



Avoiding Errors: Word Studies and Original Languages

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Introduction

The Lord calls His people not merely to notice sacred words, but to understand their sense faithfully. When Ezra's helpers "read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense," the hearers received the meaning of the passage (Nehemiah 8:8). A word study may illuminate an important term, yet no dictionary entry can settle its meaning apart from the sentence in which it stands, the passage that bears it, and the book's larger purpose. Words can carry several senses, and their use must be discerned with patience rather than assumption. In Luke 10:25–28, the lawyer asks about inheriting eternal life; Christ directs him to what is written, and the answer is read in its scriptural setting. Such care guards against making a word say more—or less—than the inspired writer intended. Prayerful attention to grammar, context, and the whole counsel of Scripture helps readers handle the Word of truth reverently and serve its hearers well.

The Scriptures were given through holy men who "spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:20–21), yet they came through human authors writing in particular tongues and settings. For this reason, attention to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek can help clarify a word's range, a grammatical form, or an expression shaped by its time. Such study, however, must serve the written Word, not stand above it. A word cannot be rightly understood by its possible meanings alone; its use in the sentence, the passage, and the book must govern, while the harmony of Scripture guards against strained conclusions. Paul charged Timothy to continue in the sacred writings, which are able to make wise unto salvation and furnish the man of God unto every good work (2 Timothy 3:14–17). The purpose, then, is not to display learning or discover novelties, but to hear the text faithfully, with humility, prayer, and care, trusting the Lord who gave His Word.

Begin with the Passage Before Consulting a Word Study

A word study is most faithful when it begins with the passage, not with a dictionary entry or an isolated phrase. Before weighing a term, read the surrounding verses and ask who is speaking, to whom, and for what purpose. Notice whether the text is narrative, poetry, prophecy, or instruction, and follow the argument from one thought to the next. In Luke 10:25–28, Jesus answers the lawyer's question by asking, "What is written in the law? How



readest thou?” His words direct attention to both Scripture’s actual wording and its faithful reading in context. The Bereans likewise received Paul’s message with readiness, “searching the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:10–12). Their example commends careful comparison, not using a word’s possible meanings to override the author’s point. Once the passage has been heard in its setting, study of the original language may clarify its sense; it must serve the text, not rule over it.

Before consulting a lexicon, attend to the passage as the writer gave it: its setting, connections, repeated terms, and movement of thought. A word’s meaning is not discovered by gathering every possible definition, but by seeing how it serves the argument at hand. In Romans 10:8–17, Paul joins the word of faith, the heart’s belief, the mouth’s confession, and the hearing of the preached message. “Faith cometh by hearing,” yet Paul’s reasoning also asks how hearers can believe without a preacher and how a preacher can speak unless sent. The word “hear” therefore belongs within this chain of proclamation, response, and calling upon the Lord; a dictionary entry alone cannot show that relation. The same care applies across a book: in Philippians 1:12–18, Paul explains how his bonds have furthered the gospel, then rejoices that Christ is preached, even amid mixed motives. First trace the author’s reasoning, and let word study serve the passage rather than govern it.

Distinguish a Word’s Range of Meaning from Its Meaning Here

A Hebrew or Greek word may carry a range of related meanings, yet its use in a verse is governed by the sentence and its setting. A dictionary can show what a term may mean; it cannot prove that every sense is present at once. Attend to grammar, nearby words, the author’s argument, and the circumstances described, then compare Scripture with Scripture. In Matthew 8:23–27, the disciples’ cry to the Lord and His rebuke of the winds must be read within the account of the storm and His authority over it, not loaded with meanings detached from that scene. In John 21:15–17, differences in the words for love and care deserve notice, but they should not be made to bear more weight than the dialogue and its pastoral purpose permit. The faithful interpreter neither neglects a word’s richness nor forces hidden distinctions upon the text. Pray for humility, let clear context govern possible meanings, and receive the passage as the Holy Ghost has given it.

A word’s full range of meaning is not the same as its meaning in a particular verse. English translations may use the same word for different Hebrew or Greek terms, while a single original-language word may be rendered in several ways according to context. Comparing



translations can reveal where wording differs and prompt useful questions, but it cannot by itself settle what a passage means. Attend first to the sentence, the surrounding argument, the speaker, and the circumstances described; then consult sound lexical resources to test possible meanings. In Acts 8:26–35, Philip began with the passage the Ethiopian was reading and, through its context, preached Jesus. His example commends careful attention to what the text is saying, not the importation of every possible sense of a word. The Lord’s word is a lamp unto our feet (Psalm 119:105); rightly handled, it lights the path before us. Humble, context-sensitive reading helps us receive that light faithfully.

Use Etymology and Lexicons without Letting Them Decide the Passage

Etymology can illuminate a word’s history, but its roots do not dictate its meaning in every later sentence. A term may acquire new senses, and familiar parts may no longer carry their earlier force. Lexicons are valuable witnesses to usage, not rulers over the passage; their glosses must be tested against grammar, context, and the author’s purpose. In Matthew 5:21–22, the repeated “Ye have heard” and “But I say unto you” direct attention to Christ’s treatment of anger and judgment, not to speculation about a word’s ancient components. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3, Paul’s examples show that eloquence, knowledge, faith, and sacrifice are empty without charity. The surrounding argument makes the meaning plain. Therefore, ask how a term functions in its sentence and passage, compare its uses elsewhere, and let Scripture’s context govern conclusions. This careful humility guards readers from imposing a meaning the inspired writer did not intend. Lexicons serve understanding best when they assist, rather than replace, attentive reading.

