The minister and his Greek New Testament

by Ronald Ward

Until recently Dr. Ward was for many years Professor of New Testament at Wycliffe College, Toronto. He is now Rector of a country parish in Suffolk, England, and is the author of several books on the New Testament and preaching.

In some parts of the world – and of the church – the study of Greek is having a hard struggle to survive. Apart from the contemporary emphasis on a scientific education, there are those who see little value in a knowledge of the language and who would dispense with it in the normal training for the ministry. It is argued that if a boy has studied Latin and Greek from a tender age he should naturally continue with the Greek Testament if he is to enter the teaching or pastoral ministry; but if it means beginning Greek when he enters a theological college, then let the attempt be given up: the time spent is out of all proportion to the advantage gained.

We may see here the convergent views of three kinds of people. There is the man who enters the ministry somewhat late in life and has a natural hesitation to embark on a subject which may well prove beyond his reach. His first cousin, so to speak, is the student for whom languages bear the mark of the beast. He has struggled manfully through his theological course and after the miracle of graduation and ordination thankfully begins his pastorate and consigns his Greek to an unlamented end. The third man dogmatically refuses even to consider the study of a "dead" language and concentrates on "practical" subjects in preparation for a practical ministry.

Now the man who enters the ministry late commands our respect and our sympathy. And I would not for one moment say that a man cannot be a faithful minister of our Lord Jesus Christ unless he knows Greek. The non-academic man may put the scholar to shame. But given youth with the energy of youth I think that the Church would be denying her ministers an essential weapon for their warfare if she abandoned the study of Greek.

AS ORIGINALLY GIVEN

Of all people the evangelicals say that they believe the Word of God written. Then they should read it, study it, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it. If they cannot or will not study the original, they are at the mercy of any and every commentator or translator, with scant means of checking him. They may even be led astray in their theology.

In addition, the preacher has the task of expounding the Word of God. "The old, old story" has to be proclaimed in a thousand variations – the metaphor is from music. Like a composer, the preacher has the tune of the gospel running in his mind, a tune which he sounds forth Sunday by Sunday with different variations.

Now an ability to handle the Greek Testament is a safeguard theologically; it enables the preacher to assess the value of the theories of the commentator and is therefore helpful exegetically; and inasmuch as it may add sparkle to his sermons it is not to be despised homiletically. It is with the last that we are more immediately concerned now.

THE VIVIDNESS OF THE GREEK

There is a vividness about Greek which the preacher can turn to good account. Not infrequently it will suggest picture and movement to his wondering eyes which can be turned into illustrations. And it is illustrations which catch the imagination, not arguments. If the hearer can go away with a picture in his mind, the chances are that he will remember the message. This is not to deny the place of doctrine or of argument. But the statement of theological fact and the "train of thought" will both be helped along by vivid and picturesque language.

Let us imagine a minister with modest linguistic equipment. He is not a Greek scholar in the usually accepted sense, but he worked at his Greek in the theological college and he may be considered to have a "working knowledge" of the subject. We will assume that he still possesses his Greek grammar and a Greek dictionary. (As a pious hope we just mention the two-volume Liddell & Scott and the masterpiece of Arndt-Gingrich.) He is preparing his sermon for next Sunday. How can the Greek Testament help him?

In the following suggestions we shall indulge in a measure of exaggeration. There is precedent for this. The very fact that we preach from a single verse exaggerates the verse at the expense of the chapter and book, even though we treat it in the light of the context. (It has been said that every preacher believes in the verbal inspiration of his text and certainly the ecumenical enthusiasts seem to support this view. John 17: 21, "that they all may be one . . ." has received more than its due share of emphasis.)

TENSES

Consider first the Greek tenses. There is a rich harvest here to be reaped by the minister. We shall consider in turn the present and imperfect; the aorist; and the perfect.

The present and imperfect (apart from the time-reference) go together. They represent either an action-going-on, a process; or continuity or repetition. The continuous process, like "he *was walking* in the middle of the road," may be represented by an unbroken line thus ————. Repetition, in contrast, may be suggested by a series of dots thus . . . . We may have mere repetition, like "he was hitting him," where it is not hard to imagine blow after blow. (Each of the series of dots would then stand for a single blow.) Or we may have the repetition of custom or habit. "He dined at seven o'clock" means that he regularly ate his dinner at a certain time in the evening, each dot doing duty for one dinner.

