

## ***"No, You Don't Have to Know Greek."***

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If any students from my Greek classes see this article, please don't read any further. I don't want you to see how I'm compromising what I've taught for all these years. The truth is that I have been asked to write an article pointing out that a Christian does not have to know Greek in order to understand the New Testament.

Like Balaam of old, though, I will not sell out completely—at first. I insist that it's a good thing to have a thorough knowledge of the Greek New Testament. Probably no work of any extent can ever be translated perfectly into another language. Subtle nuances and implications, emphases of words or of word order, and other aspects of the original text will to some extent be lost. This is true of the New Testament as well. For example; the same Greek word may mean either "wind" or "breath." In John 3:8, an English translation must choose one or the other of these words and must therefore abandon the Greek play on words, "The wind (spirit) blows (breathes) where it wishes...; so is everyone who is born of the spirit (wind)."

Frequently, implications of the Greek could be expressed in English, but the translators are reluctant to use the necessary additional words. They prefer, often rightly so, to leave this to commentaries. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:9 the emphasis is not, as English translations suggest, upon the fact that we are co-workers with God, but upon the centrality of God in the relationship. That, is, "it is God with whom we are co-workers; it is God whose tilled field you are, and it is God whose building you are." 1 John 2:1 and 3:9, moreover, may seem to be a puzzling paradox until one sees from the Greek tenses that 2:1 gives the promise of forgiveness to the Christian who is overcome by temptation and "commits a sin," while 3:9 points out that a Christian cannot be a habitual and practicing sinner.

The person who would know and understand a work as thoroughly as possible should know that work in its original language—Shakespeare in English, Victor Hugo in French, Confucius in Chinese, Cicero in Latin, the Old Testament in Hebrew. In other words, to know the original language is a clear responsibility for the professional person, the authority on a subject. The "layman," the non-professional person, can likewise benefit by knowing the original if he knows it adequately. But if the work is in translation he can assume that the message of the work is essentially available in the translation.

In ancient times, the literature of one language was rarely translated into another language. Indeed, when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek not long before the Christian era, it occupied a place almost unique in ancient literature. In our own day, on the other hand, translation from one language to another is commonplace. Certain aspects of the original are lost in the process (I cannot imagine that the characters in *Pogo*, for example, come out quite the same in Spanish). Yet the fundamental and fair assumption in the contemporary mass employment of translation is that one can adequately understand in one language what was originally said in another.

This understanding, of course, relates to content and not necessarily to form or style. There are enthusiasts for grand opera who insist that this art form should not be translated, but

should be rendered only in the original language. This does not mean that the dying heroine's forty measures of coloratura "I love you" have an essentially different

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meaning in Italian than in English. It simply means that the sound of the words, and the combination of the words with the music, are considered to be preferable in the original language for aesthetic and artistic reasons.

Two contrasting fallacies regarding the Bible can be mentioned here. The first is that "Greek is the most perfect language ever developed," and that Greek was therefore the best possible language for recording God's message of salvation. This is not true. Greek is more exact than the Hebrew of the Old Testament, and in some respects more exact than English and various other languages. On the other hand, there are countless distinctions not found in Greek, for example, such simple and obvious distinctions as those between "we" meaning "including you" and "we" meaning "excluding you," and distinction of genders in "I," "we," and "you." The writings of Eugene A. Nida and other linguists are replete with examples.

According to the other fallacy the Bible is "the most translatable of all books." The Bible is the most translated, and is certainly the book which ought to be translated most. Yet probably stories, histories, news reports, and other literature are more easily translatable than is the Bible with its oriental figures and idioms, and its spiritual concepts which may be completely unknown in another language and culture. Our own language has been greatly enriched and influenced by the language of the Bible.

For the ordinary reader a knowledge of Greek is not a necessity to understand the New Testament, Examine a number of English translations of the New Testament, and notice how nearly the same is the essential message, if not the actual wording, in all. Moreover, the message of the New Testament is on the whole simple and straightforward. . People of all levels of intelligence and education have read the New Testament, in English or in other languages, and sometimes with absolutely no previous knowledge of Christianity and with no human agent to guide or explain. From the New Testament alone, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, they have come to understand the plan of salvation and to find Jesus.

The really difficult portions of the New Testament comprise only a very small part of its text. They are almost always difficult to understand even in the original, passages with which even Biblical scholars and commentators are not in agreement. The statement attributed to Mark Twain is to the point: "It isn't the parts of the Bible I don't understand which trouble me; it is the parts I do understand."

The essential message of the New Testament can be fully understood in translation. Countless examples of important passages could be mentioned: "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:9). "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15).

The message is clear not only in individual passages but also in the continuous record. If one reads the New Testament in his native language or dialect, he may assume that he is reading essentially what the New Testament writers wrote. Earnest Christians are too easily tempted to try to "explain" the Scriptures to new believers or seekers instead of letting them find the message for themselves directly from the pages of the New Testament under the faithful guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Every person has the right to have the New Testament in his own language, the language which "speaks to his heart." It is spiritual cruelty, or worse, to give South American Indians the New Testament only in Spanish instead of making the sacrifice of translating it into their own language. In addition, not all translations are equally good or useful. There is no merit in using a New Testament that is archaic or needlessly different from one's own language. In our own family devotions, we usually use the Revised Standard Version, because we believe our children ought not to have to learn the sixteenth-century English in order to understand the Bible.

The "professional"—the teacher of the Bible, pastor, or Biblical scholar—ought by all means to know the New Testament in its original language, and as thoroughly as possible, so that he may bring out the fine points and sound the depths of the details of God's Word. The layman, on the other hand, the Christian who is earnestly and devoutly concerned to know the Scriptures, may be assured that a good English translation, or a recognized translation in whatever language he may speak, will be an adequate representation of the very Word of God, the uniquely inspired and fully authoritative record of God's revelation, and the sufficient rule both of faith and of practice.

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