Lexicons and concordances can assist careful reading, but they cannot decide what a word means in a particular verse. A lexical entry may gather several senses, related forms, or historical possibilities; the reader must ask which sense fits the passage at hand. Etymology can illuminate a word’s history, yet a word’s origin does not necessarily govern its use in Scripture. Nor does a concordance, by itself, establish meaning: examples must be weighed in comparable contexts, attending to grammar, speaker, subject, and argument. Ezra 7:10 commends Ezra’s purpose to seek the law of the LORD, do it, and teach it; such study joins diligent inquiry with obedient hearing. Paul likewise exhorts Timothy to study, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). This calls for care, humility, and dependence upon the text rather than confidence in a tool. Let reference works serve as witnesses, while the passage’s own words and reasoning lead the interpretation.



Read Grammar and Historical Setting Alongside Vocabulary

A word does not speak alone; its meaning is shaped by the sentence in which the Lord has placed it. Attend, therefore, to grammatical form, modifiers, and the connections between clauses, asking how each part serves the whole thought. A verb's tense, a pronoun's reference, or a small conjunction may guide the sense and guard against conclusions the passage does not teach. Historical setting also matters, for Scripture addresses real people in particular circumstances. In Galatians 3:15–18, Paul's reasoning turns on the relation between the promise to Abraham and the later law; the sequence of events is essential to his argument. In Romans 4:9–12, the order of faith and circumcision likewise clarifies whom Abraham's example embraces. Such details are not obstacles to devotion but help toward faithful understanding. Let vocabulary be examined within its grammar, argument, and setting, and receive the passage's meaning with humility, trusting that careful attention serves love for God's Word.

A word's meaning is not exhausted by its dictionary entry; grammar, context, and the hearers' circumstances help disclose its force. Paul's counsel concerning meat offered unto idols arose amid Corinthian questions about pagan feasts, conscience, and eating in a city where idol worship shaped public and social life. In 1 Corinthians 8:1–13, he teaches that knowledge must be governed by charity: an idol is nothing, yet a brother's conscience may be wounded by another's liberty. In 1 Corinthians 10:14–33, he distinguishes participation in idolatrous worship from eating ordinary food, directing believers to flee idolatry while seeking God's glory and their neighbor's good. These passages are not contradictory; their differing instructions address distinct circumstances. Historical setting therefore guards against forcing a verse to answer a question its first hearers were not asking. Yet background must serve the inspired text, not overrule it. Read words within their sentences and setting, and receive Paul's balanced instruction with humility and love.

Test Word-study Conclusions by Scripture and Sound Judgment

A word study may illuminate a passage, but a dictionary entry cannot decide its meaning apart from context. Ask whether the proposed sense fits the author's words, argument, and setting; then test it against Scripture's wider witness. The Bereans were commended because they "searched the scriptures daily" to examine what they heard (Acts 17:11). Their diligence counsels neither credulity nor suspicion, but careful discernment under God's Word. Scripture is "given by inspiration of God" and furnishes the believer "unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16–17); therefore, no interpretation should contradict its sound



teaching. Yet faithful comparison does not require making every occurrence of a word identical. One term can bear different senses according to its sentence and subject, and distinct passages must retain their particular force. Consider grammar, literary setting, and the passage's central claim before drawing conclusions. Pray for humility, weigh evidence patiently, and receive correction gladly, that study may serve truth and strengthen obedience.

Teachers shall receive greater judgment; therefore, handling God's word calls for humility, diligence, and care (James 3:1). A word's possible meanings or historical background may inform reading, but they must not be used to say more than the passage supports. Let the plain sense, the surrounding context, and the testimony of Scripture together test each conclusion. Where the text speaks clearly, teach it with confidence; where evidence is limited, acknowledge what remains uncertain rather than turning inference into doctrine. Paul charged Timothy to restrain those who taught otherwise and gave heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions rather than godly edifying in faith (1 Timothy 1:3-7). This warning does not forbid careful inquiry; it calls us to judge whether our questions serve truth and charity. The aim is not to win disputes, but to handle the truth faithfully, edify hearers, and foster a pure heart, a good conscience, and faith unfeigned.

Conclusion

Sound word study begins by listening carefully to the words as they stand in their sentences, attending to grammar, context, and the author's purpose. A word's range of possible meanings does not mean every meaning belongs in every passage; nor can an English gloss, dictionary entry, or root alone settle what the text says. Historical setting and usage in comparable passages help clarify, while reference tools serve as aids rather than authorities over Scripture. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering before hearing, and the same patience is needed when interpreting a word: first hear the whole passage, then weigh the evidence. Paul's charge in 2 Timothy 2:15 calls the workman to handle the word of truth rightly, with diligence and care. Such restraint guards against importing our assumptions into God's Word. As readers attend humbly to the text, they are better prepared to receive its meaning faithfully and apply its truth wisely.

Careful word study serves a greater end than mastery of Hebrew and Greek terms: it helps us hear the Lord's Word rightly and walk in it faithfully. Psalm 119:130 teaches that the entrance of God's words gives light, bringing understanding to the simple. Such light calls not for pride, but for humble attention to context, grammar, and the whole counsel of



Scripture. We should resist forcing a preferred meaning upon a passage, and receive its plain sense with reverence, allowing Scripture to clarify Scripture. Paul reminds us that all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable, furnishing the servant of God for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Therefore, interpretation is not an exercise in technical display, but a ministry of listening, discernment, and obedience. As the truth is rightly understood, may it shape our affections, correct our steps, and equip us to serve the Lord with faithfulness.