

A Consideration of William Hendriksen's Note on Personal Pronouns in English Translation
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A popular 20th Century commentary on the Gospel of Matthew is *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* by William Hendriksen, published in Grand Rapids, Michigan by Baker Book House, 1973, 1015 pp.

A brief search into the biography of Mr. Hendriksen (1900-1982) shows him to have been born in the Netherlands before coming to the United States where he earned a Th.D. from Princeton Seminary. Theologically, he identified as Reformed and taught at Calvin Seminary in Michigan where he was a colleague of Louis Berkhof. Significantly, several online sources list him as one of the translators of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, though he is not currently listed on the The NIV Bible website.¹

Hendriksen's commentary does not use the NIV translation or any other published translation, but, as the flyleaf indicates in the features of the commentary, "*New Translation: Each section of this commentary is preceded by the author's own translation, reproducing the true flavor of the original in good, idiomatic, modern English.*"²

At the end of his two page section on abbreviations, Hendriksen has a boxed comment with the words, "Please Note." The contents of the note read as follows:

*"In order to differentiate between the second person singular (see Matt. 26:64: "You said (it)") and the second person plural (same verse: "but I tell y o u,") the letters in "you sing." are not spaced; those in "y o u pl." are spaced."*³

Examples of this are throughout Hendriksen's work. For instance, in Matthew 18:33 & 35 the translation reads, "*Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you? So also shall my heavenly Father do to y o u if each of y o u does not heartily forgive his brother.*" And when citing Matthew 22 the translation reads, "*...have y o u not read what was spoken to y o u by God...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...You shall love your neighbor as yourself...*"⁴

Hendriksen's note on translation in his commentary brings up several valuable lessons for the sincere student of Scripture. These are enumerated as follows:

¹ The apparent entire list of translators of most NIV editions is available at the Bible Researcher website (<https://www.bible-researcher.com/niv-translators.html>). Hendriksen is listed as the 37th of 104 contributors to the first edition of the NIV between 1972-1978. See also for example Wikipedia's entry for William Hendriksen. The NIV website itself does not make it possible to find a list of the Committee on Bible Translation translators of the 1978 edition of the NIV. The translators of the 2011 NIV are listed on that website.

² The phrase, "true flavor of the original" in reference to the Greek text of the New Testament seems to be a nonsensical and unbiblical sentiment. It is doubtful that the authors of this phrase had David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or the Apostle John in mind, all of whom make reference to tasting or eating / consuming the words of God. It seems to indicate something other than formal equivalence.

³ Hendriksen, p. Viii.

⁴ Hendriksen, pp. 806-809.

First, Hendriksen’s note on the translation within his Matthew commentary serves as a good reminder of the practicality and accuracy of the way the King James Version handles the second person personal pronoun. The KJV’s use of “thee” and “thou” for singular, and “ye” and “your ” for plural is an undeniable strength of the Authorized Version, not a weakness. It may be that neither the KJV translators nor even Tyndale himself spoke or wrote this way exclusively (Tyndale did write this way in his introduction to his New Testament) but regardless, the original text is never so accurately reflected in a receptor language as when the second person personal pronouns are differentiated for the readers and hearers of God’s Holy Words.⁵

Second, one of the NIV’s own translators does not model his personal translation after the NIV, but instead seeks to emulate the KJV.⁶ When given the opportunity to do a translation that is entirely his own, Hendriksen goes back toward the translation philosophy of the KJV, not toward that of the NIV.⁷

Third, Hendriksen’s translation, like the KJV, puts the power in the hand of the “ploughboy,” allowing the average Bible reader who has no training in the original languages, to see for himself where the second person personal pronouns are differentiated in the underlying text as originally given by God. The NIV does not do for its readers what the KJV and William Hendriksen do for their readers.

Fourth, the differentiation of second person personal pronouns is not a phenomenon of “archaic English” or “old English,” but is what may be termed “Biblical English.” Today’s English is matter of factly less accurate than the English of classic translations of Tyndale and the Authorized Version in this regard. This is not necessarily the fault of today’s English speakers. But we cannot expect to have a translation of the Bible in “Today’s English” and retain as high a level of accuracy as the KJV unless something like what Hendriksen attempted is done.

As “actions speak louder than words,” the testimony of NIV translator William Hendriksen as seen in his translation within his helpful commentary on the Gospel of Matthew is another evidence why the Authorized Version of the Bible ought to be read and consulted by every serious student of the Word of God. As Peter was told, “thy speech bewrayeth thee.”

This article is part of a much larger forthcoming (God willing) study on *“The Commonwealth Handbook to Bibliology and Ecclesiology: Why Our 21st Century Inner-City Church Continues to Use a 500 Year Old Translation of a 2,000 Year Old Book.”* We pray that this is a help and blessing to you as you study to shew yourself approved unto God.

⁵ As Hammond notes, “The King James Bible reflects a level of grammatical precision that can’t easily be achieved with contemporary English.” See Robert W. Hammond, *Why We Still Use the King James Version at Long Hill Baptist Church*, <https://www.lhbaptist.com/pastors-blog>, December 21, 2022.

⁶ Hendriksen’s novel approach would not work for those hearing the text of his translation read, unless the reader were to do something like hold out the word “y o u” when the letters were spaced. For example, Jesus speaking to Nicodemus would said, “Verily I say unto you, youuuuuuu must be born again.”

⁷ As we have discussed elsewhere, the New World Translation of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (a.k.a. The Jehovah’s Witnesses) attempt to deal with this by capitalizing the plural “YOU,” with singular as “you.”