

# THOU OR YOU?

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*This article is from the book **The Old's Better**, a discussion of different Bible versions.*

This is a difficult matter, but “the nettle must be grasped!” The second person singular pronouns, *Thou* and *Thee*, *Thy*, *Thine*, with the accompanying verb ending *-est*, and the verb ending *-eth* for the third person, are now all regarded by many as archaic, and therefore not to be used in any modern translation of the Bible. There is a good case for dropping *-eth*, e.g., Psalm 103:14, “For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust” would become “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” There is no loss of accuracy or reverence here, but there is simply the loss of the dignity and rhythm of the AV [Authorized Version, or King James Version]. However, for the second person pronouns, the position is different, because the change does lead to a loss of accuracy of translation and also to a loss of reverence.

Taking the matter of reverence first, the reader will be aware that in many religious circles, including many evangelicals, *You* and *Your* have been widely adopted in prayer to God instead of *Thou*, *Thee*, *Thy*, *Thine*. It seems to be the “in thing” in those circles, and they will argue that it does not betoken a lack of reverence. Reverence, they will say, is the attitude of the heart, and *You* and *Your* can be just as reverently intended as *Thou* and *Thee*. While we know that reverence must be in the heart, the outward way in which that reverence is expressed cannot be dismissed so lightly. I believe this modern trend is all part of the general lack of respect for authority and of the tendency these days to bring God down to our human level. But what does Scripture say? In Psalm 50, in part of verse 21, God says, “Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee.” Speaking personally, this has been a voice to me in the matter, and I believe that the *You* and *Your* habit does in time lead to an undue familiarity and a loss of reverence.

A further point is that the use of *Thou* and *Thee*, etc., in prayer to God has been a feature of the English language for many centuries—ten at least—irrespective of what the normal secular practice has been. Even in 1881—only just over 100 years ago—when the Revised Version was published, and when *You* had become quite the normal pronoun for the second person singular in ordinary conversation, the use of *Thou* and *Thee* was retained in the Revised Version; and, at that time, the use of *You* and *Your* in prayer would have provoked an enormous outcry. This is one of those changes that has really come about very suddenly in the last 40 years in conformity with the increasing pace of change! I believe that modern translators of the Bible should have accepted that the use of *Thou* and *Thee* in address to God was a centuries-old practice, a feature of our religious English, and therefore to be retained.

In the July 1979 issue of the *Evangelical Times* (from which I quote by kind permission) there were articles respectively on the use of *Thou* and of *You*. The article on *Thou* by the Rev. Paul E. G. Cook was generally very good. Quoting the Oxford Dictionary definition of “archaic” as being “no longer in common use, though retained for special purposes,” he makes the point that a word maybe archaic, but still relevant in a particular situation. He goes on:

Language “retained for special purposes” may well be archaic, but its retention gives it the right to be regarded as modern language for the purpose for which it is used. Until the 1960s the use of *Thou* and *Thee* in addressing God was more common than the use of *You*, even though the words had long ceased to be used in general conversation in the south of England. [He points out they are still used in the north!] They were still common usage for addressing God and still are. The usage is both archaic and modern.

The question to be considered, therefore, is whether the use of *Thou* and *Thee* is still relevant to the relationship which ought to exist between the modern man and his God. We can hold onto traditions, even though they have ceased to be of any real contemporary value. But such is not the case here, since the tragedy of the modern man is that he seems to have lost all sense of the tremendous gulf which exists between the Creator and the creature...

The whole problem of fallen man is that he is unaware of the disparity between himself and God. It is also the problem of the church today. A sense of awe and wonder in the presence of God has departed from the churches.

Mr. Cook ends his article with:

Let us beware of too quickly abandoning the old paths in a desire to be modern. The quest for relevance can too easily lead to irrelevance. And many have gone that way. *Thou* is relevant; *You* is not.

But there is the important translation point to be considered also. It is often said that the AV is written in 16th/17th century English, and while this is no doubt partly true in that everything is the product of its own age, yet it is not entirely true, especially as regards this question of the second person singular pronouns. The pronoun *You* started to be used instead of *Thou* towards the end of the 13th century, and this use extended in the following three centuries. But the translators of the AV did not conform to this rising usage, so that, when the AV appeared, it was not in some ways in the usage of the 17th century. Why did the AV translator not adopt the up-to-date English of their time? For one particular reason which many people have perhaps not realized—*accuracy of translation!* Whenever the Hebrew and Greek texts use the singular of the pronoun, so does the AV; and whenever those texts use the plural, so does the AV. In other words, the AV translators stuck closely to the *biblical usage*, and translated the Word of God using a kind of biblical style of English. The version was a faithful one above all else. The same cannot be said so completely for any other English Bible—in fact, most are nowhere near that standard. There is a distinct loss of accuracy in translation if *You* is used for the singular as well as the plural: it becomes an ambiguous word. The AV informs us correctly on what was the proper original sense. Thus in Luke 22:31-32, the Lord says to Peter, “Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat,” *you* here referring to Peter and the other disciples; “But I have prayed for *thee*, that *thy* faith fail not,” *thee* and *thy* referring to Peter only. Such shades of meaning are completely lost when *you* is used throughout.

Some modern versions of the Bible have attempted to get around the point by modernizing all the pronouns, except in speech addressed to God, where *Thou*, *Thee*, etc., are retained. The RSV [Revised Standard Version] and the NEB [New English Bible] adopted this line. There are two

strong objections to it. First, the Greek does not make such a distinction: it simply uses one pronoun for the singular and another for the plural (as does the Authorized Version). Secondly, these versions have generally treated the Lord Jesus Christ as man, and have therefore used *you* when He has been addressed, and *Thou* when God the Father has been addressed. This distinction is disparaging of the person and glory of Christ, who is equal with the Father in power and glory. There are, of course, some cases where people addressed the Lord Jesus, not realizing that He was divine, *e.g.*, the woman of Samaria. It would be difficult to know how to treat these, even if *Thou* were being used in address to the Lord Jesus. It does not seem that this “halfway house” is at all satisfactory, and it is interesting to see that both the RSV and the REB [Revised English Bible] recently issued—the revision of the NEB—have abandoned it, and use *You* throughout. But the fact remains that the AV’s usage is correct as a translation, reverent, and time-honored, and children can certainly be educated to the use of *Thou* and *Thee* in worship if there is a mind so to educate them.

As a side issue on this question, one dreads the thought of any “modernization” of pronouns in our vast treasury of beautiful hymns in the English language. May we not be left to despise our birthright in this!