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Critics of 'gender-accurate' NIV 'seriously wrong,' scholar says

By Tim Palmer

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Critics of a proposal to revise the New International Version of the Bible using more gender-inclusive language may be sincere in their concern but are "seriously wrong" in attributing such changes to feminism, a Bible scholar told Christian booksellers July 14 in Atlanta.

Conducting a workshop during the Christian Booksellers Association convention at the Georgia World Congress Center, John Kohlenberger said gender-inclusive language has been used in translating the Bible since the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures dating from the second century before Christ.

The booksellers' association said it invited Kohlenberger, a Conservative Baptist author from Portland, Ore., because of recent controversy which caused the International Bible Society to drop plans to revise the NIV.

CBA official Mark Kuyper said the organization surveyed member book stores and found a majority of customers were poorly informed on matter. "What we wanted to do was provide clarity over the whole issue," Kuyper said afterward.

Kohlenberger expressed concern that as a result of the controversy, future generations could see the NIV -- currently the most popular Bible translation -- become obsolete.

A controversy over gender-accurate biblical translation erupted this spring when World magazine published reports alleging that the International Bible Societies and Zondervan Publishing House planned to publish a "unisex" NIV which would become the only version available in the United States.

Zondervan and IBS officials said the magazine distorted and misrepresented the issue but soon abandoned plans for gender-related changes in future editions, citing "significant response" from consumers.

Among critics of gender changes in the NIV were the presidents of three Southern Baptist seminaries. Writing in Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal, Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., accused NIV translators of "monkeying with the word of the Lord." Presidents Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Mark Coppenger of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, also opposed the changes.

Kohlenberger said two "suppositions" fueled the controversy. One was that gender-inclusive language is driven by a feminist agenda and the other that gender-inclusive language would be applied to God and to distinctions between men and women in church and family roles. Both, he argued, are false.

Gender-inclusive language has always been a part of Bible translation, Kohlenberger said. Examples include the male rabbis who translated the Septuagint from Hebrew more than 2,000 years ago. "This is not your hotbed of feminism in the ancient world," he said.

Another is the apostle Paul, whose writings are sometimes attacked as chauvinistic. When Paul quoted II Samuel 7:14 -- "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me" -- in II Corinthians 6:18 he wrote it as: "And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me," according to the New American Standard translation.

In an hour-long seminar on gender language and Bible translation, Kohlenberger began by stating definitions.

"Gender inclusive," "gender neutral" and "inclusive language" refer to language that does not specify the gender. An example is "person," as opposed to the gender-specific "he" or "she."

"Gender accurate" or 'gender appropriate' refers to language that clearly communicates gender reference, so that inclusive references are not misunderstood as exclusive, or vice versa," Kohlenberger explained.

For example, the Hebrew word "ben" usually is translated "son." But most English versions of the Bible, including the King James Version, use the word "children" in Hosea 2:4, because Gomer's "sons" were female as well as male, as noted in Hosea 2:1.

In all, Kohlenberger noted, the KJV translates "ben" as son or sons 2,822 times and as child or children 1,533 times, "most notably in the phrase 'children of Israel' (644 times) versus 'sons of Israel' (4 times)."

Kohlenberger also described the "classic debate" between the word-for-word and phrase-for-phrase translation styles. Both styles have been employed since the origin of the English Bible, he noted, and both are useful.

The first complete English Bible actually appeared in two versions, he said. The early Wycliffe translation was a "slavishly word-for-word rendering of the Latin Vulgate, and as such was appropriate for meticulous discussion among scholars," Kohlenberger said. A later Wycliffe Bible "was much more idiomatic and appealing to the majority of English readers," he said.

"No Bible translation is exclusively or consistently one style or the other," Kohlenberger said. "Translation style does not determine translation accuracy."

The key question Bible translators must ask themselves, Kohlenberger said, is: Are you representing the intent of the original text?

Translators go through thousands of manuscripts to find what best communicates the original text, he said. "It's not changing the text, it's changing the expression -- changing so it's heard now the way it was heard then."

Words change meaning, Kohlenberger said. An example is "gay," which once meant "merry" or "bright" but now its main connotation is homosexual. As word usage changes, Kohlenberger said, Bible translations "must change or they will miscommunicate to the reader."

