

# The Greek New Testament In Preaching

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Any sermon preached from the New Testament is, in the final analysis, based upon the Greek New Testament. This is obviously true, since the New Testament in any language or version derives ultimately from the original, the New Testament in Greek. Moreover, while the value of the several versions and translations differ, and some are better and some are inferior, the essential message of the New Testament is nevertheless present.

At the same time, translations are not and cannot be perfect. Something is lost in the process of translation. Other points may not be lost but are less clear in the translation than in the original Greek. One who searches the original text, therefore, alert to the values which await him and with the help of the Holy Spirit, puts himself in a position to bring out riches of God's Word which the average preacher never finds.

At the same time, a question is sometimes raised concerning the validity of examining closely the precise words and forms which the New Testament writers used. "Did St. Paul know the rules of grammar and syntax which we are attempting to use to interpret his writings?" is a question which is sometimes asked. The answer is that it does not matter whether St. Paul knew these rules. He, and the other New Testament authors as well, obviously knew Greek well enough to speak it in a manner which could be clearly understood by their contemporaries and their original readers. This means that they did, in fact, conform to consistent rules, regardless of whether they knew them as specific rules. In precisely the same manner, it is not necessary for us today to find out whether or not a speaker of English knows English grammatical rules in order for us to accept what he says as being meaningful.

A related point is that significant meaning may be expressed which the speaker himself does not realize nor intend. Suppose a group of men are speaking in a derogatory manner concerning living in New York City. Two other men overhear their remarks. One of the two says to the group, "Men, don't say things like

that about New York. I have lived there happily for twenty years." The second man comes along a bit later and says, "Men, don't say things like that about New York. I lived there happily for twenty years." Both speakers are concerned merely to register a mild protest against the remarks about New York City. Without intending to do so, however, the first man has unconsciously indicated that he still lives in New York, and the second has unconsciously indicated that he no longer lives in New York. In like manner it is legitimate, by the proper rules of interpretation, to seek meaning in the implications as well as in the specific statements of the New Testament writers.

There are several areas in which the study of the Greek New Testament has proved to be especially rewarding. It is to these that this study now turns.

## 1. Words

Words are meaningful. The etymology and background of a word are revealing, as is also the way in which a word is used in the New Testament. For example, the verb "study" in 2 Tim. 2:15 is a word whose basic meaning is "to make haste," "to hurry." Since making haste requires effort and exertion, and since one who makes haste often does so because he is eager and zealous concerning his mission, this Greek word came to have the added meaning of "to make every effort," "to be zealous or eager." Thus the exhortation in 2 Tim. 2:15 is, "Make every effort, be diligent, to present yourself to God..."

The common word for "world" makes an interesting study. John 3:16 says that God "loved the world," but 1 John 2:15 exhorts Christians, "love not the world." This seeming paradox derives from the fact that the Greek word, a word from which the English word "cosmos" is derived, has a variety of meanings.<sup>1</sup> Originally meaning "an orderly arrangement," from which the word "cosmetics" is derived, in such passages as "the kingdoms of the world" (Matt. 4:8) and "the world and everything which is in it" (Acts 17:24) the reference is to our planet; in John 3:16, "God so loved the world," and many other passages, the reference is to the whole race of mankind who live in the world; while the "world" which Christians are warned

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1. See, e.g., George D. Redding, "Kosmos from Homer to St. John," *Asbury Seminarian*, IV, 1 (1949), pp. 63-65.

not to love (1 John 2:15, and in numerous other passages) is the sinful world system which is under Satan's control and at enmity with God.

In Matt. 4:18 we read that two brothers were casting a fish-net into the sea. The word for "net" is made up of three parts meaning "an instrument," "throw," and "around"--hence, "an instrument which is thrown around something." To mention a different example, a common word for "obey" in the New Testament is made up of the word "to hear" with another form meaning "under" or "subject to." Hence this word "to obey" suggests being subject to what one hears.

