

Preaching and the Biblical Languages: Garnish or Entrée? *Mellon* or *Mantra*?

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1. The Importance of Preaching in the Local Church

In its biblical portrait, *the* central focus in pastoral ministry is the public proclamation of the Word of God—preaching. There are certainly other aspects of pastoral ministry, both in the NT model and in the traditional (and in the faddish) models of ministry that have developed in the church. I don't intend to imply that ministry is only about preaching. But it can be no less than preaching if it is to be a biblical pastoral ministry.¹ Our question today is how preaching relates to the biblical languages.²

I have some serious concerns about the state of the pulpit these days. My concern could be stated fairly well in the words of 1 Sam 3:1. As the old King James says, “the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision”—which, as I'm sure you know, is better translated, “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions” (NIV). I would adapt that wording and suggest that *biblical preaching* is rare in our day, a word from God is infrequently heard from our pulpits. That is not just my cantankerous opinion; some of today's best known preachers echo the same sentiment. John Stott says that “true Christian preaching ... is extremely rare in today's Church”³ and Kent Hughes bemoans the fact that “dis-exposition ... is a serious problem that deserves careful thought. At least in my part of the world [says Hughes], these abuses increasingly dominate the pulpits.”⁴

As those who stand in the pulpit and open the Word of God to a local congregation, you have the same charge as that with which Paul charged Timothy: “Preach the Word” (2 Tim 4:2).

¹ What the contemporary church often calls “pastor of x” is sometimes not pastoral ministry per se, but is rather God's use of other abilities and roles that are, indeed, helpful to the ministry of the local church. The NT is quite clear that God uses some in administration, encouragement, etc., but never makes the explicit connection of these ministries with that of pastor. The only compound terminology is that of “pastor-teacher.”

² My comments will usually be phrased in terms of “Greek,” but they almost always relate equally well to Hebrew and Aramaic.

³ *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 15.

⁴ Kent Hughes, “The Anatomy of Exposition: *Logos, Ethos, and Pathos*,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 (1999): 45–46. “Dis-Exposition” is Hughes' term: “Though the term is new, you have all experienced dis-exposition as a listener. You can easily recall a Sunday service in which the biblical text is announced and you settle back, Bible in hand for a good Sunday meal, only to find out that the text is departed from, never to return. Dis-exposition causes Sunday indigestion” (*ibid.*, 44).

That is an awesome responsibility. The apostle Peter reminds us that “if anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet 4:11). John Wycliffe, the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” described preaching as “the highest service that men may attain to on earth.”⁵ The Word of God is a most precious treasure—equal to our very salvation in worth, for if we had no Bible we would know nothing of God’s Son, the forgiveness that his crosswork provided, or the new covenant relationship which that work made possible.

As John Stott has said so well,

Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God. No attempt to understand Christianity can succeed which overlooks or denies the truth that the living God has taken the initiative to reveal himself savingly to fallen humanity; or that his self-revelation has been given by the most straightforward means of communication known to us, namely by a word and words; or that he calls upon those who have heard his Word to speak it to others.⁶

Although the Word of God has been given for all, the pastor is entrusted with the Word of God in a special sense due to his primary responsibility of proclaiming that Word to a congregation. Handling the Word of God correctly is an enormous responsibility. As James exhorted his hearers, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (Jas 3:1). There ought to be a very real sense in which we recognize and acknowledge our inadequacy for such a great task. I sense little of that in many preachers. Some are quite confident—even proud—of their ability in the pulpit. Others treat preaching rather flippantly. Richard Baxter, the famous 17th century preacher, saw it quite differently. He said,

The public preaching of the word ... requires greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal, than any of us bring to it. It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation and deliver a message of salvation or condemnation, as from the living God, in the name of our Redeemer.⁷

Indeed, “the pulpit is a perilous place for any child of Adam to occupy”!⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for many years, was of the opinion that

It seems to be the case that the greater the preacher the more hesitant he has generally been to preach.... A man who feels that he is competent, and that he can do this easily, and so rushes to preach without any sense of fear or trembling, or any hesitation whatsoever, is a man who is proclaiming that he has never been ‘called’ to be a preacher. The man who is

⁵ Cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 22.

⁶ *Between Two Worlds*, 15.

⁷ *The Reformed Pastor*, edited and abridged by Jay Green (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971), 17.

