Greek Word Studies:

Wrangle about words (3054) (logomacheo from λόγος = word + machomai = strive, contend, fight, quarrel, dispute) literally pictures a "war over words" or word battles.

Paul says warn them not to continually (present tense) dispute the meaning or use of words.

As becomes clear in the following verses, Paul was not speaking about immature wrangling over secondary matters, disruptive as that can be. Paul was warning about those deceivers who might use human wisdom and reason to undermine God’s Word. We know also from the “rotten fruit” (useless, ruin) of these "word wars" that these are not simply minor disagreements.

In his first epistle Paul warned Timothy about those who would advocate a different doctrine that does of unsound words which did not conform to godliness, noting that such a man

"Is conceited (speaks metaphorically of a beclouded and stupid state of mind as the result of pride - perfect tense speaks of their settled state of pride) and understands (unable to do any concentrated or reflective thinking) nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions (processes of inquiry = idle speculations) and disputes about words (logomachia = ἄσκος war of wordsκαὶ), out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions..." (1 Ti 6:4)

Their "disease" involves a preoccupation with useless questions and fighting over words. As Milne has noted...

Words become an end in themselves, and they alienate parties. Technicalities get in the way of truth, and core issues like righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come are never addressed. These controversies are full of heat but no light, and lead to schism in the church and spiritual catastrophe (literally) for those who allow themselves to be sucked into them. (Milne, D. J.: Focus on the Bible: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus)

As John MacArthur notes

"False teachers do little more than quibble over terminology. They indulge in pseudo-intellectual theorizing rather than in productive study of and submission to God’s Word." (MacArthur, J. 1 Timothy. Chicago: Moody Press)

Ray Stedman notes that "word battles" are a common trap in many modern day churches explaining that...

"The words in question, of course, represented doctrinal viewpoints. The church has often struggled with trying to define doctrine in words. The words themselves are all right, but what is wrong is the battles that are waged over the words.

One of the outstanding examples in church history in this regard occurred during the days of the Reformation. Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther became engaged in a controversy with the Swiss Christians over the meaning of the Lord's words, "This is my body," when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. Those words became the subject of a great controversy that split the force of the Reformation. Under Martin Luther's teaching, the Lutherans maintained that those words were to be taken literally (that the bread really becomes, or is, the body of Christ), while the Swiss Christians maintained that the words were a figurative expression (that the words meant, "this represents my body"). Both sides argued at great length, and the Reformation was almost brought to a halt by the controversy. In an attempt to heal the dispute, Count von Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss group, brought a delegation to Germany to meet with Martin Luther. When Luther entered the room where the meeting was to take place, he strode over to the large table, and, taking a piece of chalk, he wrote across the length of the table the Latin words, Hoc est corpus meum ("This is my body"). That was his stand. Whenever the other side tried to enter into discussion, Luther would refuse and again quote the words, Hoc est corpus meum. The controversy was not settled, and the Reformation was severely limited as a result. As a boy, I remember being involved in a congregational debate over whether immersion or sprinkling was the proper mode of baptism. Sometimes churches split over eschatology -- is the rapture of the church going to be post-tribulation or pre-tribulation? Entire churches have split over such word battles." (2 Timothy 2:14-19: Avoiding Congregational Gangrene)

Guy King on "words...useless"...
They can be of enormous importance, as we have already indicated. Often they are of nothing less than eternal significance. Take Luke 1:47, "My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" - who can estimate the importance of that little word "my"? Take Gal 3:16, "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but, as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" - everything hangs upon the one word; indeed, the one letter.

Take Mt 22:43, 44, "How then doth David in spirit call Him Lord, saying, The Lord saith unto my Lord"? - the whole argument turns on, the validity of the argument depends on, that one word.

Or let me take you to your Early Church History. Some of you will remember the Battle of the Word at Nicea, in A.D. 325: how that, as against the word of Arius for the nature of the Second Person of the Godhead, the word which means "of like substance," Athanasius brilliantly argued for the word that indicates, "of one substance". Fortunately, that great young scholar saw the vital issue that was at stake; the heretical Arius was defeated, and the word is in our Nicene Creed to this day - to being of One Substance with the Father." All that fuss over a word - in fact, one tiny letter, the Greek "iota" our "i," which is the only difference between the two words. Yet how much was involved. However, the contrary may also be said of words...

They can be of trifling worth - "to no profit" (useless). Alas, so much time, and heat, and energy, and temper have been wasted on "word-fighting", when the controversy has been unneedful and not called for. People have fought, and fought, over a word expressive of little else than their own personal opinion or preference. It is a little difficult to decide whether the apostle is thinking here merely of a word, or of an argument.

Dr. Moffatt is not the kind of man to disparage, or to discourage, the exercise of mental gymnastics, the battle of wits; but he sees in this passage the thought of the futility of most of that habit. Some of us lesser mortals are inclined to wonder whether, in spiritual things, argument ever does any good at all. One further thing about such words,

They can be tragically perilous - "to the subverting of the hearers". All this heat about matters of doubtful importance can have a very serious effect on those" outside the fight, those who are looking on, bewildered, disillusioned; so often they have been undermined, overthrown, and have let go their faith. The word translated "subverting" is the one from which our word "catastrophe" comes; and, in the light of this verse, one is constrained to acknowledge that while, in some circumstances, controversy is necessary, and even a plain duty, yet in many cases, and for many people, uncalled - for controversy is very near to catastrophe.

