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Why it is Important to Learn Greek and Hebrew?



by [Dan Wallace](#)

The Protestant Reformation never would have gotten off the ground unless Luther had a Greek New Testament in his hands and in his heart. And the history of Protestant seminaries is such that when schools lose the languages they lose their theological underpinnings. When professors are the only ones who know the text in the original, then they can tell their students anything they want without challenge. The great battle cry of the Reformation was "ad fontes"--back to the sources! And by this they meant the Greek and Hebrew texts.

Luther said:

"In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone--the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek.

Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others. St. Paul declared it to be the peculiar glory and distinction of Hebrew that God's word was given in that language, when he said in Romans 3, "What advantage or profit have those who are circumcised? Much indeed. To begin with, God's speech is entrusted to them." King David too boasts in Psalm 147, "He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation or revealed to them his ordinances." Hence, too, the Hebrew language is called sacred. And St. Paul, in Romans 1, calls it "the holy scriptures," doubtless on account of the holy word of God which is comprehended therein. Similarly, the Greek language too may be called sacred, because it was chosen above all others as the language in which the New Testament was to be written, and because by it other languages too have been sanctified as it spilled over into them like a fountain through the medium of translation."

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And 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 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; and, as the gospel itself points out, they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments."

I would add (as if anyone could add to Luther!) that the sacrifice of learning the languages strikes me as similar to the great missionary endeavor: we learn the language of a culture that is foreign to our own because we love Christ and we love the gospel. In many respects, both endeavors (missionary, biblical language acquisition) are a reversal of the curse on the tower of Babel. Too many people want to go into ministry unprepared for the enemy and naive about what they can offer. They don't know the cost and

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because of this they become casualties.

There is another reason to learn the languages. Although there are many great translations and Bible study tools available today, without a knowledge of the biblical languages one is incapable of determining which interpretation is right. In the cacophony of voices vying for one's attention, he becomes paralyzed at the very point at which he needs to boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

It's a small price to pay for the rewards it brings. I can think of no single greater discipline in the training of a minister of the word than the study of the biblical languages. The tragic thing is that when prospective students accent just the practical aspect of ministry without recognizing the foundational aspects, they end up building a house on a poor foundation. And if the foundation crumbles, so does the house.