⁸ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 320.

called by God is a man who realises what he is called to do, and he so realises the awfulness of the task that he shrinks from it.⁹

To those of you who are students I would say that no homiletics professor can teach you how to preach. You will only learn that by doing it. You will learn more about preaching in a year of pastoral ministry in which you must stand behind the sacred desk three or four times a week than you ever will in seminary.¹⁰ You should take some homiletics classes to get you started (and that start *is* an important one), but it is very difficult to preach in the artificial context of a classroom.¹¹ Beyond my initial reminders of the high calling of the pulpit ministry, I would warn you of the dangers that appear to lurk in the office of many clergymen. That is where many sermons seem to originate—“offices” where more attention is paid to programs and technique than to the study of the Word of God.¹² The very fact that it is conceived as an “office” says a great deal about our modern conception of ministry. The “pastor’s study” is viewed as a quaint concept—a relic, perhaps, of the 19th century; certainly not an appropriate image for the administrator of a dynamic organization.¹³

This CEO model of ministry (the office rather than the study) has had another consequence. It seems to have influenced many men to de-emphasize preaching or at least not to be too greatly concerned about it. That is true of both young men in seminary preparing for ministry and those who are already pastors. I sense less burden for preaching as the years go by. At one time that was a major topic of conversation at pastors conferences, in seminary hallways, and around the lunch tables. Today more of it seems to relate to other aspects of ministry, some relatively peripheral when compared with the primacy of preaching. Oh yes, pastors conferences still have sessions where a great speaker holds forth for an hour, but many such sessions do not consist of

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 107.

¹⁰ Some people are aghast at the idea of preaching three or four times a week. Contemporary “church lite” often features preaching only once a week, but that is not the historic practice of the church. Even the three or four preaching services per week that has been characteristic of Bible-believing churches for several centuries in the West pales in light of Reformation practice. Calvin, e.g., preached every day and multiple times on Sunday (see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009], 138 and W. S. Reid, “The Transmission of Calvinism in the Sixteenth Century,” in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. S. Reid, 33–54 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 44–46).

¹¹ You might find Lloyd-Jones’ comments in this regard of interest; I read them after I wrote the paragraph above: *Preaching and Preachers*, 118–20.

¹² “The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology.... Technique can only make us orators; if we want to be preachers, theology is what we need. If our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing, and all the incentives we need to induce us to do it faithfully” (Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 92).

¹³ Yes, every pastor has some administration to do, but that should not be the primary focus of his time. When a pastor spends more time “administrating” than studying, then he has probably succumbed to an anthropocentric, program-centered “ministry” rather than a theocentric, Word-centered ministry.

biblical preaching. I rarely hear pastors or seminarians¹⁴ these days speaking in Jeremian terms, of God’s “word ... in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones” (Jer 20:9).¹⁵

2. Preaching and the Importance of the Biblical Languages in the Local Church

Now what do my concerns with preaching have to do with the biblical languages? Let me approach that question with the words of D. A. Carson’s *Exegetical Fallacies*. The issues of the biblical languages, exegesis, homiletics, and church ministry, are closely related (though one might not suspect that from many sermons!). Addressing the focus of his title, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Carson acknowledges that,

To focus on fallacies, exegetical or otherwise, sounds a bit like focusing on sin: guilty parties may take grudging notice and briefly pause to examine their faults, but there is nothing intrinsically redemptive in the procedure. Nevertheless, when the sins are common and (what is more) frequently unrecognized by those who commit them, detailed description may have the salutary effect of not only encouraging thoughtful self-examination but also providing an incentive to follow a better way. I hope that by talking about what should be done in exegesis [and, I would add, homiletics], we may all desire more deeply to interpret [and “preach”] the Word of God aright....

... This study is important because exegetical fallacies [and, I would add, “homiletical fallacies”] are painfully frequent among us—among us whose God-given grace and responsibility is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. Make a mistake in the interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays ... and there is unlikely to be an entailment of eternal consequences; but we cannot lightly accept a similar laxity in the interpretation [and preaching] of Scripture. We are dealing with God’s thoughts: we are obligated to take the

