



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 136 – WORD STUDY FALLACIES

EXEGETICAL FALLACIES (SECOND EDITION) – DA CARSON

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The Importance of This Study

- ▶ Exegetical fallacies are painfully frequent among us. Make a mistake interpreting Shakespeare's plays and it is unlikely that there will be any eternal consequence. But we cannot lightly accept a similar laxity in the interpretation of Scripture. We are dealing with God's thoughts: we are obligated to take great pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly.

The Dangers of This Study

- ▶ The person who makes it his life's ambition to discover all the things that are wrong – whether wrong with life or wrong with some part of it, such as exegesis – is exposing himself to spiritual destruction. Sustained negativism is highly caloric nourishment for pride.
- ▶ In those who are already unsure of themselves, a study like this may drive them to discouragement and despair. If there are so many exegetical traps and pitfalls, how can we be confident that we are rightly handling the Scriptures?

The Limits of This Study

- ▶ This study focuses on exegetical fallacies, not on historical and theological fallacies, except insofar as the latter impinge on the former.
- ▶ There is no sustained discussion of the Holy Spirit's role in our exegetical task. That is important, but it involves a shift to a hermeneutical focus instead of an exegetical focus.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ Words are among the preacher's primary tools – both the words he studies and the words with which he explains his studies.
- ▶ This list includes a collection of common fallacies that repeatedly crop up when preachers and others attempt word studies of biblical terms.
- ▶ 1. The Root Fallacy – In this view meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word.
- ▶ Examples in English prove that a word's usage may not be dependent at all upon its root. “Nice” comes from the Latin *nescius*, which means ignorant. In English, “good bye” is a contraction for “God be with you.”
- ▶ One of these is sensible, the other incomprehensible without further study.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ As an example from Scripture, 1 Corinthians 4:1 tells us that Paul, Cephas, and other leaders are “servants.” The word is *hyperetas*. In the past, one commentator popularized the view that this word came from the root *eresso*, which means “to row.”
- ▶ Some went further then and said that *hyper-eresso* was an “under-rower”, or “a subordinate rower.”
- ▶ Later it was thought that this referred to “a servant of a lowly kind” pictured by a rower on the bottom, or lowest level of the ship.
- ▶ The word is never used to describe a rower in any classical literature and simply means “a servant.”
- ▶ This would be similar to defining a butterfly by looking at the words “butter” and “fly.” It results in a search for a deeper meaning or a hidden meaning that is just not there at all.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ At times the same root word can end up meaning something completely non-related. For example, one Hebrew root word serves as the basis for the word “lehem” as in Bethlehem, meaning “bread.” The same root is found in the word “milhama” which means “murder.” Murderbread?
- ▶ A common example is found in the word “apostle.” While it is true that the root word refers to “the one sent” and is interpreted to be one sent on a mission with a message, the actual usage in Scripture means a “special representative” or “special messenger.”
- ▶ This is why language study needs to go beyond a Strong’s Concordance! Sometimes the root in language has little to do with the final message.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 2. Semantic Anachronism – This fallacy occurs when a late use of a word is read back into earlier literature. For example, while the term *episkopos* is translated “bishop” and means one who is an overseer in the church, the Early Church Fathers read into it a later understanding and defined it as a church leader who has authority over multiple churches. In the New Testament, local elders served their church, not multiple churches.
- ▶ This problem is compounded when we change languages. Our word “dynamite” is etymologically derived from the Greek word *dunamis*, which means “power”, or “a miracle.” The mistake is found when preachers say that “The gospel is the *dynamite* (power, *dunamis*) of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). This is a reverse etymology. Dynamite blows things up and tears them up. This is not the same type power that raised Jesus from the dead!

