

THE BIBLICAL LANGUAGES:

THEIR USE AND ABUSE IN THE MINISTRY (Part 1)

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JOHN NEWTON, IN A LETTER to a divinity student, warns against the danger of being puffed up with knowledge: 'I have seen many instances of young men who have been much hurt by what they expected to reap advantage from. They have gone to the academy, humble, peaceable, spiritual and lively; but have come out selfwise, dogmatical, censorious and full of a prudence founded upon the false maxims of the world'. While he appreciates the importance of acquiring useful knowledge, Newton is anxious to encourage the student to look for that something extra in order to complete his fitness for the ministry which men and books cannot possibly give. He continues, 'The chief means for attaining wisdom and suitable gifts for the ministry are the Holy Scriptures and prayer. The one is the fountain of living water, the other the bucket with which we are to draw ... Next to these, and derived from them, is meditation'.¹ The learning of the original languages of the Bible, Newton places in a secondary and subordinate category for achieving wisdom.

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Someone is bound to raise an objection at this point on the ground that you cannot read the Holy Scriptures properly or meditate upon them unless you read them in the original. Only in the original languages can you really read and hear the Word of God accurately. This is what Gresham Machen said in his address at the opening of the Westminster Seminary, USA in 1929: 'You cannot read the Bible for yourself unless you know the languages in which it was written ... if we want to know the Scriptures, to the study of Greek and Hebrew we must go'.²

Dr Lloyd-Jones in his inaugural address at the opening of the London Theological Seminary in 1977 made this remark by way of reply: 'To say that a man cannot preach and cannot even read his Bible if he does not know Greek and Hebrew, I am afraid must be categorised as sheer nonsense'.³ He went on to say that it is doubtful whether all the apostles had knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures in the original. Some of the greatest preachers of the Christian Church have been

ignorant of either Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic or even of all three. It is of fundamental importance to be assured that the Bible in translation is as much the Word of God as in the original tongues. When anyone takes up an English Bible, for instance, (whatever version it might be) is it the Word of God they are reading or is it something else? Warfield quotes Lyford, 'Divine Truth in English is as truly the Word of God as the same Scriptures delivered in the original Hebrew or Greek; yet with this difference, that the same is perfectly, immediately and most absolutely in the original Hebrew and Greek, in other translations, as the vessels wherein it is presented unto us and as far forth as they do agree with the original'.⁴ At the time of the Reformation, the reason that translations of the Scriptures were made into the languages of the peoples of Europe was the conviction that even the peasants and non-academics might be able to read the Word of God for themselves. Thus Tyndale said to one learned gentleman, 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost'.⁵

Those words of Tyndale remind us of a very basic truth emphasised by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor.2:11-16, namely, that the things of God are spiritually discerned. 'The key to the understanding of the Bible', said Dr Lloyd-Jones, 'is not a knowledge of the original languages. You can have such knowledge and still be ignorant of the message'.⁶ The Bible in translation has been read, memorised and its message understood and received by countless thousands of humble, believing souls, putting to shame the ignorance of academic clerics and College professors. John Newton gives us a final warning on this subject after mentioning the benefits of acquiring the original languages: 'Only be upon your guard, lest you should be tempted to think, that because you are master of the grammatical construction, and can tell the several acceptations of the words in the best authors, you are therefore and thereby masters of the spiritual sense likewise. This you must derive from your experiential knowledge, and the influence and teaching of the Spirit of God.'⁷

The emphasis so far has been on the importance of spiritual mind and heart in the approach to the Scriptures. We must now move on to consider the place and value of the languages, particularly in the minister's sermon preparation. There is no excuse for slovenly, ill-prepared material and no one could accuse Dr Lloyd-Jones of not making use of all the aids necessary for accuracy in exegesis. The same could also be said of John Newton. The purpose of this article is to

encourage those preparing for the ministry and those already in the ministry not to despise or depreciate the learning of the biblical languages but to acquire as much knowledge as they can and to use it profitably in the work of preaching and teaching God's Word. On the other hand, there are dangers and pitfalls to be avoided, the most subtle and easily forgotten of which has already been stressed. It will be necessary to warn aspiring linguists to beware of some of the more glaring abuses.

