

The Importance of Greek to the Minister

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Many noted men in various walks of life have testified to the value of Greek in training the mind into close and accurate habits of thought. They found that this study developed mental discipline, sharpened the intellect, and enabled them to do more effective work in their chosen profession. However, there are few students in our day who will seriously pursue a study that does not promise to have immediate, practical value. Modern curriculum makers are putting less and less stress upon the study of classical languages, and even many seminaries are gradually crowding out Greek to make room for more utilitarian courses.

This trend has developed evidently from a conviction that a knowledge of New Testament Greek is of little practical value to the average minister today. Do not many ministerial students finish their required course in Greek and rarely look at their Greek Testaments again? Is not this one of the major reasons why the value of Greek has been questioned?

The position given to Greek by the curriculum makers in the future will be determined largely by the demand for it. If those who take New Testament Greek find that it has a real practical value for them in their ministry, naturally the demand for the subject will grow. Thus the primary responsibility for the future position of Greek in the curriculum rests upon those who teach it.

Regardless of how well the students have been taught the elements of grammar, if they close their books after the course is over and are not motivated to put that knowledge to work in a practical way in their ministries, the teacher of New Testament Greek has failed. The successful teacher must also impart to the class an enthusiasm for continued study. He must so 'sell' the course that his students will be

eager to explore the avenues that he has opened up. Of course the teacher cannot do this without a personal appreciation of and enthusiasm for the value of New Testament Greek.

Just what is its practical value for the minister after all? First of all, it should be remembered that the real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. No translation, however reliable, can bring out all of the delicate distinctions and shades of meaning that are couched in the original Greek. Greek is the most perfect vehicle of human speech ever developed by man. No other language is so well equipped for forceful, accurate expression. It is true that the English translation is plain enough to teach one the way of life. However, those who confine themselves to it will miss many precious truths which God has revealed and wants His children to know. If the Bible is the inspired word of God, then it is important to know *all* that He has said.

In I Cor. 2:12, 13 Paul gives the method by which the Scriptures were inspired in these words: "But we received, not the spirit of the world (Greek, lit. "the spirit of the age," i. e. they did not follow the current trends of thought) but the spirit which is from God; (for what purpose?) that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; (the Spirit thus guided them in their choice of words) combining spiritual things with spiritual words." (The Greek word translated, "combining", is *sugkrino* meaning literally to "judge with", i. e. to compare or match.) As a seamstress would take a sample of material to the store and compare it with the various spools of thread until she found the one that would exactly match it, so the authors of Scripture were guided to select just the word in

their vocabulary that would best bring out the spiritual truth the Holy Spirit wished to convey.

This does not mean that the Spirit dictated every word and the writers took it down in a mechanical manner. It is evident that the writers used their own faculties and preserved their own individual style, yet they were directed into the choice of words that would accurately set forth the truth given them by God.

This fact has a vital bearing upon the relative importance of New Testament Greek to the minister. If the words of the Greek New Testament are divinely chosen, then each word is significant and all that can be learned of its original content of meaning and significance has a vital bearing upon our theology. Grammar and syntax also become very important, because such elements as tense, mood, gender, number and case are not just accidental but significant.

In the Greek New Testament, then, one comes into direct contact with the Spirit-breathed words of God. There is a freshness and vividness there that cannot be brought over into any translation. Erasmus, who restored the Greek Testament to the general public, found this to be so and expressed his profound delight in the preface of his Greek New Testament in these words:

These holy pages will summon up the living image of His mind. They will give you Christ Himself, talking, healing, dying, rising, the whole Christ in a word; they will give Him to you in an intimacy so close that He would be less visible to you if He stood before your eyes.

I can recall yet the joy I received in reading the Gospels in Greek for the first time. Although my knowledge of both vocabulary and grammar was very limited, yet the familiar truths came home to my heart with new force. The fact that I had to stumble along so slowly, giving special attention to the meaning of words and their forms, allowed me to get impressions and notice points that I had never seen in reading the English because the words were so familiar that they slipped through my mind with little thought. This is one of the great values of Greek to the minister.

The Greek text will make a deeper impression upon his mind, because he must take more time over it. It helps a man to read thoughtfully, which is the essence of study.

In studying the Greek New Testament one has the sense of direct contact with the inspired words of God which have been preserved in this greatest of all books down through the centuries. Concerning its inexhaustible wealth Dr. A. T. Robertson said:

The Greek New Testament has a message for each mind. Some of the truth in it has never been seen by anyone else. It is waiting like a virgin forest to be explored. It is fresh for every mind that explores it, for those who have passed this way before have left it all here. It still has on it the dew of the morning and is ready to refresh the newcomer.