Muddying the issue of gender-accurate translation, Kohlenberger said, is the fact that biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and modern English do not always use gender in the same way.

"The Hebrew word for 'spirit' is feminine," he said. "A gender-specific translation would have to refer to the Holy Spirit as 'she' in the Old Testament. The Greek word for 'spirit' is neuter. A gender-specific translation would have to refer to the Holy Spirit as 'it' in the New Testament."

Virtually all English translations, however, use "he" in all references to God.

One method scholars use to gloss over gender-specific pronouns is "pluralizing," Kohlenberger said.

Several translations of Psalm 25:12 -- "Who is the man who fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way he should choose (KJV, NIV, others) -- use gender-inclusive plural nouns and pronouns -- "Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose" (New Revised Standard Version, New Living Translation, others).

Pluralizing "seems to be the farthest removed from the original language," Kohlenberger noted, yet the King James Version regularly switches between singular and plural, especially in the Psalms.

He called it "a poor criticism" to say Psalm 34:20 cannot be changed from the singular -- "He protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken" (NIV) -- to plural -- "He watches over all their bones; not one of them will be broken (New International Readers Version) on the grounds the verse no longer applies as a prophecy of Jesus. It does apply, he argued, as a comparison to rather than a prediction of the crucifixion.

He also disputed the charge that modern translators seek to blur distinctions between male and female roles or substitute neutral gender references for God.

"The more gender-inclusive translations of the 1990s do not obscure the distinctions between men and women in passages that clearly address the genders distinctly and specifically," he said.

"Check out any version in the following key texts to demonstrate that they have no 'feminist' agenda," he challenged. He listed the husband-wife passages I Corinthians 7; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; and I Peter 3:1-7, and the church office passages I Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5-9.

He continued: "The more gender-inclusive passages of the 1990s also do not obscure gender-specific language that relates to God. Only 'The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version' uses 'androgynous' language, as in 'Mother-Father' of Matthew 6:1. This version has a clearly stated feminist agenda."

In summary, Kohlenberger stated, "We may not like changes in language, but we have to recognize them and respond to them, or we will miscommunicate or fail to communicate."

In a question-and-answer session following his talk, bookseller Beth York of Richmond, Va., recalled that the language of the Bible made her feel like a "second-class citizen" as a female growing up in the church. "How can we reach younger women with the message that God loves them?"

Kohlenberger applauded Bibles such as the New Living Translation that use inclusive language where it is called for. "We must take care not to use potentially exclusive language when we intend our communication to be inclusive," he said.

"If we are misunderstood, we have miscommunicated, and we have misrepresented the word of God."

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Religious-liberty riders added to foreign-aid bill

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U. S. Senate is threatening to cut off \$200 million in aid to Russia if leaders there implement a law discriminating against religious minorities.

The Senate voted 95-4 to amend a \$13.2 billion foreign-aid bill pressuring the Russian President Boris Yeltsin to veto a new law denying legal status to "new" religious groups, those which have operated in Russia less than 15 years.

The law, passed overwhelmingly by the Russian legislature, would limit legal status to religions "traditionally" existing in Russia. Those groups include the Russian Orthodox Church, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and others.

President Clinton urged Yeltsin to veto the measure at a recent gathering of the leaders of leading industrial nations, a White House spokesman confirmed. The spokesman said Clinton stressed to Yeltsin that the U.S. believes "freedom of religion should not be restricted" in Russia.

The spokesman said the White House "will keep pushing" the issue with Russia.

Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., offered the amendment to the foreign-aid bill, terming religious freedom the "cornerstone" of democracy.

Without legal status, new religious groups could not rent public spaces for services and would find it difficult to conduct financial activity and invite foreigners to Russia.

The Senate amendment would bar financial assistance to Russia under the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill unless it is certified that Russia has not enacted a statute that discriminates against religious minorities.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said that it is "appropriate that the United States link religious freedom to our overall involvement with other nations."

Another amendment added to the foreign-aid bill addresses religious freedom in Asia. That amendment would require study and reporting of religious persecution and encourage the Clinton administration to work with the government of the People's Republic of China and other nations in Asia to establish a commission on "security and cooperation" modeled after the Helsinki Commission in Europe.

