

The more a theologian detaches himself
from the basic Hebrew and Greek text of Holy Scripture,
the more he detaches himself from the source of real theology!
And real theology is the foundation of a fruitful and blessed ministry.

HEINRICH BITZER

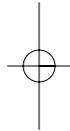
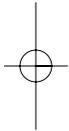
Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit;
they are the casket which contains the priceless jewels of antique thought;
they are the vessel that holds the wine;
and as the gospel says, they are the baskets
in which the loaves and fishes are kept to feed the multitude. . . .

As dear as the gospel is to us all,
let us as hard contend with its language.

MARTIN LUTHER

The original Scriptures well deserve your pains,
and will richly repay them.

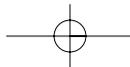
JOHN NEWTON

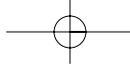


BROTHERS, BITZER WAS A BANKER

IN 1982, Baker Book House reissued a 1969 book of daily Scripture readings in Hebrew and Greek called *Light on the Path*. The readings were short, and vocabulary helps were given with the Hebrew verses. The aim of the editor, who died in 1980, was to help pastors preserve and improve their ability to interpret the Bible from the original languages.

His name was Heinrich Bitzer. He was a banker.





BROTHERS, WE ARE NOT PROFESSIONALS

A banker! Brothers, must we be admonished by the sheep as to what our responsibility is as shepherds? Evidently so. For we are surely not admonishing and encouraging each other to press on in Greek and Hebrew. And most seminaries, evangelical as well as liberal, have communicated by their curriculum emphases that learning Greek and Hebrew may have some value for a few rare folks but is optional for the pastoral ministry.

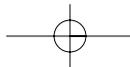
I have a debt to pay to Heinrich Bitzer, and I would like to discharge it by exhorting all of us to ponder his thesis: “The more a theologian detaches himself from the basic Hebrew and Greek text of Holy Scripture, the more he detaches himself from the source of real theology! And real theology is the foundation of a fruitful and blessed ministry.”¹

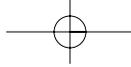
What happens to a denomination when a useful knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is not cherished and encouraged for the pastoral office? I don’t mean simply offered and admired. I mean cherished, promoted, and sought.

Several things happen as the original languages fall into disuse among pastors. First, the confidence of pastors to determine the precise meaning of Biblical texts diminishes. And with the confidence to interpret rigorously goes the confidence to preach powerfully. It is difficult to preach week in and week out over the whole range of God’s revelation with depth and power if you are plagued with uncertainty when you venture beyond basic gospel generalities.

Second, the uncertainty of having to depend on differing translations—which always involve much interpretation—will tend to discourage careful textual analysis in sermon preparation. For as soon as you start attending to crucial details like tenses, conjunctions, and vocabulary repetitions, you realize the translations are too diverse to provide a sure basis for such analysis. For example,

1. Heinrich Bitzer, ed., *Light on the Path: Daily Scripture Readings in Hebrew and Greek* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1982), 10.





JOHN PIPER

most of the modern English translations (RSV, NIV, NASB, NLT) do not enable the expositor to see that “have fruit” in Romans 6:22 links with “bear fruit” five verses later in Romans 7:4.² They all translate Romans 6:22 without the word *fruit*.

So the preacher often contents himself with the general focus or flavor of the text, and his exposition lacks the precision and clarity which excite a congregation with the Word of God. Boring generalities are a curse in many pulpits.

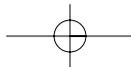
Expository preaching, therefore, falls into disuse and disfavor. I say disfavor because we often tend to protect ourselves from difficult tasks by minimizing or ignoring their importance. So what we find in groups where Greek and Hebrew are not cherished and pursued and promoted is that expository preaching—which devotes a good bit of the sermon to explaining the meaning of the text—is not much esteemed by the preachers or taught in the seminaries.

