

# Language Requirements for a Gospel Ministry

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If 2 Timothy 2:15 is viewed as a course syllabus, then one could say that Paul is not being particularly specific when he says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Timothy was, of course, already in the work of gospel ministry when these words were addressed to him, and furthermore, Paul's directives to him were not intended to set up a curriculum. They do, however, offer us important insight.

The key requirement obviously is "correctly handling the word of truth." The gospel minister must first of all correctly understand God's saving message for himself, and he must then be able to share that saving message with others. Both functions require language skills.

## **The N.T. Age: Minimal Language Barriers**

One could no doubt debate endlessly whether gospel work is more difficult in one age than in another. There were unquestionably formidable problems that confronted the Apostles and their immediate successors when they were asked to bring Christianity to their hearers as a totally unknown quantity. But in the matter of language problems, it may well have been a fairly favorable situation.

Timothy and his generation would have received their instruction in God's plan of salvation directly from the Apostles and eyewitnesses of our Lord. Hence there would have been no language barrier in the communication of these saving truths. The N.T. Scriptures, which were in process of being written, were in Greek and also posed no language barrier. Whether Timothy brought any Hebrew from his pious home is debatable. The O.T. Scriptures known and used extensively would have been the Greek Septuagint. Though Paul occasionally makes his own translation, in his writings he has countless allusions to and many exact quotation from the Septuagint. Again, no language barrier there.

Nor does there seem to have been much of a communication barrier between preachers of the Apostolic age and their hearers. True, there were occasional break-downs in communication, as with the Lycaonians who could only with difficulty be dissuaded from sacrificing to Paul and Barnabas, but in general, language difficulties do not seem to have posed a major problem in spreading the gospel -- thanks largely to Alexander and his program of Hellenization.

## **Expanding Church: Growing Language Barrier**

Successful outreach by the Church brought with it its own problems. We need to realize that Greek remained the "language of the Church" for a considerable length of time after Greek was no longer the universal world language. That Greek truly was the ecclesiastical language is evidenced by the fact that to Rome, the very center of Latin language and culture, Paul wrote his *Epistle to the Romans* in Greek! And Greek maintained itself in Rome and in many other places in the West until the middle and late 200s. When western Christianity eventually switched over to the Latin language, it did so first in North Africa, not Rome.

In the rest of the world the Greek Scriptures (N.T. and LXX) were translated into a variety of vernaculars: Syriac II or III; Coptic III; Gothic IV; Armenian IV; Georgian V; Ethiopic VI; Nubian VI; etc. The spate of translations is evidence of a growing language barrier.

## **Medieval Age: Severe Language Barrier**

The dominant translation, of course, in the geographical area of chief concern and interest to us was the Vulgate. It held sway in the West for over a millenium (400-1400). We tend to score the Vulgate as a translation marred by inaccuracies. To some extent that is true. And the inaccuracies went unchecked and unchallenged because even theologians had lost the ability to compare their Latin version with the original Greek and Hebrew.

I would submit, however, that an even greater barrier to an understanding of the gospel was that the rank and file did not understand Latin and hence were deprived of what good things the Vulgate really did contain. Hence ceremony came to replace the message. The aura of mystery that attended the Latin mass aided and abetted formalism. The essence of the church service came to be, not hearing a message and accepting it for one's salvation, but participating in the mysterium and thus improving one's status before God. At bottom the culprit was, in a sense, a language barrier. And if that be challenged, we need only remind ourselves of the Church's continued and dogged opposition to vernacular translations.

### **The Renaissance: Restoration of the Languages**

In our circles we tend to poor-mouth Erasmus. And no doubt the strictures are deserved for his inadequate theology, his vacillation and timidity, for his half-way measures of reform. But he is the "prince of humanists." Humanly speaking, he did more than anyone else to restore the languages.

Actually, he promoted what already was afoot. He did not invent but rather capitalized on the cry "Ad fontes - to the sources!" At a time when there was interest in going back to things old and original, he provided the materials to work with. That Byzantium should fall at this time and drive many eastern Christians into Europe, bearing with them their precious Greek New Testament manuscripts, was not only an act of providence but the means whereby Erasmus received the material for his monumental 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament. What Erasmus did for the Greek others, such as Reuchlin, did for the Hebrew. Through restored language ability the avenue for a correct understanding of God's Word was again opened.

But to share and convey to others the newly-discovered truths again required language skills -- skills the Lord provided in abundant measure to make possible a German translation through Luther, a French translation through LeFevre, an English version through Tyndale, and many others. The Reformation was a happy combination of language skills to recover the truth from the original Scriptures and to share it in the vernacular. In a sense, it was the removal of language barriers.

