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SINGULARLY PLURAL

There is a major debate going on today among English grammar purists. English is imprecise enough as it is in the use of pronouns. We do have a distinction among the singular and plural pronouns for oneself: I/we. It gets a little more confusing in the third person: he/she/it and they. Then we have a confusion when addressing a person or a group, both of which are you. (In the King James Version of the Bible, as in Shakspeare, generally you is singular and ye is plural; but in the past 400 years we have lost that distinction.) The debate, though, is not about plural pronouns but about the singular. Generally the singular personal pronouns are I, you, he, she, and it. Unlike most European languages, the neuter (it) is only used for inanimate objects. A living person is not an it. So what do you do when you want to talk about a person but don't know their gender? You could be driving down the road and complain that "he or she cut me off." There is, to some purists, no pronoun that leaves gender ambiguous. Many people would simply say, "They cut me off." Some grammarians, though, do not like using the plural (they) as a singular of indeterminate gender. "There was only one driver in that car, so how can you use they?" Others point out that the word has been used this way since the 1300s, but some people still don't like it.

There is another sense in which the plural form of a word can be used as either singular or plural. When the number is known, we use the specific form, such as "I have one child; you have two children." Sometimes, though, the number is not specified and we have to use the plural as a nonspecified number. Such may be the case when Paul gives the qualities of an elder. "One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity." (1 Tim 3:4) Is Paul saying that a man cannot be an elder unless he has more than one child? Or is he saying that he must have at least one child, which child or children are obedient to him. (It is the "subjection," after all, that is the qualification, not the number of children.) There are some congregations that hold that an elder must have at least two children, but most would agree that children is used in a non-numeric way.

A few verses later Paul speaks about deacons. He says, "Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well." (1 Tim 3:11-12) What a mess of singulars,

plurals, and plurals used as singular. Few people would say that "their wives" means that every deacon must have multiple wives. In fact, the next sentence makes it clear that they must have only one wife. But even there we have the potential confusion that a group of deacons should collectively be the husbands of one wife; that is, one woman shared between them all. This is clearly not the case, but it does show the potential confusion of using plurals to mean "one or more" of something.

In those instances we generally understand that children, wives, and deacons may be understood to include one or more. There is a passage, though, that uses an indeterminate plural that most people (at least in the Churches of Christ) insist must be plural. "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee." (Tit 1:5) It is longstanding doctrine that each congregation that has elders must have a plurality of elders. (Interestingly, most don't take this passage to mean that every congregation must have elders.) If an elder can have only one child, and if a deacon's wife must have only one husband, why does this not say that each city may have one or more elders? Is it not like telling a group of children that they need their parents' permission for something, knowing that some of them may have only one available parent? Granted, a plurality of elders in a congregation is good, in order to avoid one man lording it over a congregation, but this verse does not necessarily say that. Nor does it say that in a city with more than one congregation you may have one set of elders over all of them, although it could be construed that way.

Grammar is a wonderful thing. But sometimes it causes as much confusion as it does clarity.

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TIDBITS

Sometimes a thought comes to mind that is not really enough for a full article. Sometimes it may be worthy of an article full of short pieces, such as in my earlier articles entitled Musings. (Minutes With Messiah July 2000 and August 2006) This time I think I will just call them tidbits.

When confronted by God at the burning bush, Moses made the excuse that he was “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Ex 4:10) God replied that he could make him speak well. When Moses further pleaded for God to send someone else, God replied that Aaron was coming to meet Moses, and He knew Aaron could speak well. Some have taken this to mean that Moses had a speech impediment, perhaps a stutter. If so, it is amazing that this man who could not speak well could, at the end of his life forty years later, deliver the oration that is the majority of the book of Exodus. Several things come to mind. First, God could have healed Moses’ impediment during the forty years; but why not do so immediately? Second, Moses was just making an excuse; but God responded as if it was a legitimate argument. Third, Moses spent forty

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years speaking Egyptian, and another forty speaking Midianite. Perhaps in the final forty he learned to be fluent in Hebrew, rather than speaking it haltingly. In German I am also slow of speech, but after six months of immersion training I would probably speak almost like a native; so it may have been with Moses. But then, why did Aaron have to speak before Pharaoh? Egyptian was Moses’ heart language. Maybe there is another answer. Regardless of which you accept, God still was able to take a man who thought he wasn’t a good speaker and make him a great one. We, then, should not use this as an excuse for not teaching others the gospel.

