

In Titus 2:6 Paul exhorts the young men to live sensibly. Interestingly, Paul tells Timothy to set an example for the younger men by his own life (2:7–8a). As the older women should instruct the younger women with the beauty of their lives, so Timothy should instruct the younger men by his godly example of good works. In 2:7b–8a Paul specifies the good works he has in mind. Paul gives the purpose for this exhortation in verse 8b: that the opponents of the gospel should be ashamed. The ground or reason for such shame is given in 8c: the good works of Timothy and the young men make it impossible for anything evil to be said about them.

We have already pointed out that Paul exhorts slaves in verses 9–10 and provides the purpose for such an exhortation. If we continue our analysis of the structure of this text, it would be apparent that in 2:11–14 Paul provides the ground for his instructions in 2:1–10 (note the $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$ [for] in v. 11). The grace of God has appeared in Christ Jesus and thereby provides the motivation to live as new people.

Perhaps at this point the student is thinking, “Such detailed work is too much, and there are other things to do in life too!” Admittedly, the task of trying to understand someone who wrote two thousand years ago in a different language is not easy. Certainly, careful study and disciplined reading requires a great investment of time. Yet the rewards are great. The pleasure of unlocking a text and knowing that one understands it is inexpressible. If time is a problem, the wise student will spend it in the languages and in the biblical text. Firsthand knowledge of Paul is the goal, not a derived knowledge that cannot be evaluated. Commentaries can shed a great deal of light on a passage of Scripture, but careful study of the text will deal with the same issues discussed in commentaries, and nothing can replace firsthand study and knowledge of the text. Also, such intense study provides the student with the necessary tools for evaluating the commentaries.

Of course, tracing the flow of thought in a text is not the whole of exegesis. As we have already seen, exegesis depends on grammatical analysis. But how we understand propositions is inevitably related to how we understand the words that make up the propositions. Thus lexical study is imperative, and to this subject we now turn.

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Doing Lexical Studies

An objection could be raised here regarding the order of the chapters. How can one understand propositions before one understands the individual words contained in the propositions? Thus it could be claimed that one should study the meaning of terms in Paul before trying to comprehend the relationship between different propositions. A few things can be said in response to this anticipated objection. First, as recommended in chapter 3, the interpreter should already have looked up the meaning of words when translating the passage being studied. Therefore, one would not analyze propositions without any understanding of what individual words mean. Second, if one finds it more helpful to study individual terms before diagramming or tracing the argument, I have no great objection. It is true that the understanding of a particular word or words may cause one to understand the meaning of a proposition differently. Third, I have decided to put the chapter on lexical study in Paul here because the hermeneutical circle functions in such a way that the context plays a major role in determining the meaning of individual words. Most now agree that the flow of thought in a discourse is crucial for determining the meaning of a word. Interpreters may make serious mistakes in assigning a particular meaning to a word without carefully understanding the entire context of a passage. The interpreter cannot understand propositions without understanding the individual words that make up those propositions,

and yet the meaning of the propositions as a whole can also exert an impact on the meaning of particular words. The careful interpreter will always carefully consider the semantic range of a word and the particular context in which a word is used. Fourth, I placed this step here because studying words in Paul is a natural bridge to Pauline theology, and the issue of Pauline theology will be examined in the next chapter. During the history of the church, many of the words that Paul uses have rightly become crucial in the church's theology.

Some Basic Principles

Lexical study is one of the most important elements of the exegetical process. Unfortunately, it is also an area that suffers from great abuse. Since many essays and books are available today that can help students chart their way,¹ no one should commit egregious errors in this area any longer. In this chapter I will briefly sketch some rules for studying works and then will make a few observations regarding doing lexical studies in Paul.

