

# AV Pronoun Debate: Ward VS McShaffrey

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## The AV Pronoun Debate

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### A Brotherly Exchange Between Mark Ward and Christian McShaffrey

The ongoing debate over Bible translations is often marked by more heat than light. This is unfortunate and can also lead to unlawful divisions in the Body of Christ. Mark Ward and Christian McShaffrey are no strangers to the debate and have recently decided to conduct an experiment: Arguing a specific point in a calm and charitable manner. The following exchange is the result and we publish it here in good hope that it will serve as a model for all who find themselves standing on opposite sides of the issue (or anywhere in between).

### Resolved: The Superior Accuracy of its Second-Person Pronouns Commends the Continued Use of the Authorized Version in Public Reading and Preaching

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#### 1. Christian (Affirmative Constructive)

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Confusion over inspired pronouns is as old as the garden. When Satan first questioned God's word, he also misquoted it by using a plural "ye" when God had spoken singularly, saying, "thou shalt not eat of the tree." Eve, being deceived, repeated the wrong pronoun (cf. Gen. 2:17, 3:1-3). The discussion was over *what God had said*, so Eve should have quoted God's word more accurately.

That is what this debate is about: accuracy. Modern translations of the Holy Bible no longer distinguish number between pronouns, and that compromises their accuracy.

Some readers may not remember what they learned in grammar school, so here is a quick review: second-person pronouns indicate the person, or people, being addressed by a speaker. The languages of original inspiration (Hebrew and Greek) distinguish the number of people being addressed, but contemporary English cannot. Our generic "you" can refer to an individual or a multitude.

The translators of the Authorized Version eliminated such ambiguity by using *t-pronouns* for the singular (*thou*) and *y-pronouns* for the plural (*ye*). These pronouns also distinguish case, but it may suffice for this debate only to focus on number. In that era, the ordinary "man on

the street” did not speak this strictly. It was a translational decision intended to preserve accuracy, which is crucial when it comes to interpretation.

Besides the aforementioned example (which might have doctrinal implications concerning Adam’s federal headship), another example of the interpretive usefulness of numbered pronouns is found in Luke 22:31-32.

If you read the passage in a modern version, it appears as a personal conversation between Jesus and Peter. It certainly starts out as that, and also ends as that, but when Jesus says, “Satan hath desired to have *you...*” he was addressing *all the apostles*. Nothing in the context hints at that shift. Only a y-pronoun can convey it.

There are not many solutions when it comes to solving the problem of scriptural pronoun confusion, and all of them involve *education*. Here, it seems, are the options:

“Explain it, preacher.” This is an unacceptable solution because it makes people dependent upon fallible, and oftentimes incompetent, teachers. Every Bible reader deserves immediate access to the inspired words of God.

“Insert a footnote.” This option is definitely better, but it may overestimate grammar proficiency levels in America. A footnote that reads, “The original Greek employs a second-person nominative singular” may actually be less intelligible than an archaic pronoun.

“Teach the pronouns.” This is easier than most people imagine. Simply let a kindergarten teacher write the words *thee* and *ye* on the chalkboard, and ask the children about each: “How many points are on top of the first letter?” The students now know and, thanks to the added visual mnemonic, will never forget. More importantly, the kindergartener now has more immediate access to the inspired Hebrew and Greek than a professor of biblical languages who is reading the English Standard Version. By retaining the use of numbered pronouns, nothing is lost and much is gained.

## 2. Mark (Negative Constructive)

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There is a sense in which I agree with the resolution as currently stated: the KJV’s second-person pronouns *are* more accurate—if what we mean is “closer in form”—to the Hebrew and Greek than are the second-person pronouns used in contemporary English.

But one must ask: what do we mean by “accurate”? I grew up in the fundamentalist world, where fornication is frowned upon because it leads to dancing; so I can’t say for sure how many people it takes to tango. But I’ve heard it’s two. A tango dancer may get all the steps “right,” but if he’s dancing by himself, what’s the point?

Likewise with communication: it takes a sender and a receiver. So I think clear communication of what God said \_to the audience you actually have\_ is the goal of translation. What else could it be? We are called to disciple the nations, and I'm going to have to presume that Christ intended each of us to reach the nations existing during our own lifetimes, or he would have outfitted us with time machines.

Do people in English-speaking nations understand the older forms *thou* and *ye*? Yes and no.

Yes: many contemporary English speakers understand that *thou* in "Thou shalt not kill" was a second-person pronoun. I think that many of them grasp, too, that *thou* was singular (and not plural) back then. *Thou* has hung around today in ways that *bolled* and *bewray* and many other Elizabethan words have not.

But no: I believe that a proper study would demonstrate that even experienced KJV readers have a hard time remembering that *you* in the KJV is always plural. Alas, I have a scientific study ready to go to check this, but I have no funding. I am stuck describing my own experience and making educated guesses at others'. I, for example, always misunderstood, "Let this mind be in **you**, which was also in Christ Jesus." I always assumed it was singular, even for decades after I was formally taught that *you* in the KJV is plural. Why? Because it's very difficult to make oneself forget what an incredibly common word means—and in our English, *you* "means" SINGULAR-OR-PLURAL-SECOND-PERSON-PRONOUN. I think the KJV is tangoing by itself in Phil 2; I think a lot of English speakers aren't getting the message.

This, too, is key: older forms like *ye* don't just communicate SECOND-PERSON PRONOUN; they also inject a note of solemnity, of archaism, perhaps even of humor. Imagine saying to a friend, "Art thou coming?" He would likely understand the strict literal meaning, but he'd (rightly) detect that you were trying to communicate something else. Who knows quite what? I think that making God sound like an Elizabethan does, yes, make him sound more grand. But it also makes him sound more grandiloquent. God did not choose archaic Greek in Paul's day; he chose the common variety. We should do the same in English and use footnotes for clarification where needed.

