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# The Minister & His Greek Testament

by J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)



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The widening breach between the minister and his Greek Testament may be traced to two principal causes. The modern minister objects to his Greek New Testament or is indifferent to it, first, because he is becoming less interested in his Greek, and second, because he is becoming less interested in his New Testament.

The former objection is merely one manifestation of the wellknown tendency in modern education to reject the "humanities" in favor of studies that are more, obviously useful, a tendency which is fully as pronounced in the universities as it is in the theological seminaries. In many colleges, the study of Greek is almost abandoned; there is little wonder, therefore, that the graduates are not prepared to use their Greek Testament. Plato and Homer are being neglected as much as Paul. A refutation of the arguments by which this tendency is justified would exceed the limits of the present article. This much, however, may be said—the refutation must recognize the opposing principles that are involved. The advocate of the study of Greek and Latin should never attempt to plead his cause merely before the bar of "efficiency." Something, no doubt, might be said even there; it might possibly be contended that an acquaintance with Greek and Latin is really necessary to acquaintance with the mother tongue, which is obviously so important for getting on in the world. But why not go straight to the root of the matter? The real trouble with the modern exaltation of "practical" studies at the expense of the humanities is that it is based upon a vicious conception of the whole purpose of education. The modern conception of the purpose of education is that education is merely intended to enable a man to live, but not to give him those things in life that make life worth living.

In the second place, the modern minister is neglecting his Greek New Testament because

he is becoming less interested in his New Testament in general—less interested in his Bible. The Bible used to be regarded as providing the very sum and substance of preaching; a preacher was true to his calling only as he succeeded in reproducing and applying the message of the Word of God. Very different is the modern attitude. The Bible is not discarded, to be sure, but it is treated only as one of the sources, even though it be still the chief source, of the preacher's inspiration. Moreover, a host of duties other than preaching and other than interpretation of the Word of God are required of the modern pastor. He must organize clubs and social activities of a dozen different kinds; he must assume a prominent part in movements for civic reform. In short, the minister has ceased to be a specialist. The change appears, for example, in the attitude of theological students, even of a devout and reverent type. One outstanding difficulty in theological education today is that the students persist in regarding themselves, not as specialists, but as laymen. Critical questions about the Bible they regard as the property of men who are training themselves for theological professorships or the like, while the ordinary minister, in their judgment, may content himself with the most superficial layman's acquaintance with the problems involved. The minister is thus no longer a specialist in the Bible, but has become merely a sort of general manager of the affairs of a congregation.

The bearing of this modern attitude toward the study of the Bible upon the study of the Greek Testament is sufficiently obvious. If the time allotted to strictly biblical studies must be diminished, obviously the most laborious part of those studies, the part least productive of immediate results, will be the first to go. And that part, for students insufficiently prepared, is the study of Greek and Hebrew. If, on the other hand, the minister is a specialist—if the one thing that he owes his congregation above all others is a thorough acquaintance, scientific as well as experimental, with the Bible—then the importance of Greek requires no elaborate argument. In the first place, almost all the most important books about the New Testament presuppose a knowledge of Greek: the student who is without at least a smattering of Greek is obliged to use for the most part works that are written, figuratively speaking, in words of one syllable. In the second place, such a student cannot deal with all the problems at first hand, but in a thousand important questions is at the mercy of the judgment of others. In the third place, our student without Greek cannot acquaint himself with the form as well as the content of the New Testament books. The New Testament, as well as all other literature, loses something in translation. But why argue the, question? Every scientific student of the New Testament without exception knows that Greek is really necessary to his work: the real question is only as to whether our ministry should be manned by scientific students.

That question is merely one phase of the most important question that is now facing the Church—the question of Christianity and culture. The modern world is dominated by a type of thought that is either contradictory to Christianity or else out of vital connection with Christianity. This type of thought applied directly to the Bible has resulted in the naturalistic view of the biblical history—the view that rejects the supernatural not merely in the Old Testament narratives, but also in the-Gospel account of the life of Jesus. According to such a view the Bible is valuable because it teaches certain ideas about God

and His relations to the world, because it teaches by symbols and example, as well as by formal presentation, certain great principles that have always been true. According to the supernaturalistic view, on the other hand, the Bible contains not merely a presentation of something that was always true, but also a record of something that happened—namely, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. If this latter view be correct, then the Bible is unique; it is not merely one of the sources of the preacher's inspiration, but the very sum and substance of what he has to say. But, if so, then whatever else the preacher need not know, he must know the Bible; he must know it at first hand, and be able to interpret and defend it. Especially while doubt remains in the world as to the great central question, who more properly than the ministers should engage in the work of resolving such doubt—by intellectual instruction even more than by argument? The work cannot be turned over to a few professors whose work is of interest only to themselves, but must be undertaken energetically by spiritually minded men throughout the Church. But obviously, this work can be undertaken to best advantage only by those who have an important prerequisite for the study in a knowledge of the original languages upon which a large part of the discussion is based.

If, however, it is important for the minister to use his Greek Testament, what is to be done about it? Suppose early opportunities were neglected, or what was once required has been lost in the busy rush of ministerial life. Here we may come forward boldly with a message of hope. The Greek of the New Testament is by no means a difficult language; a very fair knowledge of it may be acquired by any minister of average intelligence. And to that end two homely directions may be given. In the first place, the Greek should be read aloud. A language cannot easily be learned by the eye alone. The sound as well as the sense of familiar passages should be impressed upon the mind, until sound and sense are connected without the medium of translation. Let this result not be hastened; it will come of itself if the simple direction be followed. In the second place, the Greek Testament should be read every day without fail, Sabbaths included. Ten minutes a day is of vastly more value than seventy minutes once a week. If the student keeps a "morning watch," the Greek Testament ought to be given a place in it; at any rate, the Greek Testament should be read devotionally. The Greek Testament is a sacred book, and should be treated as such. If it is treated so, the reading of it will soon become a source of joy and power.

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