¹⁴ I suspect that more seminarians these days are expecting and looking for a “staff position” (though it may have “pastor” in the title) rather than a pastoral ministry in which they will be preaching on a regular basis. That may be where some will function best, but I fear that many are underestimating what God could do through them in not aspiring to pastoral pulpit ministry. In most cases I would rather see a seminary graduate take a smaller church as “the pastor” rather than joining the staff of a large church. There is a place for “staff” roles, especially for those who may not have a solid local church background—perhaps having come to Christ during their university days and then come directly to seminary. Some of these staff positions may become life-long ministries (and that is legitimate in some cases); others may be for a few years to gain some experience. I would like to think, however, that these would be the exceptions rather than the usual pattern; unfortunately (I think) they have become the norm. A seminary grad will learn far more about ministry, about preaching, about the Bible and theology in two years of such ministry in the smaller church than they are likely to learn in twice that time as an assistant. Yes, they will make some mistakes—and learn from them. But hopefully their seminary training will have helped them avoid the worst missteps, and remember that seminary can never teach everything an aspiring pastor needs to know; it can never give them all the answers. But a good seminary program can give them the tools and teach them how to think and how to approach ministry. There is an excellent essay on this topic by Kevin Bauder, “It’s the Theology!” posted at <http://seminary.wcts1030.com/publications/Nick/Nick131.html>.

¹⁵ I fully understand that none have the prophetic office as did Jeremiah, but preaching is not restricted to that office! The NT apostles and pastors have the same commission and hopefully the same compulsion as did Jeremiah, even if they do feel as unworthy as Isaiah (6:5) or Jeremiah (1:6).

greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly. It is all the more shocking, therefore, to find in the evangelical pulpit, where the Scriptures are officially revered, frequent and inexcusable sloppiness in handling them.¹⁶

Ministry in general and preaching in particular are directly influenced by our theology. If we really believe, not just as a matter of academic statement, but as genuine convictions that the Bible is God's revealed truth, inspired and inerrant in the originals, then our preaching and teaching of that revelatory corpus must, of necessity, be based on our careful study of the text in the original languages.¹⁷ There is no other way to have the immediate confidence necessary to undergird our proclamation of "thus says the Lord" if we cannot read what he said how he said it. If you cannot read the OT in Hebrew and the NT in Greek you will always be at the mercy of those who *claim* to be able to do so.¹⁸ You may never become a "scholar" in the languages, but you absolutely must learn to understand the text as God saw fit to have it written. You must learn to read the text, use a lexicon, and evaluate and profit from the commentaries and grammars. You cannot depend on software to do this for you. Yes, any of the decent language-based software tools (and even some of the shoddy ones!) will parse every word for you, but if you don't know what to do with that information, what good is it? There is a world of difference between pieces, even mountains, of data and comprehension.

Some of you may protest, but we have good translations in English, why bother with the hard work of Hebrew and Greek when we can read what it says in English? The simplest answer was well put by a Jewish poet: "reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a

¹⁶ *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 15–16.

¹⁷ Bill Mounce expresses this same concern. "If you do not trust the Bible, you will not preach it with conviction; and if you do not hold to the total trustworthiness of Scripture, you will mix God's ideas with yours, and eventually you will get tired of coming up with your own good ideas every Sunday morning. I wonder how nonexpository preachers do it.... Is not part of the plight of the American pulpit due to an egregious lack of conviction that Scripture is true? And if you are not convinced that the Bible is true, then why spend time learning it in its original languages? There is no reason, and hence the appalling lack of solid biblical study behind many sermons preached every Sunday.... If you are not convinced of its truth, you will probably lack the fierce determination necessary to learn Greek and use it in your ministry" ("The Pastor and His Study," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. S. Storms and J. Taylor, 477–95 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 482.

¹⁸ John Wesley said something to this effect ("Address to the Clergy"): "Do I understand Greek and Hebrew? Otherwise, how can I undertake, (as every Minister does,) not only to explain books which are written therein, but to defend them against all opponents? Am I not at the mercy of everyone who does understand, or even pretends to understand, the original? For which way can I confute his pretense? Do I understand the language of the Old Testament? critically? at all? Can I read into English [i.e., translate] one of David's Psalms; or even the first chapter of Genesis? Do I understand the language of the New Testament? Am I a critical master of it? Have I enough of it even to read into English the first chapter of St. Luke? If not, how many years did I spend at school? How many at the University? And what was I doing all those years? Ought not shame to cover my face?" Available online at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/10clergy.htm>. Wesley's point in part is that you cannot judge the statements of those who at least think they know the languages. They might—but you are at their mercy with no way to know for sure.