The first rule is the most important and is full of common sense. Words derive their meaning from the context in which they occur. All words have a semantic range, but the particular nuance of a term must be gleaned from the context in which it occurs. Second, even though knowing the etymology of a word may sometimes help in deciphering its meaning, students must beware of the root fallacy. The meaning of a word is not necessarily obtained by splitting it apart and understanding the meaning of each part. The word "dandelion" means "tooth of a lion," but we all know that the word refers to a flower and not a lion's tooth. Similarly, as scholars have often noted,

1. The works cited here move from the shortest and clearest expositions to the more-technical studies: D. L. Bock, "New Testament Word Analysis," in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1989), 97–113; D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 27–64; J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); A. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 75–104; J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); idem, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

the Greek word ἐκκλησία (church) does not literally mean "called out ones" simply because it is derived from the root ἐκ (from) and καλέω (call). Third, words do not necessarily have the same meaning wherever they occur. The meaning of a term must always be supported by an exegesis of the passage at hand. Hence, the word for "leaven/yeast" refers to evil in 1 Cor. 5:6, but it clearly refers to something good in Matt. 13:33. So too, it is crucial to see that the word "faith" has a different meaning in Paul and James, for Paul declares that one is justified by faith (Rom. 3:28; 5:1), whereas James insists that one is not justified by faith alone (2:24).

Fourth, understanding the semantic domain of a word is crucial. Some have suggested, for instance, that the word "law" (νόμος) in 1 Cor. 14:34 refers to rabbinic custom, but such a conclusion is unlikely since Paul, when citing the law as an authority, invariably refers to the Mosaic law. Fifth, to determine the semantic range of a word, if a student desires to do a thorough study, one should begin with the use of the word in the author (i.e., Paul); then one should proceed to the rest of the NT and, in turn, to the use of the word in the LXX, Josephus and Philo and other Second Temple Jewish writings, the papyri, and works by Greek and Roman authors. How much literature one should consult depends on how frequently a word is used. If a word is quite common in Paul, such as the word "save" (σώζω), one can basically restrict oneself to the Pauline usage to determine the meaning. If the word is rare, such as "exercise authority" (αὐθεντέω) in 1 Tim. 2:12 or "passing over" (πάρεσις) in Rom. 3:25, then it becomes necessary to study the word outside the NT.²

Sixth, usually the definition that adds the least meaning in context is to be preferred over a more complex meaning. Scholars dispute vigorously today whether πίστις Χριστοῦ (faith of Christ) and its correlates refer to the "faithfulness of Christ" or "faith in Christ" (cf. Gal. 2:16). Silva rightly observes that the reading "faith in Christ" is simpler in context and hence should be preferred.³ Seventh, in determining the meaning of a word, interpreters must note other words with which it occurs. For example, in Rom. 7–8, Paul uses "law of God," "law of sin," "law of my mind," and "the law of the Spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2).⁴ In these various constructions, interpreters wrestle with the

2. Both words occur only once in the NT and never in the LXX.

3. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 153–56.

4. Rom. 7:22–23, 25; 8:2, 7.

definition of “law,” and the words with which “law” is paired play a significant role in deciphering the meaning. Similarly, in studying the word “flesh” in Paul, we see phrases like “all flesh,” “in the flesh,” “according to the flesh,” and “flesh and blood.”⁵ The skilled interpreter uses such contextual hints to discern the meaning of a term in a particular context.

Eighth, interpreters should note contrasting terms, such as “spirit/flesh” (πνεῦμα/σάρξ) or “Spirit/letter” (πνεῦμα/γράμμα; Rom. 2:29; 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6), or terms that are quite similar in meaning, such as “spirit” (πνεῦμα), “soul” (ψυχή), “heart” (καρδιά), “mind” (νοῦς), “conscience” (συνείδησις), and so forth. Contrasting terms often provide a sharper profile for the meaning of a word. And words that occupy the same semantic range must be interpreted carefully. Students may overemphasize the distinction between words like “spirit” and “soul,” or conversely they may fall into the error of thinking that the various words are completely synonymous. Finally, sometimes a nontheological context can help when trying to discern the meaning of a term. For example, the meaning of the word “grace” is clarified by Paul’s illustration in Rom. 4:4, where it is contrasted with a debt that is owed.

Some Reflections on Lexical Study in Paul

Studying words in Paul can be distinguished from the same enterprise in the rest of the NT. In contrast to other NT authors, Paul wrote thirteen pieces of literature. Thus the interpreter has the opportunity to trace the meaning of a particular word through a number of letters. However, dangers lurk at every corner. For example, some students may pour too much meaning into Paul’s words if they are not aware of the occasional nature of his correspondence. Indeed, the temptation is aggravated in the case of Paul precisely because his theology is so rich and thoughtful.

