It's all Greek (and Hebrew) to me

Mary H. Schertz

I was a reluctant Hebrew and Greek student. One of the wretched secrets of my past—and when it gets out, a source of amusement for my students—is the story of my unsuccessful attempt to be excused from the biblical language requirement of my seminary.

I came across that long-ago petition when I was making my usual New Year's Day pass through long-buried files. What a jumble of emotions it reveals—with earnestness sufficient to keep a person humble to her dying day! One piece of my reluctance, painfully clear in that petition, was an ambivalence about studying for the ministry in a denomination that did not at that point welcome women into the ministry. Why do something as *hard* as studying Hebrew and Greek (such was the prevailing wisdom among my fellow students), when my chances of getting a job at the end were so dismal? Another element of reluctance had to do with elitism that I connected with the biblical languages and did not want to perpetuate in the ministry. Another piece was simple arrogance, a belief that I knew better than the seminary faculty did what I needed to learn in order to become an effective minister. Certainly, much of my disinclination had to do with my own lack of confidence, a fear of failure that my students have reflected back to me many times over as I now teach biblical Greek.

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Fortunately, a wise—albeit blunt—dean told me that because I was not yet forty, the age at which seminarians are evidently old enough to know their own minds, the petition was denied. I say "fortunately," because learning Hebrew and Greek changed my

life. Hebrew and Greek saved the Bible for me. The text that I thought I knew became strange. The text that I perceived as tame became wonderfully unpredictable. The text that church authorities had occasionally used to deny my call became the wellspring that nurtured me. I have many reasons to be grateful for my seminary education. But nothing quickened my spirit the way biblical exegesis in the text's own languages did. These studies empowered me as an interpreter, piqued a lifelong passion for the biblical text, and were the context for an epiphany that forever bonded me with the love of God. But that's another story.

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If my days as a (converted) seminary student were a lively dance with the biblical languages, my days as a Greek teacher have included more than a few vocational injuries. At times, I have felt that the most sensitive topic at the seminary in which I have been teaching for seventeen years has not been, as one might think, homosexuality or war and peace or the church dividing and uniting. Instead questions about the role of biblical languages in interpretation, about how they function in the hermeneutical community of the congregation, have been more fraught and more tense than I had imagined they could be when I signed up for this life.

Certainly the biblical languages can be misused. Hebrew or Greek thrown into a sermon merely to impress the congregation with the pastor's learnedness is not a good use of knowledge. Nor is resorting to "the original languages" to trump another person in a heated argument. Any kind of skill or expertise can be used badly, and the biblical languages are no exception. That is the one point of my ill-conceived petition that had some validity.

But I think that the resistance to the biblical languages that we find in ourselves as church leaders—seminarians, pastors, and seminary teachers—has deeper causes and more pernicious effects on the hermeneutical community than such occasional misuses are likely to have. In the North American (U.S. and Canadian) Anabaptist context, our denominational suspicion of education, and our dominant cultural assumption that we can function in English in any situation, have together had a devastating effect on

our hermeneutical community.[1] Too much of the time, I experience teaching Greek as an act against the grain not only of our culture but also of our church life.

But it is for the health of our beloved hermeneutical community that my Bible department colleagues and I continue to teach biblical languages against the stream. I teach Greek because I believe that there is really no other way to keep the Bible alive for our children and our children's children. What I want my students to acquire is nothing less than intercultural sensitivity, respect for the other, their own identity and voice as interpreters, their place in the hermeneutical community, and their own relationship to God. The biblical languages are not icing on the cake for a privileged few but are essential for healthy pastoral formation and sustained ministry in the church.

Fostering intercultural awareness

The simplest and most important truth I want my biblical language students to grasp is that they cannot make an exact correlation in meaning from one language to another. That reality is so obvious as to need little mention to those who have learned to use a language other than their native one, whether or not they are literate. But it is a concept that often seems to escape those—even sophisticated, highly educated people—who have not learned another language.

