Cleave, Clave, Cloven, Cleft

Cleave or Cleave?

You will not run into the word 'cleave' in modern translations of the Bible, but it appeared in at least 100 verses in some older translations. *Cleave* is actually the spelling of two distinct English words with nearly opposite meanings:

♦ One 'cleave' means: *to divide or split*.
♦ The other 'cleave' means: *to stick to*.

If you look at the two words' etymologies (the history of usage and spelling of a word), you will find that the two words have different origins. In addition, the *sticky* cleave had two early spellings: 'cleve' or 'cleeve.'

The 'dividing' *cleave* is *clave* when used in past tense. Some folks might remember references to animals with *cloven* (split or divided) hooves in the King James Version of the Old Testament. The word *cleft* came from the word *cleave* and refers to a *hollow* or *split* place in a rock.

Modern translations no longer *cleave* to the use of these words. Sooooo…what???

Words

Words are important. If we cannot agree on the meanings of words, we cannot effectively communicate. God's word is no different. God has communicated to mankind something from his mind. He knows what he meant and he communicated it using the common language of his people. If we are going to understand God's message, we need to pay attention to his Word. We need to give attention to words as they were used in their original cultural setting.

The Little Words

Some of the most important words in the Bible are little words. Jesus was declared 'the' King of Israel by a man named Nathaniel. How much difference would it have made if Nathanael had referred to Jesus as 'a' king of the Jews?

Prepositions are also 'little words'; they show direction, location, or time. Imagine a man running. How does your mental image change if the man is running 'to'? Running 'into'? Running 'from'? Running 'with'? 'Over'? 'Because'?

Prepositions are vitally important. They help us 'get our bearings' within the text.

Context

Context has to do with the surrounding text of a word. The Apostle Paul wrote: "Bad company corrupts good morals." Before and after that statement he was writing about the resurrection from the dead. The context, the surrounding verses on the resurrection, must influence the meaning of the phrase 'bad company.'

Applied

In older translations that use the word 'cleave,' the meaning is obvious in every case. When *cleave* means *'stick to'* it ALWAYS appears as '*cleave to'* or '*cleave unto*.' When *cleave* means 'divide or split,' the *context* ALWAYS makes the meaning obvious.

The purpose is not to encourage an academic approach to Bible study. Rather, every English-reading person can discover meaning in the Scriptures. The following will help:

1. Pay close attention to the context. Ultimately, the context gives meaning.
2. Give attention to the little words. Articles (the, a, an) and prepositions are of greatest importance. They provide greater accuracy.
3. Keep an English dictionary handy.

God intended for his message to be understood. So, Instead of asking, "What does it mean to me?" read the text carefully, and consider the context. Then ask, "What did *God* mean?"

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