The student should recall that Paul did not write systematic treatises. His letters are occasional, responding to specific situations in the churches. The point here is that students should beware of assuming that Paul uses his terms technically. He did not write philosophical treatises in which he tried to define precisely the meaning of each term.

5. Rom. 1:3; 2:28; 4:1; 7:5; 8:3–5, 8–9, 12–13; 9:3, 5; 1 Cor. 1:26; 15:39, 50; 2 Cor. 1:17; 5:16; 10:2–3; 11:18; 12:7; Gal. 1:16; 2:20; 4:23, 29; 6:12; Eph 2:11; 6:5, 12; Phil. 1:22, 24; 3:3–4; 1 Tim. 3:16; Philem. 16.

For example, one might conclude that the word “works” in the plural (ἔργα) is always negative in Paul because (1) he often insists that one cannot be justified “by works of the law” (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου, as in Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16 [3 times]; 3:2, 5, 10; cf. Rom. 3:28); (2) he speaks negatively of “works” (ἔργα) in general without mentioning the law (Rom. 4:2, 6; 9:12, 32; 11:6); and (3) when he speaks of a good work, he often uses the singular ἔργον (“work,” as in Rom. 2:7, 15; 13:3; 14:20; 15:18; 1 Cor. 3:13–15; 9:1; 15:58; 16:10; etc.). Nevertheless, Paul also uses the plural “works” (ἔργα) in a positive sense in some contexts (e.g., Rom. 2:6; Eph. 2:10; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10, 25; 6:18; Titus 2:7; 3:8, 14). Indeed, these texts show that Paul thinks that good works are ultimately crucial for salvation. It is simplistic to assign a negative meaning to “works” in Paul from a selective citation of the evidence. What Paul means in any given instance by ἔργα must be determined from the context, not from any preconceived notion that Paul thinks of “works” in only one way. The careful interpreter seeks to decipher the difference between Paul’s negative and positive understandings of ἔργα.

This same error of defining words too technically in Pauline literature can be illustrated in another way. In Col. 1:26–27, Paul defines “mystery” (μυστήριον) as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In Eph. 3:4–6, however, Paul understands the “mystery” that was revealed as the unity and solidarity of Jews and gentiles in Christ. The gentiles are “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6). Now one would have to ignore the context of Ephesians if one wanted to insist that the meaning of “mystery” in Ephesians is precisely the same as that in Colossians. There is no a priori reason why Paul needs to use the same word in the same way when writing two different letters, or even within the same letter. The new dimension of the word “mystery” in Ephesians may be due to Paul’s purpose in writing that particular letter to early Christian communities.

Paul’s flexibility with words and metaphors should be illustrated again since so many students, including some NT scholars, have a view of Paul that is too wooden. In 1 Cor. 3:11 Paul says, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” But in Eph. 2:20 Paul says that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” What Paul means by “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” can be interpreted in various ways, but some think that this assertion contradicts the statement in 1 Cor. 3:11, which refers to

Jesus Christ as the only foundation. Because of this divergence (and other reasons as well), some deny the Pauline authorship of Ephesians. Incidentally, some who opt for Pauline authorship of Colossians have difficulty with Ephesians being Pauline, and one of the reasons given is that the word “mystery” is used in a different sense.

Such an approach to words and metaphors in Paul is too rigid and should be discarded. Paul feels at liberty to use the metaphor of the church’s foundation in various ways. He had an artistic and creative mind and was not writing treatises in which every word and metaphor is used in a rigorously consistent fashion (I wonder if any writer of such treatises is so consistent!). Indeed, there is no material difference between 1 Cor. 3:11 and Eph. 2:20. In the latter, Jesus is the cornerstone of the building, which is another way of saying that he is the essential component of the building, and that is what the metaphor of the foundation in 1 Cor. 3:11 communicates as well.

On the one hand, one of the most common errors committed when interpreting Paul is to assume that he invariably has coined technical terms. However, since Paul is a flexible and adaptable writer, the meaning of each word must be investigated carefully in its context. Also, the reader should keep in mind that Paul addresses his letters to specific communities. On the other hand, one could mistakenly assume that Paul embraces a wide range of different meanings for the same word; yet some words in Paul may be used with the same meaning from letter to letter. If the basic semantic range of a word suggests a particular meaning, then that semantic range should be abandoned only if there are traits in a particular context that demand the adoption of a new meaning.

