

The Profit of Employing the Biblical Languages: Scriptural and Historical Reflections¹

— Jason S. DeRouchie —

*Jason DeRouchie is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Bethlehem College
and Seminary in Minneapolis.*

In 1524, six years after posting his “Ninety-five Theses,” Martin Luther (1483–1546), father of the Protestant Reformation, charged his contemporaries:

Let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored. . . . If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall . . . lose the gospel.²

Are such musings mere rhetorical overstatement? Must individuals in every generation know and appropriate the biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, in order to maintain the purity of the gospel and the health of the Church worldwide?

¹ In the spirit of Phil 2:29–30, I dedicate this paper to the founders of Bethlehem Seminary (established in 2009). As an overflow of their treasuring of Christ and love for his Church, Chancellor John Piper, President Tim Tomlinson, Academic Dean Tom Steller, Board Chairman Sam Crabtree and the rest of the leadership teams of Bethlehem Baptist Church and Bethlehem College and Seminary have formed an educational institution to train Christian ministers—a school that has a unified course sequence that is based on the Hebrew and Greek Bible, all for the glory of God, the good of his people, and the purity of the Gospel for generations to come. May the eternal Son of God preserve this institution in humility, truth, and love, and may he, for the fame of God’s name, raise up many other schools like it in congregations throughout our world.

Earlier drafts of this essay were presented to the Hebrew Language and Exegesis Consultation at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in New Orleans on November 19, 2009 and at the Desiring God National Conference in Minneapolis, MN, on October 2, 2010. The author appreciates the numerous colleagues and listeners who responded thoughtfully. For a synthesis of the biblical foundations for Bethlehem College and Seminary, see “The Earth is the Lord’s: The Supremacy of Christ in Christian Learning,” Appendix 1 in John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 185–203; <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/the-earth-is-the-lords-the-supremacy-of-christ-in-christian-learning>. Some of the principles set forth in this paper borrow from that address.

² Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” in *The Christian in Society II* (ed. Walther I. Brandt; trans. Albert T. W. Steinhäuser and rev. Walther I. Brandt; Luther’s Works 45; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962 [orig. 1525]), 360. In the same context, Luther goes so far as to claim that his use of the biblical languages was the primary instrument that brought about the Protestant Reformation: “I know full well that while it is the Spirit alone who accomplishes everything, I would surely have never flushed a covey if the languages had not helped me and given me a sure and certain knowledge of Scripture. I too could have lived uprightly and preached the truth in seclusion; but then I should have left undisturbed the pope, the sophists, and the whole anti-Christian regime” (366).

This article supplies scriptural and historical justification for keeping the biblical languages central in training vocational ministers of God's Word. It makes no attempt to clarify *how* to maintain skill in Hebrew and Greek.³ Rather, the argument is designed to clarify *why* congregations and schools should stress original language exegesis when equipping shepherds. The study's main contribution comes in the way it discloses the perspectives of a number of influential figures from the past. This essay includes extensive quotations from ministers such as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen. By allowing these greats to speak to this issue in their own words, my hope is that this study will have a more significant, lasting impact.⁴

Before progressing, it is important to emphasize upfront that not everyone needs to know the biblical languages, even though all should seek to know God. First, the Lord has graciously made his Word translatable so that those "from every tribe and language and people and nation" may hear of and believe in the Savior. Ezra and the Levites helped a non-Hebrew speaking audience "understand the Law" (Neh 8:7–8; cf. 13:24); the NT authors often preached from the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT; and people proclaimed the gospel at Pentecost in a way that "each one was hearing . . . in his own language" (Acts 2:6). As such, believers today can and should utilize the quality translations available to us in order to meet God and make him known.

Second, grasping the fundamentals of Hebrew and Greek neither ensures correct interpretation of Scripture nor removes all interpretive challenges. It does not automatically make one a good exegete of texts or an articulate, winsome proclaimer of God's truth to a needy world. Linguistic skill also does not necessarily result in deeper levels of holiness or in greater knowledge of God. Why then do we need some in the Church who can skillfully use the biblical languages?

This article gives four reasons:

³ For advice on keeping up one's ability in the biblical languages, see most recently Constantine R. Campbell, *Keep Your Greek: Strategies for Busy People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

⁴ A number of helpful contemporary works address the place of the biblical languages in the Church and academy, but no major advances are made beyond those set forth by the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before. See E. Earle Ellis, "Language Skills and Christian Ministry," *RefR* 24.3 (1971): 162–63; David Ford, "Keeping up with Biblical Languages While in the Ministry," *Foundations* 14 (1985): 41–44; Richard G. Watson, "Secularists Did Not Steal the Colleges," *Presbyterian Journal* (June 18, 1986): 8–10; Dennis E. Johnson, "The Peril of Pastors without the Biblical Languages," *Presbyterian Journal* (September 10, 1986): 23–24; Scott J. Hafemann, "Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture: Reflections on the Current Crisis in Evangelical Seminary Education," *JETS* 31 (1988): 129–43; Wayne G. Strickland, "Seminary Education: A Philosophical Paradigm Shift in Process," *JETS* 32 (1989): 227–35; Allan M. Harman, "The Place of Biblical Languages in the Theological Curriculum," *RTR* 50:3 (1991): 91–97; Paul M. Doriani, "A Pastor's Advice on Maintaining Original Language Skills," *Presb* 19:2 (1993): 103–15; Bruce K. Waltke, "How I Changed My Mind About Teaching Hebrew (or Retained It)," *Crux* 29:4 (1993): 10–15; G. K. Beale, "Seminary Education, the Biblical Languages and the Pastoral Ministry," unpublished paper, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, So. Hamilton, MA, 1994; Scott J. Hafemann, "Is it genuinely important to use the biblical languages in preaching, especially since there are many excellent commentaries and pastors will never attain the expertise of scholars?" *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:2 (1999): 86–89; idem, *2 Corinthians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000): 171–73; John Piper, "Sacred Study: Martin Luther and the External Word," in *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 76–111; idem, "Brothers, Bitzer Was a Banker," in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 81–88; John D. Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 79–84. Of these studies, those most helpful with respect to the issue at hand are Johnson (1986), Strickland (1989), Harman (1991), and Piper (2002).

1. Using the biblical languages exalts Jesus by affirming God’s wisdom in giving us his Word in a book (God’s Word as foundation).
2. Using the biblical languages gives us greater certainty that we have grasped the meaning of God’s Book (studying God’s Word).
3. Using the biblical languages can assist in developing Christian maturity that validates our witness in the world (practicing God’s Word).
4. Using the biblical languages enables a fresh and bold expression and defense of the truth in preaching and teaching (teaching God’s Word).

