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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

Should New Testament Greek Be "Required" in Our Ministerial Training Courses?

Henry Clarence Thiessen

[p.34]

Should the theological seminaries follow the example of many colleges and make the study of the ancient languages optional? This is one of the crucial questions before theological teachers and students today. Very important results flow from the solution of this problem, and it is our purpose to examine the question briefly.

More and more keenly the theological seminaries feel the effect of the changes being made in the courses in the colleges. Since today many colleges require neither Latin nor Greek for the B. A. degree, the ministerial student often comes to the seminary not only without any knowledge of these languages, but with the distinct feeling that the study of the Biblical language is, to say the least, not important. Let him that wishes to become a specialist in that field have the opportunity of taking a thorough course in Greek and Hebrew, but let him that is not interested in these languages as a specialty be permitted to take other subjects, more to his liking and more important in his judgment. This is the attitude of many young men today when they consider what seminary to attend for training for definite Christian service. It is a matter of regret that so many theological institutions are adopting this viewpoint and are making either one or both the Biblical languages optional. One wonders how the smaller seminary can long maintain a language department when such is the attitude toward the subject; for no matter how much individual teachers may recommend the courses in the Greek New Testament, the seminary's attitude in making the courses

[p.35]

elective indicates that officially the school does not consider them indispensable to every student.

But why oppose this tendency? Why not follow the example of other institutions, even if it becomes difficult or even impossible to maintain a language department? The writer does not assume to be an authority on the technicalities of pedagogy, but he does insist that as best we can we ought to examine the question before we come to such a conclusion. We must remember that not all that is new is good, and that not all that is old is bad. Since the older seminaries rather uniformly required the languages of all their students, we begin by considering the objections that are being offered today to this practice. When we have had these before us we shall suggest briefly an explanation of the present tendency; and then we shall follow with the positive reasons for requiring the languages of all students. What is true of New Testament Greek is, to a large extent, true of Old Testament Hebrew also; but for the purpose of this paper we confine ourselves more particularly to the importance of New Testament Greek.

The Objections Considered

The modern applicant for ministerial training asks, "Why continue to require New Testament Greek in a day when there are so many translations?" "Can a student in three or four years acquire sufficient knowledge of the Greek language to do independent work in the Greek Testament?" "Are there not many more 'practical' subjects in the theological curriculum that one could take?" These questions are in reality objections to the study of the language. They deserve careful examination and merit a sincere answer.

It would seem that the many translations of the New Testament so far from being an argument against the study of the original are in reality an argument for it. A friend of the writer, a well-known Bible teacher, has approximately 150 English translations of the whole or parts of the Bible. There is, of course, nothing wrong about the acquisition of numerous translations.

[p.36]

Much help can be obtained from a comparison of different translations by one well taught in the Scriptures as a whole, especially if he be able to check up the translations with the original. But one wonders how the young student unfamiliar with the original could arrive at the exact meaning of a passage by reference to the translations. Is it sufficient to say, "It seems to me that this translation gives the true meaning here?" Clearly, such a practice makes personal opinion the final criterion,—a most unscientific procedure. Heretics and false teachers have always been quick to adopt a rendering that is in harmony with their preconceived notions; but the faithful minister of the Word should seek for a more objective touchstone than mere personal preference.

Perhaps we should stop to inquire as to the reason for the many translations. Is it because of pecuniary reward or the ambition for honor? Possibly these considerations may enter in somewhat in some cases; but the writer believes that there is a deeper reason than that. It seems to him that scholar after scholar has felt that all existing translations fall short in many instances of giving the exact shade of meaning in the original. Becoming fascinated with the richness of meaning in the Greek text, he has yielded to the impulse to try to improve on the existing renderings, and so has added his own version. Thus the presence of the many English translations in reality argues for the insufficiency of translations when one is concerned about absolute accuracy in his study.

But can a student acquire sufficient knowledge of the Greek language in three or four years to do independent work in that language? We reply, That depends on what we mean by "independent." If we mean without recourse to lexicons and grammars, then the answer would, in most cases, be in the negative. The careful student will admit that even in his English study he is not altogether independent of the dictionary and grammar; how much less can he in so short a time become independent of such works of reference in a

[p.37]

language that is read but not spoken? But if we mean ability to ascertain accurately just what the text means by the aid of such helps; if we mean ability to follow and test the interpretations of Greek commentaries, then the answer would be in the affirmative. A student

can in the time specified acquire the ability to get the Greek viewpoint and find ways of expressing that viewpoint; he can become qualified to form an intelligent opinion of the interpretations of commentaries on the text of the original. And that is an accomplishment abundantly worth while.