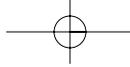
Sometimes this is evident in outright denunciation of exposition as pedantic and schoolish. More often there is simply a benign neglect; and an emphasis on sermonic features like order, diction, illustration, and relevance crowds out the need for careful textual exposition.

Another result when pastors do not study the Bible in Greek and Hebrew is that they, and their churches with them, tend to become second-handers. The harder it is for us to get at the original meaning of the Bible, the more we will revert to the secondary literature. For one thing, it is easier to read. It also gives us a superficial glow that we are “keeping up” on things. And it provides us with ideas and insights which we can’t dig out of the original for ourselves.

We may impress one another for a while by dropping the name of the latest book we’ve read, but secondhand food will not sustain and deepen our people’s faith and holiness.

2. Of modern translations, the ESV is one of the few that gets it right.





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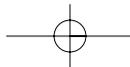
Weakness in Greek and Hebrew also gives rise to exegetical imprecision and carelessness. And exegetical imprecision is the mother of liberal theology.

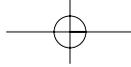
Where pastors can no longer articulate and defend doctrine by a reasonable and careful appeal to the original meaning of Biblical texts, they will tend to become close-minded traditionalists who clutch their inherited ideas, or open-ended pluralists who don't put much stock in doctrinal formulations. In both cases the succeeding generations will be theologically impoverished and susceptible to error.

Further, when we fail to stress the use of Greek and Hebrew as valuable in the pastoral office, we create an eldership of professional academicians. We surrender to the seminaries and universities essential dimensions of our responsibility as elders and overseers of the churches. I am deeply grateful for seminaries and for Bible-believing, God-centered, Christ-exalting scholars. But did God really intend that the people who interpret the Bible most carefully be one step removed from the weekly ministry of the Word in the church?

Acts 20:27 charges *us* with the proclamation of "the whole counsel of God." But we look more and more to the professional academicians for books which fit the jagged pieces of revelation into a unified whole. Acts 20:28 charges *us* to take heed for the flock and guard it from wolves who rise up in the church and speak perverse things. But we look more and more to the linguistic and historical specialists to fight our battles for us in books and articles. We have, by and large, lost the Biblical vision of a pastor as one who is mighty in the Scriptures, apt to teach, competent to confute opponents, and able to penetrate to the unity of the whole counsel of God. Is it healthy or biblical for the church to cultivate an eldership of pastors (weak in the Word) and an eldership of professors (strong in the Word)?

One of the greatest tragedies in the church today is the depreciation of the pastoral office. From seminaries to denominational head-





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quarters, the prevalent mood and theme is managerial, organizational, and psychological. And we think thereby to heighten our professional self-esteem! Hundreds of teachers and leaders put the mastery of the Word first *with their lips* but by their curriculums, conferences, seminars, and personal example, show that it is not foremost.

One glaring example is the nature of the doctor of ministry programs across the country.

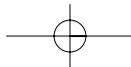
The theory is good: continuing education makes for better ministers. But where can you do a D.Min. in Hebrew language and exegesis? Yet what is more important and more deeply *practical* for the pastoral office than advancing in Greek and Hebrew exegesis by which we mine God's treasures?

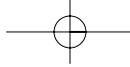
Why then do hundreds of young and middle-aged pastors devote years of effort to everything but the languages when pursuing continuing education? And why do seminaries not offer incentives and degrees to help pastors maintain the most important pastoral skill—exegesis of the original meaning of Scripture?

No matter what we say about the inerrancy of the Bible, our actions reveal our true convictions about its centrality and power.

We need to recover our vision of the pastoral office—which embraces, if nothing else, the passion and power to understand the original revelation of God. We need to pray for the day when pastors can carry their Greek Testaments to conferences and seminars without being greeted with one-liners—the day when the esteem of God's Word and its careful exposition is so high among pastors that those who do not have the skill will humbly bless and encourage those who do and will encourage younger men to get what they never got. Oh, for the day when prayer and grammar will meet each other with great spiritual combustion!

