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**Word-Study Fallacies**

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A fallacy is an incorrect conclusion drawn from faulty logic, argumentation, or reasoning.  Thus, one can commit a fallacy of logic, deduction in everyday life, or a verbal fallacy.  This post is about the latter.  What are the most common fallacies in biblical interpretation?  This is a critical question if we are to be careful and discerning Christians living according to the Word of God.

In my experience, most Christians have not been taught to read Scripture well or carefully.  Even the most avid biblical readers I know have been taught many ‘tools’ that are actually fallacious methods of drawing conclusions from Scripture.  Many of these interpretive ‘keys’ revolve around the ever so popular Greek and Hebrew word studies.

Before I explain in detail, I want to be clear from the outset that word studies in any language are not invalid across the board.  There are valid and appropriate ways to study the meaning of individual words and to trace their use through different literature and different passages in order to gain a sense of what it means in a specific passage.  However, doing this properly requires great caution and must be done with knowledge about the way a specific language works as well as a general understanding of semantics.

That said, let me briefly explain some of the most common word-study fallacies seen in preaching, bible studies, and Christian material.  I will be summarizing material from two great books that deal with this issue: Dr. D.A. Carson’s 2nd edition of [*Exegetical Fallacies*](http://www.amazon.com/Exegetical-Fallacies-D-Carson/dp/0801020867/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271855989&sr=8-1), and Dr. Grant Osborn’s book [*The Hermeneutical Spiral*](http://www.amazon.com/Hermeneutical-Spiral-Comprehensive-Introduction-Interpretation/dp/0830828265/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271856017&sr=1-1).

**The Root Fallacy:**

The root fallacy presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components.  That is, the meaning of a word is determined by its etymology.  While it is sometimes the case that the etymology of the word determines its meaning, it is not always the case.  For instance, in English, we get our word ‘ignorant’ from a Latin word that means ‘nice’.  Obviously, if I use the word ‘ignorant’ in a sentence, it does not help us at all if I attempt to explain my sentence by telling you the etymology of that word.  This is actually quite common.  Etymology and the way a word is used now often do not line up.

This fallacy also relates to finding the meaning of a word by dissecting the meaning of each of its parts and then defining it as the sum of the parts.  A classic example of this is in I Corinthians 4.1.  Paul says, “So then, men ought to regard us as servants (*hypēretas*) of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.”  Many years ago, a commentator by the name of R.C. Trench popularized the interpretation that *hypēretas*, which is made up of two words ‘under’ and ‘to row’, means ‘under rower.’  Many preachers have waxed eloquent about the ships at that time being propelled by slaves under the deck who row to the beat of the slave master’s drum.  Thus, Paul, and consequently all Christians, are said to be ‘lowly servants’ sharing the gospel to the beat of God’s drum.

While that may preach, it isn’t a valid conclusion since the interpretive principle is invalid.  Everyone who speaks English knows that words do not simply mean the sum of its parts.  A butterfly is not a fly made of butter or even a fly that likes butter.  Nor is a pineapple a special sort of fruit that grows on pine trees.  Greek and Hebrew are no different.  Sometimes a word does mean the sum of its parts (like the word *ekballō*which means to cast out from *ek* and *ballō*), but not always and not even often.  Thus, we must be careful in drawing these sorts of conclusions, and frankly, one should not even attempt to do so if you do not have a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew.

**Semantic Anachronism:**

This fallacy occurs when a meaning of a word that developed after the text was written is read back into the original text.  This is the opposite error of the root fallacy.

A great example of this when people import the modern day meaning of the word bishop (*episkopos*) into the biblical texts.  Today when we think of bishops, we think of top leaders in the Anglican or Roman Catholic Churches that rule over many different churches in his diocese.  However, there is no indication in Scripture that the word was ever used to describe a person who ruled over more than his own church as one man among other elders.

Another common example of this fallacy is found when people note that Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9.7, “God loves a cheerful (*hilaron*) giver,” and then conclude that since our modern-day word ‘hilarious’ comes from this Greek word we are to be hilarious givers.  The implication is that we should give in such a way that we have to laugh at how incredibly stupid it seems to us at first to give so much.  This is a completely invalid interpretation that reads a later meaning of the word into the original context.

**Semantic Obsolescence:**

This fallacy occurs when a meaning of a word becomes obsolete or is out of use but the interpreter assigns a word in his text that meaning anyway.  Simply put, we must remember that words change their meaning over time, especially over hundreds of years.  Certainly one can think of some words that at one time meant something common and plain but have now come to take on entirely different meanings.

The best example of this is in biblical studies is the Greek word *martyr*.  This word can be demonstrated to have developed in its meaning over time.  Its meaning developed something like this:

1. one who gives evidence, in or out of court
2. one who gives solemn witness or affirmation
3. one who witnesses to personal faith, even in the threat of death
4. one who witnesses to personal faith by the acceptance of death
5. one who dies for a cause

Depending on the context, several of these meanings still remain a possibility in common usage.  But, when we read the book of Revelation for instance, we must decide which of the meanings given above are most probable.  In all likelihood, the earlier meanings are more probable.

The main point of all of this is that when we compare the usage of a word in one text from one-time period to its usage in another time period, we must be open to the fact that words sometimes change their meaning over time.  Some older meanings become obsolete and should not be read into more recent works.

**The One Meaning Fallacy:**

This fallacy occurs when one concludes that a word means only one thing everywhere and anywhere.  Often, it is argued that one specific Greek or Hebrew word should always be translated by the same English word.

