

Editor's note: Although the Professor's Soapbox has been up till now restricted to my own essays, when I came across this one I thought I should make an exception. Mike is one of my students, a former intern, and a good friend. His essay appeared in *The Threshing Floor*, a student publication of Dallas Seminary, on April 10, 1997 (the day I first learned that he had even worked on such a topic). What he has to say here could have been said by any number of students studying at one of the better seminaries in America. I say "better" because the worse seminaries have already capitulated: Greek and Hebrew are no longer part of their required curriculum. If there is to be another Reformation-- and I think one is sorely needed--knowledge of and hunger for the biblical languages will again form a vital component in its formation. Rather than a reaction to the excesses of Roman Catholicism, the next Reformation will be a reaction, in part, to the anti-intellectualism that has infested and corrupted evangelical theology, evangelical ministry, and evangelical life.

The few footnotes are my own addition. --Daniel B. Wallace

The Place of Greek and Hebrew in a Minister's Education

by
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There is a growing tension upon the DTS campus that is affecting the whole direction of our school. It is not evident when you first arrive, but after being here for a few years the influence becomes unmistakable. It noticeably affects the attitudes of various students. The tension has even influenced whole departments and thus DTS as a whole. It is the tension between content and practice as it relates to the original languages of the Bible.

Traditionally, ministerial training in the United States was very rigorous academically. Think back to great men like Jonathan Edwards. Although obviously a highly gifted man, he was not very far from the norm. Ministers regularly knew Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and they were trained to use their minds in the ministry as much as their hearts. However, with the advent of the second Great Awakening, the emphasis upon ministerial training began to change. The educational changes in the secular world also affected the Christian scene as traditional theories of education gave way to ideas that emphasized process and practice instead of content. Through these forces a subtle anti-intellectual emphasis entered Christianity. These changes show up today in the tension which is currently present on campus. Ministerial students everywhere as a rule no longer seek to learn the Biblical languages to the best of their ability. Instead they want to cut to the chase and learn how to do what they want to do with very little knowledge as a basis. First-hand knowledge of the Biblical text is left behind for the sake of practicality. Nowhere is this more evident at DTS than in the current tension. All Th.M. students have to take a minimum of five semesters of Greek and four semesters of Hebrew. Let's be honest: this is hard stuff. It is not long before students are thinking to themselves that this really isn't necessary. They devalue the content of the Greek or Hebrew language because it does not quickly or easily lead to a great sermon or flashy lesson. This conflict has even affected the required courses in various departments. In the past students had to take six semesters of Greek and five of Hebrew. The extra semesters got cut when alumni surveys stated that those extra semesters were unnecessary because no one used it anyway.¹ So even on the administrative level content has been sacrificed for practice, the "what" for the "how."

Is the current trend toward an emphasis of practice over and against content good, especially when

the content is the language in which the Bible was written? I would offer three arguments that say no: one practical, one ethical, and one theological. First, believe it or not, focusing primarily on practice when it comes to preaching, teaching, and ministering the scriptures is not good. It is recognized in almost every field of study that solid theory must undergird any type of practice. If the theory and content that is supposed to back up a discipline is not there, eventually the one that practices that discipline will fail. When a minister decides that the original languages are not important enough to study, master, and use regularly, he is cutting himself off from the best source of content and theory that he can ever get. These are the primary documents of Christian faith and practice. If the original languages are ignored, the minister destines himself for a ministry of second-hand knowledge. And that certainly is not practical. Second, as a person who professes to believe the truth of God's word, a minister should do all he can to understand it and apprehend it. The last thing the world needs is ministers who simply preach and teach what they think they are supposed to preach and teach without knowing the accurate truth of the scripture. A minister compromises his integrity when he proclaims or teaches something he doesn't know or understand to the best of his ability. The original languages are the primary tool by which a minister can search the scriptures and learn their truth as accurately as possible. English Bible may help us understand with 95% accuracy the truth of God's word, but as ministers of integrity we should strive for 100% accuracy. Greek and Hebrew provide the key for that.² Third, when God made us as individuals, he made every part of us to love and serve him. We should love him with our hearts. We should love him with our strength. We should also love him with our minds. Loving God with our minds requires the full exercise of our minds in understanding and comprehending and probing the things of God. Since the Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew, the full exercise of our minds in his service requires the use of those languages. Most of the tension is found at this level. Students are unwilling to do the hard work necessary to use their minds as fully as they can. Yes, languages are very hard work. They demand much time and effort. However, the God who made us, loves us, and brought his Word to us deserves no less.

My plea to the students, faculty, and administration of DTS is to not sacrifice the content of our study on the altar of practicality. As ministers and people who love God with our hearts, souls, minds, and collective strength, let us be balanced in all that we do. Let us seek God's truth through the original languages with every fiber of our being so our practice will be as effective as it can possibly be. Let us accomplish the task before us with every available tool, including Greek and Hebrew, so we will be ministers of complete integrity. Let us devote ourselves to the study of the scriptures with the languages so we will honor the God who brought them to us.

Footnotes

¹ My reading of the alumni responses is a bit different. Admittedly, there was substantial attrition in the use of the biblical languages (especially Hebrew) among many graduates. This was implicitly viewed as a mandate to cut back on Greek and Hebrew. However, a different read on the data is more probable: there needs to be more Greek and Hebrew so that the graduates would feel comfortable in using these languages in their expository ministries.

² I would personally set the percentages lower--for both English and the biblical languages. Even Greek and Hebrew cannot give us 100% accuracy. However, what the knowledge of the biblical languages can give is a more informed set of multiple choice options. Though this may be disillusioning to some, the alternative is uninformed ignorance.

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