Now apply this to the New Testament. In Acts 18: 4 we read that "he was exercising suasion on Jews and Greeks." Was it always successful? After they had run the ship aground the bow stuck fast but "the stern was-being-disintegrated by the violence." (Acts 27: 41). Through the use of the vivid imperfect the ship is breaking up before our very eyes. Again, in Heb. 11: 17 Abraham "was-engaged-in-the-task-of-offering-up his only son." But did he finish the task? It was a complicated business: if you want a vast number of descendants you must not begin by killing your only son. The imperfect allows the imaginative to see into the heart of Abraham.

In Gethsemane (Mk. 14: 38) our Lord urges His men to "keep wide awake and keep on praying" (cp. Col. 4: 2). A little earlier, however, we read that "He advanced a little and fell upon the ground and prayed that . . ." Is this repeated action? Did He repeatedly kneel down and pray? Once more the imperfect opens a door to the alert onlooker, enabling him to see the inner battle.

In I Cor. 1: 18 we learn that "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." "Are being saved" renders a present participle. This brings in a question of theology and two interpretations are possible. Paul may be thinking of salvation as a process going on in each individual Christian. This is not meant to deny that a man may be saved now, already, and be certain of it. If he has laid hold of Christ, then he is saved; and that salvation is developed within him. To put it simply, once he is "over the line" he is saved, is on salvation territory; but as he grows in grace he advances further and further from that line. If, then, the apostle is thinking of the salvation of the individual, of "us" as made up of individuals, then we might think of a continuous line (————) and translate by something like "to us who are advancing on the road of (not "to") salvation."

If, on the other hand, Paul is looking upon "us" as the totality of the believing Church, then he does not mean that the Church is repeatedly saved. "Our" number is rather being augmented time and time again as more and more people are saved – obviously by putting their first faith in Christ. We might then recall the series of dots (. . . . . .) and paraphrase by "to us who are going through the turnstile of salvation." We should be picturing the crowd attending some football match and being constantly increased as more and more people come into the ground. Of course there is nothing in Paul's mind about football or turnstiles. But if he is thinking of *repeated* action, then a

series of individuals doing the same thing one after another in being saved is not unworthily represented by the turnstile. This interpretation is helped if we follow Paul's order, "to those who are being saved – to us." As for the turnstile, did not our Lord say that "strait is the gate and narrow is the way" (Matt. 7: 14)?

THE VIGOUR OF THE AORIST

In distinction from the imperfect, the aorist tense is punctiliar ("point action") and is appropriately represented by a point (.). It savours of the staccato, of the brisk striking of a note on the piano, whereas the imperfect holds down the keys of the organ. The aorist drops the curtain; the imperfect shows the players acting on the stage. The aorist corresponds to the short squirt from a boy's water-pistol whereas the imperfect is illustrated by the continuous flow of a waterfall. In "quality" of action the present tense sides with the imperfect in distinction from the aorist.

Notice therefore the contrast in Phil. 1: 21, "To me to go on living is Christ and to drop dead is gain." The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I keep on doing in order to be wrested into salvation?" They fittingly answered, "Set your faith on the Lord Jesus . . ." (Acts 16: 30f). Our Lord was once asked "What good act am I to do in order to get eternal life?" The speaker seems to have visualised one decisive act which would have put eternal life into his hands. But "this is eternal life, that they continually know (grow in the knowledge of) Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ Whom Thou didst send." (Matt. 19: 16; John 17: 3). From this we may infer that the beginning of eternal life is marked by the first step of faith in Christ, and its continuation sees him growing in the knowledge of God and of His Son.

There is a vigour and a decisiveness in the aorist. "Where is boasting?" asks Paul. (What place is there for taking the credit to yourself?) "The door was slammed on it." (Rom. 3: 27) The need to express the punctiliar action in appropriate English will not infrequently bring a picture into the mind of the translator. To show what is meant by this we shall attempt a paraphrase of I John 3: 1-8. The aorists are *in italics*.

Take a look at the greatness of the love which the Father has given to us, that *we should be dubbed* children of God; and we are that. This is the reason why the world does not know us: it *did not "discover"* Him. Beloved friends, we are now children of God, and *the curtain has not yet gone up* on what we shall be. We know that if *He comes into our view* we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And every man who has this hope in Him makes himself pure, just as HE is pure. Every man who makes a practice of sin does the same with lawlessness also; the two are identical. And you know that He *came into our ken* in order that *He might shift away* our sins, and there is no sin in Him. Every man who dwells – and stays at home – in Him does not make a habit of sin. Every man who does this has failed to see Him and has not come to know Him. Little children, let nobody deceive you: he who persists in doing righteousness is righteous, just as HE is righteous; he who habitually commits sin traces his origin to the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God *came into our ken*, namely, that He might *blow up* the works of the devil.