When trying to determine the meaning of a given word in Paul, one should first use a concordance to locate every occurrence of the word. Besides the NT text itself, the concordance is the single most important tool for a student. Most students now have a concordance at their fingertips if they have a Bible program on their computer. Indeed, having such a program is recommended, for students are easily able to do searches on phrases and more complicated grammatical constructions. When using a concordance, first check for other occurrences of the word in the same letter and then in other Pauline Letters. The order here is important. Since the same letter is the more immediate context, the student should consult it first. Then the student should check the rest of Paul’s Letters to determine the precise Pauline usage.

At this point it may be helpful to provide an example of a concordance study in which Paul uses a term in a consistent way. In reading 1 Cor. 9:27 we consider what Paul means by the word “unapproved” (ἀδόκιμος). There he speaks of mistreating his body and bringing it into subjection so that he will not be ἀδόκιμος (unapproved) after preaching to others. Some scholars have suggested that when Paul uses this word, he is speaking of losing his reward but not the danger of apostasy.⁶ But the following context suggests that this is incorrect since the example of Israel in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:1–13) and the strong words against sharing the table of demons (10:19–22) indicate that Paul is speaking about something more serious than simply losing rewards.⁷ The immediate context suggests that ἀδόκιμος (unapproved) refers to being disqualified before God at the day of judgment; hence, Paul disciplines himself so that he will not suffer eternal punishment.

A concordance study shows that Paul did not use this word anywhere else in 1 Corinthians; however, it does appear six other times in Pauline literature. In each case Paul used it clearly in reference to *unbelievers* (Rom. 1:28; 2 Cor. 13:5, 6, 7; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:16). Particularly interesting is 2 Cor. 13:5, where Paul said, “Recognize that Jesus Christ is in you unless you are unapproved [ἀδόκιμος]” (my trans.). According to Paul, only those who are believers have the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). So Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 13:5 could be construed as follows: “If Jesus Christ is *not* in you, then you are unapproved [unsaved].” Concordance study confirms the suggestion from context that in 1 Cor. 9:27 Paul is speaking of the threat of apostasy, of falling from the faith and toward destruction.

To sum up, sometimes the meaning of a word can change the meaning of the entire passage. Thus careful attention to the context and to Pauline usage elsewhere is crucial to accurate interpretation.

Selecting Words to Study

One of the crucial issues in studying terms in Paul is the selection of words for further study. Certainly no one has enough time to study

6. For this interpretation, see Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 140.

7. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 433–75, gives detailed support for such an exegesis of this passage.

each word, so an intelligent selection of words for further study is essential. No fail-safe rules can be given for selecting words since each passage is different, but the following suggestions may help the interpreter to begin the process.

First, study words that are theologically significant. Sometimes students assume that they already know what “grace” (χάρις), “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη), “hope” (ἐλπίς), and other theologically weighty words mean in Paul, and thus they never study foundational words. They assume that the way these words are defined in their systematic theology is correct. This is no criticism of systematic theology, for the theologian may be precisely right in assigning a definition for the word in question. However, the student needs to know from a firsthand analysis of the text what Paul means by grace, righteousness, and hope.

For example, opinions differ over what Paul means when he uses the word δικαιοσύνη (righteousness).⁸ Does he use it forensically to speak of our righteous status before God? Or does he use δικαιοσύνη (righteousness) with a transformative sense to indicate that God’s righteousness is both a gift and a power that transforms us? My intention here is not to enter into the debate. Here the point is that interpreters must study δικαιοσύνη (righteousness) on their own. No meaningful evaluation of the various interpretations of “righteousness” can be rendered unless one has carefully studied the word in the contexts in which Paul uses it.⁹

Second, one should study words that occur often in a passage and contribute to a major theme. For example, in 1 Cor. 1:17–2:16 Paul’s

8. The literature on this topic is voluminous. For a start, see E. Käsemann, “God’s Righteousness in Paul,” *Journal of Theology and Church* 1 (1965): 100–110; R. Bultmann, “ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ ΘΕΟΥ,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964): 12–16; J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 82–162; John Reumann, *Righteousness in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); M. T. Brauch, “Appendix: Perspectives on ‘God’s Righteousness’ in Recent German Discussion,” in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, by E. P. Sanders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 523–42; Peter Stuhlmacher, “The Apostle Paul’s View of Righteousness,” in *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 68–93; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 351–62.