And what about the third question, Are there not many more "practical" subjects in the theological curriculum today than the languages? In turn we should like to ask, What do you mean by the term "practical"? Is there anything more practical than an exact understanding of the Word of God? We are thinking not only of the personal spiritual benefit to the student, but also of the broader value of exegesis for an expository ministry and for the organization of one's whole theological thinking. Look at the practice in other fields of mental culture. When anyone undertakes to study Plato scientifically, does he do it in the translations? Or take the case of history. Are not educators constantly directing their students to the "sources"? It is the same with regard to Biblical science. Christian ministers and missionaries are expected to have a scientific knowledge of the Word of God. It is their specialty. Can they lay full claim to specialization if they content themselves with the versions? Is not an accurate knowledge of the original necessary to the highest type of expository preaching? We thank God for the time-honored Authorized Version; but have not such mistranslations in it as come from the confusion of the Greek words for "world" and "age," for "hades" and "hell," for "devil" and "demon," not to mention those of lesser importance, helped to build up and perpetuate colossal false teachings? It would seem to be "practical" enough to be able to refute the teachings of the restitutionists, second probationists, annihilationists, and other errorists, by

[p.38]

direct reference to the original, especially since they so generally pretend to base their interpretations on the original, it would seem to be abundantly worth while to get such an accurate knowledge of the Greek text that one can use it in the exposition of the Scriptures and the formulation of his own doctrinal views. For the candidate for the foreign field there is always the additional possibility that he will have to labor in a field where a new translation of the Scriptures has to be made or an old one revised. Shall he content himself with translating from the English Bible or shall he aspire to translate from the original? There would seem to be few subjects more foundational to the Christian worker than the study of the Biblical languages.

The Explanation Suggested

If, now, the tendency in theological education today is to get away from the study of the languages, what is the reason for it? We have shown the inadequacy of the objections to their continuance as required subjects; let us next suggest two explanations of the tendency itself. The first is the present-day emphasis on utilitarianism in pedagogy and philosophy. Adopting the dictum of modern philosophy that we should include nothing in our curricula that does not "function" in the life of the graduate, some men claim that New Testament Greek must be eliminated from the list of required subjects. They tell us that men in the ministry today seldom use the Greek Testament in their pulpit preparation, and that others with very little or no knowledge of Greek are more successful in the ministry than those with the regular courses in this subject. How, we are asked, do you explain these facts, if the study of Greek

placed the one class in so advantageous a position, and the omission of it does not seem to affect the success of the other?

In reply to the first assertion it may be said that there are still a goodly number of ministers that make use of their Greek Testament in the study, though the number is not as large as it was a generation ago.

[p.39]

There are several explanations why many no longer depend on the original in a large sense. The present day minister is so overburdened with administrative duties, social endeavors, and public services, that he finds it difficult to observe regular hours for study of any kind. Some of the activities of the modern pastor may not altogether square with the Biblical conception of the ministry; some of them undoubtedly have been assumed because of the pressure of circumstances, at the expense of systematic private study. If on leaving the seminary the young minister does not reserve for himself definite hours for study, including his Greek Testament, he will soon show it in his preaching. He will certainly not long retain a working knowledge of the Greek language. So when after this condition has well set in he snatches a few spare moments at irregular intervals during the week for sermon preparation, he finds it easier to sit down with the English Bible than to dig away at the original. This accounts for most of the nonuse of the Biblical languages by men in the ministry today. But we believe that in some cases the reason can be traced a step further back than that. All too many come out of the seminary without a thorough knowledge of what Greek they did take, and so they have little to preserve and build on. Never having attained to a mastery of forms and functions, they have never felt sure of their own interpretations. It may have been the teacher's fault. Perhaps he was too eager to make exegetes out of his pupils and did not sufficiently drill them on the mechanics of the language, or perhaps he took a purely professional interest in the language and so taught nothing but accident and syntax. Both are extremes to be avoided, for the student that is taught to exegete without a thorough grounding in grammar must remain a slave of the commentaries, and the student that studies nothing but grammar misses the enrichment and satisfaction that comes from the understanding of the Greek statement. But the writer believes that these are faults that can be cor-

[p.40]

rected and that the student can be inspired to do original work in the Greek text.