The word "crown" in the New Testament represents two quite different Greek words. One, which occurs only three times (Rev. 12:3, 13:1, 19:12), is the word from which the word "diadem" is derived, and indicates a kingly crown (which was originally not a golden head-piece filled with precious stones, but a blue cloth band trimmed with white). The more common word, from which the name "Stephen" is derived, is properly a victor's wreath, originally a wreath of woven laurel branches which was placed upon the head of a victor in an athletic contest. Hence almost always in the New Testament a crown is not a king's crown but a victor's crown--for example, "the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10), "a perishable crown" (1 Cor. 9:25), "the crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:8), and even Jesus' "crown of thorns" (Matt. 27:29, Mark 15:17, John 19:2,5).

At the same time, one must be careful not to lean more heavily on etymology and word-analysis than the context permits. In English, the etymology of the word "manufacture" is "to make by hand." Yet it would be a great mistake to assume that everything which is "manufactured" in our day is strictly "make by hand." This word, like many others, has undergone a change in its meaning. Thus the Greek word translated "dwelt" in John 1:14 comes from the word for a tent. In John 1:14 this word does perhaps indicate a temporary rather than a permanent dwelling, but it would not be proper to say that Christ literally "lived in a tent among us." Similarly, the Greek word "baptize" basically means to dip, immerse, sink, or overwhelm--a crowd overwhelming a city, a ship sinking in the sea, a man overwhelmed by debts. This idea is appropriate to Christian baptism, in which the person is represented as being overwhelmed by and filled with the presence of Christ. Yet since the water baptism is merely a symbol, not the reality, this

rite need only symbolize, and may or may not actually be, a literal immersion in or overwhelming by water.

## 2. The Definite Article

The Greek definite article is meaningful. It is in this area, incidentally, that the King James version of the New Testament is often indiscriminating, this probably resulting from the influence of Latin, which has no article. For example, in 2 Tim. 4:7 the Apostle writes, "I have fought the good fight," not "a good fight" as the KJV has it; and in verse 8, "there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness," not merely "a crown of righteousness."

When a Greek noun does not have the article there may be emphasis upon the nature of the person or object, or upon the kind of person or thing. This is the sense of such English expressions as "She is a Jezebel," meaning that she is a person like wicked Queen Jezebel, or "He is a prince," meaning that he is a prince-like person. Thus St. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling a world to himself"--not meaning one world from among many, nor yet merely the world, but emphasizing what the reconciliation relates to--a world. Similarly, in John 1:1 we read, "the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In the first instance, "God" has the definite article in Greek and refers to God as a person: God the Father. In the second instance there is no article with "God"; the meaning is not that the Word (Christ) was the same person as God the Father, but that the Word was the same kind of being as God the Father--in other words, the Word was deity. Likewise, in John 4:24 the word "spirit" has no article in Greek. While it is possible that the meaning is that "God is a spirit," the sense is most likely qualitative, telling what kind of being God is: "God is spirit."

The presence or absence of the Greek article is likewise significant in instances in which the difference is not normally translated into English. John 2:25 states that Jesus did not need anyone to testify concerning "man," for he himself knew what was in "man." The Greek word has the definite article in both of these instances, the article indicating that man in the generic sense is intended here--Jesus knew "mankind." When John the Baptist says (John 1:29) that Jesus will take away "the sin of the world," the Greek article with "sin" is again generic,

meaning that Jesus will lift the entire mass of the sins of mankind.

The article, or the absence of the article, with the word "sin" is a study in itself,<sup>2</sup> and many of the distinctions involved do not come through in English translations. At least some of the problems of understanding St. Paul's various uses of the word "sin" in Romans, for example, are alleviated by applying the principle that, in general, "sin" without the article in Greek means either 1) an actor acts of sin--i.e., "a sin" or "sins"--(Matt. 12:31, 1 Tim. 5:22), or 2) an emphasis upon the quality of sin--i.e., "sinfulness"--(Rom. 5:13, 8:10); while "sin" with the article means either 1) a specific act or acts of sin (Matt. 1:21, Acts 7:60), or 2) sin in a generic sense--the mass of sins--(John 1:29, Rom. 5:20), or 3) sin figuratively personified or otherwise objectified--e.g., personified as a king in Rom. 6:12, "do not let sin reign over you"; or pictured as the sting of a scorpion or other creature in 1 Cor. 15:56, "the sting of death is sin."