veil”!¹⁹ I doubt any of you would be satisfied with that sort of kiss! We want the real thing. So it is with the Bible. If we want the real thing, we don’t want an English veil between us and our text. Not that the Bible in translation is bad, but not everything comes through when the original texts are transformed into another language. The limitations include the simple fact that no two languages say the same thing in exactly the same way. Every time we translate we must, of necessity, both omit and add information. That might be a foreign concept to some of you—but that makes the point: if we know only our own mother tongue, we have no way to know what has necessarily been added or deleted to put the Bible’s message into English dress. Walt Kaiser, one of the “deans” of evangelical OT scholarship, puts it this way:

Greek and Hebrew study involves more than a mere ability to parse verbs and look up words in a lexicon or concordance or in one of several analytical tools in ways that can be taught in a matter of two to four hours of instruction. It involves, instead, the patient tracing of the “threads” of meaning through the syntax of the original languages. Translations are unable to expose the “joints” or “seams” of the units of thought to the degree that a working knowledge of the original languages is able to give. *It is the tracing of these connecting points in the syntax of a passage that is so vital in constructing sermons that reflect the original authority of the word of God.*²⁰

How can you preach and be certain that your understanding and emphasis is the same as that which God intended if you are dependent on a translation, as good as it may be? Our task is not to say good things with reference to some text. Our commission is to proclaim the truth, and nothing but the truth, of what God said. We must exegete that text, expound the meaning of that text. We dare not read our meaning and message *into* the text. I have heard countless sermons over the past half century whose content was not found in the text read (and some didn’t even *have* a text!). They may have said many good things—things that were right and helpful—but they lacked the divine authority of Scripture since they had nothing to do with the text. Indeed, John Stott suggests that the honest thing for many preachers to say at the beginning of their message, immediately after reading their text, would be something like this:

That is my text.
I am now going to preach.
Maybe we’ll meet again,
My text and I,
And maybe not.²¹

Such declamations hardly deserve being described as a message. They certainly are not a message from God, for that must be explicitly based in the text of the Word of God. Other sermons that I have heard are based only superficially and tangentially on the text, yet our job is

¹⁹ Haim Nacham Bialik, as cited by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. “The Future of the Bible in Seminary Education,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 60 (1996): 253.

²⁰ Kaiser, “Future of the Bible,” 253.

²¹ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 130.

not to discourse on things related to the text, but to proclaim the text itself—its meaning and significance.

Much present-day evangelical preaching and teaching ... is often superficial and frothy, because of failure to spend enough time with the text and to patiently hear what it is saying first.... This method of sermonizing opens up an easy path—particularly for quick, adroit, fanciful, but lazy minds who, under pretense of truth and righteousness, teach *what* they will from *where* they will in Scripture.²²

As Carl Henry has said so eloquently,

The content of church proclamation is therefore not just anything and everything.... It is the very specific Word of God. The church is called to proclaim what God says and does. Unless it verbally articulates and communicates the revelation of God, the church has no distinctive right to be heard, to survive, or even to exist.

The Christian minister [is not] anything and everything.... He is primarily the proclaimer of God's revealed Word. Unless he declares the revelation of God he has no unique vocational claim and standing.

The unmistakable priority of God's people, the church in the world, is to proclaim God's revealed Word. Divorced from this calling, the church and Christians are undurable and unendurable phenomena. By stifling divine revelation, they are, in fact, an affront to God.

The fault lies rather in timid preaching of God's revelation by professional pulpiteers, in presumptuous tampering with God's revelation ... in subtle evasions of God's revelation.²³

These are not new or novel ideas; they have been argued for centuries.²⁴ For example, Erasmus said,

These advantages [i.e., greater understanding of the NT] accrue to those who would rather draw their knowledge of Scripture from the purest springs than from such streams and pools as may be handy, so often poured from one of them into another, not to say fouled by the muddy feet of swine and asses. No: fruit tastes better that you have picked with your own hands from the mother tree; water is fresher that you draw as it bubbles up from the actual spring.... In the same way the Scriptures have about them some sort of natural fragrance, they breathe something genuine and peculiarly their own, *when read in the language in which they were first written*.²⁵

²² Walter Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Geisler (Zondervan, 1979), 126.

²³ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 2:22-23.

²⁴ Perhaps these days such a claim will be greeted with skepticism since there seem to be so many people convinced that they must "reinvent" church, ignoring twenty centuries of God's work. I have no problem with being relevant in contemporary culture, but I refuse to bow to the idol of novelty. We are part of a long history of God's church and jettisoning our heritage is arrogant.