As for the claim that many Christian leaders with little or no knowledge of Greek are more successful in the ministry than others who have that knowledge we may say that that does not disprove our contention that with it they might have become even more successful. True success in the Lord's work is not due to one's knowledge or lack of knowledge of Greek, but to prayer, the faithful exposition of the truth one does know, and the blessing of God. This being true, we fail to see how such a fuller knowledge of the Word as comes from the ability to read the Scriptures in the original can subtract from a man's success in the ministry. The rather must it help him to succeed in whatever type of work he may be engaged. We rejoice at the success of those honored servants of God who have not had the regular theological training; but it seems fair to say that they did not achieve success because of their deficiency in this respect but in spite of it. There are, we may admit, a few men so wonderfully endowed

of God that they can do without the formal training of the schools; but we must remember that there was only one Spurgeon and only one Moody. What a foolish notion it would be to assume that all that one needs to do to become a Spurgeon or a Moody is to avoid getting any more education than they had when they began their ministry! We said began their ministry, for we know that both these men in a large measure overcame their handicaps by prolonged study and self-discipline after they got into the ministry. So do other men of that type today. They avail themselves of the fruit of the labors of other men, and, in some cases, attain to a mastery of the technical aspects of their specialty to a degree not attained by the seminary graduate. It may be said, also, that generally these men are the strongest advocates of intensive training for our young people today. They feel that the prospects are ever so much brighter for the young man that goes out fully equipped from the beginning than for the young man that must,

[p.41]

like themselves, spend much time in hard study along with his ministerial labors, time that ought to be devoted to the teaching and preaching of the Word of God. At any rate, it is not right to say that New Testament Greek does not "function" in the life of a minister as long as any of the above reasons explain either his nonuse of the Greek Testament or his success without a knowledge of that language.

If the first explanation is not well founded on fact, the second is, in the writer's opinion, the real reason. Briefly stated, It is the present attitude toward the Bible. If the Scriptures are inspired only as Shakespeare and Milton are inspired; if they are but the opinions of pious men of ancient times; then they are not infallible. If they are not infallible, then why study them with minute care. Then the English translations are quite sufficient to acquaint us with the general outlines of Old Testament history, the life of Christ, and the teaching of the apostles. Men with such views study the Greek Testament chiefly, if at all, merely as a language, and not in order to ascertain the full significance of its message. This is the attitude of the modernistic seminaries, and one can understand why such institutions make Greek an elective. But it is difficult to see why the conservative seminaries should do so also. Surely, they are not willing to admit that the Scriptures need not be studied with minute care; surely, they accept the original as the very Word of God. The writer could wish that schools that have for the present made the Biblical language elective would reconsider their action and restore them to their former place among the required subjects.

The Reasons Stated

We have discussed the objections to requiring the Biblical languages of all theological students and have suggested a possible explanation of the present tendency to get away from the older practice. Let us now consider the positive reasons for continuing New Testament Greek as a "required" subject.

[p.42]

In the first place we would mention the difficulty of expressing accurately the thought of one language in that of another. In a general way, words, phrases, and clauses in one language are

similar to those in another, but that is not saying they are always exact equivalents. Weymouth shows that even the Greek words χεῖρ and ἵππος are not always the exact equivalents of our English *hand* and *horse*, though they usually are.¹ If such common words as these sometimes have different meanings in the two languages, what is to be said about the abstract words ἀγάπη, ἀρετή, etc.; about the many cases of nouns and pronouns in Greek over against the few in English; about the two Greek tenses for past time over against our one past tense, etc.? A Greek word sometimes covers more, sometimes less, ground than the word by which it is represented in our English translations. The translator is constantly confronted by two problems, *viz.*, first, how to express the exact shade of meaning in the original, and, secondly, how to do it in idiomatic English. Sometimes the one or the other purpose can be carried out only in part, owing to the differences in the two idioms.

But someone may ask, Why then study Greek if there is this difficulty in exact translation? What is to be gained by the knowledge of a meaning that you can not express? To this we reply that we recognize the difficulty of exact *idiomatic* translation. We have contended above that this is the chief reason for the multiplication of versions. But we deny that the true meaning cannot somehow be expressed in English. We believe that the student can get the Greek way of looking at it and can express the exact meaning by paraphrase and circumlocution when he cannot do it in idiomatic English. Dean Alford resorts to this method when he comments on the verb ἐγενήθητε in 1 Pet. 3:6.² This verb is translated in the A. V. by "whose daughters ye are," and in the A. S. V. by "whose children ye now are." Alford remarks that "the aorist properly refers back to

