

Definition Defined

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele emphasizes the importance of maintaining common definitions in theology to ensure clarity and prevent misunderstandings.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:9

Topics: "Theological Clarity", "Doctrinal Integrity"

Description

Daniel Steele emphasizes the importance of using common acceptance of terms in theological discussions, warning against inventing new meanings for established words which can lead to unnecessary offense and confusion among readers. He highlights the significance of sticking to commonly understood definitions to avoid revolutionary and subversive interpretations that may deviate from doctrinal foundations. Steele references Professor Austin Phelps and critiques the practice of inventing new definitions, pointing out how it can elevate discussions into the clouds of abstraction, away from practical understanding. He also discusses the contrasting approaches of theologians like President Edwards and Dr. Thomas Brown in defining key theological terms, emphasizing the value of clarity and consistency in theological discourse.

Transcript

MILL in his logic says the most correct notion of a definition is "either the meaning it bears in common acceptance, or that which the writer, for the particular purposes of his discourse, intends to annex to it." If he invents new meanings of old words, he lifts his whole discourse into the clouds away from the terra firma of practical life. If his balloon is large enough to take his readers with him, and they are willing to take the risk of breaking their necks, he may carry them to his chosen landing place. But if they are not willing to empty words of their commonly accepted meaning, he has no right to complain if they quarrel with his conclusion. He has been the innovator on the established order of things. They have a right to insist, as I shall to-day insist, on the common acceptance of terms. For instance, if a writer empties "depravity" of its bad meaning, divesting it of all moral significance, and retains only bodily and mental weakness -- "a change in the relative order of strength" -- and then insists that "depravity" is incurable till the resurrection, he is giving a needless offense to Christian readers in asking them to accept his conclusion. He might say the weakness, or the change in the relative order of strength, will continue thus long, or the effects or scars of sin will continue, without any protest from the theologians. These remarks explain the just criticisms which this book has called forth, especially from elderly men. Good English is their inheritance, which they are determined to defend by resisting all individual and private definitions invented for a

purpose revolutionary and subversive of our doctrinal foundations.

I have said that when a man invents his own definitions his whole discussion becomes aerial. Professor Austin Phelps declares that,

The controversial fever often burns out of a man's style a healthy taste. Witness President Edwards's definition of 'necessity.' The Essay on the Will brings on a pure invention in the meaning attached to that word. Edwards's idea of necessity, as he defines it, is not the English idea, is not the popular idea; it never was. It was not his own idea outside of the Essay on the Will. No man can preach it without lapsing into fatalism. In his sermons Edwards falls back, as other men of sense do, upon the popular idea. Even in the Essay on the Will in some sections, he forgets his definition, and speaks of 'necessity' and 'freedom' as the common sense of men understand them.

The most conclusive answer to the weak points in Edwards's essay is the strong point in his sermons.

The same writer also says of Dr. Thomas Brown's definition of "power" and "cause:"

The common mind has never for a day in any language sanctioned Dr. Brown's idea of the meaning of these words.

We confidently predict this will be true of all the newly-invented definitions in Growth in Holiness, especially of holiness, depravity, and cleansing.

In his preliminary chapter our new guide to perfection says of John Wesley and Matthew Simpson, in respect to their use of the terms holiness, sanctification, perfection, and perfect love: "Evidently to these men, and those for whom they speak, one word seems as good as another for all practical and theoretical purposes -- any attempt at nice discrimination or definition would be considered entirely out of place." Since much credit is claimed by our brother, the author, for accurate definitions, it may be well to inquire what is an exact definition. Webster has it in a nutshell -- " A description of a thing by its properties." "It is designed to settle a thing in its compass and extent." According to Webster, no essentially new definition is called for or is possible unless some new property has been discovered. Hence new definitions in the natural sciences are constantly needed as the human mind advances in its scrutiny of nature. In philosophy and theology, in which the greatest minds have delved for thousands of years, new discoveries are rare, and essentially new definitions are rare also. In fact, we sympathize with R. Watson, who says that "anything essentially new in Christian theology is essentially false." It follows that theological definitions essentially new are essentially erroneous.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/daniel-steele/definition-defined/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net