²⁵ Erasmus, in his preface to the first published/ printed Greek NT, 1516 (emphasis added).

The contemporary of Erasmus, the great reformer Luther, addressed the importance of the languages at some length—and his comments are worth taking time to contemplate at length, and that despite the obvious differences in our circumstances today and Luther’s a half millennia ago. (I have emphasized key points liberally below.)

In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others

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.... If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall not only lose the gospel, but the time will come when we shall be unable either to speak or write a correct Latin or German [or English]....*

Yes, you say, but many of the fathers were saved and even became teachers without the languages. That is true. *But how do you account for the fact that they so often erred in the Scriptures? How often does not St. Augustine err in the Psalms and in his other expositions, and Hilary too—in fact, all those who have undertaken to expound Scripture without a knowledge of the languages? Even though what they said about a subject at times was perfectly true, they were never quite sure whether it really was present there in the passage where by their interpretation they thought to find it....*

When our faith is thus held up to ridicule, where does the fault lie? It lies in our ignorance of the languages; and there is no other way out than to learn the languages. Was not St. Jerome compelled to translate the Psalter anew from the Hebrew because, when we quoted our Psalter in disputes with the Jews, they sneered at us, pointing out that our texts did not read that way in the original Hebrew? Now the expositions of all the early fathers who dealt with Scripture apart from a knowledge of the languages (even when their teaching is not in error) are such that they often employ uncertain, indefensible, and inappropriate expressions. They grope their way like a blind man along the wall, frequently missing the sense of the text and twisting it to suit their fancy.... Even St. Augustine himself is obliged to confess, as he does in his “Christian Instruction,” that *a Christian teacher who is to expound the Scriptures must know Greek and Hebrew in addition to Latin. Otherwise, it is impossible to avoid constant stumbling; indeed, there are plenty of problems to work out even when one is well versed in the languages.*

There is a vast difference therefore between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture, or, as St. Paul puts it, a prophet. *A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages.* Now there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. *A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough. Hence languages are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian church, as are the prophets or interpreters; although it is not necessary that every Christian or every preacher be such a prophet,* as St. Paul points out in I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4....

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be

an open book. O how happy the dear fathers would have been if they had had our opportunity to study the languages and come thus prepared to the Holy Scriptures! What great toil and effort it cost them to gather up a few crumbs, while we with half the labor—yes, almost without any labor at all—can acquire the whole loaf! O how their effort puts our indolence to shame! Yes, how sternly God will judge our lethargy and ingratitude!

Here belongs also what St. Paul calls for in I Corinthians 14, namely, that in the Christian church *all teachings must be judged. For this a knowledge of the language is needful above all else. **The preacher or teacher can expound the Bible from beginning to end as he pleases, accurately or inaccurately, if there is no one there to judge whether he is doing it right or wrong. But in order to judge, one must have a knowledge of the languages; it cannot be done in any other way.** Therefore, although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it, and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations.* Hence, Psalm 129 likens such scriptural studies to a hunt, saying to the deer God opens the dense forests; and Psalm 1 likens them to a tree with a plentiful supply of water, whose leaves are always green.

We should not be led astray because some boast of the Spirit and consider Scripture of little worth, and others, such as the Waldensian Brethren think the languages are unnecessary. Dear friend, say what you will about the Spirit, I too have been in the Spirit and have seen the Spirit, perhaps even more of it (if it comes to boasting of one's own flesh) than those fellows with all their boasting will see in a year. Moreover, my spirit has given some account of itself, while theirs sits quietly in its corner and does little more than brag about itself. *I know full well that while it is the Spirit alone who accomplishes everything, I would surely have never flushed a covey if the languages had not helped me and given me a sure and certain knowledge of Scripture. I too could have lived uprightly and preached the truth in seclusion; but then I should have left undisturbed the pope, the sophists, and the whole anti-Christian regime.* The devil does not respect my spirit as highly as he does my speech and pen when they deal with Scripture. For my spirit takes from him nothing but myself alone; but Holy Scripture and the languages leave him little room on earth, and wreak havoc in his kingdom.