Even with the above distinctions in mind there may still be problems in the precise interpretation of Paul's use of the word "sin" in some passages, since at best we do not have the natural sense of proper usage which the Apostle as a native speaker of Greek had. At the same time, attention to the article throws much light upon this and many other words. For example, "sin" in some passages in Romans 6-8 has no definite article, and thus emphasizes sin as sinfulness: 7:7, "Is the law sinful in character?"; and 7:13, "in order that it might appear sinful in character"; and 8:3, "in the likeness of flesh which is associated with sinfulness." In other passages "sin" has the article, picturing sin either as a "person" or in some other objectified manner: 6:6, "that we should no longer be slaves to the master, Sin"; 6:12, "let not sin reign over you"; and 7:17, 20, "sin (figuratively pictured as an object or person) which dwells in me."

### 3. Agreement

Agreement is meaningful. In Heb. 12:14, "which" does not agree with "peace" but does agree with "holiness"; hence,

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2. See, e.g., George A. Turner and J. Harold Greenlee, "Sin and Sinfulness: A Study in New Testament Terminology," *Asbury Seminary*, IV, 3 (1949), pp. 109-113.

"Pursue peace...and holiness; apart from holiness no one shall see the Lord" (although "which" could also refer to "pursue": "apart from the pursuit of peace and holiness no one shall see the Lord"; the choice will be on the basis of the context).

In Eph. 2:8, "that" in the KJV ("and that not of yourselves") agrees with neither "grace" nor "faith," but agrees with the idea of the entire statement. The sense therefore is, "By grace you are saved through faith; and this fact of salvation is not your own doing, it is God's gift."

In Heb. 13:20 there might be some doubt in the English versions as to whether "the great shepherd of the sheep" is "the God of peace" or "our Lord Jesus." In the Greek text "shepherd" agrees with "Jesus" and not with "God"; hence it is Jesus who is referred to as the great shepherd who is to make us perfect in every good work.

In 2 Tim. 4:3 the KJV reads that certain people will "heap to themselves teachers having itching ears." Although this English leaves the point ambiguous, the Greek grammatical agreement makes it clear that it is the people, not the teachers, who have "itching ears."

#### 4. Emphasis

Emphasis is meaningful. One way in which emphasis is indicated in Greek is by the use of special emphatic words or forms of words. In 1 John 3:1 the best Greek text reads, "... that we should be called children of God; and we are (children of God)." The form of the word "are" is emphatic, stressing the fact that not only are we "called" children of God, we actually "are" his children. In Eph. 2:14, by the use of an emphatic word, St. Paul emphasizes the fact that it is Christ alone, and no other but he, who is our peace: "For he himself is our peace."

A difficulty in understanding John 5:18 is resolved when proper attention is given to an emphatic word which is used in this verse. Both the KJV and RSV read here that Jesus was calling God "his father, making himself equal with God," and indicate that this was one reason why the Jews were seeking to kill Jesus. Yet any good Jew believed that God was his father, as the Jews plainly declare in John 8:41, "We have one father, God." Jesus, as a Jew, had a perfect right to make such a

claim. What Jesus said, however, was much more than this. An emphatic word in John 5:18 makes it clear that Jesus was claiming that God was "his own father" in a very profound sense--a relationship so exclusive that it implied that Jesus was claiming to be equal with God. It was this claim by Jesus to a unique and exclusive father-son relationship with God which offended the Jews so deeply.

In 1 Cor. 3:9 the proper emphasis is not indicated in the common English versions. In the preceding verses Paul has been emphasizing the centrality of God in the work of redemption in contrast with the merely secondary importance of the work which he and Apollos were doing. In verse 9 the English versions can easily be read with emphasis upon "we are" and "you are." Yet this is the opposite of Paul's intention. The first word in each of the three phases of 3:9 is "God"; the Apostle is saying, "It is God whose fellow-workers we are; it is God whose tilled field, so to speak, you are; it is God whose building you are." Likewise, in John 1:18 the first word in the sentence is "God." Also in an emphatic position is the word "ever." The emphasis, therefore, is not upon "no one," but primarily upon "God" and secondarily upon "ever," thus: "God--no one has ever seen him; no, not ever."