The first reason relates to the nature and foundational place of God’s Word, and the last three grow out of the pattern of Ezra’s resolve, which resulted in a ministry blessed by God: *study* the Word › *practice* the Word › *teach* the Word. “The good hand of his God was on him, for Ezra set his heart to study and to practice the Torah of Yahweh and to teach both statute and rule in Israel” (Ezra 7:9c–10, author’s translation; cf. 8:22).⁵ (See Table 1.)

Table 1: The Pattern of Ezra 7:9c–10

Study the Word	Observe accurately and thoroughly, understand clearly, and evaluate fairly.
Practice the Word	Feel properly, and apply wisely, helpfully, and appropriately.
Teach the Word	Express compellingly in words what has been studied and practiced.

1. Using the Biblical Languages Exalts Jesus by Affirming God’s Wisdom in Giving Us His Word in a Book

The God who always acts to preserve and display his glory⁶ chose to disclose himself and his will through a written Word, given to us in Hebrew (and Aramaic) and Greek. In the words of Martin Luther, “Although the gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages, was spread abroad by that means, and must be preserved by the same means.”⁷ Sadly, we live in a world where not only “the word of the cross” is considered foolish (1 Cor 1:18) but many deem unnecessary the sheath that guards and contains this sword, namely, the biblical languages. However, as Luther asserts, “If God did not despise [Hebrew and Greek] but chose

⁵ See also Jason S. DeRouchie, “A Life Centered on Torah,” in Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 249–50. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

⁶ See John Piper, “The Goal of God in Redemptive History,” Appendix 1 in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (rev. and expanded ed.; Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 308–21; idem, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards with the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

⁷ Luther, “Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 358.

them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others.”⁸ Similarly, John Owen (1616–1683), the leading Puritan of the seventeenth century, correctly noted in 1678 that “the words of the Scripture being given thus immediately from God, every apex, tittle or iota in the whole is considerable, as that which is an effect of divine wisdom, and therefore filled with sacred truth, according to their place and measure.”⁹

In his wisdom and for the benefit of every generation of humankind, God chose to preserve and guard *in a book* his authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient Word.¹⁰ Initially, God uniquely entrusted his written revelation to the Jews in the Hebrew OT (Ps 147:19–20; Rom 3:2). He spoke his Word through the prophets (Deut 18:18; Heb 1:1; 2 Pet 1:21), who in turn wrote down those words in the language of the people, thus securing a lasting guide and witness (Deut 31:24–26; Isa 30:8; Dan 9:11). This written, canonical text was then to be copied (Deut 17:18; Josh 8:32), studied and meditated on (Josh 1:8; Ps 1:3; Neh 8:13), and taught by faithful followers from generation to generation, whether priests, prophets, princes, parents, or the like (Lev 10:11; Deut 6:7; 17:18–20; 18:18; 31:11; Ps 78:5). Then, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), God spoke again, now through Jesus, his eternal Word (John 1:1; Heb 1:1), who called his disciples to obey his teachings (Matt 28:20). He also promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would recall for them all he taught (John 14:26; 16:12–13). Then these apostles, empowered by the Spirit of Christ in them, spread abroad the teaching of Jesus through what we now call the NT (Eph 2:20; 3:5; 2 Pet 3:2; Jude 3).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 359. Luther further asserts, “The apostles themselves considered it necessary to set down the New Testament and hold it fast in the Greek language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us there safe and sound as in a sacred ark. For they foresaw all that was to come, and now has come to pass; they knew that if it was left exclusively to men’s memory, wild and fearful disorder and confusion and a host of varied interpretations, fancies, and doctrines would arise in the Christian church, and that this could not be prevented and the simple folk protected unless the New Testament were set down with certainty in written language. Hence it is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish” (360).

⁹ John Owen, “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein,” in *The Works of John Owen* (ed. William H. Goold; 17 vols.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967 [orig. 1678]), 4:213. Elsewhere Owen writes, “The nature of this doctrine [of salvation] is such, that there is no other principle or means of its discovery, no other rule or measure of judging and determining any thing about or concerning it, but only the writing from whence it is taken; it being wholly of divine revelation, and that revelation being expressed only in that writing. Upon any corruption, then, supposed therein, there is no means of rectifying it. . . . Nor is it enough to satisfy us, that the doctrines mentioned are preserved entire; every tittle and ἰῶτα in the Word of God must come under our care and consideration, as being, as such, from God” (“Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures,” in *The Works of John Owen* [ed. William H. Goold; 17 vols.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968], 16:302–3). Owen correctly views the doctrine of Scripture’s inerrancy as directly bearing on our present manuscripts, for the extant texts substantially align with what is considered the original wording of the original autographs (so too Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 96). However, I believe that Owen elsewhere goes too far in insisting that the Hebrew copies of the OT he had were “the rule, standard, and touchstone of all translations, ancient or modern, by which they are in all things to be examined, tried, corrected, amended; and themselves only by themselves” (“Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture,” in *The Works of John Owen* [ed. William H. Goold; 17 vols.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968], 16:357; cf. 16:301, 349–50, 359). As Peter J. Gentry cogently argues, “Differences . . . between the LXX and other witnesses to the text which are genuine textual variants should be evaluated on a case by case basis, and one should not prefer *a priori* either the LXX or the MT” (“The Text of the Old Testament,” *JETS* 52 [2009]: 33).

¹⁰ See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 73–138.

Jesus highlights the significance of God's *written* Word when he declares that he prophetically fulfills all OT hopes: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, *not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished*" (Matt 5:17–18). The very details of the biblical text bear lasting significance and point to the person and work of Christ. As such, we align ourselves with God's wisdom and participate in his passion to exalt his Son when we take the biblical languages seriously in studying his Book.

2. Using the Biblical Languages Gives Us Greater Certainty That We Have Grasped the Meaning of God's Book

This second reason for the importance of Hebrew and Greek relates to the study of Scripture. Knowing the original languages helps one observe more accurately and thoroughly, understand more clearly, evaluate more fairly, and interpret more confidently the inspired details of the biblical text.

The Bible is clear that it was given to the simple, not just the scholar. It is designed to make "wise the simple" (Ps 19:7), to impart "understanding to the simple" (119:130), and to be easily taught to children (Deut 6:6–7; Ps 78:5–8).

These truths, however, do not mitigate either the sustained call to careful, God-reliant study or the fact that those without the languages still need the scholar to render the biblical text in an understandable way. Speaking into a context where people were abusing the gift of tongues and not appreciating the clear prophetic word, Paul asserts, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). He then later charges the Corinthians, "Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature" (14:20). Similarly, Paul tells Timothy, "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. . . . Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:7, 15). These texts together stress that *God-dependent, rigorous thought, directed toward God's Book, is the call of every minister*.

Peter's comment elsewhere regarding Paul's writings clarifies the deadly result of careless biblical interpretation: "There are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). Destruction comes to those who mishandle God's Word.