So I can by no means commend the Waldensian Brethren for their neglect of the languages. For even though they may teach the truth, they inevitably often miss the true meaning of the text, and thus are neither equipped nor fit for defending the faith against error. Moreover, their teaching is so obscure and couched in such peculiar terms, differing from the language of Scripture, that I fear it is not or will not remain pure. ***For there is great danger in speaking of things of God in a different manner and in different terms than God himself employs. In short, they may lead saintly lives and teach sacred things among themselves, but so long as they remain without the languages they cannot but lack what all the rest lack, namely, the ability to treat Scripture with certainty and thoroughness and to be useful to other nations. Because they could do this, but will not, they have to figure out for themselves how they will answer for it to God.***²⁶

²⁶ An excerpt from: "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" by Martin Luther (1524). The complete text of Luther's essay is available at: <http://ntresources.com/blog/?page_id=2496>.

And that is why you *ought* to make the biblical languages a priority, for you *will* give an account to God of how you have prepared and how you have shepherded his people through the ministry of the Word.²⁷

3. The Use of the Biblical Languages in Local Church Preaching

Now lest you think that my title was irrelevant to this essay, let me exegete the subtitle so as to summarize what I have said thus far and also to shift gears to a second matter that deserves our attention. My subtitle was “Garnish or Entrée? *Mellon* or Mantra?”

Forty years ago as a college and seminary student I was a cook. I worked in various types of kitchen settings: short order, line cook, and commercial dining rooms. In most such situations we were concerned that the plate we served look nice. Part of the “dressing” was some sort of garnish—a sprig of parsley, a spiced apple ring, a lemon curl, etc. The garnish was not part of the nutritional value of the meal. We did not intend that our customers eat the parsley. It just looked nice. What we wanted them to eat was the entrée. Whether that was a juicy steak grilled to perfection or a chicken breast stuffed and wrapped and prepared just so, we took great pains that it be good quality, tender, and tasty. We did not, however, carry it to their table on a greasy spatula or in a crusty roasting pan. We served the finished product in an appealing, ready-to-eat form. That setting provides my analogy.

Preachers Who Use the Biblical Languages as a Garnish

The biblical languages should not function merely as a garnish. Too often pastors pay only lip service to the biblical languages. They may acknowledge that they are important—at least to the commentary writer. They expect others to do the dirty work so that they can garnish their sermons with impressive-sounding jargon, a sprig of Greek parsley. “In the original Greek this is an ‘ā-or-ist’ tense, therefore it means [such and such.]” Or they add a lemon curl. “The Greek perfect mood proves that we were saved in the past and will be eternally secure forever.” Or for a real “ringer” (i.e., a spiced apple ring garnish), “This word in the original Greek is number 4352 which is a compound of 4314 and 2965, so it means to lick God’s hand like a puppy dog.”²⁸ All such statements are merely attempts to sound impressive or to wield the Greek as an authority club.²⁹ They prove nothing and do not add anything to understanding the meaning of the text. That is neither the purpose nor the value of the biblical languages.

²⁷ None of what I have said should be taken as to imply that God has not nor does not use the ministry of those who have access only to the Word of God in translation (whether English or any other language). It is to say that the pastor’s responsibility is to be the best prepared and equipped servant of the Word possible. Those without the ability to handle the original languages will always be limited to the role of what Luther calls “simple preachers.” God does use simple preachers, but the pastor ought not be content to minister in that way if he has any opportunity to transcend such limitations.

²⁸ Each of these three sample garnishes reflects one or more fallacies. Unfortunately, these are not fabricated examples; I have heard them all.

²⁹ I have also heard sincere people make statements such as I have cited above. They didn’t know any better. They *thought* that they were doing something right, they just didn’t know any better and they were attempting to

The languages are much more like the entrée than the garnish. They are not the entrée as such, but the tools used to prepare the entrée. We do not feed God's people with Greek and Hebrew. What goes on the sermonic plate is an appetizing, tender piece of meat. If we are ministering in an English-speaking context, that means that the entrée—the biblical content—must be explained in relatively simple English that our audience can understand.³⁰ Just as the goal of a vernacular translation of the Bible is communication, so the goal of a biblical sermon must be the communication of the Bible's message in language that our audience can understand.³¹

Preachers Who Use the Biblical Languages as a Mantra

Let me shift the analogy to the second part of my subtitle. I ask rhetorically in that title not only if the biblical languages are garnish or entrée, but also if they are *mellon* or mantra. I am not thinking of cantaloupe or honey dew or watermelon. My analogy here is not from the kitchen but the library. One of my favorite books not related to biblical studies is Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. In that classic epic *mellon* is the Elvish word for "friend."³² I use the term in my title, not in the Elvish meaning of "friend" (though the biblical languages should certainly be the preacher's friend!), but as that word functioned in Tolkien's narrative. It was the means by which one entered Moria through the dwarvish West-door on the border of Hollin. The inscription above the door, written in the elven-tongue of the West of Middle-earth in the Elder Days, read, "The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter." The craft of the dwarves controlled the door such that by speaking the Elvish word for friend, *mellon*, the doors would open.