Still another way in which emphasis may be indicated is by prefixing certain prepositions at the beginning of other words. This is similar to the English idiom by which the word, "burn," for example, is made more emphatic by saying "burn up," "burn down," or "burn out." Such diverse prepositions as "away from," "through," "out of," "upon," "down," and "around" can thus intensify a Greek word. For example, the word "grieved" becomes "very grieved" in Luke 18:23 by the use of one of these intensifiers, "has eaten" becomes "has completely eaten" or "has devoured" in John 2:17, "I shall know" becomes "I shall know fully" (in contrast with "now I know partially") in 1 Cor. 13:12, "astonished" becomes "utterly astonished" in Acts 3:11, and "deceive" becomes "completely deceive" in Mark 13:22, to mention only a few instances.

Greek can also indicate an emphatic negative by the use of two negative words together, which of course cannot be done in English. This emphatic negative occurs in Heb. 8:12, "I will by no means remember their sins any longer"; Heb. 13:5, "I will by no means leave thee, and I will by no means forsake thee"; 2 Pet. 1:10, "if you make a habit of doing these things

you will by no means ever fall"; and many other passages. A still stronger emphasis is given to the negation by the addition of the phrase "for ever" to the double negative. It is with this doubly emphatic expression that Peter tells Jesus, in John 13:8, "You will be no means ever at all wash my feet!"

In addition to these uses in emphatic expressions, negative words are meaningful in other ways. There are two common Greek words for "not." If one of these words stands at the beginning of a question in Greek, it signifies that the questioner expects "yes" as a reply. If the other word for "not" introduces the question, it means that the questioner expects the reply to be "no." For example, in Luke 10:15 and Matt. 11:23 Jesus' question, "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to heaven?" implies, "No, you will not." Similarly, his question to the Twelve in John 6:67, "Do you also wish to go away?" implies that he expects them to answer that they do not intend to leave him. On the other hand, in Matt. 6:26 the question, "Are you not of much more value than they?" implies "Yes, you are"; and in Rom. 9:21, "Does the potter not have authority over the clay...?" implies that he does have the authority.

## 5. Tense Distinctions

Perhaps the most important and rewarding area of all in exegesis is in the distinctions which verb tenses make in Greek. If one had to limit himself to only one phase of New Testament exegesis, he should by all means remember that tenses are meaningful. Tenses are important in all moods of the Greek verb. Outside the indicative mood (the mood used for statements of fact), however, tenses have a special significance, since they indicate specifically the kind of action which is involved rather than the time at which the action takes place. This significance in Greek is even more noteworthy due to the fact that these distinctions of kind or manner of action all too often are not distinguished in English translations.

How many preachers, not to mention ordinary readers of the Bible, have been confused when they read in 1 John 3:9 that he who is born of God "cannot sin." because he is born of God? Many attempts have been made to avoid the difficulty of the English translation, which seems to mean that it is actually impossible for a Christian to sin. Yet this is by no means the

meaning of the Greek. In this passage John is speaking of conduct and habits of life. He is refuting the argument that what a man's body does has no significance for his spiritual life. In 3:9, then, John uses the present tense, which refers to repeated or continuous action, not to one single act. He is therefore saying that a born-again person cannot go on living in habitual sin, cannot make a practice of wilful sin. At the same time, he does not intend to say, as some have interpreted this verse, that this is a "moral impossibility" for the Christian but not an actual impossibility. John's meaning is abundantly clear: it is a literal impossibility for one to be a born-again Christian and a wilful, habitual sinner at the same time.

There is another tense in 1 John 3:9 which must be understood for a proper interpretation of the verse. "Born of God" at both the beginning and end of this verse do not mean merely a person who at some time in the past has been converted, or "born from God." The perfect tense is used, which refers to a condition resulting from a previous action. The person in this verse, therefore, is not merely someone who at some past time has been born again, without regard to his present spiritual relationship with God. John is speaking of the person who has been born from God and is now walking in that born-again relationship with God. It is impossible for this person to be living in wilful sin, and it is impossible for a person living in wilful sin to be in a born-again relationship with God; these two conditions are absolutely mutually exclusive.

The perfect tense occurs frequently in other passages of the New Testament. Some of its very meaningful passages center upon the perfect tense of the verb "crucify." "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23) and "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), for example, mean not merely that Christ was crucified on a certain day in the past, but that Christ is now in a condition resulting from having been crucified--in other words, Christ's death on the cross is not a mere past event, it is an always-present reality. His death long ago is therefore effective now. In Eph. 3:17, "rooted and grounded" means to have become rooted and grounded and then to stand in that condition. Eph. 2:5,8 does not mean that it is by faith that we "become saved"; by the perfect tense St. Paul is saying that these Christians had previously become saved and were now in a "saved condition."

