

## PRINCIPLE I - EXAMINE WORD MEANINGS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Words are the building blocks of language; if one doesn't understand the meanings of individual words, then he certainly cannot comprehend the meaning of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. All of us have had the experience, while reading, of coming across a word that we didn't understand and couldn't define. Frequently, we were able to get the "general sense" of the sentence or paragraph anyway, and so we continued reading without pausing to look up the meaning of the word in a dictionary. But when we come to Scripture, which is God-breathed, every word becomes important. It is not enough for a disciple to get the "general sense" of the Bible! The better the disciple understands the words of the Bible, the more effectively he will be able to comprehend the truth of Scripture.

Illustration - Galatians 6:1 states Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Some study reveals that the word translated restore is used elsewhere of a fisherman "mending" his nets and of a doctor "setting" a broken bone. With this additional background, we see that this "restoring" calls for expert repairing skill. It follows that only those who are spiritual (see Gal. 5:16,25) could restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness (see Gal. 5:22,23).

But, how are the meanings of words determined? The primary method of learning what words mean is to study how they are used. Publishers of dictionaries spend considerable money and effort over a period of years collecting and classifying examples of the usage of words in books, magazines, newspapers, etc. Only when they have a sufficient sampling of the ways a particular word is used are they prepared to write a definition of that word in their dictionary. In the same way, the writers of Scripture employed (Hebrew and Greek) words whose meanings are discoverable through a study of how they are used. Usage is the key to discovering the meaning of a word!

Determining how a biblical word is used involves three steps: (1) finding all of its occurrences in Scripture; (2) specifying its meaning in each of these references; and, if possible, (3) learning anything one can about its usage outside of Scripture.

Steps 1 and 2 are most important. Step 1 involves using a concordance (=an alphabetical listing of the important words of a book, with references to the passages in which they occur). For biblical study, you should secure a concordance that lists all the occurrences of each word in the Scriptures. It is very helpful to utilize a concordance based on the version of the Bible you study. Using a concordance, you can determine every occurrence of any Greek or Hebrew word in the Bible, without knowing either language! (Many concordances include clear instructions for their use. If yours doesn't, find someone to explain how to use it to you.)

Step 2 brings us to a second crucial concept. Words, we have said, are the building blocks of language. Well, words are like building blocks, but with an important qualifier! Notice what happens to the meaning of "runs" as a different block is placed in front of it.

Normally, a word has several possible meanings. It has a fixed, specific meaning only in a definite context. "Word meanings are determined by the words which surround them."

Illustration - For example, take the word "match." What picture comes to your mind when you think "match"?

Do you think of a slender piece of wood, tipped with a composition that catches fire by friction? ("Strike a match so that we can see in here").

Or, do you think of an athletic contest where boxing or tennis competition occurs? ("We've got tickets for the match").

Or, do you think of a girl you know who would just be an ideal mate for a boy you know? ("She's a perfect match for him").

Or, do you think of a football team which is equal in ability to another? ("The Rams are a good match for the Vikings").

The word "match," of course, could mean any of these things, depending on the words surrounding it! The words occurring around "match" determine the particular meaning it has in a given context.

If we are studying a word and have found all the places where that word occurs in Scripture, we next want to specify its meaning in each passage where it occurs. In doing this, there are certain especially helpful clues to look for.

Look for synonyms ("a word having the same or nearly the same meaning as another word in the same language").

Illustration - According to Young's Concordance, there are 18 Greek words translated "accept" or "receive" in our English Bible (NT). One of them (lambano) is used in 1 Corinthians 2:12; another in 1 Corinthians 2:14 (dechomai). These are synonyms, but notice what Vine says (Exp. Dict., "receive"): "There is a certain distinction between lambano and dechomai... in that in many instances lambano suggests a self-prompted taking, whereas dechomai more frequently indicates a welcoming or an appropriating reception." Hence, lambano focuses more on the reception itself, while dechomai includes more reference to the attitude of the one receiving. See how this helps your understanding of 1 Cor. 2:12 and 14.

Illustration - There are two common Greek words translated "to know." One is ginosko, the other is oida. The word "know" occurs three times in 1 Corinthians 2:11, 12. The first and third occurrences render oida, the second translates ginosko. Oida most frequently indicates to know by reflection, based on intuition or information and often includes the idea of full or perfect knowledge. Ginosko usually means to know by observation or experience and often implies a beginning or progressing in knowing. Bear this in mind while reading 1 Corinthians 2:11, 12.

Look for antonyms ("a word whose meaning is opposite to that of another word in the same language").

Illustration - Galatians 5:16, 17 is helpful in understanding both "Spirit" and "flesh." This passage states But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. Here we see that the flesh has desires which are contrary to those of the Spirit. this becomes very helpful in understanding what the apostle Paul means by the word flesh.

Look for clarifying phrases, which fill out, expand or elaborate the meaning of the word.

Illustration - For example, in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, the anticipated result of Scripture performing its functions is that the man of God may be adequate. But what does adequate mean? An important clue is found in the immediately following phrase, equipped for every good work.

Look for cross references (other passages where similar words or thoughts occur).

Illustration - One could compare what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:5-15 and 7:7-11 with His teaching recorded in Luke 11:1-13. Or, compare the results of being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-20) with the results of letting the Word dwell richly in believers (Colossians 3:16-17). (Incidentally, comparing different versions of the Bible can also be helpful.)

The varying uses of a word give us its possible meanings. Its precise meaning in a specific instance, of course, must come from the context of that particular occurrence.