We can draw five summary points from these passages:

1. Every Christian should seek to think maturely, which means yearning for the clear Word of God, rightly understanding what is good, and being innocent to what is evil (1 Cor 14:20).
2. Ignorant and unstable people misappropriate God's Word, but those who are neither ignorant nor unstable can rightly understand it (2 Pet 3:16).
3. The answer to ignorance and instability and the means to right understanding in everything is God-dependent thinking over his revealed Word, given through his prophets (2 Tim 2:7).
4. Without God's Spirit guiding the human mind and altering the human heart, we will never fully grasp the message of Scripture (1 Cor 2:14).
5. An interpreter is shameless before God and handles the Word rightly only when God approves of the interpretation (i.e., when we rightly grasp God's original intention through

the biblical author; 2 Tim 2:15); this process takes self-discipline (“do your best”) and is a central element in Word-based vocational ministry (“a worker”).

2.1. Grasping the Meaning of Scripture

How then can we best think over and rightly grasp the meaning of Scripture, if not through original language exegesis? J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), during the first presidential convocation address of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, clearly stated,

If you are to tell what the Bible does say, you must be able to read the Bible for yourself. And you cannot read the Bible for yourself unless you know the languages in which it was written. . . . In his mysterious wisdom [God] gave [his Word] to us in Hebrew and in Greek. Hence if we want to know the Scriptures, to the study of Greek and Hebrew we must go.¹¹

Many others before Machen held similar convictions. For example, in his inaugural address to his students at Wittenberg in 1518, Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), German reformer and collaborator with Martin Luther, asserts, “Only if we have clearly understood the language will we clearly understand the content. . . . If we put our minds to the [Hebrew and Greek] sources, we will begin to understand Christ rightly.”¹² Accordingly, John Calvin (1509–1564), the great French theologian and influential leader

¹¹ J. Gresham Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan,” in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writers* (ed. D. G. Hart; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 188–89 (orig. published in *The Presbyterian* 99 [October 10, 1929]: 6–9). Similarly, Machen writes, “If . . . the student . . . can read the Bible not merely in translations, but as it was given by the Holy Spirit to the church, then they are prepared to deal intelligently with the question of what the Bible means” (189). In 1977, at the inaugural address of London Theological Seminary, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) took issue with Machen’s words (“A Protestant Evangelical College,” *Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions, 1942–1977* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1989], 369–70): “So 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 categorized as sheer nonsense. This is most serious, for it seems to me to show an ignorance of the spiritual character of the biblical message. . . . The key to an understanding of the Bible is not a knowledge of the original languages. You can have such a knowledge and still be ignorant of the message, as so many are and have been, unfortunately. It is the man who has a spiritual understanding who understands the Word of God.” I greatly appreciate Lloyd-Jones’ emphasis on the need for the Spirit’s help in interpretation and on the effectiveness of translations to communicate God’s Word. It is also noteworthy that he claimed that the minister needs “a sufficient knowledge of Greek and Hebrew” to use the best secondary sources (370). However, he also stressed that ministerial students need to be “trained in what is called exegesis, a true understanding of what the text is saying” (370), and this statement demands further clarification in light of his earlier assertions. As Harman says, “How can they be sure they know what the text is saying? The Bible is perspicuous in whatever language it comes to us, but for detailed study and interpretation a knowledge of it in the original languages should add to understanding and ultimately add to clarity of proclamation of it. To approach the text of Scripture through translations or commentaries is to deprive ourselves of direct access to God’s revelation” (“The Place of Biblical Languages in the Theological Curriculum,” 95). For a helpful discussion of the relationship of reason and the work of the Spirit in understanding biblical truth, see Piper, “Rational Gospel, Spiritual Light,” in *Think*, 69–80; cf. 119–54.

¹² Philipp Melanchthon, “The Reform of the Education of Youth,” as cited in *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (new ed.; ed. Joachim Hillerbrand; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 59–60. Melanchthon may have been influenced here by Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466–1536), the Dutch Renaissance humanist and Roman Catholic theologian, who two years earlier had written in his treatise on the method of biblical interpretation, “Understanding what is written is impossible if we do not know the

of the Protestant Reformation from Geneva, emphasizes that attempting to fully grasp the meaning of Scripture without the original languages is “to make all revere a Scripture hidden in darkness like the mysteries of Ceres, and let none presume to aspire to the understanding of it.”¹³ Finally, writing in 1678, John Owen states, “In the interpretation of the mind of any one, it is necessary that the *words* he speaks or writes be rightly understood; and this we cannot do immediately unless we understand the *language* wherein he speaks, as also the *idiotisms* of that language, with the common use and intention of its *phraseology* and expression.”¹⁴

The call for original language exegesis does not mean translations ineffectively communicate God’s Word. Indeed, translations are “God’s Word” in so far as they accurately align with the Hebrew or Greek original.¹⁵ However, the presence of numerous quality translations only heightens the need for some people in every generation who can evaluate these versions in light of their source.¹⁶

language in which it is written” (“*Methodus*,” trans. Patrick Preston, in Allan K. Jenkins and Patrick Preston, *Biblical Scholarship and the Church: A Sixteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* [Farnham-Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2007], 250 [§4]). A little later, in 1524, Luther himself made similar statements (“Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 364, 366): “If we understood the languages, nothing clearer would ever have been spoken than God’s word. . . . I know full well that while it is the Spirit alone who accomplishes everything, I would surely have never flushed a covey if the languages had not helped me and given me a sure and certain knowledge of Scripture.”

¹³ John Calvin, “Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote,” in *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 3 of *Selected Works of John Calvin* (ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge; 7 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 75. In light of his convictions (see previous footnote), one wonders how the Roman Catholic Erasmus would have responded to the Council’s declaration had he still been alive.

¹⁴ Owen, “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding,” 4:215.

¹⁵ Owen writes, “Translations contain the word of God, and are the word of God, perfectly or imperfectly, according as they express the words, sense, and meaning of those [Hebrew and Greek] originals” (“The Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture,” 16:357). From a slightly different perspective, A. T. Robertson stated in 1923 (*The Minister and His Greek New Testament* [1923; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], 17): “The real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. The English is simply a translation of the New Testament, not the actual New Testament. It is good that the New Testament has been translated into so many languages.”

