

On The Use Of Thou And You In The Revised Standard Version

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In “An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament” prepared by members of the Revision Committee, Luther A. Weigle, Chairman, we read on page 23: “The forms *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine* and verb endings *-est* and *-eth* are not used except in language addressed to God or in exalted poetic apostrophe.” A similar statement appears in the introduction prepared by the same committee for the New Testament.

The committee reported that the question of the use of *thou*, *thy*, *thee*, and *thine* in the new translation was the subject of long and serious debate. Some of the translators held out for consistent use of the modern forms *you* and *your* in every case. But after long consideration the decision was reached to restrict the use of *thou* to language addressed to God. The “Introduction to the New Testament” has a similar statement.

If the committee had decided to use *you* and *your* regardless of whether God or man were addressed, there would have been no problem. But the decision to use *thou* when the Deity was addressed and *you* in other cases confronted the translators with what for them was a real problem. Which of the two forms should they use in passages where Jesus of Nazareth was addressed? Should they use the reverent *thou* and thus establish the Godhead of Jesus in the mind of the reader, or should they use the more common *you* and leave the question of His Godhead as unsettled as it was in the mind of Pilate?

The committee’s decision to distinguish between Deity and non-Deity by the use of *thou* for the one and *you* for the other not only resulted in confusion and contradiction in the translation but also laid the translators wide open to the suspicion that they were denying the Godhead of Jesus, or else at least suggesting that there is reason to doubt the Deity of the Jesus who dwelt among us and who died for us on the cross.

If the committee had followed the wishes of some of the translators to replace *thou* in every case with the modern *you*, they would perhaps have offended the feelings of many who would have resented the appearance of the Lord’s Prayer in modern dress: “Hallowed be your name.” Still, people would soon have become accustomed to that form and would have found no suggestion of irreverence in that language. In our colleges and seminaries students translating from the Hebrew and the Greek commonly use *you* and *your* in passages in which God is addressed. They do not take kindly to *thou*, *thy*, *thine*, *thee*; and the thought of irreverence is farthest from their minds.

Furthermore, there is nothing whatsoever in the forms of Greek and Hebrew verbs and pronouns that remotely suggests that a distinction should be made in the form of address when God is addressed or when a man is spoken to. Exactly the same form is used in either case. The same is true of the German *du*. A consistent use of the common *you* would have avoided confusion and the much greater evil of the suggestion that Jesus was not entitled to the same reverent form of address as the Father. If the use of *thou* was intended to distinguish God from all others and to give Him honor, why was that honor withheld from the Son, of whom it is written “That all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son, honoreth not the Father which hath sent him”?

An examination of all passages in the New Testament in which God the Father or Jesus is addressed shows that the translators had a plan that they followed consistently. Wherever the Father or Almighty God is addressed in prayer, whether by Jesus or by another, the term of address is regularly *thou*. This is in accordance with the committee’s decision to use that form in “language addressed to God.”

But when Jesus is addressed the case is different. According to the Revised Standard Version the devil said to Jesus, “If *you* are the Son of God.” One can understand that the devil, contrary to his better knowledge, would imply denial of the Godhead of Jesus. The scribes, the elders, the priests, the Pharisees, and the unbelieving Jews are all made to say *you* in addressing the Lord, as in John 10:33, where the Jews say, “We stone you for no good work, but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God.” One can understand that they would refuse him a form of address reserved for the Deity. Pilate, likewise, could hardly be expected to give him recognition, but bluntly asks: “Where are you from?” (John 19:9.) All these denied the

Godhead of Jesus, but the denial lay in the meaning of the words they used, not in any subtle distinction between *thou* and *you*, because the language they spoke does not make any such distinction.

If *thou* is reserved for addressing the Deity, what are we to make of Peter's confession in Matthew 16:16: "*You* are the Christ, the Son of the living God"? Was Peter mistaken? Is that what the avoidance of *thou* is to suggest? If so, then the Lord Himself was mistaken, because He immediately blessed Peter for having made that confession and assured him that not flesh and blood but the Father in heaven had revealed that knowledge to him. Nowhere in the RSV does Peter ever address the Lord with *thou* except indirectly in the second chapter of Acts where he quotes Psalm 110:1 as referring to Him: "Sit at my right hand till I make *thy* enemies a stool for *thy* feet."

In John 11:27 Martha is made to say: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God." None of the disciples is ever reported in the RSV as having ever used the *thou* form in addressing Jesus. In Stephen's prayer to the Lord Jesus, the issue could be avoided, because the words *thou* or *you* are not used in his short prayer.

It comes, therefore, as something of a surprise to find Ananias, whom the Lord sent to Paul, praying to the Lord Jesus in these words: "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to *thy* saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon *thy* name." (Acts 9:13f.)

In Acts 22:8 and also 26:15 Paul related that when the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus he said, "Who are *you*, Lord?" A little later when he reported the Lord's appearance to him in Jerusalem, he quotes himself as having said, "Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in *thee*. And when the blood of Stephen, *thy* witness, was shed, I was also standing by and approving." Acts 22:19f.)

