

A word about a word

Last May, I earned a master's degree in theology from St. Mary's Ecumenical Institute in Roland Park. It was a new field of study for me, and I admit that I wasn't really clear on the meaning of "theology" when I embarked on this endeavor. What kind of things would I be studying? Would all my questions about God be answered?

While indisputable proof about the existence of God may remain elusive, there is plenty of interesting evidence to be obtained from courses offered at St. Mary's on church history, scripture, religious doctrines, ancient languages (my favorite), spirituality and ethics. So then, do these combined subjects represent the meaning of theology? Yes, somewhat. These are some of the things that comprise the field of study. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to travel this field. It has been a slow process. Surprisingly, I found that the time spent learning the components of theology led me right back to the word itself.

As with most words, we have a general idea of their meaning. Today, life moves so quickly that we are frequently satisfied with one meaning for each word. Indeed, we even shorten or combine words to facilitate rapid communication. For me, it has been an extraordinary experience to slowly unravel the meaning of theology as a course of study, and ultimately, as a word. As a word, it is both complex and simple, and I would like to offer this view.

The word "theology" is Greek in origin. The first part, *theos*, means *God*. This is simple and clear. Most of us are familiar with the last part, *ology*, which we interpret as *the study of*. So *theology* should most directly mean *the study of God*. Not just a suffix, however, *ology* comes from the Greek word *logos*, which is commonly, and rather finitely, translated as *word*. So then, we might say that *theology* could mean *words about God*. This definition is slightly different, but still relatively simple.

Things become very interesting, however, as we look closer at the word *logos*. In the world of theology, *logos* is more than an assembly of letters. It is both a presence and a person. At this point, it may be helpful to note that not everyone who studies theology is religious, or even very spiritual. Some are non-believers. But across the

spectrum of beliefs, anyone who studies theology will admit that *logos* is more than a mere word.

The Greeks gave us not only this word, but the language of all the New Testament writings. But centuries before the time of Christ, the Greek civilization also planted the seeds of philosophy, science, politics, art and math. We owe it to the ancients to consider their reality of this word. They were well aware of different meanings for *logos*. Philosophically, it meant *wisdom, reason or rational thinking*. In practical matters, it could also mean an *account*, or the *settlement of an account*. In addition, it could be understood as the *grounds* of an argument. As you can see, *logos* can mean many more things than just *word*!

For practical purposes, however, when texts like the New Testament are translated, reasonable and understandable choices must be made. Hence, *logos* was translated as *word*. Then, intriguingly, we discover that the astute author of the gospel of John calls Jesus “*the Logos*” in the very first sentence of his narrative. Using our simple definition of *logos* as *word*, it reads:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Whatever your beliefs, it would be difficult to deny the beauty of this sentence!

Today, we have so much more information at our fingertips, but even before touching a computer key, we can see the uncanny similarity between the words *logic* and *logos*.

So, is God logic? Hmm...but let's keep going. Go to Google. Go to Dictionary.com, which offers this philosophical definition of *logos*: *the rational principle that governs and develops the universe*. So now, in place of “Word,” cut and paste this definition in John's opening sentence.

The result is stunning!

Read more commentary ***here***.