This combines literal translation with paraphrase and a measure of exaggeration. It is not meant to be read as a lesson in church but to suggest to the minister something of the force of the tense, and possibly an illustration. For example, "dubbed" is what the monarch does when he strikes a man with a sword and makes him a knight. The swift (though light) stroke is an apt expression of "point action." "Blow up" tries to render the Greek word meaning to "loose" or "disintegrate" and so "reduce to fragments." Quite involuntarily the picture flashed into my mind of a building "going up" as a result of dynamite – "building" = "works of the devil."

THE PERFECT ABIDES

In distinction from other tenses the perfect expresses the abiding result of a past action. If, for example, a man says: "I *have eaten* my dinner" he implies: "I *am* free from hunger." The perfect tense can thus be reinterpreted as a present. On the other hand if he had said "I *ate* my dinner" he would be linguistically free to add "after which the burglar broke in. That was six months ago." In other words the perfect tells us of an effect which lasts up to the very moment of speaking. We ought to ask ourselves whether the "effect" is upon the subject or the object. Suppose we say "they have crucified him." Then the effect is: "they now have blood on their hands – and consciences;" and "he is now dead." But suppose further that we say that "Christ has been crucified for us." We cannot argue that "He is now dead." What is the force of the perfect tense? (cp. Rev. 5: 6). We can say either that "He now possesses the experience of the cross, the remembrance of the cross," and think of Him as our present Advocate (I John 2: 1); or we can assert that "His atoning work *is* complete; He *is* the Saviour."

In the light of all this the perfect tenses of the New Testament should be pondered. "The righteousness of God has been manifested" (Rom. 3: 21) suggests that it "is now available for us to see." In I Cor. 15: 3f "Christ died . . . and was buried (aorists) and *has been raised* . . ." This can only mean that "He *is* now up." He did not, like Lazarus, die again. A similar contrast is seen in Col. 3: 3. "You died . . . your life has been hidden." The implication is that "your life is in hiding with Christ in God." Men may see your good works (Matt. 5: 16) but the essential "you," the saved "you," is invisible. This is perhaps not unrelated to the unspiritual man's inability to receive Christian truth (I Cor. 2: 14) and to the doctrine of the invisible Church.

In Rom. 8 : 38 Paul says "I *have been persuaded* (and therefore I *am* now sure) that . . . (nothing) will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Here is subjective certainty built up through experience. Can the "experiences" be traced which convinced

the apostle? Finally we may detect an objective certainty in Eph. 2 : 8, "By grace you *have been saved* through faith," which must mean that "you *are* now safe" (though a distinguished theologian once told me that he was sure the Greek could not mean this as it was incorrect theologically!) John speaks of the evidence for this (I John 3 : 14): "We know that we *have changed* our residence, *have 'moved,'* from death to life, because we love the brethren." We *now live* "in life." We must therefore "grow in grace" (2 Pet. 3 : 18), in the new district in which we live after our "move." And we must not loll but stand! (Rom. 5 : 2) (From another point of view we might say that we must now "grow" in the new soil because we have been "transplanted.")

PROHIBITIONS

So much for the verb, though we have not touched on such matters as the middle voice. Before we finally leave the verb, however, we ought to take a look at prohibitions. The negative with the present imperative implies "do not go on doing . . ." Hence in Rom. 11 : 20 we can translate "do not go on thinking lofty thoughts" by "get rid of your superiority complex." The negative with the aorist subjunctive is somewhat peremptory and means "don't . . ." i.e. "don't start to . . ." This has great possibilities for the preacher. When Stephen was being stoned he prayed (Acts 7 : 60) "Lord, don't start to put this sin down to them." It speaks volumes of the character of Stephen and of the longsuffering of the Lord. The Recording Angel, so to speak, has been asked to "hold his fire". There is a sermon here on "Hesitant Grace."

The two constructions are combined in Acts 18 : 9, "Do not go on fearing but keep on speaking and do not begin to be silent." This is very literal and we may paraphrase thus: "Fade out your fear (a radio allusion); keep the wheels of speech turning; don't shut your mouth." Good counsel for a preacher of Christ!

LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Sometimes the linguistic background of a word can be turned to good account. Take, for instance, John 14 : 1, "Let not your heart be troubled" – let the trouble stop. The verb in question is used not infrequently of political agitation, disorder and anarchy. Some republics are a by-word for their "troubles," with presidents rising and falling rapidly. The "trouble" of a divided state and an unstable government with its swift succession of presidents would be avoided if there were one ruler and everybody was loyal to him. So it is with the human heart. The "troubles" of indecision, of the divided allegiance, of having one "ruler" after another, would come to an end if the whole heart gave itself in utter loyalty to Christ. "Believe also in Me."

It is stated in Eph. 2 : 10 that "we are God's *handiwork*." The Greek word *poiema* means something which has been made, and at times it has the particular meaning of "poem." The preacher can illustrate his sermon by the use of this category, especially if he has to preach the annual sermon to the Literary Society. "We are God's poem." We may then infer that He took pleasure in making us, spiritually; and that one of our many duties is to be a joy and a solace to others. Think of all that poetry means to the discerning: the music of words, the pictures that speak, the balm that soothes every mood of the human heart. Further, a *poiema* may have reference not only to a whole poem but to a single line. It is said that a great poet may spend hours, even days, "polishing up" the lines he has written, so that there may be nothing to jar, nothing to spoil the picture or the music of his words. In like manner we may think of the Lord God polishing up His people to "literary" perfection.

But a single line, by itself, has not great value as a rule (though admittedly we quote it) apart from the other lines of the context. Thus our religion has a social reference. We are to be associated with other "lines" in the great poem. In literature we speak of purple patches, where some lines have far outshone the average of the book. So in that vast poem which is the Church some lines are nobler than others. We call them Saints. But it is God's purpose so to polish all the lines that in the end there is one perfect poem, with no word or syllable misplaced.

I once took a very dim view of the apostle Paul who, so my grandmother informed me in a moment of rebuke, had learned to be content. (Phil. 4 : 11) But I doubt if he meant "content" in the sense in which we generally understand it. His word is *autarkes*, which appears in the modern noun "*autarky*." It means self-sufficient or self-contained. It is a good Stoic word and is an instance of a philosopher's word which has been baptised into the Christian faith. The cold grim creed of the Stoic may have little attraction for the radiant disciples of Christ, for the Stoic made the human heart a desolation and called it peace. But the technical term "autarky" was a worthy candidate for baptism. The Stoic "wise man" is independent of his circumstances; he can discard all the adornment and amenity of life because whatever happens is on his theory determined by sovereign reason. Material good may be far removed from him, but it does not matter: reason decreed it, and reason is good, and the wise man needs nothing apart from himself and his attitude. He is himself (*autos*) able to suffice (*arkeo*) himself. Now when St. Paul speaks as he does he is not saying what a wonderful man Paul is. If we may put it so, he is speaking geographically and saying where his resources are located. We sometimes speak of a block of apartments or a vast hotel as being self-contained. We imply that it has its own shopping arcade and other amenities. You do not have to go outside to get what you need. That is precisely what the apostle means, for he has within him the living Christ. He can always travel light. He is not cumbered with the luggage which the world must carry if it is to be amused. He need not bother to ensure his supply of drugs to relieve his boredom and dope him into unconsciousness: he has it all within. "Thy word have I hid in mine heart". In a deeper sense than Zeno the Stoic ever dreamed, he is self-contained.

Observers of political and economic life will be able to illustrate the apostle's meaning in other ways. We are told, for example, that Greece

can never be self-supporting, as owing to the mountains and the general roughness of the soil she can never produce enough wheat for her own population. Again, before World War II Germany embarked on a scheme which would render blockade fruitless in any future war in which she might be engaged. What would be the use of denying imports to a country if she already has ample stores of everything she might need? Her aim was "autarky." For Paul it meant that he never need fear a blockade. All is within, Christ in you the hope of glory.

Here, then,are some of the treasures in the New Testament which await our discovery. Evangelicals hold strenuously that God speaks to them through His Word written, and He sometimes says what is not to be found in the commentaries. Study the commentaries by all means, especially the best ones; try to arrive at the right exegesis. But remember Dr. Helmut Thielicke's recent characterisation of Spurgeon as a "charismatic listener," with an "inimitable immediacy . . . to his text." Get everything you can out of the Greek text *before* you consult the commentaries. Use all your academic equipment, but listen with the hearing of faith. For "it would only indicate that we had been driven mad by the art of hermeneutics if we were no longer capable of accepting and valuing, as a corrective of our perfect exegesis, the childlike candour of a preacher who could 'listen like a disciple'. "[1]

NOTE

[1] Helmut Thielicke: *Encounter With Spurgeon*, London, 1964, p 3.