¹⁶ Owen asserts, “The sense and substance of the Scripture being contained entirely in every *good translation* (amongst which that in use among ourselves is *excellent*, though capable of great improvements), men may, by the use of the means before directed unto [i.e., ‘diligent reading of the Scripture, with a sedate, rational consideration of what we read’], and under the conduct of the teaching of the Spirit of God in them, usefully and rightfully expound the Scripture in general unto the edification of others” (“The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding,” 4:216; for the embedded quote, see 4:199). A sentiment similar to Owen’s regarding the level to which we can call translations “God’s Word” was echoed over a century later in these words by the English Baptist theologian John Gill (1697–1771): “To the Bible, in its original languages, is every translation to be brought, and by it to be examined, tried, and judged, and to be corrected and amended” (*Body of Divinity* [London: Briscoe, 1839; repr., Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1957], 13a). He further writes (13b, italics added): “Let not now any be uneasy in their minds about translations on this account, because they are not upon an equality with the original text, and especially about our own; for as it has been the will of God, and appears absolutely necessary that so it should be, that the Bible should be translated into different languages, that all may read it, and some particularly may receive benefit by it; he has taken care, in his providence, to raise up men capable of such a performance, in various nations, and particularly in ours; for whenever a set of men have been engaged in this work, as were in our nation, men well skilled in the languages, and partakers of the grace of God; of sound principles, and of integrity and faithfulness, having the fear of God before their eyes; they have never failed of producing a translation worthy of acceptation; and in which, though they have mistook some words and phrases, and erred in some lesser and

2.2. Thinking More Deeply and Gaining More Confidence

There are certain levels of thinking, wrestling, and assurance that are possible only when one exegetes the original language. A. T. Robertson (1863–1934), Professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, clarifies part of this point when he notes that “the minute study called for by the Greek opens up unexpected treasures that surprise and delight the soul.”¹⁷ The biblical languages are the very means by which God gave us his Word, and using them forces interpreters to ask questions that would have gone un-raised, to observe details that would have been missed, to evaluate arguments in a way otherwise impossible, and to grasp more clearly and confidently the intended message of the biblical authors.

2.3. Interpretive Challenges for Those without the Languages

At least two serious interpretive challenges face the minister who is unable to use the biblical languages. The first is captured by Machen, who rightly observes that a student without Hebrew and Greek “cannot deal with all the problems [of interpretation] at first hand, but in a thousand important questions is at the mercy of the judgment of others.”¹⁸ With respect to secondary resources for study, this means that students without skill in the languages must either use what Machen figuratively calls “works that are written . . . in words of one syllable,” or they must borrow what others say without accurate comprehension or fair evaluation.¹⁹

With respect to the biblical text, interpretations done apart from Hebrew and Greek are always dependent on someone else’s translation.²⁰ By God’s grace we have many good English versions. Yet how is one to evaluate whether a given translation is justified? And how is one to respond when faced with great diversity in the versions themselves, as in the various renderings of the *Shema* in Deut 6:4,²¹

lighter matters; yet not so as to affect any momentous article of faith or practice; and therefore *such translations as ours may be regarded as the rule of faith.*”

¹⁷ Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 21.

¹⁸ J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writers* (ed. D. G. Hart; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 212 (orig. published in *The Presbyterian* 88 [February 7, 1918]).

¹⁹ Ibid. Luther (“Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 364) avows, “It is . . . a stupid undertaking to attempt to gain an understanding of Scripture by laboring through the commentaries of the fathers and a multitude of books and glosses. Instead of this, men should have devoted themselves to the languages. . . . If you knew the languages, you could get further with the passage than they whom you are following. As sunshine is to shadow, so is the language itself compared to all the glosses of the fathers.” While these words are strong, the literary context makes clear that Luther is not discounting the use of secondary sources as much as he is stressing the benefits of interpreting God’s Word firsthand. Indeed, he affirms that the wise will seek the counsel of others (Prov 11:14; 24:6) and asserts that the “right sort of books” in a library would include not only “the Holy Scriptures, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and German, and any other languages in which they might be found” but also “the best [and most ancient] commentaries” and “any books that would be helpful in learning the languages” (376).

²⁰ A related challenge is that those without the languages are fully dependent on others to address the textual variation found in the biblical witnesses.

²¹ The Hebrew of Deut 6:4 reads, שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד. The interpretive challenges involve clause delineation, lexical meaning and function, and identifying subject and predicate. A quick comparison of The Message, KJV, NIV/ESV, NRSV, and NASB discloses the dilemma. For an introductory overview of the issue, see Cynthia L. Miller, “Pivotal Issues in Analyzing the Verbless Clause,” in *The Verbless Clause in Biblical*

the “without a vision” text in Prov 29:18,²² or of the virgin daughter versus virgin fiancé issue in 1 Cor 7:36–38.²³

Regarding “simple preachers,” who approach the interpretive process without the languages, Luther states, “Even though what they said about a subject at times was perfectly true, they were never sure whether it really was present there in the passage where by their interpretation they thought to find it.”²⁴ More than a millennium before, in 397, St. Augustine (354–430), Latin Church Father and Bishop of Hippo, similarly affirmed, “The literal translation cannot be ascertained without reference to the text in the original tongue.”²⁵

The second challenge faced by those without Hebrew and Greek is that no two languages bear one-to-one correspondence, so even the best translations lose something in their renderings.²⁶ In the words

Hebrew: Linguistic Approaches [ed. Cynthia L. Miller; Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999], 4–6).

²² “Where there is no *vision*, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” Many preachers have used this classic KJV translation of Prov 29:18 to promote the need to have an intentional strategy or plan for one’s own life. However, the Hebrew text never uses וַיִּרְאֵהוּ that way. Rather, “vision” points to a “divine revelation,” as is suggested by the second line in the verse itself: “Where there is no *prophetic vision* the people cast off restraint, but blessed is who keeps the *law*” (ESV). See Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC 14; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 231.

²³ Both the KJV and NASB translate παρθένος in 1 Cor 7:36–38 as “virgin” daughter, whereas the NIV and ESV render it “virgin” fiancé. For a full discussion of the issues, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 594–98.

²⁴ Luther, “Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 361.

²⁵ Saint Augustine of Hippo, “On Christian Doctrine,” in *Augustine*, vol. 18 of *Great Books of the Western World* (ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins; trans. J. F. Shaw; Chicago: William Benton; Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 641b (§2.12). The irony of this quote is that Augustine himself never learned Hebrew, had an incomplete knowledge of Greek, and discouraged Jerome from translating the Latin directly from the Hebrew, being convinced that the Old Greek was sufficient. Nevertheless, the validity of his statement stands. On another note, while reflecting on the challenges of translations, Owen asserts, “What perplexities, mistakes, and errors, the ignorance of these *original languages* hath cast many expositors into, both of old and of late, especially among those who pertinaciously adhere unto *one translation*, and that none of the best, might be manifested by instances undeniable, and these without number” (“The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding,” 4:215).

