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Necessary Consequence: Definitions

by Michael Holloway

Suppose that someone made the following statement to you: "I just saw a movie, and it was really bad." Would you think that the person liked the movie, or not? Suppose a teenager told you that their football team was hot. Would you think that the team was playing well, or that the players had spent too much time out in the sun?

These simple examples illustrate the critical importance of *definitions*. Without knowing how the person talking about the movie defined the word "bad", it is impossible to know what they thought about the movie. Without knowing the meaning the teenager gave to "hot", it is impossible to know what he was saying about the football team.

With these examples, the consequences of not knowing the definitions given to particular words are not severe. In the first case, you might miss seeing a movie you would have enjoyed; in the second case, you might end up being embarrassed when you offered the star quarterback a drink of water.

However, in theology the consequences of not knowing the definitions can be much more severe. This is especially true in two cases: (1) reading and understanding the Scripture, and (2) communicating with and understanding other people.

In order to read and properly understand the Scripture, one must know what the words of Scripture mean. Few statements are more self-evidently true than that. However, some of the most ubiquitous theological errors within the Christian community throughout history have resulted from a misunderstanding of definitions. For example, antinomianism (the denial of the relevance of the moral law to Christians) is largely a result of a failure to understand the several different meanings the New Testament gives to the word translated in English as "law"; salvation-by-works stems from a misunderstanding of the proper scriptural meaning of "works"; and the charismatic movement errs by misunderstanding (among other things) the definition of "tongues".

To avoid falling prey to these, and other, errors, we must be diligent to learn and understand the correct meaning of the terms used in the Scripture.

Not only are definitions essential for correct understanding of Scripture, they are also essential for communicating with and understanding other people. Unless we provide clear definitions when we attempt to communicate Biblical truth to others, we are likely to be misunderstood. Unless we insist upon clear definitions from others when they talk to us, we are likely to be misled.

To illustrate the importance of definitions in communicating the truth to others, consider the following question: "Does man have a free will?"

What is the answer to this question?

It is impossible to answer the question accurately without knowing what the questioner means by the term "free will." If the questioner means the ability to choose to do what one desires, then the answer is an unequivocal "yes." However, if he means the ability to choose to believe in the gospel, without first being regenerated by God, then the answer is an unequivocal "no."

If we are asked this question, and we provide an answer to it without first clarifying the necessary definitions, we are almost certainly going to be misunderstood. Even if the questioner happens to have in mind the same definition that we do, others listening to the exchange may not.

Definitions are critically important to communication, but, in much of what passes for theological discourse today, they are conspicuously absent. In fact, the following observation from J. Gresham Machen is even more true today than it was in 1925 when he first penned it:

Indeed nothing makes a man more unpopular in the controversies of the present day than an insistence upon definition of terms. Anything, it seems, may be forgiven more readily than that. Men discourse very eloquently today upon such subjects as God, religion, Christianity, atonement, redemption, faith; but are greatly incensed when they are asked to tell in simple language what they mean by these terms. They do not like to have the flow of their eloquence checked by so vulgar a thing as a definition.

-- J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State, Essays by J. Gresham Machen*, edited by J. Robbins, The Trinity Foundation, Jefferson MD, 1987.

Although insisting on definitions may well make you unpopular, it is essential if you are to avoid being misled into supporting those who believe and teach heresy. For example, if you do not know what a Mormon means when he refers to Jesus as the Son of God, or what a neo-orthodox preacher means when he refers to the Bible as the Word of God, you may find yourself agreeing with such people, when in fact, you should be exposing them as teachers of error.

In summary, to properly understand the whole counsel of God, we must diligently learn and understand the Scripture's definitions of terms; to properly communicate God's truth to others, we must diligently provide clear definitions of the terms we use; and to guard against being deceived, we must diligently insist that others provide clear definitions of the terms they use.

[This column was introduced in the May-July 1993 issue of the Calvary Herald. Its name comes from Chapter I, Section VI of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which states that "The whole counsel of God ... is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" The purpose of the column is to provide instruction in how to understand and construct logical arguments, and in how to recognize and guard against incorrect arguments.]