

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #22: THE EDITORIAL OR LITERARY “WE”

By John Temples

English, Greek, and many other languages have a rhetorical device called the “editorial we” (sometimes called the “literary we” or “literary plural”). It involves using the pronoun *we* when you mean “I” or people in general. (The pronouns *you*, *they*, *us*, and *our* can also be used in this fashion.) Many style manuals discourage the use of the editorial *we* in formal text, but its usage remains quite common in everyday speech and writing. Examples of it are also found in the Bible, which makes it of great interest to Bible students.

WHY DO WE USE THE EDITORIAL *WE*?¹

It is used by editors and op-ed writers to state the official position of their publication or organization on a particular issue. That is why it came to be called the “editorial *we*.” In some newspapers, the daily editorial is called “Our View” or “Our Position.” It lets the reader know that the position taken is not just that of an individual editor, but of the paper’s entire staff.

It is used to speak of people in general or indefinitely. “By adding 3 and 5, **we** get 8.” “**We** can’t believe everything **we** hear.” There’s a Bible example in 1 Thessalonians 4: 15--“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that **we** who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.” (“We who are alive” is the literary plural or editorial *we*. Paul did not mean that he or the Thessalonians would be alive when the Lord returns; he meant people in general.) Jesus used the editorial *we* in this way: “And He said, ‘To what shall **we** liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall **we** picture it?’” (Mark 4:30.)

It is used for inclusion or establishing common ground, to identify with one’s readers or hearers. It’s a means of bonding with others--it’s “you and I.” “**We** honor George Washington as the father of **our** country.” “**We**’re all in this together.” Ezra

¹ And yes, I just used it.

did not sin against God by marrying a foreign woman, as many of his countrymen did; yet when he prayed to God about the matter, he said “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for **our** iniquities have risen higher than heads, and **our** guilt has grown up to the heavens. Since the days of our fathers to this day **we** have been very guilty, and for our iniquities **we**, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day” (Ezra 9:6-8). To strengthen his bond with his Gentile readers, Peter even went so far as to include himself in the class of sinning pagan Gentiles: “For **we** have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles--when **we** walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (1 Peter 4:3).

It is used to soften the overuse of “I” or to achieve a degree of anonymity or ambiguity. It’s a handy literary device for diverting attention from one’s self. The more people you can include in a statement, the less attention is called to you! Politicians specialize in this vague usage. You often hear congresspersons saying, “This is who **we** are” or “This is not who **we** are” in regard to some particular issue. Nothing like implying the whole nation agrees with your political position!

It is used to be condescending or patronizing. A doctor may ask a patient, “And how are **we** doing today?” A parent may tell a child, “It’s time to take **our** medicine.” A waiter asks, “And what are **we** having today?” And men, who can forget this one: “Hmmm...**we** seem to have left the toilet seat up again, haven’t **we**?”

THE ROYAL *WE*

There’s an interesting and amusing form of the editorial *we* known as the “royal *we*” or “imperial *we*.” Kings, queens, popes, and monarchs routinely use “*we*” when they mean “I” for purposes of formality, dignity, or even to claim an association with God--to mean “God and I make this decree.” Queen Victoria is reputed to have said when someone in her presence told an off-color joke, “*We* are not amused.” This usage is so ingrained in monarchs that when former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announced the birth of a grandchild in a 1989

press release, she said, “We have become a grandmother.” The royal *we* was in use as far back as Old Testament times. In Ezra 4:8 we read² that a personal letter was sent to King Artaxerxes. In his reply, Artaxerxes said, “The letter which you sent to **us** has been read before me” (Ezra 4:18). Of course, this usage sounds awkward to regular people, and smacks of pomposity, condescension and self-importance. You might want to heed Mark Twain’s advice: “Only presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial *we*.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EDITORIAL *WE* IN BIBLE STUDY

A failure to understand the editorial *we* usage can lead to erroneous interpretations of important Bible doctrines, statements, and references to persons. Examples:

Missing the fact that Bible writers often used “we” or “us” in different senses. Paul used *we* with at least four different meanings:

