**A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament***

(1923; text below taken from a 1977 reprint by Baker; no original publication information given; it is now out of print and out of copyright).

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**Chapter 7, "Grammar and Preaching"**

**{77} PAUL *vs.*PETER AND JOHN**

It may provoke a smile on many a preacher's face when there is suggested any connection between grammar and preaching. Moody broke grammar and broke hearts, we are reminded. That is true, but he did not break hearts because he broke grammar. Plenty of preachers have broken grammar who have never broken hearts. Power in the preacher rests at bottom on the Master, the message, and the man. The power of Christ is mediated through the Holy Spirit and is at the service of all men. The message of the gospel is open to all who can apprehend it. We gain fresh glimpses of the word of life, but in essence it remains the same. The one variable quantity in preaching is the man's personality. This is itself complex and includes what we call genius and magnetism for lack of more precise terms, for there is a subtle power in a real man that cannot be defined. God uses men of differing gifts. "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit" (I Cor. 12:4). But we must not confuse cause and effect. The Spirit of God blesses the work of different men, not because they are ignorant of Greek or English, but although they are ignorant. We can thank God for this fact.

{78} Knowledge ought to be power and ignorance is weakness. Knowledge may minister to pride and so become an element of weakness (I Cor. 8:1). God has always been able to take the weak things of the world and confound the strong (I Cor. 1:7). But we must not forget that Paul himself was a man of the schools with the best technical training of his day at Tarsus and Jerusalem. The chosen vessel of Christ for the conquest of the Roman Empire was the ablest mind of the age with Hebrew, Greek and Roman culture, and not the fishermen of Galilee, who had courage, but lacked the special scholastic equipment (Acts 4:13) that Paul possessed. Paul was a linguist, at home in Aramaic (Hebrew), in Greek, and probably in Latin, and did not need an interpreter like Mark for Peter. Even his oratorical impetuosity and intensity of feeling in Second Corinthians did not betray him into the grammatical crudities seen in the Apocalypse. Paul wrote and spoke the vernacular Koiné¬ but as an educated man in touch with the intellectual life of his time. I am not pleading that Paul was a professional stylist, as Blass has done. I do not believe that Paul consciously imitated the rhetoricians of Rhodes or the grammarians of Alexandria. He was not artificial, but real, in his learning. However, Paul knew the power in a word and in a phrase and was able to write I Cor. 13, the noblest prose poem on love in all literature. Man of genius that he was, he was also a man of the schools, as Peter and John were not. He became the great preacher, missionary, theologian of the ages. Linguistic learning is not all **{79}**that the preacher requires, but the supreme preacher like Paul does need it. Instance Alexander Maclaren as a modern example of the scholarly preacher.

**NOT PLEADING A LOST CAUSE**

There is no denying that the drift to-day in educational circles is heavily against the study of the classics. This undoubted fact by no means proves that the modern minister acts wisely when he ignores or neglects the Greek New Testament. There are fashions and fads in education as in other things. It remains to be seen whether the new utilitarian education will equal in value the old cultural standards and ideals. There may be as much mental drill and gymnastics in the study of scientific details and sociological theories as in the study of the language and of the literature of the ancients. The modern topics demand a place, but the old term "humanities" for the classics is not without significance. They have had a refining and a humanzing influence beyond a doubt. In Dean West's volume, *The Value of the Classics*, the most striking argument is that made by business men, captains of industry, who plead for the retention of Latin and Greek in the college curriculum on the ground that classical students make better leaders in business life than those without the humanities. And ex-President Woodrow Wilson is quoted in a recent magazine as saying that, if he had his college course to go over, he would give more attention to the study of Greek. In his case he was not thinking of Greek is a pastime, as when Gladstone would write Greek **{80}**hymns to relieve the tedium of dull speeches in the House of Commons, but rather as a means of sharpening his intellect for problems of statecraft. The best outcome of educational discipline is not the storing of facts, useful as that may be, but the training of one's powers for instant service on demand. For this result the study of the Greek language claims preeminence. It is true that in the United States the high schools now seldom offer Greek. Here in Louisville my own son could not study Greek at the Male High School because it was not offered, though he did take it up at college. Even Oxford University, with the approval of Professor Gilbert Murray, has at last dropped compulsory Greek. One can now, alas, secure his B.A. in some colleges without either Greek or Latin. But if the study of the dead languages become itself dead in our colleges, the problem is still not settled for the minister of the gospel.