### 3. Christian (Affirmative Rebuttal)

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Yes, it takes two to tango and there is actually something worse than dancing alone: Allowing a third party to cut in. Due to the nature of inspiration, Bible translators should be concerned *primarily* with two parties: God and the original audience.

Per your example, unconverted nations need to hear what God said *to the saints at Philippi*. Explaining and applying those inspired words to a contemporary audience is properly the work of teaching, not translation (Matt. 28:19-20).

Your example also seems to bewray a deeper problem than misunderstanding pronouns. Namely, literary imperception. If the immediate contextual emphasis on like-mindedness, being of one accord, and esteeming others (vv. 2-4) does not incline the reader to anticipate a communal exhortation (vs. 5), nothing probably will.

As for the alleged difficulty of remembering the meaning of the AV's pronouns, my previously suggested t/y mnemonic device has proven extremely effective in my congregation.

The "Art thou coming?" illustration is as ironic as it is unpersuasive because you employ humorously grandiloquent expressions often in your YouTube videos without any apparent concern over alienating the plowboys who are watching on their iPhones.

Your proposed solution of adding explanatory footnotes is simply not reasonable. I actually did this with the plural verb conjugations and pronouns in Phil. 2 and ended up with more footnotes than there are verses!

All personal anecdotes aside, you have essentially conceded the debate by agreeing that the AV's pronouns are indeed superior in formal accuracy and offering no reasonably executable alternative.

#### 4. Mark (Negative Rebuttal)

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I plead guilty to occasional humorous grandiloquence on my YouTube channel. It's other people's fault if they come hear me—or the fault of algorithms (which, and this is a little known fact, get their name from a former US vice president cum tech inventor). But I learned long ago not to use obscure humor while preaching in church. Why? Well, nobody laughs. And a herald should *not* have only two audiences in mind; he needs, as I said earlier, to speak to the audience God gives him.

Bible translators, too, must translate not for the ideal reader who knows all they know but for the plow boy.

The answer KJV defenders always give to my English readability concerns is *teaching*. The plow boy must be taught to understand the more accurate and beautiful English of the KJV. And one would think that the second-person pronouns in the KJV provide a perfect opportunity. Many people already sort of know them from exposure to Shakespeare.

But in my experience, this teaching usually doesn't happen. I can't demonstrate this except from experience, however. So, in a way, I must admit defeat on the technical accuracy point of this debate (as I knew I would going in!)—*if KJV preachers will do what Christian does and teach their people to understand archaic second-person pronouns*. If KJV preachers can get their congregations to the point where 80% (?) of their members and regular attenders know

that “let this mind be in you” is plural, I’ll willingly lose. My goal is just to see people understand God’s word! I think the number is rather at about 5%—but, again, I lack the resources to prove it (anyone want to fund a Barna study?).

But I don’t think Brother McShaffrey has answered my point about what the inclusion of archaic forms does to the overall feel of the language—the way it makes not just the humor in Scripture but practically every single line sound grandiloquent. He took my suggestion of footnotes and applied it woodenly. Contemporary translations don’t need to footnote every plural, anymore than they need to footnote “whom” in “knowing of whom thou hast learned them” (2 Tim 3:14).

What do I mean? Old English used to distinguish, as Greek does, between singular and plural *relative* pronouns (like “whom”), not just *personal* pronouns (like “you”). But KJV and modern Englishes have no way of making this distinction; the very finest grammatical details just don’t always come over easily from one language to another—but God’s truth still does.

Meanwhile, a value most people aren’t actually getting—accuracy—is trumping a value they have a right to, the Bible in their own English. Again I say, God had a chance to use archaic Greek but chose the language of the people. We should do the same, and use footnotes where careful Bible teachers judge that a little extra help might be beneficial for the plow boy.

## 5. Christian (Affirmative Rebuttal)

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My opponent has admitted technical defeat, so I will simply tie up loose ends, agree on one point, and advocate for today’s plowboy.

As for loose ends, the language of the AV is technically *Early Modern*, not *Old English*. Also, I did not address the “overall feel” because that is entirely subjective. It does not “feel” quaint, humorous, or grandiloquent to me and, even if it did, why should I be surprised that an ancient book might actually sound ancient?

One point of agreement is this: If most preachers today are failing their people as alleged, they should repent or resign.

When it comes to the proverbial plowboy, let it be noted that Tyndale was not arguing for colloquial translations for the un-intelligentsia when he said, “If God spare my life, I will make a plowboy know more of the scripture than thou dost.” He was denouncing papal authority and, as a schoolmaster, simply wanted to help working-class folk understand scripture better than the priests. He succeeded.

Why should we effectively undo his work by making people dependent on a *new* priestly class of “careful Bible teachers” who “judge” whether and where to grant occasional insights to the inspired original via footnotes? Every man deserves immediate access to the inspired text and the grammatical precision of AV pronouns affords just that.

Finally, as one who homeschooled six children and pastored dozens more, I have personally seen the old adage proven: Most students rise—or fall—to the level of expectation.



Mark Ward (PhD, Bob Jones University) is the editor of *Bible Study Magazine* and author of its back-page column, “Word Nerd: Language and the Bible.” He is the author of several books and textbooks including *Biblical Worldview: Creation, Fall, Redemption* (BJU Press, 2016), *Basics for a Biblical Worldview* (BJU Press, 2021), and *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* (Lexham Press, 2018), which became a Faithlife infotainment documentary. He is also an active (read: obsessive) YouTuber.



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