

thou and you

extract from Proposition XV § v

§ v. In this place it is appropriate to say something about using the *singular number* when speaking to *one person*; there is no controversy in Latin, because when we speak to one person, we always use the pronoun *tu*, and anyone who did otherwise would break the rules of grammar. . . . But the human pride which has corrupted many things refuses to practice this simple speech in other languages. They are puffed up with a vain opinion of themselves, as if the singular number were not enough for them, and they want others speak to them in the *plural*.<sup>1</sup> . . .

This form of speaking, and these profane titles originate from the base flattery of past ages, and from the delicate haughtiness of worldly people, who have invented these things so that they could honor one another under a pretence of some kind of civility and respect. This is why many so-called Christians have become so perverse in commending wicked people and wicked customs. The simplicity of the Gospel is completely lost; giving people and things their own names is out of fashion, and doing so is considered absurd and rude by these delicate parasites who want to call this flattery by the name of civility. Moreover it is clear that this way of speaking proceeds from a high and proud mind, because people generally use the singular number when speaking to beggars, and to their servants, and in their prayers to God. The superior speaks to his

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, the singular form of the second person, *thou*, was in use but not with anyone considered “superior,” who had to be addressed with the plural form *you*. Quakers suffered much persecution because they spoke to people of high rank with *thou*. It is ironic that in modern English the singular form has completely disappeared from ordinary speech. Nowadays the originally plural form *you* is used with one person as well as with many, without social distinction.

inferior in this way, but will not allow the inferior to speak to him in the same way, because he considers it a kind of insult. And so, human pride has put God and the beggar in the same category.

I don't think I need to use arguments to prove to people who know correct language that we ought to use the singular number when speaking to one person. That is the common usage in all of Scripture, and most interpreters translate it that way. It is obvious to us that this way of speaking to individuals in the plural proceeds from pride and is, in itself, a lie. Therefore we felt it was necessary for us to testify against this corruption by using the singular equally to *all* individuals. There is no reason why we should be persecuted for this, especially by Christians who profess to follow the rule of Scripture, when this is Scripture's usage. Perhaps it would seem incredible to tell how much we have suffered for this thing, and how these proud people fume, fret, and gnash their teeth, frequently striking and beating us when we have spoken to one of them in the singular number. This confirms us even more in our convictions, since we see that this testimony of Truth, to which God has told us to bear witness in everything, so vexes the serpentine nature in the children of darkness.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XV § v (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 441-443 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 341-343.