In Genesis 29, Jacob sought the hand of Rachel in marriage. He agreed to work seven years for her. When the time came, Laban substituted Leah for Rachel. (Some rabbis say that Rachel had a part in this deception.) When Jacob complained, Laban said, “Fulfil her week, and we

will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.” (Gen 29:27) So Jacob worked another seven years for Rachel, but with a difference. The first seven years came before the marriage (to Leah in Rachel’s place), but the second seven years came after he married Rachel. Why? Did Laban not trust this stranger, although a kinsman, after just meeting him, but changed his mind after seven years?

Speaking of Leah, she was said to have had “weak [or tender or infirm] eyes.” Nobody is sure what this means. It is not likely that it meant nearsightedness, unless that gave her a perpetual squint. Otherwise her eyes would not have been contrasted with Rachel’s beauty. Whatever it meant, David had the opposite characteristic. In 1 Samuel 16:12, David is described as having a “beautiful countenance,” which would literally be translated as “fair eyes.” Whatever Leah’s eyes lacked, David’s made up for it.

Bigotry is not new. Joseph’s brothers went down to Egypt for food during a famine. On their second trip down, Joseph (now the Prime Minister of Egypt) invited them to dinner.

And they set on for him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, which did eat with him, by themselves: because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians. (Gen 43:32)

The Egyptians would not eat with the Hebrews, but the joke was on them. They had been eating with a Hebrew (Joseph) for at least eight years. And that is the way of bigotry. In the words of Oscar Hammerstein II, “You have to be carefully taught.” And even then you cannot always tell. Color of skin is not a reliable indicator of whom to hate; there are many who can “pass.” If the bigotry is with some other characteristic, it is likewise hard to tell. Is he gay or not? Is he Jewish or not? Is he a Republican [or Democrat] or not? Many were the citizens of 1930s Germany who were friendly with their neighbors until the day that they were exposed as “Juden.” Wouldn’t it be easier to love everyone, regardless of distinction, so that you don’t have to suddenly change your mind about them?

Did you ever wonder who baptized the apostles? Or even how they baptized thousands in one day? With the apostles it may be that God baptized them. “For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” (Acts 1:5) It may be that the baptism with the Holy Spirit was sufficient in their

case. On the other hand, Cornelius (Acts 10) had the same baptism with the Spirit as they had, but he still had to be immersed for forgiveness of sins. Another possibility: the apostles baptized each other. The command is to be immersed, and so it seems irrelevant who administers it as long as the one being baptized acknowledges that it is for forgiveness of sins. (Acts 2:38) So it may be that one apostle baptized another, then that one baptized the others. But what about the 3,000? Could 12 men immerse that many people in one day? Even if the immersion was administered only by those who had faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which is likely, it could have been exponential rather than linear. That is, twelve apostles baptize twelve people. Those 24 (twelve plus twelve) baptize 24. Then 48. At that rate, it would only take eight rounds of baptisms to reach the 3,000 number. And that is assuming a one-on-one ratio. It may be that several people were immersed at once by one person witnessing it. But where would they find that much water in Jerusalem, away from any river? These were Jews. Immersion was already a part of their culture, and so they had *mikvot* already prepared. After all, on any given day one-thirtieth of the female population and possibly that proportion of males or more required ritual cleansing. There had to have been hundreds of places in town where multiple people could be immersed.