In the RSV there is no instance anywhere in the four Gospels where disciples, who certainly did recognize Jesus as their Lord and God, ever address Him with *thou*. It is always *you*. There is one exception. In Jesus' description of the Day of Judgment (Matt. 25:37–44) the RSV lets the righteous say on that day, "Lord, when did we see *thee* hungry?" Likewise the condemned also: "Lord, when did we see *thee* hungry?"

These three instances, —Ananias in a prayer to the Lord Jesus, Paul in prayer to Jesus, and Jesus quoting what the righteous and the condemned will one day say to Him, —are the only ones in the RSV where Jesus is directly addressed by believers with the *thou* reserved for address to the Deity. In each instance it is the glorified, ascended Christ that is thus addressed. What inference is to be drawn from this distinction between the form of address used for the unascended Jesus and for the ascended Lord? Are the readers to infer that He who died on the cross was not yet God? That Jesus, while on earth in the body, was not God, but only became God later? Or that the Jesus whom the disciples walked and talked with was not true God as well as true man, but only a phantom God, a kind of representative of God, or a very good man who was later promoted to Godhead because of his virtue? Such theology would be nothing new in the history of the Church.

As long as the Christian Church has been in existence it has had to fight off determined efforts to strip Jesus of the honor that God Himself clearly gave Him, —that He is indeed God's Son, begotten of the Father in eternity, born of the Virgin Mary. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, all are symbols of the desperate battle that the Church has fought against the heresy that Jesus of Nazareth is not truly God.

That heresy cost the Church a long and bitter struggle in the third and fourth centuries. The truth was established then but the battle has continued with unabated heat. It is going on today. By withholding from Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God, the honorable title of address given to God the Father, the RSV, if it has not consciously gone over to the side of the enemy, has at least furnished him with ammunition and declared the issue to be in doubt.

If *thou* is expressly reserved for God, and Jesus is consistently addressed with *you* until after His ascension into heaven, what conclusion can be drawn but that He is not really to be considered God while giving His life for us on the cross? If that conclusion was intended by the translators, it was a surrender to the powers of darkness. If it was not intended, it was an inexcusable blunder that will greatly encourage those who deny to Christ a Godhead in all respects equal to that of the Father. This is the language of the Samosatenes of

the third century, of the Unitarians, of the Universalists, and of the Liberals of today in whatever denomination they may be found.

To the credit of the translators be it said that where in the New Testament Micah, Malachi, Psalms 2, 45, and 110 are quoted (in about 15 different passages) as testifying prophetically that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, the form of the pronoun is regularly *thou*, as in Hebrews 5:5: "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee," quoting the Second Psalm. In these quotations we have the testimony of the Father and of the Holy Spirit as to the eternal Godhead of the Son, as the voice from heaven shows, Mark 1:11.

But when we turn to the Old Testament and read the same passages, the effect is one of complete confusion. Whereas in the New Testament these quotations regularly use the term *thou* where the Son is addressed, the corresponding passages in the Old Testament of the RSV just as regularly use *you*. Thus the Second Psalm as quoted in Hebrews 5 reads: "Thou art my Son"; but the same passage in Psalm 2 is rendered: "You are my son," not even capitalizing the S. One asks Why?

One other occasional use of *thou* in direct address cannot but create confusion unless the reader is familiar with what the translators say in their "Introduction" on page 23.

Matthew 2:6 in the RSV reads: "And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from thee shall come a ruler who will govern over my people Israel."

A second such passage is Luke 1:76 where Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied concerning his son John: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High; for thou shalt go before the Lord to prepare his ways."

A third passage is John 12:15. "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold *thy* king is coming," quoted from Zechariah 9:9, where, however, we read, "Lo, *your* king comes to you." Here again the attention is arrested by the inexplicable choice of *thy* in the New Testament and *your* in the Old Testament, although in both cases the same daughter of Zion is addressed.

The fourth passage (there are only four) is Revelation, chapter 18, where Babylon, the "haunt of every foul spirit," is addressed throughout the chapter with the term *thou*, as in the fourth verse: "Alas! alas! thou great city, thou mighty city Babylon!"

The "Introduction" prepares us for this surprising use of *thou* in these three passages when it says that this form was used in "exalted poetic apostrophe." The only other use of *thou* in address is to be found in prayers addressed to God the Father, as for example, in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and in His sacerdotal prayer in the seventeenth chapter of John.

It must be admitted that if the translators had tried to include Jesus when they decided to limit the use of *thou* to language in which God was addressed, they would have had to decide whether or not to let the devil, Pilate, and the Pharisees use the term. They might also have felt it necessary to decide for themselves and for the reader which disciple was convinced of the Godhead of Jesus and which still was not clearly convinced.

The only alternatives were to retain the *thou, thy, thine, thee* of the King James Bible, or to change completely to the modern *you* and *your*. Instead of choosing one or the other the translators compromised. They made the worst possible decision and thus introduced confusion and yielded the field to those who are not ready to confess clearly that the child born in Bethlehem and the Jesus who died on the cross is indeed our Lord and our God, blessed forever.