Lest we assume too rosy a picture of the situation, we need perhaps to remind ourselves of the dismal scenes of continuing inadequacy and ignorance that the visitations all too often disclosed, but in general, it was an age marked by a removal of language barriers. The original Greek and Hebrew had been recovered. Theologians were able to handle the Latin and thus to retain what was useable of the heritage of the medieval church. And in the days of stress and tension that followed Luther's death, monumental works in both Latin and German were produced that justly deserve continued study to the present day. It is in retaining these works to our day that we are again encountering a growing language barrier.

### **The Modern Age: Growing Complications**

We need not spend much time on the Lutheran trauma of losing the language of Luther. We are considerably past the day in which earnest and concerned people insisted, "Ich will deutsch seling werden." In our circles German has not been a teaching medium for years, and as a spoken language, useful for public worship, its demise also is now almost complete. To my knowledge, there is annually only one Seminary vicar call that specifies work in German. In other congregations German is used only in special situations, or retained as a favor to venerable "pillars" of the congregation who generally grasp the news quite nicely in English, who follow the plot of the "soaps" on TV (though that could perhaps be done easily enough even without turning up the sound on the set) and who are likely to greet one another in English after the service. Need for German as a spoken medium is marginal. Hence it is perhaps not particularly disturbing that only two of the present

graduating class of sixty seniors wrote a German sermon, and none of them were described to the calling board as having a "speaking knowledge" of German.

It is rather our literary heritage that is in danger. Translation of large portions of Luther into English has not made obsolete the reading of the original for the exact sense and flavor of the author. There is furthermore a wealth of useful material available in the German works of the 16th and 17th century dogmatists. Many of the writings of our synodical fathers, e.g., Hoenecke, are available only in German, as well as the works of the founders of the Synodical Conference, such as Walther, et al. We stand to lose much if a reading knowledge of German goes by default.

Much the same can be said for the Latin. It has been used extensively in our Lutheran Confessions and dogmatic works. But Latin is useful not only for presenting us with the proper exposition of the Scriptures and the Lutheran faith. It informs us also of the misunderstandings and errors against which our Confessions and dogmatists were addressing themselves. Latin is necessary for an accurate assessment of the medieval church. Opinio legis is not merely a neat "short-hand" term; it is marvelously descriptive of the mindset that characterized the Latin church with its particular genius for law and form.

But I think one needs to go farther. Latin is an invaluable tool for understanding western culture. And when I speak of "western man" I am thinking of him as "natural man." For example, I know of no more sustained description of natural man's idea of pietas than Vergil's *Aeneid*. Or a knowledge of the *Aeneid* is indispensable if one is to understand and appreciate Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that illuminating insight into a contemporary view of the Church.

Though it has rankled many a student, and some parents as well, I think it is still legitimate to recognize in Latin a basic and ideal bridge to other languages. Not that that is its sole reason for inclusion in the curriculum, but it is a serious consideration nonetheless.

Our present methodology of teaching Greek is directly tied to the Latin program. Whether it could be done some other way is no doubt a question that could be pursued, but it really did not take thirteen years of teaching beginner Greek for me to realize how dependent and how indebted I was to Latin teaching before me.

I will go light on the value of Greek in our curriculum, lest by past or present connection with that discipline I seem to be biased. Suffice it to say that I have never heard the value of Greek for New Testament study seriously challenged. That wording is, however, a bit cagey. I did not say that I have never heard the value of classical Greek challenged. That debate goes on. Let me simply say without any reservation: we weaken our Greek program to the degree that we undercut its classical base. The classics are invaluable both as a basis for N.T. Language and many N.T. concepts.

In regard to understanding the language, the regularity of Latin has its counterpart in the classical Greek's adherence to form. That's what makes it classical. Classical Greek provides the one reasonably stable factor against which to measure the koine's flux and liberty. By the middle of the first quarter our incoming Juniors have generally come to smile indulgently when their instructor continues to point out to them that virtually all koine constructions can not only be documented by reference to pertinent paragraphs in Robertson, Blass-DeBrunner, and Moulton, but can also be illustrated in the so-called "poor Greek" of Xenophon. I would hate to lose the many forerunners to koine usage that the *Anabasis* exhibits.

We are also indebted to classical Greek for our understanding of many a N.T. concept. For example, there is never any problem in explaining why the Athenians would listen to Paul only until he proclaimed the resurrection if the student understands Plato's aversion to matter as something that merely "clogs the soul." To the Athenian resurrection of the body would be the equivalent of reattaching a ball and chain.

