

Thou, Thee or Me - Archaic or just Proper English?

At the risk of repeating things you all may already know, I should like to share a little of what I say to folks who are not familiar with the pronoun forms "thou, thee, ye and you".



First of all, these forms are not "Old English". They are Modern English. Old English is technically Anglo-Saxon, which sounds a lot like German, is highly inflected, and which in turn developed into Middle English, the language spoken by Chaucer and his contemporaries and which contains a good deal of French. Middle English also sounds strange to our ears but it in turn developed into Modern English, which is already what we call the language spoken by Shakespeare and Cranmer in the 16th century.

"Thou and thee" do come to us from Old English or Anglo-Saxon, but they are the modern form of that derivation. For example, here is the first line of the

Lord's Prayer in Anglo-Saxon ... Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum ... the word "þu" or "thu" being just an early form of the word "thou" ... The phrase literally is ... Father our thou that art in heaven ...

"Thou" is simply the nominative singular form of the second person personal pronoun "you" ... That is ... it is the form used to say "you" when the "you" is the subject of the sentence. The form "thee" is simply the accusative singular of the same pronoun. That is, it is the form used when the "you" is the object of a verb or a preposition. The same pattern holds with "ye" and "you". The "ye" is the nominative plural form and the "you" the accusative plural form.

Thus, we would say ... "thou art good" ... but "I love thee". Or, "ye are good" ... but "I love you".

The distinction is easily seen in this prayer from the BCP ... "Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins" ... where "ye" is nominative and "you" accusative ... "ye" the subject of the sentence... and "you" the object of the verb repent ... which is in this case a reflexive verb.

The preservation of these distinctions in the Authorized Version and in our BCP is quite useful. It preserves distinctions inherent in the original languages of the Bible and which are important to our understanding of God's Word. Likewise, these sorts of distinctions are used in many other modern languages and are easily learned by the smallest child. As well, we still retain similar forms even in Modern English, the distinctions between "I" and "me" or "he" and "him", for example, which are just distinctions between nominative and accusative forms.

In addition, the use of "thou" and "thee" is really to be more personal and informal and direct than to use "you" as we do exclusively in the present day version of Modern English as used here in North America. I recall reading letters written by Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn ... he refers to her as "thou." When she replies to him, there is no use of "thou" but rather "ye" and "you." In the same way in Spanish people often refer to a

respected elder as "vosotros" ... which is the plural of "tu" or "you". The idea is that the respected person should not be referred to in a way that is too informal or familiar. The plural form shows respect. Interestingly in Spanish, the informal "tu" is always used to refer to God.

So, in Modern English, "thou" and "thee", besides being more accurate, are actually more personal, informal, and intimate than the one general, boring, over-used pronoun that we are accustomed to use. Thus, "Thou shall not steal" has a very personal and direct application. Or, when we refer to God as "Thou" ... we are referring as children to our loving heavenly Father, not some distant and impersonally divine "you".

Thus, praying that some of this might be useful, and thanking you all for your patience, I bid you most heartily well to fare ...

In Christ,
+ Garth
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