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 3. Semantic Obsolescence – In some ways, this fallacy is the mirror image of semantic anachronism. Here the interpreter assigns a word in his text a meaning that the word in question used to have in earlier times, but that is no longer found within the live, semantic range of the word. That meaning has become obsolete.
- ▶ Some words pass out of usage completely. Others change their meaning!
- ▶ Here is the progression of the word *martyr*: a) one who gives evidence in or out of court; b) one who gives solemn witness or affirmation; c) one who witnesses to personal faith, even with the threat of death; d) one who witnesses to personal faith by acceptance of death; e) one who dies for a cause.
- ▶ Words change meaning over time, so we need to be aware of the context and usage, and we must be careful when depending upon Classical Greek rather than Hellenist Greek.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 4. Appeal to Unknown or Unlikely Meanings – These typically spring from poor research or an undiscerning acceptance of a statement made by an “expert.” This is often found in a defense of a new, progressive interpretation of a controversial text.
- ▶ 5. Careless Appeal to Background Material – At times the preacher needs to dig deeper. In Matthew and Luke’s accounts of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew refers to Jesus going up a mountain, but Luke refers to a plain, thought to be a level place on a hillside. In fact the terms simply mean that Jesus went into the hill country.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 6. Verbal Parallelomania – Many biblical scholars discover parallels where there are none. Don't force the text to fit a pattern.
- ▶ 7. Linkage of Language and Mentality – This is the disproved idea that any language constrains the thinking processes of those using the language, speaking of the “Hebrew mind” or the “Greek mind” and limiting thought to a “school” based on language.
- ▶ 8. False Assumptions About Technical Meaning – In this fallacy an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning. For example, the word “sanctification.” In most conservative theological discussions this refers to the process by which one becomes increasingly holy, but there are times it also refers to the initial “setting aside” of an individual for God at his conversion.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 9. Problems Surrounding Synonyms and Componential Analysis – This includes 2 fallacies.
- ▶ 1) The terms synonymy and equivalence are so little understood by many of us that adequate distinctions are not always preserved. For example, “of men” and “like a man” may be equivalent at times, but they are not synonymous.
- ▶ 2) Isolating the components of words demonstrates that at some level they may be synonymous but not always! Consider: human may mean man, woman, boy, or girl; but a male human is only a man or boy, while an adult human may be a man or woman.
- ▶ Examples – when Jesus tells Peter to “feed My lambs” and “feed My sheep” are these equivalent or synonymous? Most likely they mean the same thing.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 10. Selective and Prejudicial Use of Evidence – Like using a proof text, this takes and uses evidence that supports a claim even if evidence to the contrary is available.
- ▶ 11. Unwarranted Semantic Disjunctions and Restrictions – When faced with an either/or alternative, don't force a decision! Sometimes the ideas are disjunctions and at other times complementary.
- ▶ 12. Unwarranted Restrictions of the Semantic Field – Illegitimately limiting the word's semantic range makes correct interpretation impossible. In English an example is board: a piece of lumber, room and board, board of directors, falling overboard, or boarding a plane or ship...

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 13. Unwarranted Adoption of an Expanded Semantic Field – This fallacy supposes that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context allows. This is also called a totality transfer.
- ▶ 14. Problems Relating to the Semantic Background of the Greek New Testament – How does the Hebrew Old Testament influence New Testament writers? At times we wrongly trace the meaning of a Greek word by using a corresponding Hebrew word. This usually appears when one relies on the Septuagint to interpret the Hebrew Old Testament when the Septuagint is a translation and therefore somewhat interpretive.

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ 15. Unwarranted Neglect of Distinguishing Peculiarities of a Corpus – Some take Paul's word usage and assign his meaning to the word when it is used by another writer. When Paul refers to God's call it is effective, by contract in the gospels the call is an invitation.
- ▶ 16. Unwarranted Linking of Sense and Reference – A word serves as a reference when it denotes something particular, like names. Moses refers to the man, Moses. But some words contain a sense and not a reference, like the word “beautiful.” We understand the meaning but must be careful because the sense is not a direct reference. We could explain it by saying “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Word Study Fallacies

- ▶ The Heart of the Matter – Coping with Context
- ▶ The principal reason word studies constitute a particularly rich source for exegetical fallacies is that many preachers and Bible teachers know Greek only well enough to use concordances, or perhaps a little more. There is little feel for Greek as a language. Words are important. So is grammar and usage! Language involves phrases, sentences, discourse, genre, style, etc.
- ▶ At times we must ponder why *this* word is used instead of *that* word...
- ▶ And this is important because we are studying to interpret *God's Words*.
- ▶ Next Week: Grammatical Fallacies