblical text declares an affirmation of women, our translation of the Biblical text should too. In Colossians 1, Paul is not saying that “only men” are to be educated in wisdom and found mature in Christ, but that everyone – every person – is called to such discipleship. Romans is not saying that just men are justified by their faith – Paul is saying that everyone – every person – every man and woman – is justified by their faith without the works of the law.

The Biblical text has at times been exploited to reflect less than the fullness of God’s love as transcribed in the ancient Hebrew and Greek. It has, at times, been used to silence people, to abuse people, to exclude people, and to maintain power for a privileged few. This was not the intent of the Biblical text. This was not the hope of the God of grace and love. This was not the witness of God’s will as exemplified in the life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. God calls each of us, and all of us ... God gifts each person, and every person ... God empowers each one, and everyone ... that together, as one body, as one community, as one witness we might proclaim God’s glory. To those who have ever been told otherwise, do not be fooled by failed translations: you are gifted; you are called; you are loved by the Creator who brought you into being. May we each – every *anthropos* ... every sibling of the body – receive God’s love and respond to God’s great glory. In the name of Christ, may we receive this good news. Amen.

ⁱ Mark L. Strauss. *The Challenge of Bible Translations: Communicating God’s Word to the World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Strauss.