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Ohio religious-liberty bill would not protect inmates

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- Critics say a proposed Ohio religious-liberty law would "underprotect" religion by watering down levels of protection from a recently invalidated federal law and by denying claims to prisoners.

Ohio Solicitor Jeffrey Sutton argued before the Supreme Court that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act was unnecessary because states were poised to pass laws of their own that would "overprotect" religious exercise.

But critics say a proposed state law backed by Sutton and the Ohio Attorney General is substantially weaker than RFRA, which was passed by Congress in 1993 and struck down as unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in June.

Whereas RFRA required "strict scrutiny" and a "compelling" governmental interest to pass laws which substantially burden an individual's religion, Ohio's proposed religious-liberty act would invoke "intermediate scrutiny" and require the government to show an "important" interest.

Critics say those words would make it easier for the government to infringe on religious freedoms.

The Ohio law would also exempt prisoners from its protections. This provision especially drew fire from members of the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion.

"If that is his idea of overprotecting, I say don't do us any favors," said Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee. "We cannot afford to water down the level of protection or deny religious liberty to prisoners."

Before the Supreme Court struck down RFRA, saying that Congress lacked the authority to force states to comply with the law, several attempts were made to exempt prisons from accommodating sometimes frivolous religious claims by inmates.

But Forest Montgomery, counsel for the office of governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, said the exclusion of inmates from the Ohio proposal "is not our understanding of religious liberty,

which should be religious liberty for all." He suggested that what Sutton really has in mind is "underprotection" of religious freedom.

At a July 14 hearing to evaluate responses to the high court's ruling in *Boerne v. Flores*, Sutton told a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee that prison officials saw "exponential growth" in requests to alter prison routine under RFRA.

Some claims, like the right to grow long hair for religious reasons, could pose safety risks by allowing inmates to conceal weapons, he said.

Douglas Laycock, law professor at the University of Texas Law School, countered that prisons could have enforced haircut regulations under RFRA if it could demonstrate the government had a "compelling interest" in requiring inmates to wear short hair.

Laycock, who argued for RFRA before the Supreme Court, cited a case in which a 64-year-old convicted forger is allowed to go to church but may not take communion because it would violate the prison's no-alcohol policy.

"Everyone knows that prisoners file phony and frivolous claims," Laycock said. "Prison authorities sometimes make frivolous rules," he added.

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Baptist layman proposes religious textbook covers

By Marv Knox

PAMPA, Texas (ABP) -- Students will be working on everlasting multiplication tables when school starts, if a Texas Baptist layman has his way.

They'll be focusing on multiples of 10 -- carrying the Ten Commandments on specially designed book covers, said William Rasmussen, a member of Calvary Baptist Church in Pampa, Texas.

"God has put on our hearts to help our kids out," Rasmussen explained. "We're tired of the same problems in the public schools that have been going on for quite a while. The best way to establish moral values in our children is to expose them to the Ten Commandments, which God gave to Moses."

Constitutional restrictions prevent public schools from posting the commandments, he acknowledged. But that doesn't mean students can't carry them in on the covers of their books.

And that's where the multiplication comes in, added Lyndon Glaesman, Rasmussen's pastor.

If the commandments could be posted, they would show up -- at most -- one time per room, Glaesman said. But with book covers, the Ten Commandments will be multiplied.

"Instead of one time per room, they could be carried 25 to 30 times in the classrooms," he said.

"It's a great idea. I believe this is in the mind of God."

And it's an idea that is "going nationally," Rasmussen said, citing a number of national contacts.

He's been interviewed about the concept by American Family Radio and the USA Radio Network, he said. He's also received support from Concerned Women of America and the American Family Association, he said.

Other national radio and television programs have expressed interest, and sample book covers have been presented to denominational leaders and Christian musical artists, he added.

Rasmussen's family has printed 2,000 prototype covers. Plans call for local congregations to print the covers for their students, he said, unless a larger sponsor underwrites mass publication of the covers.

And although public schools -- as institutions of the government -- cannot post the Ten Commandments, the book covers should be protected constitutionally, a church-state expert said.

Schools won't be involved in the production and distribution of the covers, and the covers will be circulated and promoted solely by students. Consequently, the covers should be protected by the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech, said Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee.

"I don't foresee any constitutional problems," Walker said.

