

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

**“WE” IN PAUL<sup>1</sup>**

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As is well known, there are two main ways by which languages distinguish between first person (in English “I” or “we”), 2nd person (“you”), and 3rd person (“he,” “she,” or “they”). One way is by the form of the verb, as in the Greek *luō* “I untie”; *lueis* “you (singular) untie”; *luei* “he or she unties.” The other way is by the use of pronouns, as in the English “I untie.”

Many languages combine these two methods in different ways. On the one hand, in English the 3rd person singular is usually different from the other forms: “he unties,” but even there it is necessary to use a pronoun (“he” or “she”) or a noun (“John unties”). On the other hand, in Greek, in which verb forms give all the required grammatical information, pronouns are sometimes used as well, generally to add a certain amount of emphasis. For example, in Rom 7.14 Paul writes, “We know that the law is spiritual; but *I* am unspiritual,” using the pronoun *egō* “I,” for emphasis. (All NT quotations are from *Today’s New International Version* [TNIV] unless otherwise indicated.)

In some languages, the situation can be much more complicated. William D. Reyburn writes:

To give just a taste of Cherokee difficulties consider the following: English has seven subject pronouns: I and we, you singular and plural, he, she, it, and they. By contrast Cherokee has eleven: I, I and another person (we 1), I and more than one other person (we 2), I and you singular (we 3), I and you singular plus others (we 4), you singular, (you 1), you dual (you 2), and you plural (you 3), he/she animate, it inanimate, they animate and inanimate ... English has one way to say “we” but in Cherokee the speaker has to choose one out of four, depending on the persons that must be included or excluded. (*Marching Through Babel. True Tales from the Life of a Linguist* [2002, obtainable from [www.Orders@Xlibris.com](http://www.Orders@Xlibris.com)], 71)

Cherokee is perhaps an extreme example, but many languages specify whether “we” includes or excludes the people being addressed. This can cause problems for translators when translating into such a language from a language which does not make this distinction. For example, it can cause problems for translators from NT Greek into a language like Cherokee. Translators then have to decide in each case whether the writer’s “we” includes or excludes the people to whom he is writing. The Paratext 6 program for translators includes, in its Checklists tool, a list of NT passages where decisions need to be made between inclusive and exclusive pronouns, but this list is as yet “unreviewed,” and should be used with caution. This article will consider the issue only as it occurs in letters attributed to Paul and addressed to churches.

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The decision on which type of pronoun to use is usually fairly easy. As always, the solution is to be found by looking at the context. Sometimes, Paul solves the problem by stating explicitly who "we" are. In 2 Cor 1.19, e.g., he writes, "Jesus Christ ... was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy." The Christians to whom Paul is writing are excluded, not only because Paul tells us who "we" are, but also because the text makes a clear distinction between "us" ("me and Silas and Timothy") and "you" (the Corinthians). In the same way, in 1 Cor 4.6, Paul writes, "I have applied these things to myself and Apollos ... , so that you may learn from *us* ... ." It is unusual for Paul to say so clearly what he means by "we"; but where he uses "we" and "you" forms close together, it is usually safe to assume that "we" excludes "you" (the people to whom he is writing). However, when Paul writes "we all," as e.g. in Rom 4.16; 8.32; 14.10, 12 (literally: "each of us"); 1 Cor 12.13; 2 Cor 3.18, that is almost always a clear sign that the recipients of the letter are included.

Sometimes Paul uses one kind of "we" or the other throughout quite long passages. In 2 Corinthians he is concerned to defend his own and his companions' ministry against harmful attacks, so the great majority of the occurrences of "we" in this letter exclude the Corinthians. Only occasionally does he appeal to deep convictions which he and his readers hold in common: e.g., when he writes "*our* Lord Jesus Christ" (1.3; 6.16); "*we* all ... are being transformed into [Christ's] likeness" (3.18); or "*we* are the temple of the living God" (6.16). These cases would use inclusive "we."

Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians are also concerned mainly with his and the other evangelists' relations with the Christian community. "We" in these letters is therefore most often exclusive. Some of the exceptions are common expressions such as "*our* God and Father himself and *our* Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 3.11); "*our* Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5.23, 28; 2 Thess 2.1, 16; 3.18; compare 2 Thess 1.8, 12); "*our* God" (2 Thess 1.11); "God *our* Father" (2 Thess 2.16).