Or he who understands what is really involved in being part of a Greek polis will have no difficulty in understanding the idea that our politeuma is in heaven.

Or in Paul's letter to the Galatians in the list of works of the flesh he combines pharmakeia (a combination of drugs and witchcraft) with idolatry. I know of no place in literature where this combination of imploring heathen gods to grant power to magic potions is more graphically or more gruesomely portrayed than in the vengeance which Medea is able to wreak on the cad Jason and his newly-acquired princess. Euripides has given us an authentic glimpse of the popular opinion of pharmakeia. Similar examples could be multiplied.

What was said about Greek in the curriculum can be repeated for Hebrew. I know of no one's questioning its necessity or worth. And happily there is not the debate over classical vs. koine Hebrew. I have heard people ask for more Hebrew, or deplore the fact that they muffed what was offered, or ruefully admit that rust is forming on what they did learn, but I have not heard its status in the curriculum challenged.

### **Use of the Languages in the Seminary Curriculum**

While it may be safe to assume that all of you have recently received a new Seminary catalog, it might still not be out of place to refresh your memory as to how the languages are being used in the Seminary curriculum.

#### **Hebrew**

All incoming Juniors are required to take a 1 quarter/2 hour course in Advanced Hebrew Grammar. This Hebrew skill is directly utilized in all three quarters of all three classroom years in the exegetical study of *Genesis*, *Psalms*, and *Isaiah* respectively. Middler and Senior O.T. isagogics courses on the Penteteuch, Poetic and Prophetic books are set up on the basis of the English text, but scarcely a day goes by that the Hebrew is not consulted.

An Aramaic elective (2 quarters/1 hour) is also offered. This year it had an enrollment of 30 -- mostly Juniors, who took it at some cost. It cost them their only free period.

General Evaluation: Interest in Hebrew and ability to handle it have rarely been higher. A general reaction gained from the O.T. Department men would seem to be: Give us more of the same. Incidentally, the rumor that the Seminary Board altruistically offered to relieve NWC of half its Hebrew faculty in the interest of allowing the College to call stronger men as replacements has not yet been fully substantiated.

#### **Greek**

A segment of the Hermeneutics course offered to Juniors covers what used to be called Advanced Greek Grammar. We don't view it as much of an advance. Actually, its more of a holding operation, trying to retain and refresh what they've learned of classical grammar and to lead that over to the changes that are characteristic of the koine. No major difficulties there.

An area that requires some concentration on the part of incoming Juniors is the acquisition of a N.T. vocabulary. Whatever basic vocabulary they bring is decidedly helpful. I assume the Metzger word-lists are still being inflicted on NWC Juniors and/or Seniors. While lists are helpful, there is no substitute for seeing words in their context, preferably in quantity. Perhaps that makes N.T. vocabulary building largely our assignment.

Junior N.T. Isagogics (5 hrs/3 quarters) offers the opportunity for some quantity reading. A connected account of the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline epistles which are not treated exegetically, and the General Epistles (minus the *Revelation*) are read in the original. Exegetical courses cover *Galatians*, *Ephesians* (and the Pastorals), and *Romans*.

General Evaluation: On balance, incoming Juniors seem capable of doing seminary-level work in Greek. A personal observation, based on no particular statistical evidence, suggests that there is something of a mindset that argues: Greek is easier than Hebrew; ergo, students should do better in handling N.T. material than they do with O.T. -- i.e., assigned Greek translation should be more polished and sight reading should be possible. That rationale may perhaps be sound, or more likely, it represents our optimism as to what seminarians are capable of.

In the N.T. Isagogics course the sheer bulk of material allows little time for reading the Greek aloud. In the exegetical courses all the Greek is read aloud by students -- sometimes with indifferent success. A question that may be worthy of some discussion: Is the effort that would be needed to hone reading skills worth the gain that could be realized from better reading?

A question occasionally asked (and more often subtly hinted at) is: How do NWC and Bethany graduates compare in linguistic skills? In general, one would have to say that they compare very favorably. Both have some among the front-runners in the class and both contribute some to the lower echelons. The latter does not at all imply that they are poor students. After all, somebody has to be last, regardless of the level of the class. All in all, both groups fall within a manageable range of ability. Individual aptitude and application seem to be more determinative of a person's standing in the class than his alma mater. These conclusions are by personal observation limited largely to their work in Greek, but I'm informed that the same holds also for Hebrew.

### **German/Latin**

German and Latin proficiency is, of course, a slightly different matter because previous preparation has not always been the same. Some Bethany students have been outstanding in Latin; others in German. Some in both. A rather large number, however, have not had the opportunity to acquire either. Consequently, the use of German and Latin as a uniform class assignment becomes difficult.

