

A question about 'women in church leadership' and the various translations of the Bible

Dear Mako,

In many of your explanations of passages, especially controversial passages from which you derive significance contrary to many other, more traditional and patriarchal understandings of the texts, you revert back to the original words and phrasings. Often, in the course of these detours, you actually reword the passage. [The] question [asked], then, was this: If these other wordings and phrasings are actually more accurate to the original meaning of the passages, then why have they not been incorporated into modern translations of the Bible? Why have these translations not been popularized and replaced the more confusing and misleading translations that most of us Americans read?

Dear *****,

That's a very, very good question. At the beginning of most printed Bibles is an explanation from the translators, and what traditions they are from. In it, they explain the principles of translation in general. They will usually say that there is the basic tension inherent in any work of translation: do you stick close to the original language even when it seems a little wooden and archaic, even when there are idiomatic expressions in Hebrew and Greek? And/or do you take idiomatic expressions in current English and use them in the translation itself?

But the reality is that Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox translators, who are on translation committees as much as Protestants, are not likely to translate passages like 1 Timothy 2 - 3 in the way Protestants like me (and the scholars I've drawn upon) because of their church leadership commitments. From a Protestant perspective, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox concepts of *an elevated priesthood*, which is male, as opposed to simply ministers or pastors or elders, is a prior commitment that negatively affects their ability to translate Scripture.

So for example, when we encounter Paul's phrase "adoption as sons" in Ephesians 1:4 or Romans 8:15 or Romans 9:4 (and Exodus 4:22 behind that), what do we do as translators? (Step 1) Translators first need to understand the original historical-cultural context. Moses and, much later, Paul, both draw from ancient practices where adult men (not women and not children) were adopted by an older man who wanted to bestow his inheritance on a younger male heir. (Step 2) Then translators need to examine the linguistic use of words and phrases. Hence, we know that "adoption as sons" is an idiomatic expression that needs to be understood as a phrase, because adoption of women and adoption of children really didn't happen. (Step 3) Then the translators need to consider the new theological context that this phrase is being used in. Paul takes this idiomatic phrase "adoption as sons" and brings it into a Christian theological context, where men, women, and children who believe in Christ becomes heirs of God, who wants to bestow on us the inheritance He has prepared. In the application of this language, there is no question that women and children are included, as if they were "sons", taking the cultural idiom as only a reference point for the theological truth that it is being made to reference. (Step 4) Then the translators need to translate this into English. But the translational issue there is whether we take an idiom "adoption as sons" and translate it phrase-for-phrase as "adoption as children" or word-for-word as "adoption as sons." If we go phrase-for-phrase, do we remove the patrilineal cultural context from which this phrase comes to make it gender and age universal? By modernizing the phrase, we take away the question of whether this applies to women and children. But we also blunt the significance of the inheritance that was connoted by the idiomatic phrase "adoption as sons". Good historical-cultural commentaries will help us piece together what Paul originally meant, which is arguably what we should be doing anyway. Many Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants have agreed that there is a legitimate place for gender-neutral translations like "adoption as children". The NRSV is a good Bible translation of that sort, with endorsements all around.

But when it comes to the passage 1 Timothy 2 - 3, the same basic issues occur, but in ways that directly affect the idea of male priesthood and leadership. Is "teach and/or exercise" is a literary hendyadis expressing one concept, or two different concepts grouped together? Should we translate the unusual word *autentein* ("authority") with a negative tinge or not, because *exousia* is the standard biblical word for "authority"? Does the use of male pronouns and examples in Christian leadership support or deny an equivalent application to the female, since Hebrew and

Greek are gendered languages? And so on. Scholars have to first understand the original social and cultural context of Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian communities (which is mostly agreed upon). Then, second, they have to understand the linguistic use of certain words within that setting (a few of which have some debate to it and are legitimately unclear). Then, third, they have to consider how much cultural connotation/baggage is retained when certain words are taken from Jewish or Greco-Roman contexts and brought into a Christian theological context. The precise definition of the word might actually be limited to some connotations and not others. Then, they have to decide how to translate the concept into current English. It's a big job.

But once you add in the wrinkle that Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox already have their commitment to an elevated priesthood, and specifically to a male priesthood, there is our big challenge. That's why when it comes to issues of church leadership, especially, and maybe to some degree marriage, the second and third steps of translation need to be really carefully scrutinized. If we as Protestants are correct to emphasize the "priesthood of all believers" and to claim that Christ does not need to be physically represented (by male priests, or by the physical bread and wine, for that matter), because he is already spiritually present without needing these things to represent him, then the implications seem quite clear to me: Both men and women are made in the image of God individually; we know this from Genesis. Now, marriage of male and female is a special union of oneness in which the image of God is active in bringing forth new human life, and represents God in that sense (Gen.1:26 – 27). But the New Testament's upholding of chaste singleness as a real option for both men and women (Mt.19:12, 1 Cor.7) means that new possibilities of Christian vocation and leadership are open to unmarried people, including unmarried women, and presumably married women as well. Why then would men alone (single or married) represent Jesus in some way that women absolutely cannot? I can't think of any real reason theologically, primarily because gender seems virtually irreducible to something else; to reduce masculinity to "authority" or "initiating" and femaleness to "relationality" or "responding" seems especially unsupported by any biblical evidence (although some Christians do reduce gender down to those things - unfortunately, in my opinion). And, on the biblical and linguistic level, I find that Israel's initial elders and judges and prophets consisted of both men and women equally, showing that Hebrew male pronouns and examples were open to inclusion of women in those cases. Although it is true that, biblically and linguistically, we find that Israel's priests and kings were men, this is probably because they dealt with *death* physically and theologically (priests through sacrifice, kings through warfare), up until the coming of Jesus who defeated *death* itself, absorbed priesthood and kingship in himself, and abolished them for us.

In general, that is why biblical language often sounds patriarchal linguistically without being patriarchal in essence. The biblical writers were not simply endorsing the cultural practices they drew upon to communicate. The language starts from the cultural context, as all language must. But that patriarchal language is made to point to a theological reality that will make us reevaluate the cultures and institutions from which that language comes. So, for example, Christians brought an end to the practice of "adoption as sons". They began to adopt children, primarily girls, that were left on Roman doorsteps. Not only that, but they radically questioned the legitimacy of passing down wealth in circles of privilege, because of Jesus' ethic of generosity and his mission to the whole world. So I don't know of any early Christians trying to "reenact" or "preserve" the cultural metaphor "adoption as sons" just to preserve the cultural reference point from which we are to understand this language. Even though that language was used by the biblical writers! That's a fairly remarkable phenomenon.

To fully answer your question, and in fairness to my Catholic and Orthodox friends, I would need to step you through the way those traditions defend their views of church, priesthood, sacraments, leadership, and therefore men and women. Whether or not I'm the most reliable or best suited for that, though, is a fair question. If you're really interested, you can find those views easily on the web. By contrast, I've followed in the historical and sociological critique of the "sacred" in the church, and wrote a compressed version of that here: http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew_dev_09_01-13d.htm. It puts forward a Protestant (and rather Anabaptist) view of church history in that sense, but as a person who very much values the disciplines of history and sociology as well as theology, I do regard it as significant.

Best,
Mako