The reference in 1 Thess 3.2 to "Timothy, our brother" is particularly interesting. The *Translator's Handbook on Thessalonians* (32) says: "the phrase *our brother* would be inclusive ... , since Timothy would be a fellow believer, not only of Paul and Silas, but of the Thessalonians as well." The last part of this statement is clearly true, but in the context: "We sent Timothy, who is our brother ... ," it seems more likely that "our," like "we," refers to Paul and Silas, and is therefore exclusive.

First Corinthians appears to hold a balance between defence of the apostolic preaching and ministry, in which exclusive "we" is mainly used (chs. 2 and 4; 15.11-15, 30), and explanation of the Christian message, which sometimes calls for inclusive "we" (e.g. in 5.8; 6.11, 14; 8.8; and throughout ch. 10).

In contrast to 2 Corinthians, other Pauline letters are almost entirely about fundamental truths that Christians hold in common, but which Paul needs to explain in more detail. Romans is one such letter. Occasionally, he may refer to what he and other evangelists have in common, e.g. when he writes: "Through

[Jesus Christ] *we* have received grace and apostleship” (Rom 1.5; we shall return to this text later). In Romans, as (much more strongly) in 2 Corinthians, there is a note of controversy: “Why not say—as *we* are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that *we* say—‘Let us do evil that good may result’?” (Rom 3.8). In this text, the two uses of “we” clearly mean, not the Romans, but Paul and his co-workers. Often in this letter Paul draws his readers into a kind of virtual dialogue, using expressions such as: “*we* know” (2.2; 3.19; 6.6, 9; 7.14; 8.22, 28) or “What then shall *we* say ... ?” (4.1; 8.31; similarly 6.1; 7.7). In such texts, “we know” cannot possibly mean: “we evangelists know, but you Romans do not”; it must include the readers. Similarly, when he writes: “What then shall we say ... ?”, he is not asking someone beside him what he should say next; he is drawing the readers into the discussion, inviting them to think through the implications of their faith.

Ephesians, even more consistently than Romans, is concerned with Christians’ common faith and experience. Almost all the uses of “we” in this letter are inclusive, from the opening: “Praise be to the God and Father of *our* Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed *us* ...” (1.3) to the concluding: “Grace to all who love *our* Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (6.24). The only exceptions are 1.11-12, where “we” is contrasted with “you also,” and the personal note near the end: “I am sending [Tychicus] to you ... , that you may know how *we* [Paul and his co-workers] are” (6.22).

For a rather different reason, most of the occurrences of “we” in Philippians are also inclusive. Philippians is a very personal letter. Paul is writing from prison, and although Timothy is with him (1.1), he is writing from his own experience. He therefore uses “I” much more often than “we,” and more often than in his other letters. He even, rather unusually, writes “Christ Jesus my Lord” (3.8), and “my God” (4.19). The only certainly exclusive use of “we” is in 3.17, where, just after speaking of “following my example,” Paul goes on, referring to himself and his fellow-evangelists: “keep your eyes on those who live as *we* do.”

Large parts of Galatians are concerned either with Paul’s personal experience (1.11-13; 2.1-14), in which “I” is more frequent than “we,” or with theological and ethical teaching (including exposition of OT texts), in which “you” forms are the most frequent. There are however some contrasts between the exclusive “we” and “you” (2.4-5), in a passage where Paul and Barnabas are “we,” and other evangelists are “they” (2.9-10), and also some passages where “we” refers to all Christians without distinction (3.13-14, 23-24; 4.3-6). In 4.6, Paul finds the dividing line between “you” and the inclusive “we” very easy to cross: “Because *you* are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into *our* hearts” (4.6).

Colossians, like Galatians, contains a good proportion of theological and practical teaching, in which first person forms, whether “I” or “we,” are comparatively rare, and “you” forms more frequent. In 2.13-14, however, after speaking of “the uncircumcision of *your* [the Colossians’] sinful nature,” Paul immediately (and sensitively) links himself with his readers, and continues with inclusive “we”: “He forgave us all *our* sins, having canceled the

statement ... that was against *us* and that stood opposed to *us*." In the same way, after the "you" passage 1.9b-12, Paul continues from v. 13 with inclusive "we": "For he has rescued *us* from the dominion of darkness, and brought *us* into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom *we* have redemption." (If the early manuscripts which have "we" instead of "you" in v. 12 are correct, then the inclusive use starts in v. 12). Otherwise, though, most occurrences of "we" in Colossians are exclusive rather than inclusive, beginning with a typical example in 1.3-4: "*We* always thank God ... when *we* pray for you, because *we* have heard of your faith ..."