"Our schools are not religion-free zones," Rasmussen noted. "The book covers would be presented in such a way that the kids can either accept or reject the idea. ... We expect no litigation feedback."

But supporters of the book covers do expect a large crowd at a rally supporting the idea.

"Bring Back the Ten Commandments" will be the theme of a rally at 2 p.m., Aug. 16, at Central Park in Pampa.

Rasmussen said he is not certain who will be on the program. But he has invited former Republican presidential candidates Pat Buchanan and Alan Keyes and several Christian musical artists to appear.

He also has invited Alabama Judge Roy Moore, who has raised a storm of controversy by posting the Ten Commandments in his courtroom.

"We're expecting at least 15,000 people, if not more," Rasmussen said. "The rally's basically to show support for the idea.

"We're wanting to show that a lot of people love the idea -- that it's wholeheartedly supported, not only by the community of Pampa, but by Christians who want to live for God."

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Award-winning Dallas columnist tackles issues of faith, morality

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Baptist layman Steve Blow says he doesn't consider his column in the Dallas Morning News a pulpit. But the recipient of this year's Texas Baptist Communications Award admits that some readers see it that way.

"There are a few people who have said they're sick of me wearing my religion on my sleeve," said Blow, a member of Shiloh Terrace Baptist Church in Dallas. "I don't think I do that, but I did get a letter last week from someone who said I sound like a bleating divinity student."

While Blow is not always appreciated by those who disagree with him, his human-interest column in the newspaper's metropolitan section is popular with readers. He often incorporates competing opinions from readers on issues of faith, morality and ethics.

"I try to use the column as a place where people with lots of different ideas feel comfortable and safe expressing their views," Blow said. "I hope it's a place where we can listen to each other. I just want to be the moderator of the discussion, to provide a place where we can talk in a civil way to each other about a lot of things, including matters of spirituality and faith."

On that basis, a communications advisory committee selected Blow as the recipient of the 1997 Texas Baptist Communications Award. The award is presented annually to a person in communications who has made significant contributions to the religious life of Texas.

The committee honored Blow for his ability "in portraying religion as a normal part of daily life," according to chairwoman Beth Pratt, religion editor of the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal.

"Steve Blow skillfully weaves entertaining and provocative columns on a wide range of topics, including ethical and religious subjects," Pratt said. "He is up-front with his readers about his own faith without being preachy or 'holier-than-thou.'"

Blow has worked for the Dallas Morning News since 1978, including about 10 years as a general-assignment reporter and East Texas bureau chief. Previously, he worked as a reporter for the Fort Worth Press and the Corpus Christi Caller-Times.

In a nomination letter, two staff members at Blow's church said "he has used wit and humor to pen articles that reveal how Christian values are influencing our society and how society influences Christian values."

"He draws from real-life situations to remind his readers that spiritual values are still needed in today's world. A strong witness for the Lord, he often writes about his faith and his relationship to Jesus Christ, many times in the face of criticism."

Blow said he grew up in a Church of God congregation and became a Christian as a 12-year-old at an East Texas camp.

"I may be one of the last people to have been saved in an honest-to-goodness brush arbor camp meeting," he said.

Blow's faith tends to permeate his column, to the delight of some and the consternation of others.

"I certainly didn't begin writing the column with the idea that 'here's my pulpit,'" he said. "I did make the conscious decision to be as honest as I possibly could be in the column about my life and experiences, and a big part of my life is my faith."

"Matters of spirituality are important to me and they interest me, so I write about them."

But Blow says he is not interested in advancing anybody's political agenda. And that has drawn fire from fellow Christians when he has featured people with a variety of perspectives on volatile issues such as homosexuality and abortion.

"I'm cursed with the ability to see both sides of every issue," he reflected. "I think that comes with being a journalist. But that's what prompts the letters about being lukewarm and getting 'spewed out.'"

On at least one occasion, it also drew a protester who picketed outside the church where Blow and his family were worshipping.

"The folks at Shiloh Terrace have been wonderful to me," he said. "And they were also wonderful to [the protester]. A number of people went out of their way to make him feel welcome. I think it probably took all the fun out of it for him."

For Blow, the fun still hasn't gone out of writing his column, particularly when he is able to feature people who confound stereotypes and force readers to think, such as a 53-year-old conservative Baptist policeman who works with the homosexual community.

