

A Cornucopia of Reasons to Study Greek

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- *Traduttore, traditore* – Italian proverb, “Translators, traitors.”

As D.A. Carson points out in *The Inclusive Language Debate*, it is impossible to translate without losing something, without betraying the original. Translation is not running words through a grammar hopper and receiving the words in another language at the end; it is terribly more complicated than that.

And because the Bible is more than just an historical book, but is a document on which people base their hopes and lives, it is essential that we understand it accurately. While we do have many excellent English translations, **no** translations are able, by their very nature, to give full understanding of the Scriptures; they are always one step removed. Every translation is a commentary to a greater or lesser degree. So to understand rightly, and to teach well, we must be able to go to the source, the documents in the original languages.

One brief example: Titus 2:14

- ζηλωτὴν καλῶν ἔργων

- “zealous for good works” = “works of the Law” in Paul (cf. Romans)

- NASB changes “good works” to “good deeds”

- NIV changes “good works” to “what is good”

One’s theology inevitably affects how one translates here, and original language study is required to even see the possibilities.

- So you can benefit from the many great Greek language-based reference works and commentaries available for biblical study today.

While our goal should be to *read* Greek, never to “use Greek” (what a dangerous, short-sighted, and American-pragmatic way of thinking!), there are many tools – especially the good commentaries – which can aid us in interpreting Scripture. An understanding of Greek and hermeneutics is essential to use these.

- To do theology is to labor over the very words of Scripture.

Nil aliud esse Theologiam, atque Grammaticum, in Spiritus Sancti verbis occupatam.

“The science of theology is nothing else, but grammar, exercised on the words of the Holy Spirit.”

~ Martin Luther, as quoted in J.A. Bengel’s *Gnomon*, p. 44.

According to Luther and many others, to do Christian theology is to wrestle with the very words of Scripture in all their meanings. To do this in Greek and Hebrew rather than merely English, is crucial. As Luther also said, “The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained” therefore, we should “hold zealously to the [biblical] languages...” (in essay entitled, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” as quoted in D.A. Black, *Using NT Greek in Ministry*, p 16).

- Non-theological zeal is only short-lived and always dangerous

Zeal without knowledge is easy to come by but hard to live by. Studying Greek will greatly deepen your knowledge and appreciation for theologically-based ministry.

- Reading the Bible in Greek will help you read it slowly and with new eyes.

A disconcerting trend in our culture is the death of the art of quiet reflection and the ability to meditate on truth. To live godly lives, it is essential that we be people who regularly get quiet and reflect and meditate on words and ideas. Learning to read the Greek New Testament will enable you to note every word, to make new observations, to see connections you hadn't seen – all because you will be forced to read ever so slowly (especially at first). It is like taking a walk in your neighborhood: You may have raced by the houses around you countless times on the way somewhere; but when you take a leisurely walk around your neighborhood you will see houses and nooks and crannies and trees and flowers that you didn't even know were there!

- We need desperately to be *thinking* Christians and this comes only through rigorous study.

We must be wary of and fight against the anti-intellectualism that is many of our Evangelical traditions. It is a way of thinking that separates theology from spirituality and theology from practical ministry. Church history shows that when groups of people begin to make this distinction, within one or two generations their children will fall into heresy or total unbelief.

Rigorous study is essential for Christian ministry and life because it transforms us and prepares us to think hard for the glory of God. Studying ancient languages is one of the great types of rigorous study.

“In order to teach, [the Church] must think; for without thinking there is no knowing. This necessity, that [Christians] must think, stands as one of the bedrock results of the course and outcome of the history of philosophy we have surveyed.”

~ Adolf Schlatter, *Die Philosophische Arbeit* as quoted in Robert Yarbrough article in *Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*.

- Rigorous thinking is a great means of grace

“No object can come at the heart but through the door of the understanding.”