There is, however, a more pressing matter that needs to be attended to at this juncture. Barricades have been erected in the minds of many sincere, spiritually-minded men against the learning and use of the biblical languages which need to be removed. What are these barriers? Here are some of the most well known:

- a) No good at languages
- b) learning a strange alphabet
- c) No time, or time better spent on other things
- d) Never going to be expert
- e) Danger of becoming dry and academic
- f) Disillusioned through the experience of others who have abused the knowledge
- g) Experience at College
- h) Poor presentation of material

Any one of these reasons is enough to turn people off the study of Hebrew and Greek so it is essential that we tackle these issues at the outset. It is to be remembered that we have in mind throughout, not the person with a flair for languages who takes up such study as a hobby, nor the recluse who loves to bury himself in his study from morning until night, but the busy pastor.

The Goal

Any book dealing with the principles of language learning will tell you how important it is to have a goal in view. What is more, that goal must be an attainable one and not some impossible ideal. Leslie Sloat, Lecturer in New Testament Greek at Westminster Seminary recalls someone saying that it was Machen's view that the study of Greek in seminary

was not per se intended to produce Greek scholars. That work belongs to the universities. Mr Sloat says that their programme is designed 'to provide students with a sufficient proficiency in the language so that they will be able to read commentaries intelligently and, with the help of grammars and lexicons, carry out responsible exegesis'.⁸ Dr Lloyd-Jones uses similar words concerning the training at the London Theological Seminary, 'What is needed by preachers today is a sufficient knowledge of Greek and Hebrew to enable them to use their commentaries, and to read the many translations available in an intelligent manner, to be able to follow the argumentation of the authorities for one view rather than another'.⁹ If this aim is clearly in mind no one should become disillusioned because they do not feel expert enough. It takes years of intense study to become expert and the vast majority of us are never going to be proficient in any one of the languages like the authorities, no matter what College or Seminary we attended.

Breaking Psychological Barriers

It follows from what has been said above, that it is not beyond the possibility of any person of average intelligence to attain the end in view. Granted some have that ability to lap up new languages with the greatest of ease while others are much slower, nevertheless, the excuse about being no good at languages is ruled out of court. It is a weak-willed person who is put off at the sight of something new or unfamiliar. Yes, Greek and, more especially, Hebrew characters are difficult and awkward when first encountered. Accept it as a challenge. Grasp it firmly. Do not be disheartened at the first difficulty, but press on. Take no notice of those who, having fallen by the wayside in learning the basic grammar, make it their life's ambition to dissuade others from achieving the goal with depressing tales of woe. Instead of looking on the negative side, consider the subject in a positive way and remember the good purpose. It can be helpful to work closely with someone else who is tackling the same language. In this way the one encourages the other.

One can well understand the feelings of those who have heard the self-opinionated exhibit their learning in public only to reveal their ignorance in the use they make of the biblical languages. It is most obnoxious and should warn us of the danger of becoming heady and high-minded; a little knowledge can be dangerous. But this is no reason for going to the other extreme of abandoning the discipline. Christianity has its charlatans but this does not mean that we turn our backs on

the true way.

Many confess that while at college or university they have passed their Greek and Hebrew by learning off by heart whole chunks of the English Bible with just enough knowledge of the languages to recognise where they are to begin and end. They have looked upon the whole exercise as an easy way to pick up marks in examinations and since leaving college they hardly ever refer to the Greek or Hebrew text. If this is your experience I hope to encourage you not to lose what you have learned and to refer to the original more often than you do and to stimulate you to refresh what knowledge you have with more worthy motives in mind.

