

Thee and Thou: Not Just for Quakers

By Bill Fortenberry

Have you ever wished that the King James Version didn't have all those pesky antiquated pronouns? Why can't we just change them all to the word *you*? Well, there are actually some very good reasons behind the use of these ancient words in the KJV, and if you will let me, I will list a few of them for you.

Thee vs. You: The difference between *thee* and *you* can be seen in Ruth 2:4. When Boaz returned to his fields, he said to his employees "The Lord be with you." They responded in kind by saying "The Lord bless thee," and here we see the difference between the two. When Boaz spoke, he was speaking to a group of people and used the plural pronoun, *you*; but when the workers responded, they spoke to a single person and used the singular pronoun, *thee*. Any time that you read the words *thee*, *thou*, or *thy* in the KJV, you should recognize that they are references to a single person. Whereas, any use of the words *ye*, *you* or *your* should be read as a references to a group of people.

This understanding will help clarify several difficult passages of Scripture. For example, the argument is often made that the virgin conception prophesied in Isaiah 7:14 could not have been a Messianic prophecy because it was given as a sign to Ahaz. I have heard dozens of people argue that it doesn't make sense to give a sign to Ahaz that would not be fulfilled until several hundred years after he was dead and that the conception referenced must have taken place at some point within his reign for the sign to have any meaning.

If you were to stop reading at this point and turn to Isaiah 7:11-14, you would notice right away that this prophecy was not given to Ahaz at all. It was given to the whole house of David. When Isaiah spoke to Ahaz in verse 11, he used the pronoun *thee*: "Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God," but when Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, Isaiah turned from speaking to the king personally, and addressed the house of David as a whole as recorded in verse 13: "Here ye now, O house of David." Then without turning back to the king, he presented the sign to the entire house of David by using the plural pronoun, *you*: "The Lord himself shall give you a sign." By understanding the differences in the pronouns, we are able to understand that Isaiah 7:14 is not limited in its application to the reign of Ahaz alone, but instead to the whole existence of the house of David, a house which was still around when Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem "because he was of the house and lineage of David."

Ye vs. You: We can see the difference between *ye* and *you* in Jeremiah 29:13-14. In the KJV, the word *ye* is only used in the nominative case. In other words, it is only used as either the subject or the predicate nominative. *You*, on the other hand is only used in the objective case. It is used as the direct or indirect object or as the object of a preposition.

Look at Jeremiah 29. In verse 13, the word *ye* is used: "And ye shall seek me, and find me;" but in verse 14, the word *you* is used: "And I will be found of you." Notice the difference in the two phrases. In the first, the pronoun is the subject of the sentence and takes the nominative case, *ye*. In the second, the pronoun is the object of a preposition and takes the objective case, *you*.

Thee and *thou* have a similar relationship, but they are reversed in their roles. For the singular pronoun, *thou* is the nominative case, and *thee* is the objective case. Notice the use of the two in Psalm 17:6. The psalmist first used the objective case as the object of a preposition: "I have called upon thee." He then used the nominative case as the subject: "for thou wilt hear me."

Thy vs. Thine: The difference between *thy* and *thine* is the same as the difference between *a* and *an*. The *n* sound is added when the word is followed by a vowel sound. The reasoning for this rule was actually carried over from the Greek language when English was developed. In Greek grammar, it is not permissible to have a vowel sound at the end of a word if the next word also began with a vowel sound. There has to be a consonant sound in between them, so they developed the idea of a moveable *nu*. The *nu* is the same letter as our English *n*, and in English, we inherited this rule by adding an *n* to the words *a* and *thy* whenever they precede a word which begins with a vowel.

An illustration of this rule can be seen in Psalm 71:2. In the first part of the verse, the word *thy* is used to precede a word which begins with a consonant: "Deliver me in thy righteousness." At the end of the verse, the word *thine* is used before a word which begins with a vowel: "incline thine ear unto me."

There is one exception to this rule. *Thy* and *thine* are used interchangeably when followed by words beginning with the *h* sound. This is also a carryover from the Greek language. In Greek, there is no letter for the *h* sound. The *h* is simply a variation of the vowel sound in which one makes a noticeable exhalation while speaking the vowel. Thus while the letter *h* was being developed in the English language, some people treated it as a consonant, others treated it as part of the vowel sound, and some people just dropped the *h* sound altogether. This is why the word *hand* is preceded by the word *thine* in Psalm 21:8: "Thine hand shall find out all thine enemies," but it is preceded by *thy* in Psalm 139:10: "Even there shall thy hand lead me."

Conclusion: It is intricacies like these that keep me fascinated by the King James Version. While I have many theological and scientific reasons for believing that the KJV is the only legitimate English translation available today, it is the little things about the KJV that really cause it to grab my attention more than any other version. And there are many more besides those that I just listed. For instance, I would love to explain for you the difference between *thoroughly* and *thoroughly* or the very important distinction between an ensample and an example, but I will leave you to make those discoveries for yourself. Just remember the next time you come across a supposedly antiquated word in the KJV that there is probably a very good reason that particular word was chosen over another, and finding out that reason might just be the key to understanding the entire passage.