~ Jonathan Edwards sermon, *Christian Knowledge*

God has ordained that “there is no other way by which any means of grace whatsoever can be of any benefit, but by knowledge.” It should be no surprise, then, that Scripture regularly exhorts us to use the gift of our minds:

~ “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col 3:2)

~ “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, *dwell on these things*.” (Phil 4:8)

~ “*Think over* what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything.” (2 Timothy 2:7)

And we are regularly called to “consider” things to build our faith:

~ “Do not be anxious... consider the ravens... consider the lillies...” (Luke 12:22 ff)

~ “Holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus... Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 3:1; 12:3)

Conversely, a stagnant mind is a cesspool for sin and heresy. All study, including the study of Greek, develops rigorous habits of mind, for the good of our souls.

- You don't know what you don't know until you know it.

Like all knowledge, it is impossible to really understand the benefits of learning Greek until you already have learned it; only then one can know the myriad of benefits. You have to trust those who have gone before you and look beyond your own limited understanding. As Dr. Mounce points out, you don't meet very many people who know Greek well who complain that it is not helpful; you do meet a lot of people who don't know Greek (and Hebrew) who don't see its value!

- Learning a foreign language is like exposure to a foreign culture.

If you have ever spent any time in a foreign culture you know that it transforms who you are. It is humbling and mind-expanding; it exposes and challenges our presuppositions and "sacred cows." Learning a foreign language approximates this in that it shows different ways that different peoples have encountered and interpreted our common world.

Brief example: In our American culture, "freedom" has certain connotations due to our history and current public debate. But the same concept of freedom (ελευθερια) has different connotations in the rhetoric-based culture of Greco-Roman antiquity. This is only one of many biblical words that are misinterpreted through a modern (American) framework.

- Foreign language learning is especially good for overall brain development and power.

This is most clearly demonstrated from the studies done on foreign language learning in children. In every way, on every scale, children who learn more than one language at an early age far surpass those who don't. The entire brain develops more synaptic connections which are the highways of all understanding and intelligence.

While we as adults won't benefit as much from children in learning another foreign language, we can still improve our brains through this all-important type of study.

- To protect us from error in light of the weighty responsibility of being a teacher of God's Word.

James 3:1 – *"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment."*

2 Timothy 2:15 – *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."*

Teachers are those who traffic in ideas. And teachers of God's Word traffic in the most important ideas there are. Every day people are making decisions of eternal weight based on their ideas, what they believe. These decisions will result in either their everlasting joy or their eternal punishment. We as teachers must take seriously this weighty responsibility as brokers of life and death (2 Corinthians 2:14-17). And to do this, we must make sure that we handle accurately the source of our ideas, God's Word.

- To win souls and nurture them to maturity we must be people whose knowledge about God and His ways is deeper than the elementary teachings.

"First, let me say that an ignoramus is not likely to be much of a soul-winner. A man who only knows that he is a sinner, and that Christ is a Saviour, may be very useful to others in the same condition as himself, and it is his duty to do the best he can with what little knowledge he possesses; but, on the whole, I should not expect such a man to be very largely used in the service of God..."

~ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner*, p. 40.

- The quality of the ministry of the church is at stake.

“Every scientific student of the New Testament without exception knows that Greek is really necessary to his work: the real question is only as to whether our ministry should be manned by scientific students.”

~ J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament” (1918), in J.H. Skilton, *Studying the New Testament Today. Vol. 1: The New Testament Student*

- Education/Seminary should beat us up a little bit.

One of the most grievous things about American education and culture is how little we’ve come to expect of children. This is seen in the trend away from good old hard work and a dominant emphasis on making learning “fun.” But little that is worthwhile is easy, and little that is easy is worthwhile. We should not come to seminary or any education and not expect it to give us some bruises and stress and strain and anguish. This is part of growing to being fully human and growing in intellect. Greek will beat you up a little; but for your good!

- God has ordained our sanctification to come through setting our faculties to seek Him.