[p.43]

the precise time when they were so made; but," he adds, it "cannot be so expressed in English." He means in idiomatic English, for he translates by "of whom ye have become children." But that may mean by a long process of well-doing, which is contrary to the sense of the aorist. Thus his explanatory statement is needed to indicate the true force of the original. Take as another illustration the first part of Paul's statement in Eph. 3:17. The writer was long puzzled as to Paul's meaning when he prays, as the A. S. V. translates, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Were not his readers Christians? Was not Christ already in their hearts? Surely that was the case, as is clear from chs. 1 and 2. What then does he mean? It was not until the writer looked carefully at the original that light came. The important word here is κατοικῆσαι, an aorist infinitive, not the aorist infinitive οἰκῆσαι, nor the present infinitive οἰκεῖν. We have here the compound word κατοικέω (from κατά and οἰκέω) in the aorist tense. The compound expresses the perfective idea and means to *dwell or settle*, and together with the ingressive (inceptive) idea in the aorist signifies to take up *permanent abode, to settle down* in the heart. Not that Christ comes and goes in the experience of the believer, but that there is the privilege of having Him Who is already in the heart take up a settled abode in it. This implies a larger welcome on part of the Christian to Christ and a fuller surrender to Him. This is what Paul prayed for, and this is what believers should covet today. These examples show that the exact meaning of the Greek can be expressed, though not always in idiomatic English.

¹ *On Rendering into English of the Greek Aorist and Perfect*, p. 4 f.

² *Greek Testament, in loc.*

In the second place we would emphasize the solemn obligations of the Christian minister. He has been commissioned to "preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2). Even the Old Testament says: "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" (Jer. 23:28). That means more than to maintain a general loyalty to the great fundamentals of the faith: it means a conscientious dealing with every part of the revelation God has given us. Jesus emphasized the importance of jots and tittles

[p.44]

in the Old Testament (Mt. 5:18), is the New Testament any less important than the Old? Paul based his argument that Jesus is the One through Whom the Abrahamic blessing comes to the Gentiles on the use of the singular (Gal. 3:16). A knowledge of the original makes it possible to interpret the Word of God faithfully. The Christian minister is not commissioned to preach the current views of philosophy or the changing hypotheses of science; he is not called upon to review the latest books of fiction or the present-day pictures in the movies; he is not even charged with the duty of preaching the purest kind of ethics he knows and of making men better,—he is asked to preach the Word, to be urgent in season, out of season; to reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching (2 Tim. 4:2). He, like Paul, is "set for the defence of the Gospel" (Phil. 1:16), and, as Jude says, is to "contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). He is not to handle "the Word of God deceitfully" (2 Cor. 4:2), for he is a steward of the mysteries of God, and "it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:1, 2). Some day he will be called to give an account of his stewardship. What will he say at the judgment seat of Christ if he has not availed himself of every opportunity to become qualified for the most exact and faithful exposition of God's Word?

In the last place we would call attention to the relation between exegesis and preaching. Dr. A. T. Robertson quotes A. M. Fairbairn as saying, "No man can be a theologian who is not a philologist. He who is no grammarian is no divine."³ This seems like an exaggeration in our day of superficial Bible study. Dr. Robertson refers us to Alexander Maclaren as a good illustration of this dictum, saying that "his matchless discourses are the fruit of the most exact scholarship and spiritual enthusiasm."⁴ Thayer says, "The somewhat indiscriminate depreciation of the study of the dead

[p.45]

languages at the present day is not without injurious influence upon those who are preparing themselves to be expounders of the Divine Word."⁵ This is true, and we may add that the "depreciation" has grown apace since Thayer wrote the above words.

We have emphasized above the importance of preaching the Word. No wonder there is such a dearth of expository preaching in our day when there is so little interest in the exact study of the text. We need to get back to the study of the Bible in the original languages if we are to get back to Biblical preaching. It should not be forgotten that the foundations for the

³ *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. x.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Preface to *Buttmann's Grammar of New Testament Greek*.

Protestant Reformation were laid in the Renaissance. Think of the influence in those days of the lectures of such men as John Reuchlin (1455-1522) in Germany who taught Hebrew, and of John Colet (1467-1519) in England who lectured on the Greek text of Paul's Epistles. However far these men may have fallen from the true evangelical position, they contributed much to the undermining of the speculative fancies of the Schoolmen and prepared the way for the fuller evangelical message. Would it not be true today also that if teachers of theological truth returned to the exposition of the Scriptures from the original languages the foundations of modernism would soon be undermined and the way be prepared for a great spiritual awakening?

We have seen that the objections to requiring New Testament Greek for graduation are not well taken; that the reasons for the present tendency to make the subject an elective are not in harmony with the highest scholastic and spiritual ideals; and that the results of the exposition of the Scriptures on the basis of the original are most practical and far-reaching. In view of these facts the writer could wish that all the evangelical theological seminaries would continue New Testament Greek as a required subject in their curriculum!

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Prepared for the Web in July 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw.

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