9. The use of the word “righteousness” in the OT and during the intertestamental period also plays a key role in the debate.

conception of “wisdom” (σοφία) is obviously of major importance since he used the word fifteen times in this text. In 1 Cor. 1:18–31 the meaning of “calling” (κλητοῖς, v. 24; κλήσιν, v. 26) can be grasped more keenly if one notices that it is contrasted with κηρύσσομεν (we preach) in 1:23, and is equated with “chose” (ἐξελέξατο) in 1:27–28. Since “calling” is implicitly distinguished from “preaching,” “calling” cannot be identified as an invitation to believe the gospel. Indeed, Paul describes “calling” in terms of God’s choice of the Corinthians (1:27–28). Thus Paul uses the word “calling” here to refer to God’s sovereign and effective choice by which he brings believers into fellowship with himself (see 1 Cor. 1:9).¹⁰ In 2 Cor. 1:3–7 the noun and verb forms of “I exhort” (παρακαλέω) occur ten times. A word cries out for examination when it is so prominent. Thus careful observation of a text will help the interpreter notice words that recur often and that have potential significance for the interpretation of a given passage.

Third, one should study words with debated meanings that are crucial for the understanding of a given passage. For example, did Paul assert that the husband is the *authority over* his wife or that he is the *source of* his wife? The argument hangs on the meaning of the Greek word κεφαλή (head) in Paul, a topic that is vigorously debated today (1 Cor. 11:3–16; Eph. 5:22–24; etc.).¹¹ Also, did Paul use the word σκεῦος (vessel) in 1 Thess. 4:4 in reference to one’s body or to one’s wife? If the former, then Paul is exhorting the Thessalonians to control their bodies in a sexually honorable way. If the latter, then Paul is exhorting the Thessalonians to acquire a wife in a sexually honorable way.

10. A concordance study of καλέω, κλητός, and κλήσις shows that this is a common meaning for these words in Paul.

11. For representative positions in the debate, see Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, “What Does *Kephalē* Mean in the New Testament?” in *Women, Authority & the Bible*, ed. A. Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 97–110; Wayne Grudem, “Does *Κεφαλή* Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *Trinity Journal* 6 (1985): 38–59; R. S. Cervin, “Does *Κεφαλή* Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Rebuttal,” *Trinity Journal* 10 (1989): 85–112; Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of *Κεφαλή* (‘Head’): A Response to Recent Studies,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 3–72; A. C. Perriman, “The Head of a Woman: The Meaning of *Kephale* in 1 Corinthians 11:3,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45, no. 2 (1994): 602–22; Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of *Κεφαλή* (‘Head’): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Imagined,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 1 (2001): 25–65.

Conclusion

In conclusion, words play a vital role in interpreting a Pauline text. Students must apply the basic principles of word study, and they must also be aware of specific issues that relate to studying words in the Pauline Letters.

8

Probing the Theological Context

From the outset of the book it was acknowledged that the capstone of exegesis is theological synthesis. We all live from our own worldview, which is another way of saying that we all live based on our theology. It follows, then, that the importance of the theological context in the Pauline Letters can hardly be exaggerated.

The Pauline Letters pose a unique challenge theologically because we possess thirteen letters by him. No other NT writer presents quite the same challenge. Luke and John also wrote substantial parts of the NT, but their writings come in bigger blocks, not in thirteen different pieces of literature.

We have already noted that Paul wrote his letters to address specific situations in the churches. This raises the question of whether it is even possible to discover a Pauline theology. Are Paul's Letters exclusively pastoral responses to specific problems? And if so, does not the very attempt to construct a Pauline theology impose an alien form on Paul's thought? Did Paul, in writing his various letters, counteract errors manifesting themselves in his churches without considering whether what he wrote in one letter harmonized with what he wrote in others? Was Paul simply a firefighter putting out flare-ups in the churches without having a coherent philosophy of fire prevention?

J. Christiaan Beker's distinction between the *coherent center* of Paul's thought and his *contingent* instructions for the various churches