“As we must be renewed into the Divine image in wisdom and righteousness, so God teaches us by the written, as well as by the inward Word; and because his written Word was originally given in Hebrew and Greek, it is necessary to learn these languages. He could sustain our animal life without agriculture; yet he has appointed that man should till the ground. He could increase in us mental and spiritual light without our seeking it; yet we are obliged to seek it, and to set our faculties to work for that purpose.”

~ Johann Albrecht Bengel, in a letter, ca. 1720’s

- Many of the great renewals, revivals, and reformations have had at their core a renewed, detailed study of Scripture in the original languages.

The greatest example of this is the Protestant Reformation. Many of you may know already that Luther’s “conversion” and reforming zeal came in part from when he was preparing his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans. As he studied Paul’s great letter in his (relatively new) Greek New Testament he began to see that the Latin Vulgate translation, which was the official text of the Church, had mistranslated some crucial words. The result was, for Luther, a new theological understanding that led over time to the great Protestant Reformation. Even if you’re not a Lutheran (which I am not!), I hope you can see what an impact the GNT had in that generation. Maybe you’ll be the next Luther!

- The ministry should never cease to be a “learned profession.”

“The ministry is a ‘learned profession;’ and the man without learning, no matter what other gifts he may be endowed, is unfit for its duties... A man must be learned, on pain of being utterly incompetent for his work... [Learning and godliness] must never be set over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs.”

~ B.B. Warfield, *The Religious Life of Theological Students*, pp.1,2

- “We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” – 2 Corinthians 4:5

“The best safeguard against the gravitational pull toward self-proclamation is text observation. At best, and where possible (as it generally is in the West), this involves consistent interaction with the text in its original form.”

~ quoted from Robert Yarbrough lecture, “An Argument for Exegetical Preaching”

- “Whatever our hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might!” ~ Eccl. 9:10

“Now as students of theology your vocation is to study theology; and to study it diligently, in accordance with the apostolic injunction: ‘Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord.’ It is precisely for this that you are students of theology; this is your ‘next duty,’ and the neglect of duty is not a fruitful religious exercise.

Dr. Charles Hodge, in his delightful autobiographical notes, tells of Philip Lindsay, the most popular professor in the Princeton College of his day... that ‘he told our class that we would find that one of the best preparations for death was a thorough knowledge of the Greek grammar.’ ‘This,’ comments Dr. Hodge, in his quaint fashion, ‘was his way of telling us that we ought to do our duty.’ Certainly, every man who aspires to be a religious man must begin by doing his duty, his obvious duty, his daily task, the particular work which lies before him to do at this particular time and place. If this happens to be studying, then his religious life depends on nothing more fundamentally than on just studying...”

~ B.B. Warfield, *The Religious Life of Theological Students*

- Studying Greek is worth it!

“No toil is too great if by means of it men are enabled to understand more exactly the mind of Christ.”

~ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*

- All Christians should endeavor to grow in their knowledge of Divinity. Why?

(1) What distinguishes man from beasts is understanding. God has designed that we are to improve upon this superior faculty. Divine knowledge is the greatest end to this purpose.

(2) The truths of divinity are of superlative excellency and better than any riches or pursuits.

(3) Divine truths not only concern ministers but are of infinite importance to all Christians – they relate to every man’s eternal salvation and happiness

(4) No matter how diligently we apply ourselves to the study of Divinity there is room enough to increase our knowledge. There is room to employ ourselves forever with the utmost application.

(5) It is right to endeavor to excel in the knowledge of things that pertain to one’s profession or principal calling.

(6) The Word clearly teaches that all Christians are to grow in knowledge of Divinity (1 Cor 1:4,5; Phil 1:9; 2 Peter 1:5)

~ excerpted from Jonathan Edwards sermon, *Christian Knowledge*

- We must never forget that Greek has a proper place in ministry.

“Greek, Hebrew, and Latin all have their proper place. But it is not at the head of the cross, where Pilate put them, but at the foot of the cross, in humble service to Christ.”

~ old Scottish saying as quoted in D.A. Black, *Using NT Greek in Ministry*, p 21.