²⁶ Different translation theories stand behind the various Bible versions available in modern languages, creating a continuum of literalism based on how they handle lexical, grammatical, and cultural correspondences. Translations differ on whether they are form- or sense-driven and to what degree they are gender-inclusive, and liberal-versus-conservative theology does not appear to play a role in which theory one prefers. One must assess a translation’s quality by its faithfulness to the Hebrew or Greek original and in light of the target audience and communicative purpose of the translation itself. Even when one knows Hebrew and Greek, sermon or lesson preparation always benefits from interacting with a number of versions along the equivalence continuum, and the expositor should always be aware of the main translation his audience uses. For more on translation theory, see Eugene A. Nida, “Theories of Translation,” *ABD* 6:512–15; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 33–54; David Dewey, *A User’s Guide to Bible Translations: Making the Most of Different Versions* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005); Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Leland Ryken, *The ESV and the English Bible Legacy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); cf. D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978); Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

of Robertson, “The freshness of the strawberry cannot be preserved in any extract.”²⁷ Owen puts it this way:

There is in the originals of the Scripture a peculiar *emphasis* of words and expressions, and in them an especial *energy*, to intimate and insinuate the sense of the Holy Ghost unto the minds of men, which cannot be traduced into other languages by translations, so as to obtain the same power and efficacy. . . . It is [therefore] of singular advantage, in the interpretation of the Scripture, that a man be well acquainted with the *original languages*, and be able to examine the use and signification of words, phrases, and expressions as they are applied and declared in other authors.²⁸

Furthermore, linguistic features like discourse markers, verb choice and placement, and connection are often difficult to fully convey cross-linguistically, so those working only with a translation are at a loss in capturing all that the original authors intended, especially the flow of thought.²⁹ As Machen says, “Our student without Greek cannot acquaint himself with the form as well as the content of the New Testament books.”³⁰ Or as Robertson observes, even when many translations are examined, “there will

²⁷ Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 17. Robertson further writes, “The fact that [the NT] was written in the *koiné*, the universal language of the time, rather than in one of the earlier Greek dialects, makes it easier to render into modern tongues. But there is much that cannot be translated. It is not possible to reproduce the delicate turns of thought, the nuances of languages, in translation.” Some have compared approaching Scripture with or without the languages to viewing a high-definition digital picture to a television receiving only an analog signal.

²⁸ Owen, “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding,” 4:214–15. Similarly, Augustine observes, “In some languages there are words that cannot be translated into the idiom of another language” (“On Christian Doctrine,” 641a [§2.11]).

²⁹ For an overview of a number of discourse features in the Hebrew Bible that are often missed in translation, see Duane A. Garrett and Jason S. DeRouchie, *A Modern Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), chs. 37–41, esp. §37.C–E, §39.B, and §40.A. For a comparable discussion of biblical Greek, see Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). When asked whether the biblical languages are truly important in sermon preparation, seeing as “there are many excellent commentaries and pastors will never attain the expertise of scholars,” Scott J. Hafemann helpfully responds (*The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:2 [1999]: 88): “But I have saved the best for last. Knowing the biblical languages enables us to do something very few commentaries ever do: trace the flow of the argument of the text. Commentaries save us time by providing the historical, linguistic, cultural, canonical, and literary insights that we simply do not have time to mine for ourselves week in and week out. For \$35.00 we can benefit from ten years of a scholar’s life! But in the end, what we preach is the point and argument of the biblical text, as informed by this backdrop, but not replaced by it. Commentaries and translations do not excel in tracing the flow of an argument and mapping out the melodic line and theological heartbeat of a text. By definition, most commentaries are atomistic, while a translation often must obscure the density and complexity or ambiguity of the original for the sake of its target language. So when all is said and done, we do not learn Greek in order to do word studies, but in order to see where the conjunctions are and are not, where participles must be decoded, where clauses begin and end, where verb tenses really make a difference and where they do not, and, in the end, what the main point of a text actually is.” For more on tracking the flow of a biblical author’s thought, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 97–124, and www.biblearc.com.

³⁰ Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 212. With respect to such details, Erasmus argues for the necessity of the languages (*Methodus*, 250–51 [§5]): “What about linguistic peculiarities that cannot be expressed in a different language so as to retain the same light, their native grace and equal emphasis? What about

remain a large and rich untranslatable element that the preacher ought to know.”³¹ For this, Hebrew and Greek alone can help.

2.4. Synthesis of the Call to Be Students of God’s Book

§2 highlights the importance of the biblical languages for Bible study. *I am not suggesting that those who know the languages will always get things right or that through the languages all interpretive challenges are set aside.* Indeed, Luther is correct that, although without knowledge of Hebrew and Greek “it is impossible to avoid constant stumbling . . . there are plenty of problems to work out even when one is well versed in the languages.”³² Nevertheless, as Owen states, through the biblical languages “a hindrance is removed” and “occasions of manifold mistakes are taken away, and the cabinet is as it were unlocked wherein the jewel of truth lies hid, which with a lawful diligent search may be found.”³³ It is in this context I assert that using the biblical languages enables one to observe more accurately and thoroughly, understand more clearly, evaluate more fairly, and interpret more confidently the inspired details of the biblical text.

3. Using the Biblical Languages Can Assist in Developing Christian Maturity That Validates Our Witness in the World

Scripture is clear that a true encounter with God’s Word will alter the way we live, shaping servants instead of kings and nurturing Christ-exalting humility rather than pride.³⁴ Bible study should overflow in deeper levels of radical surrender to the Lord and his ways. In both the OT and NT, the pattern for nurturing sustained life with God is this: *teaching or reading* the Word leads to *hearing* the Word, which gives rise to *learning to fear* God, which overflows in *obeying* the Word (Deut 31:11–13; cf. 6:1–2; 17:19–20; John 5:25; 6:45). One is self-deceived and will be cursed if he claims to be a man of the Word yet fails to live it out (Matt 23:2–3, 23, 25–27; Jas 1:22). However, those who hear and act will be blessed

certain things that are too minute for completely accurate translation (a matter that Jerome constantly proclaims and complains about)? What about the very many things which, restored by Jerome have been lost by the injury of time, like the Gospels amended in accordance with Greek truth? What about the books corrupted in the past and being corrupted now by the mistakes or rashness of the scribes? Finally, what about the fact that those things to which Jerome made the appropriate emendations are not sufficiently understood if you just do not know the languages on evidence from which he relies? Because, if Jerome’s translation once sufficed, what is the purpose of warning in the Papal decrees that the truth of the Old Testament is sought in Hebrew books, but the faith of the New Testament from Greek sources? Certainly, at that time Jerome had already made his translation.”

³¹ Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 19.

³² Luther, “Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 363. Augustine similarly observed, “Very often a translator, to whom the meaning is not well known, is deceived by an ambiguity in the original language, and puts upon the passage a construction that is wholly alien to the sense of the writer” (“On Christian Doctrine,” 642a [§2.12]).

³³ Owen, “The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding,” 4:215.

