



"It is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry."
—Thomas Paine

12-May-06

'Arguments Over Words'

During my daily commute to and from the office, a trip of just under fifteen minutes, I usually have my radio tuned to WBT and its talk shows, but on occasion I have the pleasure of listening to a book on tape (in this case, on CD). Presently, I am devouring a wonderful book by Simon Winchester titled *The Meaning of Everything*. Its subject is the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a potentially dry subject if there ever was one. However, Winchester manages to weave an intriguing story, not only of the gargantuan book's long progress itself, but also of its colorful characters - originators, editors, contributors, and publishers. While some of it can be tedious at times, it is a truly remarkable story.

As many know, I have always been interested in words - in fact, I make my living with words. I began to read fairly early and quickly, and I have continued to read voluminously ever since. Early on - I cannot recall how early exactly - I began to notice similarities among words and learned to break them down into prefix, root, and suffix, and thus to spot probable origins and basic meanings. I am probably among a very small minority of people who owns a handful of etymological dictionaries and word books and actually sits down to read them from time to time. Yes, I will admit it: I am a strange bird.

Nevertheless, my peculiar interest has stood me in good stead in the work I do as an editor and writer. Though I am obviously not perfect, I can often spot nuances of meaning in my own or another's writing and make edits that are helpful to the reader's comprehension of the subject under discussion. In terms of preparing sermons, I often find myself spending inordinate amounts of time researching the meaning of a Greek or Hebrew word that has some connection to my proposed subject - and often that unintended excursion leads to a whole new direction of thought. To me, it is a fascinating process.

This process, however, has its dark side, and I am just as capable of crossing over to it as the next guy is, though perhaps due to my experience I may be more careful. Paul warns Timothy about teachers who are "proud, knowing nothing, but [are] obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wrangling of men of corrupt minds and destitute of truth . . ." ([1 Timothy 6:4-5](#)). "Arguments over words" can get a teacher into great trouble and actually lead him away from the doctrine of [Jesus Christ](#). So it is that Herbert Armstrong cautioned the church in days past not to hang a doctrine on the definition of a Greek or Hebrew word, but rather let the preponderance of Scripture - particularly the clear verses - define the correct, godly meaning.

In fact, I recently received an admonitory email about the church's use of the word "Bible." Believe it or not - and these days people seem to believe just about anything - there are some in the Christian world who are teaching that "Bible" is a word of pagan origin and thus should not be uttered by God-fearing individuals. The argument goes that "Bible" originates in the name of a pagan [god](#) or goddess, and the evil "they," nudged along by [Satan](#) himself, have managed to convince the whole world to use this awful word to name God's own Book.

Would that these people had cared to crack open any respected etymological dictionary for the truth!

The word "Bible" is ***not*** of pagan origin. "Bible" derives from Byblos, the Greek name of the Phoenician city, Gebal. The Greeks called this city *Byblos* due to its importance in the *bublos* ("Egyptian papyrus") trade. Because they were made of papyrus, books were called *biblia* by the Greeks, and from a

Christian point of view, the greatest collection of Greek writings is what we call the Bible.

Gebal, the Phoenician name of the city, is a Semitic word that generally means a "line," as in a line of mountains or a straight coastline. Whatever it described about this city, "Gebal" is not the name of a pagan deity. Anciently, this Phoenician port's patron deity was named Ba'al Gebal or a Ba'alat Gebal (which mean "Lord of Gebal" or "Lady of Gebal," respectively). In either case, "Gebal" is not the pagan god's/goddess' proper name but merely denotes his/her place of residence: Gebal. This may be the fact that has led some to leap to the conclusion that "Bible" is a word of pagan origin. However, as above, *Byblos* ("papyrus," book) is a completely different word in a quite dissimilar language from *Gebal* ("line"), even though they are both names of the same city.

We regularly receive similar emails on the words "Jesus" and "God." Both of these common words for Ones we know as the Son and the Father, respectively, are condemned as "pagan" (the critics' favorite word). The former is often said to be descended from the name of the supreme Greek god Zeus, while the latter has purportedly been discovered to come from the name of a Teutonic god, Got or Gott. That "Jesus" can in any way derive from "Zeus" is ludicrous on its face; it is in fact a Latinized spelling of the Greek *Iesous*, which is itself a transliteration of the Hebrew *Yahshua* or *Joshua*, "Yah saves" or "Savior." As for "God," the esteemed Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* reads simply, ". . . the common Teutonic word for a personal object of worship. . . . The word 'god,' on the conversion of the Teutonic races to Christianity, was adopted as the name of the one Supreme Being, the Creator of the universe. . . ." As the writer points out, it is analogous to the Greek *theos*, used in Scripture to name God.

So, just a caution to [Christians](#) in this "Information Age": Allow the red flag to wave furiously in your mind when you come across a theological argument that stands or falls over the meaning or origin of a word. As Paul says, it often leads to trouble. In fact, he cautions, "From such withdraw yourself." There is [wisdom](#).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Debate](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

We in the church should side neither with the progressive (liberal) worldview nor the traditional (conservative) worldview, but march to the beat of a different drummer. Americans, as part of the culture of Israel, debate absolutely everything. The Bible takes a very dim view of argument, debate, discord, and strife. In all matters of contention, but especially in matters of doctrine, we must strive to put ourselves above the fray. Regarding verbal dispute, we are no match with someone imbued with a satanic spirit. Those who perpetually dispute and wrangle probably are tares with no trace of God's Holy Spirit. Like the archangel Michael, we must put the battle in God's hands, equipping ourselves with protective defensive spiritual armor.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Names of God](#)

by Martin G. Collins

The name of God is important—so important that He included its proper use among His Ten Commandments. What is His name? Martin Collins shows how God's names reveal His character to us. Includes the inset, "A Sampling of the Names of God."

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