

The Word of God & Language

Modernisation of language, is where words often shift, drift or drop out of use. New words get developed, or new meanings attach themselves to and revise the meaning of old words. This is not right or wrong—it is just how language inevitably works.

Sometimes, this is just a bit funny, such as when we use the wrong word, or use an older word not realising that it has shifted in meaning. But sometimes it can be confusing and lead to problems—especially in reading important historical texts like the Bible.

So being curious and diligent in figuring out what words mean can help our Bible reading and communication enormously.

Among the various problems we have with words, sometimes we just use the wrong one—perhaps not really know what a particular word actually means. We come across a lot of these. One funny example is the word ‘enormity’. It is amusing to me enormously (so to speak) because the word ‘enormity’ in its established meaning means ‘something that is outrageously or heinously evil’. An incredibly bad crime or act of evil can be described as an ‘act of enormity’. But now we just use it to mean something incredibly enormous, instead of using the word ‘enormousness’, which would be the correct word. And so it always amuses me when those preaching says, “And we must marvel at the enormity of God’s love.”

The interesting thing is that because the word is now used so frequently simply to mean ‘enormousness’, that has now become one of the meanings of the word in the dictionary. If you go back 100 years, that meaning of the word ‘enormity’ wasn’t in the dictionary. All the dictionary is doing is give you a current description of what the word means at the time of publication.

The problem is when we’re reading a text from another time and seeking to understand that text—particularly when it comes to reading the Bible, because sometimes the English words we use to translate the original Greek and Hebrew of the Bible have shifted or broadened or changed their meaning or connotation over time, so that they no longer convey what the Greek or Hebrew words originally meant. This is a very real issue, because it means we will read back into Scripture the current meaning of the English word, rather than reading out of Scripture the original meaning of the word. And because the word of God is what we use to correct us and shape our mind and thinking, Making it our supreme authority, we can get ourselves into a muddle by reading things back into the text, and so I thought it’d be good to just tease out a few examples of the living, shifting nature of English from the Bible, to just show that we have to be a bit careful when we’re reading Scripture.

Sometimes, we have a problem with transliterated words—that is, where the translator has not translated the word into an English equivalent but just turned the Greek letters into English letters. Fair examples would be ‘deacon’ (Gk *diakonos*) or ‘apostle’ (Gk *apostolos*). The fact that *diakonos* means ‘servant or ‘minister’, and *apostolos* means ‘delegate or messenger or sent one’ isn’t conveyed at all through the English words ‘deacon’ and ‘apostle’.

And so when we come to Hebrews 3:1, for example, where it says that Jesus is the “Apostle and High Priest of our confession”, we say to ourselves, “Hang on, how can Jesus be one of the apostles?!” But when you realize that ‘apostle’ just means ‘messenger’ or ‘sent one’ it makes perfect sense, because the two big themes of Hebrews 1 and 2 are that God has sent his Son into the world to reveal himself, to become one of us, to take on flesh and blood, and to die and make purification for sins as the great high priest. And so ‘sent one’ and ‘high priest’ are a good summary of who Jesus is in those first two chapters.

My view is that the English word ‘ambassador’ would be a better word for ‘apostle’.

Another common example would be the word ‘church’, a word that we get a lot in the New Testament, but which in contemporary English has almost no relation to what the Greek word means, the Greek is used twice in Acts 19, once about a riot or a crowd, and another time about a regular council meeting or a political assembly. And so the word basically meant ‘a gathering’ for which the purpose may vary. It was a common everyday word in Graeco-Roman society, but for us, the word ‘church’ now has a whole series of additional meanings. So give it a try—next time you see the word ‘church’ in your English Bibles, do a little mental cross out and replace it with the word ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering’. You’ll find it considerably changes what you’re getting out of those verses.

