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Teaching the Usage of *Thee* and *Thou*

John W. Welch

John W. Welch is a professor of law at BYU and editor-in-chief of BYU Studies.

In his May 1993 general conference address, Elder Dallin H. Oaks encouraged Latter-day Saints to address God by using “special words that have been sanctified by use in inspired communications, words that have been recommended to us and modeled for us by those we sustain as prophets and inspired teachers.”¹ In particular, he mentioned the use of the pronouns *thee*, *thou*, *thy*, and *thine* to show respect to God,² even though those words may seem “archaic. . . unfamiliar and difficult.”³ Indeed, using these reverent forms of speech when addressing God in prayer or encountering them in the scriptures can be confusing or awkward. But with a little effort, this small hurdle can be removed for people who wish to use these pronouns more comfortably.

The use of *thee* and *thou* has shifted somewhat arbitrarily and loosely over the centuries;⁴ however, I believe the following six guidelines may be helpful in teaching children or other students or useful simply in keeping the basic patterns in mind. These reminders are not intended to create rigid constraints on the free flow of words uttered in love and humility before the Lord because the essence of prayer is not in the parts of speech but in the sincerity of a person’s heart. The following patterns, however, may increase our familiarity with these forms and raise our comfort level, thus building our confidence and openness in speaking this way before the Lord. Using *thee-thou* language also helps English speakers to learn foreign languages, most of

which have two forms of *you* that are used in particular circumstances, depending on the local culture.

Guideline 1: *Thee* is like *me*. *Thy* is like *my*. *Thine* is like *mine*.

In other words, in places where it would sound right to use the first-person pronouns *me*, *my*, or *mine*, it is appropriate to use the rhyming second-person forms.

For example, a person would say, “Walk with *me*.” So in speaking of God, one would say, “Walk with *thee*” (not with *thou*). Similar pairs illustrate this point further:

People thank *me*.
 People thank *thee*.
 My mother knows *me*.
 My mother knows *thee*.
 This is *my* church.
 This is *thy* church.
 The glory be *mine*.
 The glory be *thine*.

Indeed, when praying, we can formulate a thought negatively in the first person and then resolve it positively in the second person with respect to God:

That they will glorify not *me*, but *thee*.
 Not *my* will, but *thy* will be done.
 The thanks be not *mine*, but *thine*.

Obviously, more is at work in improving our language than mechanically mastering an archaic form of speech. Thinking “not me, but thee” and “not my, but thy” can shift our attention away from ourselves and to our Father in Heaven. Speaking this way in prayer also reinforces the close relationship that God desires to foster between us and Him, the *me* and *thee*.

Guideline 2: Use *thine* instead of *thy* when the next word starts with a vowel.

These cases are exceptions to the first guideline. Accordingly:
thy son
thine only son
thy word
thine own word

This rule is similar to what happens in using *a* or *an*. English usage requires the use of *an* when the next word begins with a vowel sound:

a son

an only son

a day

an extraordinary day

When the main word begins with an *h*, the usage can go either way. The King James Bible treats the initial *h* as a vowel, but modern usage is mixed:

thy foot

thine hand (alternatively, *thy* hand)

thy mind

thine heart (alternatively, *thy* heart)

Guideline 3: Use *thou* as the subject of a sentence or of a dependent clause when you would normally use *you*.

In grammatical terms, *thou* is the nominative form. This rule is a little more difficult to apply than the first rule because, as the following example shows, the same word *you* can be used either as a subject (in the nominative case) or as an object (in the accusative case):

You love us, and we love *you*.

The first *you* is doing the loving; the second *you* refers to the one who is loved. This becomes:

Thou lovest us (Guideline 3), and we love *thee* (Guideline 1).

Note the similarity in spelling between *you* and *thou*, even though the *ou* is pronounced differently. The two words are closely related (through the German *du*). This third rule is further illustrated by other examples:

I am here.

Thou art here.

I see.

Thou seest.

You know our needs.

Thou knowest our needs.

You have given us.

Thou hast given us.