If we find ourselves involved in controversy, let us make quite sure that it really is a necessity for Truth's sake, and not for personal reasons, and, having decided that, then let our words be as "before the Lord".

Let me repeat that controversy may become incumbent upon us; but unless it be that, let us eschew it, lest it prove the perilous word, that leads to a soul's undoing. Above all, let us beware of the company of the man who really cares little about the right or the wrong of his word, so long as he wins his argument. (2 Timothy 2:14-19 Three Words)

WHICH IS USELESS: epouden chresimon: (1Sa12:21; Jer 2:8; 2:11 7:8; 16:19; 23:32; Hab 16:26; 1Ti 4:8; Heb 13:9)

Useless is literally "of no profit" or "which is profitable for nothing". This is a Greek phrase composed of absolute negative (oudes 3762) and (chresimos), the negative particle "reversing" the meaning of chresimos (5539) (chresimos from chráomai = furnish what is needed; in turn from chrão = to lend, furnish as a loan; only used in 2Ti 2:14) which pertains to that which has value and is useful, profitable, beneficial and advantageous. So these "word wars" have absolutely no use, profit, benefit or advantage and instead of building up, they tear down the body.

As Guzik reminds us...

The stakes are high: If we take the focus off the message of God, and put the focus on human opinions and endless debates, it will result in the ruin of the hearers. The Bible says, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). But if people arenâ€™t hearing the word of God, then ruin comes by hearing the opinions and speculations and entertainment of man!. (2 Timothy 2)

Word wars never lead to moral and spiritual edification but always produce the opposite effect of subverting those who are listening. The body of Christ must stand for the truth, but it must not become a debating society. It is easy to become distracted by negotiable issues and take our focus off our central purpose which is to
preach the Word of Truth and make faithful disciples who are trained to in turn make other disciple makers. John Calvin put it this way...

Let us notice first that teaching is rightly condemned on the sole ground that it does no good. God’s purpose is not to pander to our inquisitiveness but to give us profitable instruction. Away with all speculations that produce no edification! (Amen!)

Pastor Steven Cole...

While we chuckle, it’s no laughing matter when people really use the Bible improperly. In 2 Timothy 2:14, Paul tells Timothy to solemnly charge those under his pastoral ministry the presence of God that if they misuse the Bible, it will lead to ruin. We get our word from the Greek word for ruin. Paul means, ultimate spiritual ruin! He names Hymenaeus and Philetus, who had gone astray from the truth, upsetting the faith of some with their misuse of the Bible! Paul is saying that...

To use the Bible for knowledge without obedience is to use it improperly (2Ti 2:14).

Wrangling about words (2Ti 2:14) was a notorious characteristic of the false teachers in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:6; 2:8; 6:3, 4, 5, 20, 21). They liked to display their knowledge on peripheral matters that did not lead to godliness, but only to pride over being right. Paul said (1Ti 1:5), But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Any time you use the Bible to grow in knowledge apart from godliness, you’re heading for spiritual trouble. One of the most common sins Satan uses to trip us up is spiritual pride-puffing us up with supposed knowledge (1Co 8:1). To know God truly in His holiness and majesty will humble us. When you study the Bible, always ask, What does this teach me about God and about myself? How should I apply this to my life?

We need to be careful not to misinterpret what Paul is saying here. We would be wrong to conclude that means that the precise words of Scripture do not matter. In Gal 3:16 Paul builds an argument over the fact that the promise given to Abraham uses singular rather than plural. Jesus argued for the resurrection based on the pre-sent rather than past tense of the Hebrew verb in Exodus 3:6 (Mt. 22:32). He taught that the smallest letter of the law would not pass away without being fulfilled (Mt. 5:17). It is important to study the precise words of Scripture and to understand the nuance of the original languages so that we interpret it properly.

Also, Paul is not saying that growing in spiritual knowledge through Scripture is unimportant. He often mentions the need to grow in spiritual knowledge and understanding (Eph. 1:17, 18, 19; Phil 1:9, 10; Col. 1:9, 10). As see in a moment, accuracy in handling God’s truth is crucial. So Paul is not discouraging careful Bible study. Truth matters greatly and error always causes harm.

Rather, Paul is here combating those who like to get into intellectual banter over obscure points of doctrine, but who are not seeking to grow in obedience to God. These scholars like to prove their superior intelligence by winning theological debates. But the point of Scriptural knowledge is not to fill our heads but to change our lives. To use the Bible for knowledge without application is to misuse it. (2 Timothy 2:14-19 Using the Word Properly)

Stedman illustrates this point noting that...

As the Battle of Trafalgar was about to begin, Admiral Nelson came across two officers of his own flagship who were arguing hotly and about to take sword to each other. Nelson stepped between them and said, "Stop." Then, pointing to the French fleet, he said, "There is the enemy."

Christians need to remember that. We are not to be engaged in debates that get so intense and so hot that we forget what the Lord has sent us to do. Quarreling over words does no good, so Timothy was to plead earnestly with them to avoid such disputes. I have been present at several church quarrels, and it is very evident that it is true that no further light is ever shed when a controversy gets heated. Nobody is bringing out truth; they are simply hammering away at each other with the Bible. Division, not unity, comes out of that. No witness before the world is increased because of church squabbles, but quite the opposite. (2 Timothy 2:14-19)

Wuest paraphrases "useless" as that which
results in not even one useful thing, since it ruins those who hear.

In all our ministry the question should always be “Will my words profit the body of Christ?” Do they edify or “nullify” (make of no value)?

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