In Dogmatics, for example, translation of the German and Latin quotations is generally restricted to NWC students -- though also there the translation isn't always with distinction. It is my understanding that there is at present some soul-searching as to whether class time for these translations can be afforded.

Quite apart from the practical matter of class translation of quotations, there is still a great deal of benefit derived from a knowledge of Latin and German for Dogmatics and Symbolics. These languages provide useful technical terms, clear and concise explanations of concepts, and apt formulations of doctrine. Again, a question that might be discussed is whether equivalent English terms and terminology could not perhaps be found. The fact of the matter is, however, that the literature of those two disciplines is replete with those technical terms, and our students will have to have some acquaintance with the terms if they are to use the literature with profit.

The use of German and Latin is, of course, not restricted to Dogmatics and Symbolics. There are some reading requirements made of all. Middlers, for example, are required to read Zorn's comments on the Psalms treated in class, and that material is available only in German.

In many areas individuals are encouraged rather than required to utilize their German and Latin skills. And it may be of encouragement to those of you who have instilled those skills to know that the encouragement doesn't always fall on deaf ears. Despite the availability of the American Edition, there are always some Middlers who read their Luther assignments in the original. A Middler church history research paper also drives considerable numbers to some German and Latin sources. It is my feeling that in his Lutheranism in America course Professor Fredrich is particularly successful in interesting students in material relating to the founding of our Synod and the Synodical Conference -- much of that material being available only in German.

A German elective (2 quarters/1 hour) is also offered annually and has drawn up to a dozen takers. This year the enrollment was eleven. Usually the material translated has been drawn from the *Quartalschrift*. This year, as a contribution to the general observation of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, the class translated selected Summaries of Luther's exposition of the Psalms, thus completing a project that Dr. Peters had begun some years ago.

General Evaluation: Students benefit more than they realize from the Latin and German skills you've equipped them with. And if they're directed to a specific problem or task, they can handle these languages with greater facility than they are sometimes inclined to admit.

Even though once-removed from the primary Biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, it would be a decided loss to the Church if Latin and German were dropped or drastically curtailed in the "regular" curriculum. Whether everybody needs both languages may be within the province of this group to discuss, but it would be a serious erosion in the quality of our ministerial training if we settled for a program where by default all questions involving German or Latin had to be referred to a small group of "specialists."

## Conclusion

It's easy to find fault. We at the Seminary are by no means exempt from the inclination to wish for greater competence and more zeal on the part of our students. We would, I suppose, be suspect if we were not interested in having ever better-prepared students enrolling in our classes.

But the fact of the matter is, we have been blessed with truly outstanding young men -- outstanding in all categories, and in language preparedness perhaps second to none. What seminary in our land has the kind of undergrad program that we enjoy?

Our combined task, it would seem to me, is not so much feverishly to urge one another to upgrade their courses, but rather to maintain what we have. The danger of erosion is constantly at hand, particularly in what does not conform to modern methods of secular education and in the areas that the world believes to be frills. And let us make no mistake about it, a liberal arts education with a heavy language emphasis is a frill to many hard-headed and practical "realists." The temptation is there to reduce ministerial training to a Bible college program, and to view the work of the ministry primarily in social terms. Both can function without the languages, but neither are in the best interests of the gospel. Luther's observations and encouragement in his 1524 treatise *To the Councilmen of All the Cities in Germany, That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, is still much to the point:

Therefore...let us open our eyes, thank God for this precious treasure, and guard it well, lest it be again taken from us and the devil have his will. For though the Gospel has come and daily comes through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it has come by means of the languages, by which it was spread abroad and by which it must be preserved....

In proportion, then, as we prize the Gospel, let us guard the languages. For not in vain did God have His Scriptures set down in these two languages alone -- the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. The languages, therefore, that God did not despise but chose above all others for His Word, we too ought to honor above all others....

And let us be sure of this: we shall not long preserve the Gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which we carry this jewel; they are the vessel in which we hold this wine, they are the larder in which this food is stored; and as the Gospel itself says, they are the baskets in which we bear these loaves and fishes and fragments....

For know this, God's Word and grace are a passing rainstorm, which does not return where it has once been. It came to the Jews, but it passed over; now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks, but it passed over; now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins had it, too; but it passed over; now they have the pope. And you Germans must not think you will have it for ever; for ingratitude and contempt will not suffer it to remain.

And well does he urge us also:

Take and hold fast then, whoever can; idle hands cannot but have a lean year.