**THE MINISTER A SPECIALIST**

The physician has to study chemistry and physiology. Other men may or may not. The lawyer has to study his Blackstone. The preacher has to know his Bible or the people suffer the consequences of his ignorance, as in the case of the physician or the lawyer. The extreme in each instance is the quack who plays on the ignorance and prejudice of the public. It is true that the minister can learn a deal about his Bible from the English versions, many of which are most excellent. There is no excuse for any one to be ignorant of his English Bible, which **{81}**has laid the foundation of our modern civilization. But the preacher lays claim to a superior knowledge of the New Testament. He undertakes to expound the message of the gospel to people who have access to the English translations, and many of these are his equal in general culture and mental ability. If he is to maintain the interest of such hearers, he must give them what they do not easily get by their own reading. It is not too much to say that, however loyal laymen are to the pulpit, they yet consider it a piece of presumption for the preacher to take up the time of the audience with ill-digested thoughts. The beaten oil is none too good for any audience. Now the preacher can never get away from the fact that the New Testament was written in the Greek language of the first century A.D. The only way for him to become an expert in this literature of which he is an exponent by profession is to know it in the original. The difficulty of the problem is not to be considered. One will not tolerate such an excuse in a lawyer or in a physician. The only alternative is to take what other scholars say without the power of forming an individual judgment. Some lawyers and physicians have to do this, but they are not the men that one wishes in a crisis. The preacher lets himself off too easily and asserts that he is too busy to learn his Greek Testament. In a word, he is too busy about other things to do the main thing, to learn his message and to tell it. Fairbairn says: "No man can be a theologian who is not a philologian. He who is no grammarian is no divine." Melanchthon held that grammar was **{82}**the true theology, and Mathias Pasor argued that grammar was the key to all the sciences. Carlyle, when asked what he thought about the neglect of Hebrew and Greek by ministers, blurted out: "What! Your priests not know their sacred books!"

**THE SHOP AND THE SERMON**

One is familiar with the retort that the preacher must not be a doctor dry-as-dust. It is assumed that technicalities sap the life out of one's spirit. The famous German professor who lamented on his death-bed that he had not devoted his whole time to the dative case is flaunted before one's eyes. So the preacher proudly reminds us of the "Grammarian's Funeral," and scouts "Hoti's business" and all the other dead stuff while he preaches live sermons to moving audiences. "Grammar to the wolves," he cries. No gradgrind business for him! He will be a preacher and not a scholar. He will leave scholarship to the men who cannot preach. Such a preacher seems to rejoice in the fact that he does not look into his Greek grammar, lexicon' or Testament, and not often into his commentary.

It is not argued that the preacher should bring the dust and debris of the shop into the pulpit, only that the workman shall have a workshop. There is music in the ring of the hammer on the anvil when the sparks fly under the blows. Certainly the iron has to be struck while it is hot. No parade or display of learning is called for. Results and not processes suit the pulpit. The non-theological audience can usually tell when the sermon is the result **{83}**of real work. The glow is still in the product. There are men who study grammar and never learn how to read a language, men who cannot see the wood for the trees, who see in language only skeletons and paradigms, who find no life in words, who use language to conceal thought, who have only the lumber of learning. These men create the impression that scholarship is dry. Ignorance is the driest thing on earth. One does not become juicy by becoming ignorant. That is a matter of temperament. The mind that is awake and alert leaps with joy with every scholarly discovery that throws light on the thought of a passage.

**THE PREACHER A LINGUIST**

He is so by profession and he is debarred from unconcern about grammar. He is a student of language in the nature of the case. Just as the lawyer must know how to interpret phrases to make a will effective and to keep one from losing money, so the preacher must be able to expound the will of God to men that they may not lose their souls. The preacher only reveals his incompetence when he disclaims being a student of language. He uses the English language and he must be understood in that tongue. Often he is not understood because he preaches in the language of the books while the audience thinks in the language of the street. The homely language of Spurgeon went home to men's business and bosoms. Spurgeon was deficient in his college training, but he made himself at home in Greek and Hebrew that he might speak with {**84}**first-hand knowledge. Language is man's greatest discovery, or invention--or whatever it may be called. Nothing else save the gospel of Christ has played so great a role in human history as the use of language. It is folly for the preacher to affect a superiority to linguistic knowledge. There is no other key to literature save the knowledge of letters. Grammar is simply the history of human speech. It is the record of human thinking. The first thing to do with any passage in a book is to read it, to construe it. This has to be done by the elements of speech. One picks up a certain amount of English without much technical study. He hears English of a certain type spoken and he learns to speak that dialect. But he has to learn his dialect whether he gets it out of books or by hearing of the ear. The very preacher who glories in his own eloquence condemns his lack of interest in the Greek New Testament. He is a linguist by profession.