The minister should not deprive himself or his audiences of the rich blessing that is to be derived from this direct contact.

It was the Greek New Testament which awoke the world during the Renaissance. Scattered over Europe by the newly invented printing press, it produced a spiritual upheaval wherever it went. Those who loved the darkness at first attempted to stamp out the light, and failing in that, they sought by devious means to hide from it. We can be thankful that there were some who loved the light and were not afraid of its penetrating and revealing power.

In our day we are in grave danger of going into darkness again because fewer and fewer people are willing to go the original Greek or even to the translations, to find out first-hand what God has said. They are content to depend upon the scholars and the clergy to tell them what to believe. The minister who has by faithful, diligent study obtained first-hand from the Greek a reason for his faith, will be a great encouragement to his congregation to search the Scriptures also for themselves.

The efficiency of a man and the quality of work he puts forth are dependent upon his skill in using the proper tools. The tools do not make the man, but, other things being equal, he can accomplish far more with them than without them. This fact is universally recognized in our industrial age.

So also a minister of the Gospel must have certain tools to accomplish his work. If it is important for a doctor to have the very finest equipment and to be thoroughly trained in its use in order that he might deal with the various needs and diseases of men's bodies, how much more important it is for the man who presumes to be a guide and shepherd for the immortal souls of men to equip himself with the very best tools at his command that he might faithfully fulfill his ministry. The issues at stake are far greater.

There is no tool that can be put to more practical use by the minister than the knowledge of the elements of Greek grammar and syntax. Obviously, such equipment will never substitute for spiritual qualifications, but other things being equal, the Holy Spirit can use such a man far more effectively than one who has failed thus to equip himself.

To what practical ends can this knowledge be directed? The Greek student can go direct to the Greek New Testament for material for his sermons rather than to the commentaries and other secondary sources. If he knows how to use his tools he will be able to unearth an ever-fresh supply of truth to feed his own soul and the souls of those to whom he ministers. There will be an originality and freshness in his preaching which his audiences will not fail to notice and appreciate.

The word of God is very much like a gold mine. There are many nuggets of truth lying on the surface ready to be picked up, but much of its riches lie beneath the surface and are yielded up only by faithful digging. Such truth the minister should give to his people - truth that the ordinary person would not get by reading his English translation. There are sermons hidden in Greek tenses, prepositions, cases, and the roots of Greek words; not dry, scholarly sermons without practical bearing upon the life, but heart-warming truths for which audiences are hungering.

Many heresies come from a misinterpretation of the Bible and can be conclusively settled only by recourse to the Greek. Hence a general knowledge of Greek is a

great deterrent to the propagation of error. People are blown about by every "ism" and wind of doctrine who do not know the word of God. The minister will be able to expose many subtle errors by knowing and using his Greek. A. M. Fairbairn has said that he is no theologian who is not first a grammarian.

Even the most elementary points of grammar will often be found to have the greatest significance in their doctrinal application. The application of the simple rule of Greek syntax that a pronoun agrees with its antecedent in gender and number clears up any difficulties and ambiguities in the English text. For example, in Matt. 1:16 we have the statement: "And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." From the English translation it would be possible for one to contend that "whom" refers to both Joseph and Mary. However, a glance at the Greek text shows us that the relative pronoun is *ἥς*, the feminine singular form. The antecedent thus must be female in gender and singular in number. Obviously then it could not refer to both or to Joseph. Thus the application of a simple rule of Greek grammar gives clear evidence of Matthew's belief in the virgin birth of Christ.

A knowledge of Greek synonyms is also of great practical value to the minister. The Greeks often divided out to several different words what is combined in one word in English. Thus the fine distinctions of the Greek text are often lost in the English translation. There are literally hundreds of examples of this in the New Testament. The minister who knows his Greek will be able to help those whom he teaches to arrive at an accurate interpretation of these passages. Also by the use of the excellent word studies that are available to the Greek student, he can bring out many rich truths that would otherwise be obscured.

One does not have to be an erudite scholar to put his knowledge of Greek to practical use. Needless to say, the true preacher will not use his Greek to make a show of his learning. The knowledge of Greek is a tool, and tools belong in the workshop.

Much of this truth which is not available to the English reader can be presented in the pulpit and classroom without ever mentioning the Greek itself.

There is indeed a price to be paid for thus equipping oneself, but in the long run it will prove to be saving of time. Questions can be answered in five minutes from the Greek lexicon that it would take hours

of wading through commentaries to find. Dr. A. T. Robertson, who devoted the greater part of his life to this field, said: "There is no sphere of knowledge where one is repaid more quickly for all the toil expended."

The minister who studies his Greek New Testament regularly will soon become a *voice* and not merely an *echo*.