Guideline 4: Use *ye* as the plural equivalent of *thou*.

The word *ye* is not likely to be used in prayers, but it appears frequently in scripture.⁵ For example, when Jesus instructs individuals how to pray alone in their closets, He says, “When thou prayest.” When He instructs people regarding group prayers, He says, “After this manner therefore pray ye” (3 Nephi 13:6, 9).

Guideline 5: When *thou* is the subject, the indicative verb ends in *-st* or *-t*.

For example:

you *have*

thou *hast*

you *had*

thou *hadst*

you *would*

thou *wouldst* (or *wouldest*)

you *should*

thou *shouldst* (or *shouldest*)

you *know*

thou *knowest*

you *love*

thou *lovest*

A simple *-t* is added to the end of some English verbs where the *s* sound has dropped out:

you *will*

thou *wilt* (not *willst*)

you *are*

thou *art* (not *arst*)

Other verbs remain the same as in normal speech.⁶ Even a verb in the imperative mood with *thou* as the subject does not change: “Father, glorify thou me with thine own self” (John 17:5).

One of the best ways to learn to appreciate the rhythm and distinctive sound of *thee-thou* language is to read the scriptures out loud. Especially rich is the entire chapter of John 17, where Jesus prays to the Father. The King James translation renders Jesus’ words:

I have finished the work which *thou gavest* me.

They have believed that *thou didst send* me.

I pray not that *thou shouldest take* them out of the world.

Sanctify them through *thy truth*.

That the world may know that *thou hast sent* me, and *hast loved* them, as thou *hast loved* me.

Guideline 6: When the word *who* stands in place of *thou* or refers to God, the verb that follows may likewise end in *-st* or *-t*.

Our Father, [thou] who *art* in heaven.

But this usage is flexible. For example, in the sacrament hymn we sing, “O God the Eternal Father, who *dwells* (not *dwellst*) amid the sky.”⁷

Conclusion

In most cases, these six guidelines are the only rules a person needs to know to use *thee-thou* language. Strictness is not crucial; many variations exist. And if ever in doubt, we can usually avoid awkward or uncertain constructions by rephrasing but retaining the respectful tone. For example, to avoid a sentence like “We ask thee that thou mightest lend us thy mercy,” we might say, “We ask thee to lend us thy mercy” or “Please lend us mercy.” The Lord, who looks upon the heart, will understand and answer the humble prayer that is offered with real intent. ■

Notes

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Language of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 15–16.
2. On the rules of English grammar in the 1830s pertaining to the use of *thee* and *thou* in respectful discourse, see Noah Webster, *An Improved Grammar of the English Language* (New Haven: Hezekiah Howe, 1831), 25; Samuel Kirkham, *English Grammar* (Rochester, New York: W. Alling, 1835), 142–47.
3. Oaks, “The Language of Prayer,” 16.
4. The use of *you* began to replace *thou* and *ye* as nominatives in the fourteenth century, eventually becoming common in sixteenth-century speech; but “for a long while the old and the new forms often alternated with each other,” and by the eighteenth century *you* became the standard in English prose. See George O. Curme, *A Grammar of the English Language* (Essex, Connecticut: Verbatim, 1977), 2:15–16; 2:527–29; and J. N. Hook and E. G. Matthews, *Modern American Grammar and Usage* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), 170. During Elizabethan times, when the King James Version of the Bible was being produced, “there is strong evidence that, while the older ‘eth’ ending continued to be *written*, it was *pronounced* as if it were ‘-s’” (Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 272. So we cannot insist that the distinctions between these forms must be rigidly or dogmatically enforced.
5. “In Biblical language *ye* is now uniformly employed as nominative [plural] and *you* as dative and accusative [plural]. . . . In the original text of [the King James] version this usage was not so uniform, as there were in it a number of *you*’s where we now find *ye*” (Curme, *Grammar*, 2:15).
6. For a chart of the full inflection of English verbs, see Curme, *Grammar*, 1:327–33.
7. “O God, the Eternal Father,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 175.