"I feel so blessed to have found a career I love," he said. "There are so many people who work just to make a living. I've been blessed to have found something that is still exciting to me and exhilarating for me."

Blow said he fears his willingness to discuss matters of faith in a public forum might cause some to put him "on a pedestal" and hold unrealistic expectations for him.

"I don't want to be seen as anything other than a saved sinner," he said.

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John Claypool, Joel Gregory scheduled at Alabama meeting

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Baptist pastor turned Episcopal priest John Claypool and former Dallas mega-church pastor Joel Gregory are scheduled speakers for a conference in Birmingham, Ala., this fall.

Both are scheduled to be on the program at the Baptist Center for Ethics' fourth annual "leadership integrity" conference Oct. 6-7 at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church.

Claypool, once a popular Baptist preacher and author, is now rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Birmingham.

Gregory was groomed to succeed the legendary W.A. Criswell as third pastor of the 29,000-member First Baptist Church of Dallas but resigned after less than two years. He described his experience in the 1994 book "Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church."

Other scheduled speakers and conference leaders include Rodney Clapp, senior editor at Inter-Varsity Press and author of "A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society;" Gary Fenton, pastor of Birmingham's Dawson Memorial Baptist Church; Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Gary Furr, pastor of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in Birmingham; and Gary Farley, director of the Center for Rural Church Leadership and former head of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's office of town and country missions.

"We are excited about our conference faculty," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Nashville, Tenn.,-based Baptist Center for Ethics. "We think our faculty will help us to reach across some traditional barriers and will certainly enrich and empower conference participants."

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: Persons attending the conference will be charged a \$95 registration fee. Information is available from the Baptist Center for Ethics, 1-800-469-4223.

Texas Baptists set goal for hunger offering

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists have set a goal of \$850,000 for a world-hunger offering to be collected in 1998, after raising nearly \$775,000 last year.

Last year, giving to the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission's world-hunger offering grew by 18 percent. It was the first year for the offering to be collected over four Sundays prior to Thanksgiving. Before, the offering was collected on one Sunday in October.

It was also the first year for a new division of hunger funds collected in the state. Previously, the general hunger offering was divided 80 percent-20 percent between Southern Baptist Convention's foreign and home missions boards. Now the Texas convention solicits specific ministry proposals from the two SBC mission boards plus other agencies including the Baptist World Alliance, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Texas Baptist associations.

The 1998 hunger-offering goal earmarks \$335,000 for the SBC International Mission Board, up from \$264,895 last year to the Foreign Mission Board, and \$166,000 for the North American Mission Board, up from \$145,000 last year to its forerunner, the Home Mission Board.

It includes \$119,000 for projects of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an alternative Southern Baptist missions and ministry agency, and \$60,000 for the Baptist World Alliance, a worldwide fellowship of Baptist organizations.

Another \$170,000 is earmarked for hunger-relief programs in Texas.

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-- By ABP staff

European Baptists endure flooding, help victims

HAMBURG, Germany (ABP) -- The European Baptist Federation is monitoring damage to Baptist churches and coordinating response to severe flooding in central Europe.

Nearly 100 deaths have been attributed so far to flooding in Poland, Czech Republic and eastern parts of Germany. Residents braced for another rise in flood levels July 22, with damage already in the millions of dollars.

Pastor Daniel Trusiewicz of First Baptist Church in Wroclaw, Poland, told European Baptist News Service his church was not affected, but the city's Second Baptist Church was flooded. Five families from the two Baptist churches were known to have been evacuated from their homes.

Baptists in the Czech Republic sent donations with their president, Dobraslav Stehlik, who traveled to the country's Moravian region, the area hardest-hit by flooding.

Josef Kulacik, general secretary of the Brotherly Union of Baptists in Slovakia, reported that one church had suffered some damage from the flood. Slovak Baptists have already taken up a collection to aid the churches in the Czech Republic.

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-- By ABP staff

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CORRECTION: In the July 17 ABP story "Pastors denied teaching posts over ties to Fellowship," please replace the 6th paragraph with the following:

Stubblefield acknowledged leading a session on Baptist distinctives at a state chapter of the Fellowship. He said he was asked to do so by a church member.

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