



A Plea for Hebrew Study-

Especially for Pastors and Teachers

Introduction. In this short article, John Piper attempts to cajole his fellow pastors to take their duty to study the original languages of the Scriptures seriously. I would qualify Dr. Piper's comments, however, by insisting that the study of Hebrew *must take priority* over the study of the Greek text (though of course both are important).



After all, the Greek text of the New Testament derives its authority and veracity from the Jewish Scriptures, and not the other way around. In other words, *while it's possible that the Hebrew Scriptures are true and the Greek Scriptures are not, it's impossible for the Greek Scriptures to be true if the Hebrew Scriptures are not.* Too many Christian theologians go at this backwards, reading the Greek New Testament as the interpretative filter for the study of the Hebrew text. The hermeneutical primacy of the Hebrew text should be evident to all who study the Scriptures seriously.

Indeed, I would go well beyond Dr. Piper's modest proposal and implore pastors and teachers to study the Hebraic mindset of the Scriptures and to become fluent with Jewish ways of reading and understanding the Scriptures. It is nothing short of folly for the Christian Church to disregard the wealth of insights afforded by the Jewish sages over the millennia. Moreover, the Jewish *moedim* (holidays) are all clearly prophetic and offer tremendous insights regarding redemption, social concerns, and eschatology.

It is imperative to always remember that God chose to reveal Himself to the world as a Jewish man who was born, who lived, and who died within a Jewish culture and context. The great redemptive work of God is virtually inscrutable apart from this awareness, and "forgetting" this truth invariably leads to all sorts of exegetical errors and fallacious theological inferences (e.g., misinterpreting the dialogs between Jesus and the Pharisees).

Even if you have mastered all the verb paradigms and noun endings in your Greek New Testament, even if you are conversant with the various syntactical rules of Koine Greek grammar, etc., etc., *nonetheless* -- without a profound comprehension of the Hebraic mindset that informs its pages, you are likely to misread much of its intent, especially considering the implicit anti-Semitism and "Replacement Theology" that has pervaded Christian thinking over the centuries...





Brothers, Bitzer Was a Banker!

By John Piper, The Standard, June 1983, 18-19.

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

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

Last year Baker Book House reissued a 1969 book of daily Scripture readings in Hebrew and Greek called *Light on the Path*. The readings are quite short, and vocabulary helps are 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, and he was a banker.

A banker! Brothers, must we be admonished by the sheep 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 well is merely 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! (p.10).

Plague of Uncertainty

What happens to a denomination where a useful knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is not cherished and promoted as crucial for the pastoral office? (I don't mean 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. You can't 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 human 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.



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.

Expository preaching, therefore, falls into disuse and disfavor. I say disfavor because we often tend to protect ourselves from difficult tasks by belittling 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 original meaning of the texts) is not much esteemed by the clergy or taught in the seminaries.

Sometimes this is evident in outright denunciation of schoolish exposition. More often there is simply a benign neglect; and the emphasis on valuable 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, but second-hand food will not sustain and deepen our people's faith and holiness.

The Mother of Liberalism

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

Where pastors by and large 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 relativists 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 crucial 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.

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)?

The Pastor Debased

One of the greatest tragedies in the church today is the debasement of the pastoral office. From the seminaries to the denominational headquarters, 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 anything but 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 meanings 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 for God's Word and its careful exposition is so high among pastors that the few who neglect to bring their Testaments will go home to study. The day when prayer and grammar will meet each other with great spiritual combustion.

Never Too Late

In 1829 the 24-year-old George Muller wrote, "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" (Autobiography, p. 31).

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" (Dallimore, Whitefield, I, p. 77).

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.

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!

