

Why Learn the Languages?

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Language is the foundation of all communication and, therefore, stands as the heartbeat of any personal relationship. The lover communicates his thoughts, desires, hopes, and dreams through language to his beloved. Presence can and does communicate, but it is through conversation, through language, that we come to know others most intimately.

Language is also the foundation of all creation. “In the beginning . . . God said.” Everything that lives, moves, and has its being came to exist through language. Even salvation itself is rooted in language. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Faith is begotten from language through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:10). In this way, language is central to everything the church believes and does.

There are, of course, practical reasons for learning the biblical languages. One such reason is that, by learning a foreign language in general, one’s knowledge and understanding of his native language increases. He has stronger vocabulary skills, a better understanding of language itself, and an overall improved literacy. This prompted Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to write: “Those who know nothing of foreign languages, know nothing of their own.”

Learning the biblical languages will also sharpen one’s overall cognitive abilities because learning a foreign language at all involves a variety of learning skills. Thus, Richard Riley, the former U.S. Secretary of Education under the Clinton administration, remarked: “We have strong evidence today that studying a foreign language has a ripple effect, helping to improve student performance in other subjects.” Learning the languages can actually enhance one’s ability to learn in other areas.

But still, why do we learn biblical Greek and Hebrew? What makes these languages so indispensable? Why not simply rely on the various good translations we already have? St. Jerome in the fourth century AD, supposedly said: “*Translatio traditio est.*” The phrase can mean that translation is tradition, that is, that the translation of

texts is rooted in the tradition of the church. On the other hand, it can also mean that translation is treason or betrayal, which conveys the sentiment that translation oftentimes betrays the text because it doesn't quite capture the fullest meaning grammatically, poetically, and literally. Each translation must give one of these categories an emphasis. It must decide whether it will be faithful to the words, to the poetry, or to the grammar. Sometimes they can all be captured, but often one is sacrificed to clarify the others. By learning the biblical languages, you are prepared to investigate how others have translated the biblical text. You are given the tools to see how it all fits together in their most original state.

For Martin Luther, the preservation of the biblical languages was inextricably tied to the preservation of the Gospel itself. "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." Luther here sees the biblical languages not simply as the bearers of the Gospel but as the very abode of the Gospel—the place where it lives, dwells, and resides. So, if you wish to find the Gospel, look to the biblical languages—to the Hebrew and the Greek texts. For this is why we at the seminary still teach the languages, and this is why those who come to the seminary still learn them—because the Gospel is at stake.

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