I once took part in a conversation in which all the participants had advanced degrees. We were talking about the translation of a contemporary church document into another language. One person remarked about the excellence of the translation but went on to describe some of the theological nuances the document took on in the new language context. Another person sputtered a bit and suggested that somebody should correct the translation. The conversation ground to a halt. No one quite had the courage to express astonishment that a sophisticated thinker could fail to understand that any translation is an interpretation—that the language context in which an idea is expressed shapes the idea.

The meaning of a text may be reasonably represented in a translation. We have excellent versions of the biblical text, and we rely on them in every congregation every Sunday morning. But the wonder and play of a language—its puns, rhymes, alliteration, and

so much more—are only available to us in the original language. The features of a text, the patterns that give it shape and meaning, are only visible in the original. The plain-sense, close reading of the text on which a biblical community relies is dependent on real encounter with the language on its own terms.

Countering the tendency to domesticate the text

The second understanding I covet for my students is that despite our sense that we know it pretty well, the Bible is a foreign book. There are strange and terrible texts in the Bible as well as strange and wonderful ones. But it is not the texts that make us furrow our brows or step back in silent awe that are most in danger when we do not know, care about, or attend to the text's own language. Rather it is the most familiar passages that are in danger precisely because they are so familiar that we think we really do understand them and know exactly what they mean.

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I usually introduce the Lord's Prayer in Greek early in the first semester of study. The exercise is partly pedagogical—students can measure their progress as their ability grows. But the exercise is mostly spiritual. These, the most familiar words in Christian worship, ring strange in Greek. As Hans Dieter Betz notes, they sound the desperate notes of theodicy—"God, start being God; start being who you say you are"[2]—that is a distant experience for most North Americans. As my students stumble slowly through their Greek words, and I supply the most dogged, wooden, awkwardly literal English renditions, we hear first-century prayer more directly than any description could permit. The prayer we thought we knew, the prayer some of us pray every day, the prayer we pray without thinking more times than not, confronts us anew with the Jewish mind of Jesus in his most intimate moments with his disciples.

As Westerners, members of the dominant culture, we have a special obligation to be aware of our own limited perspective. The biblical text has suffered from our unexamined assumptions in much the same way that other peoples and cultures have suffered.

Our prejudices erupt as disturbingly in our studies as in our interactions with others. But the gift of the text is that it remains the text. It remains other. No matter how badly misinterpreted and misused it is in one situation, it remains what it is in all its wonderful strangeness and is available for rediscovery and new delight. But part of letting the text be its "other" self, part of letting the text encounter us anew, is knowing—with head and heart—that it belongs not to us but to the ages. Hebrew and Greek are part of that knowing.

Finding one's voice as an interpreter

The third—and most personal—understanding that I want my students to acquire in their study of the biblical languages is that they have their own interpretive voice, and they are responsible, with appropriate humility and appropriate confidence, to contribute their insights for the common good of the hermeneutical community.

What I hesitate to say, but what I think is true, is that an acquisition of the biblical languages is essential to a pastor's authority in preaching the word of God. I hesitate to make this assertion because I risk hurting or angering pastors who have never studied these languages. I hesitate because others will surely argue that the pastor's heart for the congregation, the pastor's relationship with God, the pastor's ability to discern the Spirit, are the true necessities. I am by no means saying that these pastoral and spiritual gifts are unnecessary. Of course pastors must understand and care about the congregational context in which they are preaching. Of course pastors must listen to God and seek the leading of the Spirit.

But the preacher is not only the spiritual and pastoral leader of the congregation. The preacher is also a minister of the word—the word from God, the word that comes through the biblical text. As pastors, we have a dual responsibility—for the people we hold in our hearts and for the text we hold in our hands. Despite the popularity of topical sermons, and despite some preachers' propensity to fill the pulpit with long quotations from various spiritual books, the biblical text is still the best test we have of whether a word is from God. The biblical text is still the most lively, fullest expression we have from the heart of God.

The confidence and humility essential for authentic interpretation of God's word are acquired as a unit. The two grow together and develop in conjunction with language experience. These qualities are not so much the result of a vast store of knowledge. Extensive vocabulary, lightening-fast parsing ability, and perfect exam scores have never been my concern. (I am hoping, of course, that my students do not read this article!) What I am looking for and working for in my students is the confidence and humility that grow from simply reading text—week after week. There are no shortcuts; there are no substitutes. How do we understand the distance between the text and its translations? How do we learn what differences matter and what differences do not? How do we figure out which of conflicting interpretations is the better reading? How do we distinguish between important questions and merely interesting ones? How do we slow down our reading enough to really hear?

