



Peninsula City Church

Community

Singular or Plural? (Lost in Translation)

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Singular or Plural? (Lost in Translation)

Introduction

Q. What could happen if we really grasped the idea of community?

Have you ever stopped and thought about how we can all be about the individual? What about the group, how does it figure these days? This is not a new thing it has been said that,

“In his (Harvard sociology professor Robert Putnam) office in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, he spoke with passion about how society had moved since the 1960s from the ‘We’ society of ‘We’re all in this together’ to the ‘I’ society of ‘I’m free to be myself.’ The loss of community has many consequences, one of which is social isolation... We are not made to live alone... We have lived through an extended period during which the ‘I’ has grown stronger at the expense of the ‘We’... The over-emphasis on ‘I’ and the loss of ‘We’ leaves us isolated and vulnerable. It is not good to be alone.”¹

If that is the case, then it would affect the way that many read the Bible. That is, they would see it as purely relating to them as an individual. In other words, the Bible is just speaking to me as part of the ‘I’ society. But what if this is not the only way to read the Bible? What if there is a primary way to read it that focuses on the ‘We’ society?

The focus of this paper is the way the Bible was written to record being part of a community. Yes, the community is made up of individuals, but we were not made to live alone. Therefore, the Bible talks a lot about the community using plurals. Therefore, God said to Adam in the garden of Eden,

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man (Heb. *adam* humanity) to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him’” (Gen 2:18 NASB).

This is the order of creation we may have a partner, but also that we are part of community. However, it has not always been like this since things went sour in the garden.

1. Is there any difference in the Bible between singular and plurals?

Q. So, what is meant by the idea the singular and plural within the Bible?

Before we try to answer this question a word of caution, the first thing that needs to be said here is that we need to be careful when dealing with matters like this one. We need to be alert that we do not end up using oversimplifications. Remember that, ‘Context is king.’² This means that,

“Context is King affirms two core values or principles:

- (1) Always interpret Scripture with Scripture.
- (2) Our most basic goal is always to discern the author’s intended meaning.”³

What that means is that,

“Guideline: Examine its immediate context: the passage as a whole; the book as a whole.”⁴

¹ Sacks, Jonathan. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. John Murray Press. (Loc. 534, 702, 756 of 6580) Kindle Edition.

² McQuilkin, Robertson. *Understanding and Applying the Bible*. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009), 197.

³ Wu, Jackson. “Context is King.” <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2012/11/06/context-is-king/> (20th July 2020).

⁴ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, 197.

The following examples of the singular plural issue that we may have come across when reading our Bible are as follows. How do you know if they are speaking to individuals or more than one person? See below,

The first one is Jesus speaking,

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again” (Jn 3:7 NASB).

“How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?” (Jn 5:44 NASB).

“You, therefore, pray like this: ‘Our Father in heaven! May Your Name be kept holy” (Matt 6:9 The Complete Jewish Bible [CJB]).

Then we have Paul saying,

¹⁶ “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are” (1 Cor 3:16-17 NASB).

“And my God shall supply all your (plural, the Philippian Christ-followers) needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19 NASB).

Finally, Peter said

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Pet 1:2 NASB).

So, in dealing with the matter the singular and plural within the Bible, we need to keep things in the correct context. What this means is that we need to remember that, the groups are made up of individuals. So, strictly speaking, the biblical writer was talking to a person as well as persons. As it has been suggested,

“Though common, this sort of view of the plural is reductionistic; ‘there is no neat one-to-one correspondence between the grammatical alterations in a word’s form and the meanings thereby conveyed.’⁵ While the second-person plural can indeed be used to urge group application, it can also include individual application or a nuanced third alternative.⁶ Only context can indicate which type of application is called for... It is reductionistic to assert that the use of the second-person plural mandates that the application being called for concerns a group (or groups) and not the individual.”⁷

This will help us not to lose sight of the one midst the crowd. We need to remember that Jesus came for the one sheep as well as the flock.

Having stated this vital guideline, let us now look at the matter at hand. That is, what is meant by the idea the third person plural ‘they’ (3ps), the second person plural ‘you’ (2pp) and the second person singular ‘you’ (2ps)? On this, it has been said that,

“At the risk of oversimplifying their conclusions and using slightly different terms, I present it this way: the 3ps, the 2pp, and the 2ps contain different levels of rhetorical directness. All

⁵ David Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. (2nd ed.). (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

⁶ We refer to plural second person having application to singular second person. Though relevant here, we leave aside using the second person to refer to the third (that is, “you” [pl] used with the force “someone”). See Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 392–93.