To give an example as to why this is a bad idea, one must simply look at the Greek word *sarx*.  This word often is translated ‘flesh’, but this is not always helpful for the English reader.  Look at the number of ways this word is used in context:

1. Matthew 24.12 – ‘no flesh will be saved’ = no person
2. John 1.14 – ‘the Word became flesh’ = became a human being
3. Romans 9.8 – ‘children of the flesh’ = children of natural birth
4. Hebrews 5.7 – ‘days of his flesh’ = his earthly life
5. Romans 8.13 – ‘live according to the flesh’ = the sinful nature
6. Jude 7 – ‘go after strange flesh’ = sexual immorality

The point is simply that words often have multiple meanings which may require multiple English words to be used to translate them.

**Problems Surrounding Synonyms and the Range of Meaning:**

This fallacy fails to understand the differences between synonyms, equivalence, and the fact that words have a range of meaning.

The best example of this is the well known Greek words *phileō* and *agapaō*.  It is often said that *agapaō* means ‘unconditional love’ while *phileō* means ‘brotherly love’.  This conviction is problematic because, as we saw above, words do not simply have one meaning.  But, it also fails to recognize that different words can have the same meaning in certain contexts even if they differ on their full range of meaning.  Let me explain.

It is not accurate to argue that *agapaō* always has a positive connotation.  In 2 Samuel 13, the word is used in the Septuagint to describe Amnon’s love for his half sister Tamar whom he raped.  In 2 Timothy 4.10, Paul uses *agapaō* to describe the love that Demas had for the present evil world.

Sometimes, *phileō* and *agapaō* are used interchangeably in the same passage.  In the Gospel of John, the words are used throughout the work without any shift in meaning (John 3.35, 5.20, 21.15-17).  This is especially significant in John 21 when Jesus restores Peter after Peter’s three denials before the crucifixion.  Many people have attempted to read in all sorts of significance to the different uses of each word when in fact, the use of different words for ‘lambs’ and ‘sheep’ and for ‘feed’ and ‘shepherd’ suggest that no such nuances should be inferred.  Jesus is simply speaking like all of use do when we repeat ourselves.  He uses different words to say the same thing to help get across his point.

A thorough study of the Gospel of John reveals that although *phileō* and *agapaō*can mean different things, they are often used to the same way to speak of love.  *Phileō* can be used to mean ‘kiss’ (Lk. 22.47) as is the case when Judas betrayed Jesus.  As far as we can tell, *agapaō*is never used that way in all of Greek literature.  So, the words have a different range of meaning (and thus they can mean different things), but their ranges of meaning overlap (and thus they sometimes are used interchangeably).

**Conclusion:**

I have summarized a few of the insights from Carson and Osborne in order to help those who want to read the bible well and carefully.  There are many other fallacies that they discuss, so if you are interested in learning more, then I suggest you check those out.

Many of us have been taught that ‘deep’ bible study is marked by intense word studies that mine the depth of single Greek and Hebrew words.  Part of my intention in this post was to show how careful we have to be when engaging in this sort of study.  Most people are not equipped to study words in this way even when they hold in their hands a Greek Lexicon or a Strong’s Concordance.  Word studies require an understanding of how these languages work.  Without a working knowledge of the language, one will tend to commit several of the fallacies mentioned above.

But the main intention for this post is not the technical argumentation meant to expose the common word-study fallacies.  My hope is to encourage you to see that you don’t need to have studied Greek or Hebrew at all to read the bible well.  Certainly, knowing those languages is an important tool for those who teach Scripture publicly, but the general message of Scripture is clear to those reading translations.

One reason for this is that no language that I know of works in such a way that one cannot understand what is being said without deep technical word studies for the simple fact that words do not have static meaning and language says more than the sum of its definitions.  Context is the largest determiner of the meaning of a word.  Furthermore, the meaning of sentences and paragraphs are found in the relationship between the sentences and the syntax of each sentence more than in single words.  Meaning in human language is not best understood by focusing narrowly on single words, but on looking at the interplay of words in a sentence.  Human language is not an equation or formula that can be dissected into unrelated variables that are then added together.

This means that if you talk and read everyday, you probably have 95% of the tools you need to understand Scripture adequately enough to walk with God and to grow in wisdom as you read Scripture.  Whenever preachers wax eloquent about the meaning of this or that Greek or Hebrew word, I often wonder how that benefits the congregation’s understanding of the passage.  Certainly there are times when a preacher will need to explain why this or that translation does not, in their opinion, best capture what is said in Greek, but more often than not, when someone is talking about the Hebrew or Greek, they are committing one of the fallacies mentioned above.  I know it can be a temptation to try and bolster our credibility by pronouncing a Greek word that no one will remember rather than seeking to show from what everyone has access to why the passage means this or that.  But this must be avoided.

So, first of all, be encouraged.  God’s Word is not beyond you.  It is near you.  Read it.  Study it.  Use the tools you use every day in reading other things to help you discern what Scripture says.

Secondly, if you do study Greek and Hebrew, be careful not to do damage with the little you know.  Just because you have a lexicon or a concordance doesn’t mean you actually know how the languages work.  We can be easily tempted to try and impress people with what we ‘know’ rather than helping them to see how to read the bible for themselves.  So think carefully about how language works in the first place.  Sentences and paragraphs rarely have their meaning tied up in an obscure meaning of a single word.