This rapid general survey of Paul's usage in his letters to churches has shown among other things how responsive he is to his circumstances. At one extreme, in Romans, the frequent use of inclusive "we" has the cumulative effect of drawing the receptors (whom Paul has never met as a group) into his exploration of what it means to be Christian. At the other extreme, large parts of the letters to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians, addressed to Christian communities which Paul knew well, are a vigorous dialogue between Paul and his co-workers on the one hand, and the readers on the other; so most uses of "we" are exclusive.

There are however a number of passages which raise particular problems.

One group of these concerns "we" occurring in quotations, mostly from the Old Testament, but also from people whom Paul probably knew personally. In Rom 3.8, he quotes people who say "Let *us* do evil that good may result." These people probably intended this bad advice to apply quite generally, in which case the "us" would be inclusive. In 1 Cor 8.1, "*We* know that '*We* all possess knowledge'," Paul is probably quoting a slogan current in Corinth. The second "we," followed by "all," is clearly inclusive. So is the first, since Paul is stating something about which he and his readers, even his opponents, agree, though he goes on to show immediately where that agreement ends: "But knowledge puffs up ..."

Where Paul's quotations from the Old Testament include "we," it is important to decide, not what the OT writer meant by "we," but what Paul means in his quotation. The two may of course be the same, as they are in Rom 8.36, where Paul quotes Ps 44.22:

For your sake *we* face death all day long;  
*we* are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

The Psalmist is speaking inclusively of Israel's suffering, and Paul is speaking, not only of his own and his co-workers' suffering, but asking, in the name of all Christians, "Who shall separate *us* from the love of Christ?" (v. 35). In Rom 9.29, Paul quotes Isa 1.9:

Unless the Lord Almighty  
had left *us* descendants,  
*we* would have become like Sodom,  
*we* would have been like Gomorrah.

This is the last of a series of four OT quotations. Paul had introduced the third of these with the words: "Isaiah cries out concerning Israel"; Paul applies all these quotations inclusively to the Christian community.

Galatians 2.14b-21 poses a special problem, caused largely by the fact that the biblical writers did not use quotation marks. The passage begins with a clear statement that Paul is quoting what he himself "said to Cephas in front of them all" (v. 14a). There is no such indication of where this self-quotation ends. Most of the translations we have consulted close the quotation at the end of v. 14, but several note that some interpreters continue it to the end of the chapter; in fact, others close it at the end of v. 17, where Paul changes from "we" to "I." The truth of the matter is probably, as a note in the Spanish *Versión Popular* puts it: "Paul passes gradually from words addressed to Peter to those he addresses to the Galatians." Verse 15: "We [emphatic] who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' " would be more appropriately addressed to Peter than to a church having a mixed Jewish and Gentile membership. In any case, it is important to note that any "we" which includes the receptor is inclusive, even though the context excludes others (in this case Gentiles); so "we" in vv. 16-17 should also be understood as inclusive. (Note that the word "Jews" in TNIV's translation of v. 17 is implicit in the Greek text; as also in Rom 4.1.) What matters is whether the "others" who are excluded are among those addressed.

A similar (but simpler) example is found in Rom 15.1, where "We [emphatic] who are strong" clearly excludes "the weak"; but Paul is generously assuming that his readers are among the strong, so the "we" is inclusive. The same is true in 1 Cor 8.5-6: "For even if there are so-called gods ... , yet for us there is but one God ... " In 1 Cor 15.51, "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed," Paul is assuming that, although some Christians have "slept" (i.e., died), not all of them will die before the general resurrection. At that time "all," both those who have died and those who are still alive, will be "changed." The second "we" is clearly inclusive, as the word "all" shows. The first "we" is also inclusive, since it includes the receptors, and excludes only those Christians who have died.

There are a few texts in which "we" may be understood as either inclusive or exclusive. Some of these relate to Paul's co-workers and associates: "our sister Phoebe" (Rom 16.1); "Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ" (Rom 16.9). Does Paul think of Phoebe as the "sister" of Christians inclusively, and Urbanus as a "co-worker" in an exclusive sense? One may also ask whether Paul intends to distinguish between, on the one hand, these people for whom he uses the "we" form, and others, notably in the long list of greetings in Rom 16.3-16, whom he describes as "my co-workers" (v. 3) or "my dear friend" (e.g. in v. 5).