⁷ Peterman, Gerald W. “Plural You: On the Use and Abuse of the Second Person.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.2 (2010): 186, 196.

three can be used to call for individual application; only the 2pp can call for group application. But generally speaking, the 3ps is less direct, the 2pp more direct, the 2ps most direct.”⁸

In the New Testament, the writers used both second person singular and plural pronoun you. It has been suggested that the difference is,

“Jesus uses plurals to present general statements and directions, while the second-person singular presents particular examples and applications of the general statements.”⁹

However, it is predominately the second person plural pronoun you that is used in the New Testament. To be more precise, the second person plural may be said as ‘you all’.

So, repeatedly we have the plural aspect being taught in the Bible. However, the English only uses one pronoun ‘you’ for both plural and singular. This has created a difficulty in our reading that, we think that it can always mean only me and not us. It has been estimated that there are,

“...over 1000 uses of the singular pronoun, and nearly 2200 of the plurals, a subject is also clearly expressed in every verb form. So, one must also distinguish between ‘you’ and ‘you all’ when there is no pronominal subject in evidence. Here too, plurals predominate... The Greek language, like most others, makes very clear distinctions. In English translations, however, the word ‘you’ has been used for both singular and plural pronouns. A plural ‘you’ addressed a group of people, as a group, a unit. If the individual members of a group were intended, ‘each / every one of you’, was used.”¹⁰

Consequently, we mainly read it in a self-centred way, understanding it to mean just me.

If the pronoun ‘you’ is used over 2200 time in the New Testament and just over half are 2pp, this makes a difference to how we need to understand what is said. But it is not always clear in our English Bibles if it is a 2ps or a 2pp or even 3pp. So, what can we do about this issue, especially as many cannot read the Greek New Testament? Well, probably the only clue that an English reader will have whether it is in the singular or plural is the context. Even then, we may not get it right all the time, as the speaker or writer may be addressing the group while speaking to the individual and vice versa. However, it will help us in many cases.

2. What can we conclude from all of this on the matter?

Q. What is lost in translation?

So, it appears that the matter of whether the ‘you,’ is singular or plural may be lost in translation. You may or may not have thought too much about this as you have read the Bible. But as part of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ society that we live in most of us probably are happy to read that Bible as either being mainly about me or we do not even think of how it encourages us into community. Just because we are Christ-followers and are part of a local church, does not mean that we will naturally be drawn to community above our desire to gratify self. So, what is lost in translation? Community is lost in translation. Others are lost in translation. One of the reasons is that for the most part whenever we read the pronoun ‘you,’ we think that it is just about me.

⁸ Peterman, “Plural You: On the Use and Abuse of the Second Person.” 194-195.

⁹ Buth, Randall. “Singular and Plural Forms of Address in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Bible Translator* 44 (1993), 446.

¹⁰ Word Study #142 — You, You-all, and Each of You.” <https://pioneernt.com/2012/04/25/word-study-142-you-you-all-and-each-of-you/#:~:text=Since%20modern%20convention%20makes%20no,to%20a%20group%2C%20not%20an> (6th July 2020).

So, in light of this issue, we need to intentionally retrain ourselves to read the Bible and see the 'us,' and 'we' and not merely the 'I,' and 'me.' Now, this may take some effort because basically, we are all so self-focused. Even in the way that we read the Bible. We need to be transformed in our thinking on this matter. Having said this, I have taken the passages that I mentioned earlier and will review them here. We will look at the pronoun 'you' in each passage and try to determine if it is singular or plural and what that means for us as part of the community of Jesus Christ.

1. The first one is Jesus speaking to Nicodemus, who has come to Him at night. As part of the conversation, Jesus said,

"Do not marvel that I said to you (singular, Nicodemus), 'You (plural, everyone) must be born again'" (Jn 3:7 NASB).

So, Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus about being born again. However, He was also pointing out that this truth applies to everybody who wants to see the kingdom of God Jn 3:3.

2. Jesus, in the following passage, is scolding the religious leaders. John pointed out that these were the Jews from Judea who were seeking to kill Jesus, Jn 5:16.

"How can you (plural, the Jews of vv18,19 and the same in this verse) believe, when you (plural) receive glory from one another, and you (plural) do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" (Jn 5:44 NASB).

Notice at first glance that this passage could be read in the singular but is, in fact, the plural you. The context of this verse is seen by reading Jn 4:16,18 "the Jews," and 19 "Jesus answered and said to them..." Then He spoke to the religious Jews through to the end of the chapter.

3. In our next example, we read that Jesus taught the crowd that was listening to Him, Matt 5:1-2. In this section of Matthew in Chapter six, Jesus was teaching how to pray. He said,

"You (plural, the crowd from Matt 5:1-2), therefore, pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven! May Your (singular, the Father) Name be kept holy'" (Matt 6:9 The Complete Jewish Bible [CJB]).