The other day I was reading *The Mother Tongue*, Bill Bryson's book about the development of the English language. He devotes an early chapter to the development of language in general. Linguistics as a science is barely 200 years old. In the late 18th century, someone noted similarities between languages. This led to the classification into language groups, such as Indo-European, Athabaskan, and Dravidian. Some languages defied classification. For instance, it was long believed that the Basque language of the western Pyrenees was unique, with no relatives. That alone made linguists scratch their heads. But then it was determined that Basque is related to a language of southern India. How could two related languages exist in two widely-separated areas of the world, with no possible link between them? Linguists have long had a dream of finding a single, original language. Various theories have been put forth with disparaging names such as the bow-wow, ding-dong, or ta-ta theories. Linguists tend to pooh-pooh (also the name of a theory) the oldest and best-known theory of how languages developed or diversified.

And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore

is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (Gen 11:6-9)

This was the one-language theory long before any other. Whether that original language was Proto-Indo-European, Chaldean, or something entirely lost to history is irrelevant. One might even name this theory the Babel theory or the Tower theory. How about just the God theory?

Descriptive words or phrases. We all use them, and probably have our favorites. Sly as a fox. Dumber than a pile of bricks. Beautiful as a New Mexico sunset. (That last one, knowing that no other sunset except maybe one at sea can compare.) Sometimes these descriptions are repetitions of an old cliché. At other times we make up our descriptions based on personal experience. Moses was not

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immune to this practice. When he wrote about Lot's choice of land to settle, one wonders if he makes reference to a favorite place as a descriptor.

And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. (Gen 13:10)

Zoar, in reference to a town on the Plain of Jordan, appears several times in the Bible. That Zoar does not fit Moses' description of an Egyptian town. Most Egyptian towns were not "well-watered," but as an Egyptian prince Moses had probably spent a considerable time in the Nile delta. Maybe Zoar was his favorite summer palace, although we have no record of such a place. No record, anyway, except in a descriptive phrase for a fair land, comparing it even with the Garden of Eden.

I have a bunch of other notes that may or may not turn into articles. Some of them are casual thoughts like these. As you read the Bible, take note of unusual phrases or verses. Some of them may just be a nice turn of phrase. Others may raise questions. Some of those may lead to deeper research, but others may just be tidbits of knowledge to be stored up and pondered on. Just because it is not worth writing a doctoral thesis about does not make it any less interesting. In fact, just that they make you ponder makes them tidbits worth noticing. After all, a nibble of chocolate tastes just as good as a bite.

GOOD PERSECUTION

Some complain that Christians are now a persecuted group in America. They cite the apparent increase in support of certain sins. They mention the removal of Bibles and prayer from schools; although neither has been banned except as a mandatory practice. They bring up the removal of Jewish scriptures (the Ten Commandments) or nativity scenes from government buildings. They object to the term “happy holidays” instead of “merry Christmas.” None of these things, in and of themselves or collectively, really constitutes persecution. But even if Christians are mildly persecuted in America (as opposed to being beaten, imprisoned, or killed as in other countries), that may not be a necessarily bad thing.

Jesus had a different view of persecution than we generally hold. He thought of it as an occasion for rejoicing.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matt 5:10-12)

On another occasion the Jewish leaders threatened to kill Jesus because he had performed a miracle on the Sabbath. After defending his actions, he told his disciples, “If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.” (Jn 15:20) It seems that Jesus is saying that if we are not persecuted we may be doing something wrong. If we are following him, we will be persecuted; if we are not persecuted, we may not be noticeably following him.

In another sense, though, persecution may be beneficial. A lack of persecution can lead to complacency. The message of the prophet Haggai was, “wake up and rebuild the Temple.” The people who had stayed in Jerusalem when others were carried off to Babylon had become complacent. It took Haggai, Nehemiah, and the high priest Joshua the son of Josedech to start building, and only then did the surrounding people start persecuting them.

One can look earlier in Israel’s history. After years in Egypt the people became slaves. They could have buckled under this persecution but they did not.

Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. (Ex 1:11-12)

This same pattern held true for the first-century church. Everything seemed to be going smoothly until Stephen was executed. Then things changed, ultimately for the better.

And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. (Acts 8:1, 4)

Had this persecution not arisen, the church would not have spread outside Jerusalem. It is even possible that God caused, or at least allowed, this persecution for that purpose. Just as the confusion of languages at Babel caused men to disperse, so persecution can cause people to spread and increase the population of the church.

Timothy J. O’Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123