

Going Beyond Definitions

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Because of the ever-present winds of doctrine that are always ready to carry us away, one of the principles of Bible study we have been taught is not to base a teaching, let alone a fundamental doctrine, on the definition of a Greek or a Hebrew word. Today we will revisit this so we can safeguard ourselves, as we prove all things and hold fast to what is good.

Part of the problem with just using the definition of a Greek or Hebrew word is that many of them have multiple definitions. Just like in English, Greek and Hebrew words can be used in a variety of ways, and we must use caution in settling on one definition when there are other possibilities.

As an example of multiple usages, in the letter to Ephesus, Jesus says the brethren had left their first love. The word translated as “first” is *protos*, and it means—according to Mr. Strong—“foremost (in time, place, order or importance).” We typically interpret Christ’s words to mean the Ephesians had degenerated from the love that they had at the beginning of their conversion, when they were wide-eyed at new understanding, and brimming with excitement. That was the love they had at first. This is a sound interpretation, but it is not the only possibility. *Protos* can also indicate first in importance. In that case, it would mean the Ephesians had left their most important love, meaning their relationship with Jesus Christ. That could explain why He was ready to remove their lampstand—because without that relationship, they could not be bright lights, or make a good witness, to the world.

We can find a good application in both interpretations, and both meanings are good to meditate on. Yet even if we do favor one over the other, it probably won’t lead us off the path. There is a distinction, but not a great difference. However, when it comes to the words translated as “spirit,” suddenly the definition one chooses becomes critical. Because “spirit” can indicate the heart, or an attitude, or even a sentient being, choosing the wrong meaning can make the difference between the right concept of God and the trinity.

Therefore, the more central a word’s meaning is to a verse or a teaching, the more crucial it is to understand all the possible ways that word is used, so we do not choose blindly. This will help to guard us against wrongly dividing the word of truth.

There is a related principle of study we can use to check ourselves. The principle comes from the judicial ordinances in Deuteronomy that two or three witnesses are required for a serious matter to be established. For example, someone could not be executed just on the testimony of one witness. In II Corinthians 13:1, Paul draws on that principle and applies it to his visits to the congregation. He writes that it would be his third visit, or third witness, and therefore the things he had been saying to them would be firmly established.

We should use this same principle in our studying to keep ourselves on solid footing. If there is only one verse that seems to teach a matter—and especially something that could be considered doubtful—we probably don't want to put our full weight on that branch. The Bible is consistent in its revelation because of Who authored it. This means that not only does the Bible not contradict itself, but also the foundational principles will be found in multiple places. The places may not all contain the exact same words, but they will contain the same concepts, and that is one way we can know that we are on the right track.

Here is another example of the problem of stopping with a definition. We all understand that godly love is far different from the popular concepts of love. The Bible's basic definition of love is keeping God's commands. That is not the full definition, but it is the foundation.

But suppose you are in a conversation, and the other person says, "No, godly love is social love. I looked it up, and that was the definition." This scenario is actually quite plausible. We know that the Greek word for love is *agape*. *Agape* is a noun, and it comes from the verb, *agapao*. If you look up *agapao* in Strong's concordance—it is #25—it indeed says, "to love (in a social or moral sense)."

This brief definition appears to support our friend's statement about social love. But if we use this in one of Christ's fundamental teachings, we paint a picture that is vapid and grotesque. In John 13:34, Jesus declares, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love [*agapao*] one another; as I have loved [*agapao*] you, that you also love [*agapao*] one another."

If we plug in the definition "to love ... in a social sense," Jesus would be saying that He loved the disciples with a "social love," and now they—and thus, we—need to love each other with the same "social love." Thus, Christ's newly enhanced commandment about love becomes blunted and shunted into an admonition about social gatherings, about social niceties, and saying pleasant things about shoes that you secretly believe could cause someone eye damage—and somehow all of this demonstrates the love of God.

Of course, this is a somewhat whimsical example, but this sort of plug-and-play interpretation is easy to fall into. And it is why there is wisdom in not basing a teaching only on the definition of a word. In fact, this example is a double-whammy, because it not only stands on the definition of a word, but also upon our concept of the word “social.”

Mr. Strong’s definition is technically correct, because the meaning of “social” as he intended it has to do with interpersonal interactions and relationships, and *agapao* does indeed describe love in these contexts. But because of the popular usages of the word “social”—such as social media, or social gatherings, or social responsibility—we can get the wrong idea, and gallop off into the sunset with it.

To really build a solid concept of *agapao*—just intellectually—we must examine its usage within the Bible. This is a vital aspect, because what a given word means in secular Greek or Hebrew can be quite different from how the Bible’s writers use it. God says that His word is purified seven times. It is just as much a part of His creation as the ingenuous flora and fauna that surround us. We will find the same sense of structure, harmony, and internal reinforcement within God’s Word as in the most complex of vertebrates. This is why Paul exclaims about “the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” God’s Word is a concrete example of His knowledge and wisdom, and therefore the way His Book uses words means far more than how common men use those same words.

To begin to comprehend what the word *agapao* means, we should examine the 142 times it is used in Scripture, and let those instances inform our understanding. And when we grasp that *agapao* is what the Father did when He gave His Son for the antagonistic world, we will recognize that even though Mr. Strong’s definition is correct, it also hides the breadth and magnitude of what the word can mean.

Now, after we have searched out all the ways a word can be used, and after we have found those two or three scriptural witnesses that help us know we are not chasing our tails, there is another step that can be very helpful, and it is found in a couple of Proverbs that say that in the multitude of counselors there is safety [Proverbs 11:14; 24:6]. So, rather than making Mr. Strong do all the lifting, we can check in with other study aids. There is a caution here, though, because God does not promise that counselors will always give a complete answer, or even an accurate one. God only says that there is wisdom and safety in seeking out the perspective of those with knowledge. Many, if not most, of these scholars are trinitarian and antinomian, so we must account for their biases. We still have to double-check their perspectives against Scripture.

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But even more than the writings of unconverted men, our counselors should be our brethren—and especially those God has gifted to teach and shepherd us. We have all experienced God using His people to tell us things, sometimes in ways we could not anticipate. There is wisdom and safety in using these counselors, because, if nothing else, it is a safeguard against the snare of leaning on our own understanding.