³⁴ This will not happen perfectly overnight but progressively over our lifetimes, until we meet Jesus face-to-face (Phil 3:12–14; 1 Thess 5:23–24; Heb 12:22–24; 1 John 1:8–10; 3:2–3).

(Jas 1:23; cf. Rom 2:13), and others will “see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16).³⁵

Having addressed how exegeting the biblical text in the original languages aids study, we now turn to the benefits of Hebrew and Greek for one’s walk with God and witness in the world. Using the biblical languages helps clarify what feelings God wants us to have and what actions he wants us to take. The languages help foster a depth of character, commitment, conviction, and satisfaction in life and ministry that substantiates our Christian testimony in the world.

3.1. The Biblical Languages as a Means for Knowing God and His Ways

In 1918, speaking out against the secularization of Christian education, J. Gresham Machen asserted,

In many colleges, the study of Greek is almost abandoned. . . . The real trouble with the modern exaltation of “practical” studies at the expense of the humanities is that it is based upon a vicious conception of the whole purpose of education. *The modern conception of the purpose of education is merely intended to enable a man to live, but not to give him those things that make life worth living.*³⁶

Study is supposed to lead us to what is most important in life.

Paul writes, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). The apostle treasures what the psalmist also knows to be true: “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps 16:11). Seeing God, knowing God, savoring God—he alone brings maximum pleasure for the longest amount of time. Is this not a pursuit worth making?

But how can it be done? Solomon provides sound guidance in Prov 2:1–5:

My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.

Mining God’s Word is the means to the most grounded, authentic, satisfied, and God-glorifying life. *Through Scripture* “you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.”

One cannot help but see, therefore, the intimate link between the biblical languages and our daily lives. If the Word is the means to knowing God and living for him and if the biblical languages are the

³⁵ Obeying God validates an authentic inward transformation by God, and faithfulness to God is a necessary qualification for eldership (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). Rebirth gives rise to holy conduct, not as the basis for our justification but as the evidence of it (Rom 6:6–7, 22; 8:13), and sustained growth in holiness gives assurance to us and to others of our life in Christ (Mark 5:16; 2 Pet 1:5–10; 1 John 2:18–19).

³⁶ Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 211 (italics added).

very means by which God communicated his Word, then knowing Hebrew and Greek can directly serve one's desire for God and display of God in daily life. Exegeting Scripture through the original languages assists in shaping proper feelings toward God's truth and in applying this truth in wise and helpful ways.

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation always viewed the principle of *sola Scriptura* to require not only serious biblical scholarship but also "the practice of godliness": "Piety was the first prerequisite, followed by biblical and theological scholarship."³⁷ Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), who initiated the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland, helpfully assesses the importance of biblical languages in the growth of Christians:

Once a young man is instructed in the solid virtue which is formed by faith, it follows that he will regulate himself and richly adorn himself from within: for only he whose whole life is ordered finds it easy to give help and counsel to others.

But a man cannot rightly order his own soul unless he exercises himself day and night in the Word of God. He can do that most readily if he is well versed in such languages as Hebrew and Greek, for a right understanding of the Old Testament is difficult without the one, and a right understanding of the New is equally difficult without the other. . . .

But in respect of [Hebrew and] Greek as well as Latin we should take care to garrison our souls with innocence and faith, for in these tongues there are many things which we learn only to our hurt: wantonness, ambition, violence, cunning, vain philosophy and the like. But the soul . . . can steer safely past all these if it is only forewarned, that is, if at the first sound of the voices it pays heed to the warning: Hear this in order to shun and not to receive. . . .

If a man would penetrate to the heavenly wisdom, with which no earthly wisdom ought rightly to be considered, let alone compared, it is with such arms [namely, the languages] that he must be equipped. And even then he must still approach with a humble and thirsting spirit.³⁸

³⁷ Harman, "The Place of the Biblical Languages in the Theological Curriculum," 91.

³⁸ Ulrich Zwingli, "Of the Upbringing and Education of Youth in Good Manners and Christian Discipline: An Admonition by Ulrich Zwingli," in *Zwingli and Bullinger* (The Library of Christian Classics; Ichthus Edition; ed. G. W. Bromiley; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 108–9. Elsewhere, Zwingli directs, "You and other territories should—when the occasion arises—allow useless ministers to die off, with God's help, and apply a portion of their possessions to poor parishes and the other portion toward training a few scholars in the languages for the good and benefit of your area. Otherwise there is grave danger when reading (which in our day has become so popular), that—as may be clearly seen—a goodly number of those who read become merely *more informed and eloquent than pious and god-fearing*. Those very people burst forth with every nonsense which has no basis at all in the original language and context" ("The Preaching Office, June 1525," in *In Search of True Religion: Reformation, Pastoral and Eucharistic Writings*, vol. 2 of *Huldrych Zwingli—Writings* [ed. and trans. Edward J. Furcha; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1984], 173–74). In a similar vein, Owen cautions against letting knowledge of the languages lead to arrogance: "Withal this skill and faculty, where it hath been unaccompanied with that humility, sobriety, reverence of the Author of the Scripture, and respect unto the *analogy of faith*, which ought to bear sway in the minds of all men who undertake to expound the oracles of God, may be, and hath been, greatly abused, unto the hurt of its owners and disadvantage of the church" ("The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding," 4:216).

3.2. The Biblical Languages as a Means to Dying to Self and Living for God

For biblical interpreters today, all of whom are non-native speakers of ancient Hebrew and Greek, the benefits of the languages for holy living are not limited to the ways they help us encounter God through his Word. Indeed, the arduous task itself of learning, keeping, and using the languages provides many opportunities for growth in character, discipline, boldness, and joy. Machen rightly observes that the languages are “the most laborious part” of biblical studies.³⁹ But he would have also agreed with Robertson, who says, “There is no sphere of knowledge where one is repaid more quickly for all the toil expended.”⁴⁰

Our God, who is passionate for his own glory and our joy, calls people whose primary language is not Hebrew or Greek to handle his Word with care. The countless hours of memorizing, parsing, diagramming, and tracing the logical flow of thought are designed not only to help us grasp the biblical message but also to conform ourselves to it. “Grammar is a means of grace” in more than one way,⁴¹ and at times God makes it difficult for us to interpret his Word correctly in order to fight our laziness and to develop character. When tempted to give up on the languages due to their taxing nature, may students of God’s Book remember that the Lord is graciously calling them to greater God-dependence and less self-reliance, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5).⁴²

3.3. Synthesis of the Call to Be Doers of the Word

When it comes to the order of Ezra’s resolve (*study* the Word › *practice* the Word › *teach* the Word), the area of personal application is too quickly neglected. Abounding hypocrisy hinders Kingdom-expansion, but biblically grounded study accompanied by a virtuous life substantiates the gospel.⁴³ Because our knowing God and living for God develops only in the context of the Word and because Bible study is best done through the original languages, Hebrew and Greek serve as instruments of God to develop holiness, which enhances the mission of the Church.