We have all probably used this outline to pray and rightly so, but there is more to it than it being our personal prayer guide. The reason being when Jesus said, "You, therefore, pray like this" he was speaking to the crowd mentioned in Matt 5:1-2. So, although we can use it as our own personal prayer guide, it is more significant than that, it is that we need to pray this way.

4. Then we come to Paul, who was encouraging the local church in Corinth to see that they are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he said,

¹⁶ "Do you (plural, the Corinthian Christ-followers 1 Cor 1:2 and in these verses) not know that you (plural) are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you (plural)? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you (plural) are" (1 Cor 3:16-17 NASB).

We love to use this verse to say that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We may have even heard it said that we are all temples of the Holy Spirit. That is, there are many temples. However, Paul is speaking to the whole church in Corinth as the temple (singular) of God. He was not saying that there are many temples, but that they were all one temple. The whole church of Jesus Christ is one temple (singular) where He lives us as this temple. There are not many individual temples.

Consequently, each time the word temple is used in these verses, it is in the plural, but each time the pronoun 'you' is used, it is in the plural. As a result, we are all the temple of God together. It was the case from day of Pentecost until today and into the future. There is only one temple, and it is made up of all of His own.

5. Another passage that we love to use for our self as individuals is the following,

“And my God shall supply all your (plural, the Philippian Christ-followers) needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19 NASB).

Yet, again Paul spoke to a local church and not merely one person. However, we like to take this verse also as applying to us as individuals. But this is not the case, Paul was speaking to the Christ-followers from the local church in Philippi, Phil 1:1. So, when he said this, he was speaking to the whole local church. This truth can be applied to all His children as the church.

6. Our final example comes from the second letter from Peter. He blessed them when he said,

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you (plural, a group of Christ-followers v1) in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Pet 1:2 NASB).

What a lovely blessing that we can apply to ourselves personally. However, again it was first spoken to the community of Christ-followers. They were,

“those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:1 NASB).

So, it is a blessing to ‘us,’ not just ‘me.’ Although as has been pointed out earlier, the community is made up of individual people (and we should not look sight of that), it is bigger than the individual.

A consequence of passages like these and the many others is that we can see that the community of Chris-followers is essential. This is vital in the day of ‘me,’ and ‘I,’ there needs to be a balance between the two positions. A unique feature of the church of Jesus Christ is that it has always been an expanding community of Christ-followers and it still is today. We just need to adjust our perspective to see this truth. The way we see things need to be transformed by the work of the Spirit of God, to see the church as He does. We are to be the community reaching out to those around us, drawing them to the Father through the person and work of Christ in the power of the Spirit. It has rightly bee said that,

“One significant contribution of religion today is that it preserves what society as a whole has begun to lose: that strong sense of being there for one another, of being ready to exercise mutual aid, to help people in need, to comfort the distressed and bereaved, to welcome the lonely, to share in other people’s sadnesses and celebrations.”¹¹

Some Concluding Thoughts

Q. What could happen if we really grasped the idea of community?

So, the idea of the community of us and we should not just be an ideal. It was meant to be the reality. As the church, for the most part, we have lost focus of the ‘We’ society of ‘We’re all in this together’ to the ‘I’ society of ‘I’m free to be myself.’ However, it is not too late; it is never too late to change. Our current climate might make think that it is not possible, but together we are the temple of the Spirit. There are more that need to be brought into His temple, and we have been sent out to get them. Remember, Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus also pointed out the truth, which applies to everybody who wants to see the kingdom of God, that you all need to be born again.

¹¹ Sacks, Jonathan. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. John Murray Press. (Loc. 729 of 6580) Kindle Edition.

So, why not when reading the Bible when you come to a pronoun 'you,' ask "Who is being spoken to here?" Maybe ask, "Is the 'you' used here singular or plural and what can be learnt from what has been said here?" we are all part of the community of the Kingdom of God as Christ-followers. Some will be encouraged by this truth of belonging where there will be others who are more solitary. But we are all part of this community. We need to be transformed in our reading and thinking on this matter. On this, it has been said,

"To be sure, not everyone likes company. There are people who find solace in solitude. They are alone without being lonely. But for the most part, life is about relationships. That is why loneliness can be depressing and dangerous."¹²

How would you answer the following?

- What part do you play in God's community of Christ-followers?
- What part can I play as part of God's community of Christ-followers?

Which leads up back to our main question:

- **What could happen if we really grasped the idea of community?**

¹² Sacks, Jonathan. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. John Murray Press. (Loc. 647 of 6580) Kindle Edition.