**EXACTNESS IN EXEGESIS**

It is pitiful to think how the Bible has been abused by men who did not know how to interpret it. Many a heresy has come from a misinterpretation of Scripture. The worst heresy is a half truth. The literalist carries it to one extreme and the speculative theorist to the other. The only cure for wrong criticism is right criticism. The people find themselves at the mercy of every new "ism" because they are themselves so poorly instructed in the Bible. Sometimes the preacher does not know how to expose the subtle error before it is too late. There {85} is in some quarters a prejudice against all scholarship because of the vagaries of some men who have not been able to be loyal to Christ and open to new learning. To a little man a little learning is a dangerous thing, Broadus used to say. Obscurantism is no answer to radicalism. The man who loves the light is not afraid of the light. No amount of toil is too great for the lover of the truth of God. The true preacher wishes to plant his feet on the solid rock of real learning. Grammatical exegesis precedes the historical and the spiritual. A preacher with college and seminary training can hardly keep his self-respect if he does not have upon his study table a Greek Testament, a Greek lexicon, a Greek grammar, and several modern commentaries on the book that he is studying. He will have many other books, of course, but these are prime necessities if he plans to do serious work upon a page in the New Testament before he preaches upon it. Only thus can he be sure of his ground. Only thus can he be relatively as original as he ought to be. The contact of his mind with the Greek Testament is a fresh experience of first importance. The mind of the Spirit literally opens to his mind in a new and wonderful fashion.

**THE PREACHER A PSYCHOLOGIST**

The psychology of preaching is attracting fresh attention these days. Language itself has its psychological side. Grammar cannot be fully understood until one considers language as the expression of the thought in the mind. The thought shapes the **{86}**mold into which it is cast. The very inflections and cases have a meaning. The Greek prepositions are instinct with life. There are pictures in Greek prepositions and sermons in Greek roots that leap out at one. The preacher has to know the mood of the audience as well as the mind of the spirit. He mediates the written word by the living word to the hearer. He must know his own heart and keep it ready for this spiritual transmutation. If a man is a wizard in words he will win hearts to attention and to service. Those men spoke like Jesus in depth of thought, simplicity, charm, and power of expression. Men, even rough soldiers, hung on his words, listening. His enemies gathered round him to seize him, but their hands were palsied as they listened to his speech. The gift to pick the right word and drive it like a nail in a sure place is what makes a speaker effective. Hence the exact and prolonged study of language is of inestimable value for the preacher. Instead of scorning grammar he should devour it with avidity.

**A CLOSED GREEK TESTAMENT**

Imagine yourself with a Greek Testament, priceless treasure of the ages, and yet with no lexicon and no grammar and no teacher. Imagine yourself without even a copy of the Greek Testament of your own, and yet with a deathless passion to read for yourself this book that is the greatest not only in the Greek language but in all the world! Imagine yourself too poor to buy a copy of the Greek Testament and unable to go to school because you had to make **{87}**your living as a shepherd boy on the hills of Scotland. Surely one would be excused for not learning to read the Greek Testament in such a case. One day in 1738 a youth of sixteen, John Brown, walked twenty-four miles to St. Andrews, and in his rough homespun clothes startled the shopman by asking him if he had a Greek Testament for sale. He took it eagerly and read a passage in the gospel of John, and proudly walked back to his sheep with the most precious book in all the world in his hand. This lad had borrowed a Greek Testament from a minister and at odd hours had made a grammar for himself slowly, like a new Rosetta Stone, in order that he might unlock this treasure for himself. One of the dearest treasures at St. Andrews today is John Brown's Greek Testament. Grammar, self-made grammar, unlocked the closed Greek Testament for him and opened the door to the treasure of the ages. Today, thousands of ministers who have had Greek courses in college and seminary and who have Greek grammars and lexicons on their desks lack the energy to hold themselves to a steady course of daily reading in the Greek Testament till it becomes one of the delights of life. One could wish that the picture of John Brown, the shepherd lad, making his own grammar, might rise to put us all to shame and send us back to grammar and lexicon and Testament. For in the Greek Testament Jesus speaks to us with almost more of reality, Erasmus says, than if he stood by our side and we heard his audible voice. He spoke both in Greek and in Aramaic. Certainly, we have some of his *ipsissima verba*, and his very words are life.