In 1829, twenty-four-year-old George Mueller, famous for his faith and prayer and orphanages, wrote:





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I now studied much, about 12 hours a day, chiefly Hebrew . . . [and] committed portions of the Hebrew Old Testament to memory; and this I did with prayer, often falling on my knees. . . . I looked up to the Lord even whilst turning over the leaves of my Hebrew dictionary.³

In the Methodist Archives of Manchester you can see the two-volume Greek Testament of the evangelist George Whitefield liberally furnished with notes on the interleaved paper. He wrote of his time at Oxford, “Though weak, I often spent two hours in my evening retirements and prayed over my Greek Testament, and Bishop Hall’s most excellent *Contemplations*, every hour that my health would permit.”⁴

Luther said, “If the languages had not made me positive as to the true meaning of the word, I might have still remained a chained monk, engaged in quietly preaching Romish errors in the obscurity of a cloister; the pope, the sophists, and their anti-Christian empire would have remained unshaken.”⁵ In other words, he attributes the breakthrough of the Reformation to the penetrating power of the original languages.

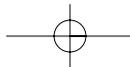
Luther spoke against the backdrop of a thousand years of church darkness without the Word when he said boldly, “It is certain that unless the languages remain, the Gospel must finally perish.”⁶ He asks, “Do you inquire what use there is in learning the languages . . . ? Do you say, ‘We can read the Bible very well in German?’” And he answers:

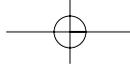
3. George Mueller, *Autobiography of George Mueller* (London: J. Nisbet and Co., 1906), 31.

4. Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 77.

5. W. Carlos Martyn, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (New York: American Tract Society, 1866), 474.

6. Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther’s Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1943), 17.





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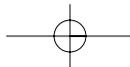
Without languages we could not have received the Gospel. Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit; they are the casket which contains the priceless jewels of antique thought; they are the vessel that holds the wine; and as the gospel says, they are the baskets in which the loaves and fishes are kept to feed the multitude.

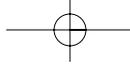
If we neglect the literature we shall eventually lose the gospel. . . . No sooner did men cease to cultivate the languages than Christendom declined, even until it fell under the undisputed dominion of the pope. But no sooner was this torch relighted, than this papal owl fled with a shriek into congenial gloom. . . . In former times the fathers were frequently mistaken, because they were ignorant of the languages and in our days there are some who, like the Waldenses, do not think the languages of any use; but although their doctrine is good, they have often erred in the real meaning of the sacred text; they are without arms against error, and I fear much that their faith will not remain pure.⁷

Brothers, perhaps the vision can grow with your help. It is never too late to learn the languages. There are men who began after retirement! It is not a question of time but of values. John Newton, the author of “Amazing Grace” and former sea captain, was a pastors’ pastor with a winsome, gentle love for people who, nevertheless, thought it important to pursue the languages. He once counseled a younger minister, “The original Scriptures well deserve your pains, and will richly repay them.”⁸ Concerning the early years of studying the languages he says:

7. Martyn, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, 474–75.

8. John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 143.

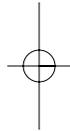
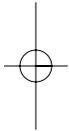




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You must not think that I have attained, or ever aimed at, a critical skill in any of these: . . . In the Hebrew, I can read the Historical Books and Psalms with tolerable ease; but, in the Prophetical and difficult parts, I am frequently obliged to have recourse to lexicons, etc. However, I know so much as to be able, with such helps as are at hand, to judge for myself the meaning of any passage I have occasion to consult.⁹

Continuing education is being pursued everywhere. Let's give heed to the word of Martin Luther: "As dear as the gospel is to us all, let us as hard contend with its language." Bitzer did. And Bitzer was a banker!



9. Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 1, 49–50. For the story of Newton's life and ministry see John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002).