4. Using the Biblical Languages Enables a Fresh and Bold Expression and Defense of the Truth in Preaching and Teaching

In 1909, ministering amid the rising waves of Protestant liberalism, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), Professor of Theology at Princeton Seminary and J. Gresham Machen’s senior faculty member and mentor, claimed, “A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low

³⁹ Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 211.

⁴⁰ Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴² While the following quote may initially appear tendentious, in light of the fact that there are likely thousands of purposes for every single act of God in space and time, Owen is probably correct. Addressing the numerous challenges raised by the textual variations within the biblical witnesses, he states, “God by his providence preserving the whole entire, suffered this lesser variety to fall out, in or among the copies we have, for the quickening and exercising of our diligence in our search into his Word” (“Of the Divine Original,” 16:301).

⁴³ Accordingly, Erasmus (“*Methodus*,” 258 [§26]) asserts, “You will be sufficiently immune from refutation if you advance to that point where you succumb to no vice, and lapse into no desires, even if you depart from a disputation where you had the worst of it. He who teaches Christ without spot is unquestionably a great teacher.”

conception of the training necessary for it.”⁴⁴ If ministers are to be merely overseers of religious programs, agents designed to advance modern culture, or inspirational speakers, then certainly Hebrew and Greek are unnecessary. But if ministers are called to be specialists in the Word and winsome advocates for the truth, everything changes. As Warfield says,

If the minister is the mouth-piece of the Most High, charged with a message to deliver, to expound and enforce; standing in the name of God before men, to make known to them who and what this God is, and what his purposes of grace are, and what his will for his people [is]—then, the whole aspect of things is changed. Then, it is the prime duty of the minister to know his message; to know the instructions which have been committed to him for the people, and to know them thoroughly; to be prepared to declare them with confidence and with exactness, to commend them with wisdom, and to urge them with force and defend them with skill, and to build men up by means of them into a true knowledge of God and of his will, which will be unassailable in the face of the fiercest assault. No second-hand knowledge of the revelation of God for the salvation of a ruined world can suffice the needs of a ministry whose function it is to convey this revelation to men, commend it to their acceptance and apply it in detail to their needs. . . . *For such a ministry . . . nothing will suffice for it but to know; to know the Book; to know it first hand; and to know it through and through. And what is required first of all for training men for such a ministry is that the Book should be given them in its very words as it has come from God's hand and in the fulness of meaning, as that meaning has been ascertained by the labors of generations of men of God who have brought to bear upon it all the resources of sanctified scholarship and consecrated thought.*⁴⁵

Nine years later, in 1918, Machen himself stressed that a preacher is true to his calling only if he succeeds “in reproducing and applying the message of the Word of God.”⁴⁶ That is, the Bible “is not merely one of the sources of the preacher’s inspiration, but the very sum and substance of what he has to say. But if so, then whatever else the preacher need not know, he must know the Bible; he must know it at first hand, and be able to interpret it and defend it.”⁴⁷ And how can this best be done, if not through original language exegesis?

Having considered the uniqueness and importance of God’s Book, the priority of studying God’s Book, and the necessity of applying God’s Book, this section addresses the responsibility of teaching God’s Book. My intent is to show some ways that knowing the biblical languages (1) provides a sustained freshness, a warranted boldness, and an articulated, sure, and helpful witness to the truth and (2) equips one to defend the gospel and hold others accountable in ways otherwise impossible.

⁴⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Our Seminary Curriculum,” in *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings* (ed. John E. Meeter; 2 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 1:369 (orig. published in *The Presbyterian* [September 15, 1909], 7–8). He also writes, “A comprehensive and thorough theological training is the condition of a really qualified ministry. When we satisfy ourselves with a less comprehensive and thorough theological training, we are only condemning ourselves to a less qualified ministry” (1:373).

⁴⁵ Warfield, “Our Seminary Curriculum,” 1:372 (italics added); cf. Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 211; idem, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 193.

⁴⁶ Machen, “The Minister and His Greek Testament,” 211.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

4.1. A Door for Personal Discovery and Passionate Proclamation

Saturated study of Scripture through the languages provides sustained opportunity for new discovery, freshness, and insight, all of which enhance one's teaching. *The goal in instruction is not to be original in one's message but to be individual in one's grasp of truth and in the presentation of the message.* In A. T. Robertson's words, through wrestling with the Hebrew and Greek Bible, "the originality that one will thus have is the joy of reality, the sense of direct contact, of personal insight, of surprise and wonder as one stumbles unexpectedly upon the richest pearls of truth kept for him through all ages."⁴⁸ Centuries earlier, Martin Luther similarly wrote, "Where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations."⁴⁹

4.2. The Minister as an Able Guide

It is a devastating reality that local churches today often treat ministers more as general managers of congregational affairs than as specialists called to know and teach God's Book. Thus critical questions about the Bible are left to theological professors and the like, while congregational leaders stand ill-equipped to confront the biggest problems facing the world with the only answer that can satisfy. However, as Machen rightly observes,

Especially while doubt remains in the world as to the great central question [of the truthfulness and beauty of the gospel], who more properly than the ministers should engage in the work of resolving such doubt—by intellectual instruction even more than by argument? The work cannot be turned over to a few professors whose work is of interest only to themselves, but must be undertaken energetically by spiritually minded men through the church. But obviously, *this work can be undertaken to best advantage only by those who have an important prerequisite for the study in a knowledge of the original languages upon which a large part of the discussion is based.*⁵⁰

In a world filled with competing truth claims, ministers are called to guide their flocks in biblical truth. Certainly the biblical languages can assist toward this end.

4.3. An Aid for Declaring and Defending Biblical Truth

The call of every Bible expositor is to communicate "as one who speaks oracles of God" (1 Pet 4:11). Teachers of God's Book "will be judged with greater strictness" (Jas 3:1; cf. 2 Pet 2:1, 3), and condemnation will fall on all who add to or take away from God's words (Deut 4:2; 12:32; Josh 1:7; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18–19).

Because life and death are at stake when the Word is proclaimed, Paul tells Titus that the elder in God's Church "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). Such an effort is best done with the biblical languages. As Luther observes,

⁴⁸ Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, 20–21.

⁴⁹ Luther, "Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," 365.

⁵⁰ Machen, "The Minister and His Greek Testament," 212–13 (italics added).

When it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, [one unskilled in Hebrew and Greek] is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages. Now *there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough.* Hence, languages are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian church.⁵¹

One contemporary example of the benefits of knowing the languages in order to preserve the gospel is seen in the way Christian apologists skilled in the languages are better equipped to defend the doctrine of Christ's deity when confronting Jehovah's Witnesses. A careful walk through the Greek NT discloses the numerous heretical errors of the New World Translation.

