Doing a Word Study

Introduction

Two factors need to be considered when doing a word study:

1. A single word by itself conveys very little: it is seldom an adequate guide to a biblical idea. Thus a word like "holy" needs to be studied in its various contexts if we are to discover what the full biblical idea of holiness is. Word study is only valuable as a means of pursuing a given theme: it is only a means to an end. Ideas not words are our goal, and few ideas are tied to a single word.
2. Since the Bible was not written in English and no translation is perfect, words in the English Bible can represent two or more different words in the original language and the range of meanings in one English word does not do justice to the complexity of the original. The word study tries not only to get at the meaning but also the thought processes of the Hebrew or Greek authors. The context should indicate the meaning of the word being studied. The word study should be based on the Hebrew and Greek originals.

The purpose of a word study is to discover the themes of biblical thinking and not as a mere linguistic or lexicographical exercise. There are a number of strategies to be followed in order to ensure a productive approach.

Strategies for Doing Word Studies

A number of learning strategies are necessary in order to conduct a word study successfully:

1. Learn Hebrew and Greek (see Guides # 2, 9, 16 and 17 in this series)
2. Use an Analytical Concordance

If you are unable to learn Hebrew and Greek, the next best alternative is to consult an analytical concordance. For example, there are:

The best known and most useful based on the Authorized Version (AVE) lists the occurrences of each English word under the various Hebrew and Greek words (transliterated) which that word translates. An appendix lists all the English words used in the AVE for each Hebrew and Greek word. It contains about 311,000 references, subdivided under the Hebrew and Greek originals with the literal meaning and pronunciation of each. It also has index lexicons to the Old and New Testaments, with a guide to parallel passages and a complete list of scripture proper names. So without knowing a word of Hebrew or Greek it is possible, by using this source, to trace the use of any word of the original.

It covers the AV and the Revised Version (RV) making it possible to discover the meaning behind words which, though identical in English, are different in the original. As well as the Main concordance, it provides the New Strong's concise dictionary of the words in the Hebrew Bible, with their renderings in the King James Version, and the New Strong's concise dictionary of the words in the Greek Testament, with their renderings in the King James Version.

3. **Compare Different Translations**

   This is a useful way of getting the real meaning of the word or phrase, as each translation brings out a different facet of its meaning. However, some translations paraphrase too freely which may result in a departure from the emphasis of the original.


   While classical and popular Greek shed light on the meaning of New Testament (NT) words, the main source is still the Old Testament (OT). Thus NT use of a word should not be studied in isolation as it will be considerably illuminated by its usage in the OT.

5. **Choose Words Carefully**

   Choose the words you wish to study carefully. Words such as "love", "law", or "faith" have an obvious value in terms of their doctrinal and devotional significance. Ordinary words such as "rock", "fruit", "white" also have their value for while they may appear mundane they can potentially have a metaphorical use or as illustrations of spiritual truth. Whatever the word we choose it is important that it be read in context in order that we understand what the author meant to convey. At the same time, one needs to respect what the author intended to say and not to assume allegory or metaphor where it was not intended. Let the context decide the meaning not preconceived usage determined by tradition.

**Searching Using the Strong's Numbering System**

If you do not have a grasp of Hebrew or Greek, you can still search for terms in these languages by using the Strong's Numbering System.

- These numbers are available only by selecting the KJV text.
- To get the Strong number of a word, search [here](#). Select book, chapter, and verses. Then select "Show Strongs Numbers." This will give you the Hebrew Strong number for the Old Testament and the Greek Strong for the New Testament.
- Make a note of all of the numbers you wish to search, remembering which are from the OT and which are from the NT.
- Then insert your choice of Strong Numbers individually in the box below your original search, specifying Hebrew (H) or Greek (G). Then select Search and view the results.
- The results will provide information on transliteration, pronunciation, root word, outline of biblical usage, and a listing of the occurrence of the word throughout the books of the Bible.
Example of a Word Study: "Fellowship"

- Under "fellowship" we find one main word-group, koinonia (abstract noun), koinonos (concrete noun= 'sharer'), koinoneo (verb).
- An index of Greek words shows that koinonia is variously translated as 'communication' (used once), 'communion' (4 times), 'contribution' (used once), 'distribution' (used once), 'fellowship' (12 times).
- koinonos and koinoneo yield a similar range of translations, though 'partaker' and 'partner' occur as noteworthy additions.
- To be comprehensive, each of the terms in the koinonia group should be searched under the English equivalents listed. However, restricting this to 'fellowship', 'communion', 'partaker', and 'partner' is likely to save time and produce more relevant results.
- From this it emerges that koinonia is not primarily something that you do but rather signifies a state of affairs understood by the word 'partnership'. It means sharing, belonging together, togetherness. Those who have become God's people by faith are joined at the deepest level. They have koinonia with Christ and with God.
- In the context of the NT, koinonia can be a matter of money. Christians are intended to share not only in spirit but in kind. In the NT, 10 out of 45 occurrences of the word refer to this material aspect of sharing; and 5 others make it likely that it was being referred to.

Relationship of a Word Study to Analysing a Passage

How does a word study relate to the analysis of a passage? A word study is only one element in the broader study of a passage. Repeated readings of a passage (even from different versions) are a necessary prerequisite to any detailed examination of the text. It is important to identify the type of passage (e.g. poetry, prose, history, argument) before proceeding as this will determine one's approach. For example, the literal meaning might be useless where passages in the Psalms are concerned (e.g. Ps.60:7). The following elements are to be recommended when exegeting a passage:

- Establish the main theme and summarize it in a single sentence or short phrase.
- Determine the principal divisions of the passage based on the main paragraphs and their subdivisions (if applicable).
- Identify connecting elements or links between paragraphs.
- Note the imagery used to explain difficult or abstract ideas.
- Note the use of repetition for the sake of emphasis.
- Note the key words for a word study.
- Identify the character(s) mentioned and connect this information about what you know of them elsewhere in the Bible.
- Note the questions raised by the passage. Often the crucial question will relate to the main theme. Note the questions raised in one's own mind. Does the passage itself answer these questions?
- Explore and note cross-references. For example, in a study of Psalm 73, compare the theme of the prosperity of the wicked in the Book of Job and Psalm 49.
- Note the presence of any particular literary features like unusual word order, rhythm, figures of speech, and imagery.
Acknowledgement

In the preparation of sections of this guide, I have drawn on J. Rutherford, "Analysing a Passage" and D. France, "Word Study" in J.B. Job (ed.), *How To Study the Bible* (Downer's Grove, IVP: 1979), 35-45, 54-64.