I really like Dave Mansfields viewpoint that for him, the church is what’s left after the building burns down. There are a bunch of them like this. For example, the word ‘comfort’ is an interesting one that has shifted over time as well. I’m thinking of 2 Corinthians 1, where we have God of all comfort, who comforts us in Christ so that we in turn can comfort each other, and so on. ‘comfort’ has quite dramatically changed in our current understanding because it used to mean ‘to strengthen’ or ‘to establish’. An example is the famous Bayeux Tapestry where the bishop is *comforting* his troops by sticking his spear into their backs so as to move them forward, which is a million miles from 21st century ‘comfort’, which is a woolly blanket or a ‘comforter’. It is something to make you feel soothed. Whereas when Isaiah says “‘Comfort my people,’ says the Lord” there may be some soothing comfort to it but it is mostly saying, “Be encouraged, be strengthened.”

The origins come from *com-forte*, where 'forte' means 'strength'. So comfort originally meant 'to bring strength to', and this is how it was mostly used when the English Bible was first translated in 16th century. And so it was natural enough word to translate the Greek word *paraklesis* in 2 Corinthians 1—which in most other places in our Bibles is translated 'encouragement' or 'exhortation'.

So next time you read 2 Corinthians 1, where it speaks about receiving the comfort of God, and comforting one another with the comfort we have received from God, try replacing the word 'comfort' with 'strengthen' or 'encourage' or 'urge on'. It changes the feeling of the passage entirely, and helps you see connections that you might not otherwise have noticed.

It is the urging on by your mentor, or being cheered on from the grandstand.

Another example is the word 'worship', which is a particularly complex one, because there are, I think, four different Greek words that we often translate as 'worship' in our English New Testaments. Sometimes the original word means 'to give honour to a higher person than you' or 'to submit to that person', sometimes literally in bowing down and falling on your face and prostrating yourself before somebody. Sometimes it can mean 'to do service toward the superior person'.

So the words for 'worship' in the Greek have all these different sorts of connotations, but for us in English 'worship' is almost entirely connected with church services. Even though we try and persuade ourselves that it's a bigger word than that—we *worship* God in all our lives—yet almost the entirety of the semantic range of the word is connected with either church as an act of public worship, or more recently, to that time within the church service where we sing songs to God as an act of 'worship'. And so because of what the word has come to mean for us, we often will miss what's going on in the text of the Bible, because we can't help but take the common connotation of what the English word has now become and think that that's what the Bible is talking about.

Then we have the word 'praise' which is interesting because it's a very Old Testament word. We get a lot of our feeling of what 'praise' is from the Psalms, and from its frequent use of the Hebrew root *hll* (which is where get 'hallelujah' from, in another example transliteration)—to praise Yahweh.

In Hebrew, *hll* means 'to advertise or promote', to tell how great somebody is so that their reputation and glory is demonstrated in front of everybody. And so the Psalms that give the exhortation to 'praise' then proceed to say how great God is and urge other people to do the same.

Whilst music can be praise, praise is not necessarily music. So it's got nothing to do with music intrinsically. Often you might set it to music to make the most noise if you want it to advertise how great someone is and to declare it together as a group and regarding music, not all hymns are necessarily 'praise'. So what we're doing when we call on each other to 'praise the Lord' is to tell the whole world in God's presence—or to tell God in everyone else's presence—just how extraordinary God is, and we do this so that his glory, his brilliance and his reputation is made known before everybody—so that everybody gets to see and acknowledge how great this God is because of how many wonderful things he's done. And that's what praise is. And yet, because that word has shifted so much, when we hear the word 'praise' we really can't think of anything else apart from singing, and especially singing that's directed to God as a devotional, affectionate, heart-level kind of response. So that we end up misreading the word 'praise' when we see it in the Bible.

We need to be conscious that we may actually be using Bible words unbiblically. So what should we do about all this? The fact that it's normal for language to shift and change is not evil in itself, but it then results in our language ceasing to communicate what is really going on in the Bible's teaching. It presents us with a challenge, and we could probably say especially for our translators.

We need to pray for translators and encourage and help them in the real difficulty of precision in understanding the originating Greek and Hebrew with an awareness of how modern language has evolved. J.B. Phillips provided a great translation because he was a journalist who knew how English functioned. But you need to be experts in both those things to give a good translation.

For those of us who don't have a PhD in ancient Hebrew and Greek, we must be reliant upon those who are, we also need in every congregation those who do have enough proficiency in these languages that they can forthrightly critique those reliant upon scriptural in our teaching.