The third tense which calls for consideration is the aorist. This tense, contrasting with the present tense, speaks of completion. It may be used of a single simple act, such as "He spoke," or of an occurrence of a long duration, such as "He grew up"; but in any event the aorist tense considers the event as a single completed idea; and completion is its particular emphasis. Thus in 1 John 1:9, "he is faithful and righteous to forgive" indicates that forgiveness of sins is something which God does and completes, not a process which is never finished. Similarly, in contrast with the present tense of "to sin" in 1 John 3:9, in 1 John 2:1 the aorist tense is used: "...that you may not sin; but if anyone should sin..." The aorist tense indicates that John is not here referring to habitual sinning but to an individual act of sin--that is, an act which is done and completed. John here tells his readers that he does not want them to commit any act of sin; but, recognizing human frailty and the real possibility that a Christian may be overcome by Satan and commit a sin, he says, "if anyone should commit an act of sin, we have an advocate..." Here is no license to sin, but rather a word of hope to one who has succumbed to a temptation.

The contrast between the present and the aorist tense is particularly illuminating. In John 10:39 the verb "know" is used twice, first in the aorist and then in the present tense: "in order that you may come to know and may keep on knowing..." The aorist tense is used when the Philippian jailor asks Paul how he may become saved, and also in Paul's response, "Put your trust in the Lord Jesus..." On the other hand, when the New Testament speaks of "believing" which guarantees eternal life the present tense is always used; in other words, eternal life is guaranteed to the person who continues to believe in Jesus, not to one who has at some time trusted in Jesus but no longer believes.

Commands to love are commonly in the present tense--"love continually." "Ask...seek...knock" (Matt. 7:7, Luke 11:9) are present tenses. The promise is to those who persistently ask, seek, and knock, not to one who asks once and shows no further concern for his request. In Acts 1:9-11 the fact that the disciples actually saw the ascension of Jesus is clearly underlined by five occurrences of the present tense: "as they were looking...as they were gazing attentively...as he was going...looking into heaven...(beheld) him going..."

The aorist tense is likewise significant in many passages. Matt. 8:2-3 refers not to improvement or progress toward healing, but to complete healing, since the aorist tense is used: "...you are able to cleanse me...be cleansed." The aorist tense in 1 Thes. 5:23 refers to an action which is to be completed, not to an unfinished process: "May the God of peace make you completely holy..." In 2 Cor. 7:1, "Let us cleanse ourselves" is an aorist tense, meaning that the cleansing is to be finished, not merely progressed toward.

Various other points are particularly meaningful from time to time. The use of a different preposition for "in" in John 3:15 from the one which is used in John 3:16 gives a significant difference of meaning: John 3:15, "everyone who believes may have eternal life in him"; John 3:16, "everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." The use of different moods of the verb gives a significant difference in meaning between 2 Cor. 4:16 and 5:1--in 4:16, recognizing that the human body is daily wasting away, Paul says, "Even though it is true that our outward body is wasting away," as expressed by the indicative mood; while in 5:1 he refers to the contingency and possibility of death, saying, "If our earthly body should be dissolved," using the subjunctive mood. Clause-types are likewise meaningful, answering such questions as Where? Why? Which one? What? How? and others. The preacher, teacher, or Bible-lover who will pay the price of thoughtful, prayerful attention to the meaningful elements of the New Testament in Greek can be rewarded with rich insights which all too few, even of those who claim to love God and his word, ever see.

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I welcome the opportunity to write on this subject in a volume honoring Dean William D. Turkington, since it was under his instruction that I did my first class study of the Greek New Testament. Not only so, but it was he who, when I was in great need of guidance regarding my life work, first gave me the counsel which led me to enter Asbury Theological Seminary and thus was instrumental, under God, in helping to bring about a re-direction of my entire career. For this I am profoundly grateful. In a very real way, then, Dean Turkington has influenced my life's work; and I desire this article to express a bit of the honor which I wish to give to a faithful teacher, counsellor, colleague, and man of God.