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Students gain confidence and humility as they give texts their best prayerful, disciplined attention. They learn how to give the text an authentic hearing in the congregation. They learn to find sustenance in the words that they are reading and from which they discern and then preach the word of God. It is that wisdom, composed equally of confidence and humility, that is the foundation for a pastor's ability to interpret the biblical text with, in, and for the congregation. It is that wisdom that grounds a pastor's excellence in the ministry of the word. It is that wisdom that is acquired through language experience.

Finding the church's unity in hearing

Why does this excellence matter? Some students find this emphasis on finding one's own interpretive voice disconcerting. It smacks of individualism, some say. It threatens notions of objective biblical interpretation. It moves too far toward postmodernism and endless subjectivity. But I would contend that those fears themselves may be more individualistic and postmodern than is the actual search for one's own voice in biblical interpretation.

Perhaps we have misunderstood the locus of the unity of the church. We tend to interpret the injunction to be of one heart and mind to mean that we speak with one voice. But, as one of my students pointed out recently, we have not adequately attended to the first word of the Shema: "*Hear*, O, Israel, the Lord is our God" (Deut 6:4).[3] If our unity is not a speaking unity but a hearing unity, then our oneness lies in listening.

We listen to the same God; we listen to the same texts; we listen with the same attitudes of allegiance and devotion. No, we do not all interpret what we hear in the same way—but that matters less, because the burden of unity lies not in our interpretation but in our attention. In fact, uniformity in interpretation is not desirable—for that would shift our concern, as has happened far too often in the history of the church, from the God who speaks through the texts to our own understanding of the God who speaks through the texts. For our concern to be fully rooted in the God behind the text, each voice matters. Furthermore, the honesty and integrity of each voice matters.

Promoting honesty in the church

The issue of integrity is at the heart of the role both of the biblical languages and of the Bible teacher in the congregation. Truly we all read and live by the Bible. Every member of every congregation has a voice in discerning what scripture means for our lives today. But just as we need folks who understand the issues in any discernment process, we also need folks who can keep us honest with the biblical text.

Congregations regularly do discernment about building and space issues. Rarely do those plans and programs succeed if no one in the congregation keeps the group honest about the costs. In all aspects of our congregational and individual lives we rely on professional knowledge. That reliance does not mean that we expect the contractors in our congregations to make our building decisions or the physicians among us to tell us how to pray and provide pastoral care for someone with a life-threatening disease. But we do rely on information that has integrity in both cases. We do seek those who have studied in these fields and have a reputation for competence and trustworthiness. Why would we not also rely on those who have studied scripture to keep us honest as we

struggle to discern what God is saying to us about how we are to live our lives?

Studying the Bible as prayer

Finally, I care about the biblical languages and how they form pastors because I cannot distinguish between reading Greek and Hebrew and praying. If prayer is coming before God with confidence and humility and meeting God in that quiet confluence of body and spirit, then studying the Bible is also prayer. Like prayer, such study requires commitment and practice. Like prayer, study takes time apart; it requires saying No to the excessive busyness of our lives. As is true of the fruits of prayer, the results Bible study yields are not facile or predictable. We can no more control the direction study takes us than we can direct any other kind of epiphany. The pages of text, and our openness to them, constitute one of those "thin places" the Celtic mystics were alert to, places where heaven and earth are scarcely separated. For it is those foreign squiggles scrawled in strange and dusty places so many years ago that proclaim to us today nothing less than the love of God. And that is the very best reason to teach Greek against the grain.

Notes

[1] To be sure, I am speaking from a US perspective. Those Canadian students who know German or French are often more eager to learn Greek and Hebrew. But for the most part, the assumption that we can function in one language applies on both sides of the border.
[2] Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7, 27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 378.
[3] David Elkins, "Hear, O Israel: Christian Education's Greatest Commandments" (student paper, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2004).

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