This leads to a final matter on which interpreters and translators disagree, and which could be the subject of another article. This is the question of whether Paul sometimes uses the exclusive "we" to mean simply "I." This is variously known as the "writer's plural," the "editorial plural," or the "plural of modesty." Many non-biblical authors in the ancient world followed this

practice; it is common in some modern languages also, e.g. in scholarly writing and in the leading articles of newspapers.

Some translations of Paul’s letters render his exclusive “we” as “I,” though not always consistently. This can be seen from the following sample texts, in versions which at least sometimes understand Paul to be using the “writer’s plural”:

	REB	GECL	DUCL	GNT, FRCL	BRCL2000, PV, SPCL	ITCL
Rom 1.5	+	+	+	+	+	+
1 Cor 2.6-7	+	- (note)	-	+	-	-
2 Cor 1.8-11	-	+	-	-	-	+
Gal 1.8	+	+	-	-	-	+
Phil 3.17b	-	+	+	-	-	-
1 Thess 2.1-12	-	vv. 1-4 - vv. 5-12 +	-	-	-	+
2 Thess 2.2	-	-	-	-	-	+

+ translates “we” as “I”

- translates “we” as “we”

REB	= Revised English Bible
GECL	= German Common Language Version [ <i>Gute Nachricht Bibel</i> ]
DUCL	= Dutch Common Language Version [ <i>Groot Nieuws Bijbel</i> ]
GNT	= Good News Translation
FRCL	= French Common Language Version [ <i>La Bible en français courant</i> ]
BRCL2000	= Brazilian Common Language Version, revised 2000 [ <i>Nova Tradução na Linguagem de Hoje</i> ]
ITCL	= Italian Common Language Version [ <i>Parola del Signore</i> ]
PV	= <i>Parole de Vie</i>
SPCL	= Spanish Common Language Version [ <i>La Biblia: Versión Popular</i> ]

Other current translations of these texts, including the TNIV, the NRSV, the *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible*, the *Nouvelle Bible de Jérusalem*, and the *Nouvelle Bible Segond*, consistently translate Paul’s “we” as “we.”

A thorough exegesis, even of these few sample texts, would go beyond the bounds of this short article; but a few comments may be added.

Although all the translations cited agree that in Rom 1.5, Paul is speaking in his own name, this is perhaps not quite so certain as might appear. There are probably two reasons for these translations’ decision. First, Paul does not associate anyone else with him in the opening of Romans; and second, the use of the word “apostolate” seems to exclude Paul’s co-workers, since they were not apostles. Yet at the end of the letter (16.21-24), Paul names eight people who were with him, including Timothy “my co-worker,” and Tertius, the secretary. And Paul’s description in 16.7 of Andronicus and Junia (or Junias) as “outstanding among the apostles” (however exactly that phrase may be

understood) suggests that Paul had a more flexible understanding of apostleship than later became the norm.

Alone among the translations consulted, GECL adds a helpful note on 1 Cor 2.6: “*we*: Paul could be thinking of his co-workers, but perhaps he is only speaking of himself. The plural was used to bring out the speaker’s authority, or on the contrary modestly to de-emphasize it.”

Philippians 3.17 is one of Paul’s most abrupt changes from “I” to “we.” TNIV translates: “Join together in following *my* example ... , just as you have *us* as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as *we* do.” However this change is understood, it seems unsafe to remove it by translating “we” as “I” in the second part of the verse, as GECL and DUCL do.

It is also difficult to understand why GECL uses “we” in 1 Thess 2.1-4, and “I” in vv. 5-12. ITCL is more consistent in using “I” throughout the passage. However, 1-2 Thessalonians are remarkable among Paul’s letters in using “we” almost to the exclusion of “I.” Most translations are probably correct in assuming that Paul is speaking on behalf of a group of evangelists, of which he is no doubt the leader.

In any case, decisions concerning translation of these and similar texts need to take into account the practice of the target language. If the target language naturally uses “we” forms to refer to the writer alone, that is a strong reason to leave Paul’s “we”s unchanged. If this is not possible, or not natural, in the target language, then translators need to consider both Paul’s flexible usage in all his letters to churches, and the special problems of certain texts.

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## “SURNAME” IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

### Or: How to be Rude Politely

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#### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

When I was a boy at secondary school in England fifty years ago, it was normal for the schoolmasters to address the boys by their surnames only. It was also very common for the boys to address one another by surname only. There was nothing impolite about this usage. In the case of teachers addressing boys, it

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