- Christians in general (Romans 5:1, Galatians 6:9, Philippians 3:16)
- His fellow Jews (Romans 3:5, 9; Galatians 3:23-25; Ephesians 1:12)
- The apostles (1 Corinthians 2:12, 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20)
- Himself (Romans 1:5, 1 Corinthians 9:4-5, 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, 3:1)

Drawing wrong conclusions in regard to the apostles’ understanding of the time of the Lord’s return. We’ve³ already cited 1 Thessalonians 4: 15--”For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that **we** who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.” Many readers have erroneously concluded from this that Paul believed Jesus would return in his lifetime. But Paul was just using “we” in a generic and indefinite sense. Here are brother Burton Coffman’s comments on 1 Thessalonians 4:15: “Paul used the editorial ‘we,’ not meaning at all that he personally intended to survive to the Second Advent; but, as in Lightfoot’s paraphrase, ‘When I say “we,” I mean those who are living, those who survive to that day.’ Nothing could be more flimsy than the postulations of scholars built upon Paul’s famous ‘we.’ It was his constant habit

² There it is again--I can’t help myself.

³ I used it again. See how handy it is?

to identify himself with the readers, even those involved in sin (Heb 2:3; 6:3). Here Paul identified himself with those who would survive to the Second Advent, but on other occasions he identified himself with those who would rise from the dead (1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:14).” (Coffman's Bible Commentary, Copyright © 1971-1993 by ACU Press, Abilene Christian University. All rights reserved.)

Other passages make it clear that Paul knew that he would die before Jesus returns. In Acts 20:29, he told the Ephesian elders, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” And in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, he warned that a major and prolonged apostasy would occur before the Lord’s return.

Failing to distinguish between references to the apostles alone and Christians in general. Sometimes “we” or “us” in the Bible refer to all Christians; other times the apostles alone are under consideration. Bible readers must be careful to note this distinction. Examples:

- “But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to **us** through His Spirit.... Now **we** have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that **we** might know the things that have been freely given to **us** by God.... **We** have the mind of Christ’” (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). The subject is miraculous inspiration and revelation. Who are the recipients of this miraculous revelation? To whom do the pronouns *we* and *us* refer? “All Christians” is the answer given by many. But a careful study of the context will show that Paul means only the apostles, or possibly just himself (the editorial *we*). Note the contrast between “we” and “you” in verses 1, 2, 3, and the first verse of chapter 3.
- Many people read the promises of divine and miraculous inspiration Jesus made to “you” in John 14-16 and assume that the “you” means all Christians. But Jesus was speaking only to the apostles.

- There's a similar situation involving the word "they" in Acts 2:1. That reads, "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, **they** were all with one accord in one place." Who are "they"? Back in chapter 1, the 120 disciples are mentioned. Many people today, in their zeal to claim miraculous powers, say that the "they" of Acts 2:1 are the entire 120. In fact, one Bible version, the "New Living Translation," reads, "On the day of Pentecost *all the believers* were meeting together in one place." Of course, the words "all the believers" are not in the original text--the NLT compilers simply "translated" their view of the situation right into the text! But when you (dare I say we?) read the last verse of chapter 1 along with the first verse of chapter 2, who "they" are immediately becomes clear: "And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with **the eleven apostles**. 2 When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, **they** were all with one accord in one place." The obvious antecedent of the pronoun "they" is the eleven apostles. They were the only ones endowed with miraculous gifts on that occasion.

Finally, while we're on the subject of personal pronouns, I've noticed that some prayer leaders in our assemblies say "I pray" instead of "we pray." Maybe it's not a big deal, but I think corporate prayer is a time for an editorial *we*! It's a public, congregational prayer, not a personal one. To me, inclusive language is more appropriate--you're voicing the sentiments of the whole congregation. Saying "I pray" might make some feel that they are not part of the prayer, or that they are eavesdropping on someone else's personal prayer. I believe a prayer leader who begins his prayer with "let us pray," and uses "we" often, draws his hearers in and encourages them to be part of his prayer. --John Temples