Writing in response to the Council of Trent (April 8, 1546), where the Roman Catholics asserted that the Latin Vulgate translation alone was the only authentic text of Scripture, John Calvin avows, "By one article they have obtained the means of proving what they please out of Scripture, and escaping from every passage that might be urged against them."⁵² By turning from the biblical languages, we "shut our eyes to the light that we spontaneously may go astray."⁵³

In this regard, Luther stresses,

All teachings must be judged. For this a knowledge of the language is needful above all else. The preacher or teacher can expound the Bible from beginning to end as he pleases, accurately or inaccurately, if there is no one there to judge whether he is doing it right or wrong. But in order to judge, one must have a knowledge of the languages; it cannot be done any other way.⁵⁴

Luther expresses constant frustration at "simple preachers," unskilled in the biblical languages, who continually mishandle God's Word:

⁵¹ Luther, "Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," 363 (italics added). Zwingli believed just as strongly about the necessity of the languages aiding one's ability to know and defend biblical truth. In the following quote, however, I believe he goes too far, for he writes as if a knowledge of the languages alone makes one an accurate reader of texts: "It is true and quite certain that human hearts are not turned toward God by anything other than God who draws them, so help me God, however learned a person might be; nonetheless, one must have knowledge of Scripture because of those who do violence to it. For hypocrisy stops short of nothing. It dares present itself as if it were the spirit. But when one discovers afterwards that their speaking does not conform to God's word, one knows which is hypocrisy. For among the simple one soon reaches the point at which violence is done to God's word; they don't know what it is all about. Nonetheless, one has to probe for meaning, to find out whether it is thus. In this way a believer is well informed on whether or not the right meaning has been found. And there is no better way to do that than through languages. For just as in German nothing remains unknown to us when it is written out because we all know German, so—if we knew Hebrew as well as German—we should be able to fathom the Old Testament. Similarly, if we knew Greek as well as German, nothing in the New Testament should be hidden from us either. Therefore all commentaries and teachers are nothing when compared to the knowledge of languages. . . . Therefore it is essential that we have teachers in several places who are able to instruct others in the languages" ("The Preaching Office, June 1525," 173).

⁵² Calvin, "Antidote," 3:69.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3:71.

⁵⁴ Luther, "Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," 365.

When men attempt to defend the faith with such uncertain arguments and mistaken proof texts, are not Christians put to shame and made a laughingstock in the eyes of adversaries who know the language? The adversaries only become more stiff-necked in their error and have an excellent pretext for regarding our faith as a mere human delusion. When our faith is thus held up to ridicule, where does the fault lie? It lies in the ignorance of the languages; and there is no other way out than to learn the languages. . . . [Those without Hebrew and Greek] often employ uncertain, indefensible, and inappropriate expressions. They grope their way like a blind man along the wall, frequently missing the sense of the text and twisting it to suit their fancy.⁵⁵

4.4. Synthesis of the Call to Preach the Word

Machen asserts that what was needed in his day were not “theological pacifists who avoid controversy, but . . . earnest contenders for the faith.”⁵⁶ The same is true at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The biblical languages sharpen preaching to make it as pointed, accurate, and penetrating as possible. Preaching without original language exegesis is like wielding a blunt sword. May our God build an army of men and women in the next generation who can boldly articulate and defend the truth of the gospel because of their humble grounding in Hebrew and Greek.⁵⁷

5. Conclusion

Writing to his contemporaries who were questioning the need for Christian education, Martin Luther avows,

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book. O how happy the dear fathers would have been if they had had our opportunity to study the languages and come thus prepared to the Holy Scriptures! What great toil and effort it cost them to gather up a few crumbs, while we with half the labor—yes, almost without any labor at all—can acquire the whole loaf! O how their effort puts our indolence to shame! Yes, how sternly God will judge our lethargy and ingratitude!⁵⁸

If Luther could say these words in 1524, how much more true are they today!

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁵⁶ Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary,” 192.

⁵⁷ A complementarian perspective of biblical manhood and womanhood necessitates that there be women who are skilled teachers of Scripture in their designated contexts—e.g., Priscilla standing alongside her husband Aquila to explain the way of God to Apollos in private (Acts 18:26); (grand)mothers instructing their (grand) children in the sacred writings (2 Tim 1:5; 3:15); older women teaching younger women the Word of God (Titus 2:3–5). Certainly there is a place for godly women to handle God’s Book in the languages it was given.

⁵⁸ Luther, “Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” 364.

Hebrew and Greek are gifts of God that we can use for gain or ill. Many ministers without the languages treasure Christ and ably pass on this treasure (2 Cor 4:7), and others who know Hebrew and Greek are massively blinded from the glory of Christ (4:3–4). Nevertheless, the biblical languages aid in the “open statement of the truth” (4:2) by which gospel light goes forth (4:5–6), and knowing the languages provides an unmatched connection for individuals with the unchanging Word, which remains unscathed in this ever-changing world.

For the Christian minister who is charged to proclaim God’s truth with accuracy and to preserve the gospel’s purity with integrity, the biblical languages help in one’s study, practice, and teaching of the Word. Properly using the languages opens doors of biblical discovery that would otherwise remain locked and provides interpreters with accountability that they would not otherwise have. The minister who knows Hebrew and Greek will not only feed himself but will also be able to gain a level of biblical discernment that will allow him to respond in an informed way to new translations, new theological perspectives, and other changing trends in Church and culture. With the languages, the interpreter’s observations can be more accurate and thorough, understanding more clear, evaluation more fair, feelings more aligned with truth, application more wise and helpful, and expression more compelling.⁵⁹

In light of the above, I offer the following action steps to readers of all vocational callings:

1. *Seminary professors and administrators.* Fight to make exegeting the Word in the original languages the core of every curriculum that is designed to train vocational ministers of God’s Book.
2. *Church shepherds and shepherds-in-training.* Seek to become God-dependent, rigorous thinkers who study, practice, and teach the Word—in that order!
3. *Other congregational leaders.* Give your ministers who are called to preach and teach time to study, and help your congregations see this as a priority.
4. *Young adult leaders and college professors.* Encourage those sensing a call to vocational ministry of the Word to become thoroughly equipped for the task.
5. *Everyone.* Pray to our glorious God for the preservation of the gospel, for our leaders, and for the churches and schools training them.

May God through his Word satisfy and sustain his Church for generations to come, and may he continue to raise up individuals in every generation who rightly and unashamedly handle the Word of truth for the purity of the gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ (2 Tim 2:15).

⁵⁹ For the pattern “observe › understand › evaluate › feel › apply › express,” see Piper, *Think*, 191–98.



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