There is some bite to the criticism that many of the grammars used in the teaching of the languages do not present the material in a very attractive or appealing form. In addition, the bewildered student is also faced with a barrage of grammatical expressions to which he is unaccustomed. The result is that the poor student is lost before he begins with such terms as palatal sibilants, proclitic and enclitic particles, declensions and conjugations. Are we to continue to bemoan the fact that English grammar is no longer taught as it once was, or do we move forward into an era where language learning does not have to contend with these hurdles, at least in the early stages of development? There are new, interesting books on the market which are a vast improvement on the old grammars and we shall list them later. Of course, as in all disciplines, there is necessary jargon to be learned but for beginners it can be kept to a minimum.

The Time Factor

The question of time is an old chestnut. When we consider the preachers and missionaries of the past, the amount of work they accomplished and yet they still had time to study the Bible in the original tongues, it should make us ashamed. Very often we make excuses and try to salve our consciences by diminishing the challenge of our forefathers with such remarks as 'they didn't live in the hectic world of the late 20th century'. If we are honest with ourselves most of us make time for doing the things we want to do or like doing. If we are convinced there is a place for some knowledge of the original languages then we will make time to learn them and to use them in our study and preparation for preaching. It is a false piety which would suggest there is something unspiritual about the whole enterprise. Indeed, we can make a

superior spirituality a cover for laziness.

A Spiritual Exercise

As for the fear of becoming dry and academic in the study and pulpit, it must be stressed that this is not the fault of the languages, nor should the reading of the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible encourage such a spirit. Any theological subject studied can become dry to you. It all depends on your whole approach. Warfield, speaking on 'The Religious Life of Theological Students', urges them to 'make all your theological studies "religious exercises" ... Put your heart into your studies; do not merely occupy your mind with them, but put your heart into them'.¹⁰ In another address he has this to say, 'Let nothing pass by you without sucking the honey from it. If you learn a Hebrew word, let not the merely philological interest absorb your attention, remember that it is a word which occurs in God's Holy Book, recall the passages in which it stands, remind yourselves what great religious truths it has been given to have a part in recording for the saving health of men. Every Biblical text whose meaning you investigate treat as a Biblical text, a part of God's Holy Word, before which you should stand in awe. It is wonderful how even the strictest grammatical study can be informed with reverence... And when done with grammar, we begin to weigh the meaning, O let us remember what meaning it has to us! Apply every word to your own souls as you go on, and never rest satisfied until you feel as well as understand.'¹¹

In the next issue we shall seek to stimulate your interest and inspire you to take seriously the study of the biblical languages by discussing the subject from four angles: the theological, historical, biographical and practical.

References

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A R C I C

THE FINAL REPORT of the Anglican-Roman Catholic
International Commission
(CTS/SPCK, 1982, 122pp, £1.95)

A Review-Article by Rev Graham Harrison MA BLitt
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IN MARCH 1966 the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsay, met with Pope Paul VI in Rome. One of the outcomes of their meeting was a decision to set up an Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission. ARCIC (the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission)

is the heir and successor of that ecumenical initiative. It met a number of times between January 1970 and September 1981. The Final Report brings together in convenient form the series of Statements and Elucidations thereof issued by ARCIC as the result of its deliberations during that period. It was published last year amidst the euphoria being built up around the visit of Pope John Paul II to Britain. True, there was evidence of delaying tactics, not to say disapproval, on the part of the more conservative elements in the Vatican. But its publication was hailed widely as signifying an agreement in principle to the not-too-ultimate reunification of the Church of England and the Church of Rome. Only a few years ago such a possibility would have been dismissed as idle Anglo-Catholic day-dreams. But now, so it seems, Rome and Canterbury can see more than a glimmer of light at the end of their particular ecumenical tunnel. Certainly the Report sounds at times like those peculiar cooing noises made by starry-eyed lovers in the early stages of the great romance. If only the Holy Father would give his unequivocal consent to a real marriage instead of a protracted courtship Canterbury would be waiting at the altar eager for the nuptials to commence.