Likewise it is through the door of the biblical languages that we enter (certainly as friends!) into the Scriptures. They function to open the message of the Bible to us in a direct, immediate way, enabling greater depth and greater ease in comprehending the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, his unsearchable judgments and untraceable paths, the mind of the Lord (Rom 11:33–34). Now it is true that a translation offers access to many of these riches, but in an indirect, secondhand way that leaves some things inaccessible. A translation functions like the deep shafts of Moria that shed light into the wide hall of the underground city of Dwarrowdelf. The filtered light is not as bright as it is outside and it does not reach all the areas of the cavern.

use tools they knew nothing about. I admire their sincerity; I cringe at the results. The old saying is quite true: "they know only enough Greek to be dangerous." Such people are like a child behind the wheel of an automobile.

³⁰ "Relatively simple" refers only to the language used, not the content that is communicated. Preaching is not the place for complex jargon. The most profound concepts of the Word of God *can* be communicated in simple language. The grammatical language of the exegetical classroom or the technical terminology of systematics is neither needed nor appropriate in the pulpit of the local church.

³¹ The preacher must understand his audience. What is appropriate in an inner-city ministry is not the same as a rural church or an affluent, suburban, white-collar audience. I have heard a PhD student preach in a rural church who had no clue how to communicate to rural people. His vocabulary and graduate school lecture style were totally foreign to the dear country folk with whom I worship every week. They left quite mystified as to what he was trying to say. They also left without having received any spiritual nourishment from the Word of God that day.

³² See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, Part 1, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book 2, Chapter 4, "A Journey in the Dark" (50th Anniversary edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 308.

It is certainly true, as the preface of the KJV said in 1611, “Translation opens the window to let in the light. It breaks the shell so that we may eat the nut. It draws back the curtain so we may look into the most holy place.”³³ But there are limits to how much light can be let in through the window of a translation. Though the KJV translators’ goal was for “Scripture to speak like itself as in the language of Palestine that it may be understood even to the least educated,” neither the KJV nor any modern translation can really “speak like itself as in the language of Palestine.” A decent translation can enable God’s message to “be understood even to the least educated,” but not in its entirety. As Luther asked,

How do you account for the fact that [the church fathers] so often erred in the Scriptures? ... in fact, all those who have undertaken to expound Scripture without a knowledge of the languages? Even though what they said about a subject at times was perfectly true, *they were never quite sure* whether it really was present there in the passage where by their interpretation they thought to find it.

Yes, Luther says, it is true that,

A simple preacher ... has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages.

Luther was right. Unless we are content with the epitaph “simple preacher,” we really have no choice but to develop some degree of competence in the biblical languages. As Luther makes clear, “simple preacher” does not mean one who preaches simply. It refers to those who have recourse to Scripture only secondhand in a translation. The consequence is a lack of confidence when we get beyond the most basic message of the Bible. Our commission as pastor-teachers is the exposition of the whole counsel of God. If we are serious about being approved workmen who correctly handle the Word of Truth (2 Tim 2:15), we cannot settle for the limits of Luther’s simple preachers. We will not be able to teach nor to gently instruct those who oppose biblical truth (2 Tim 2:24–26) unless we have our *mellon* to enable access beyond the limits of a translation.³⁴

³³ Miles Smith, 1611 KJV, “The Translators to the Reader.”

³⁴ This certainly and emphatically does not force us to conclude that the Bible in translation is not the Word of God. My discussion partner at the Council bluntly declared as much during the panel discussion following this paper and his own. He insisted that no translation could be designated as “Word of God”; it is therefore essential, he concluded, that a pastor must teach his congregation Greek and Hebrew if they are to be spiritually mature. To be very blunt, that is elitist nonsense based on an invalid postulate with no relationship to the real world of pastoral ministry, either in the West or (even more clearly so) in the rest of the world where most of God’s people live. First, it defines “Word of God” in such a way that only the autographa could qualify as such. Second, when we designate Scripture as the Word of God we mean that it says in words what God wants said—something that is true of any decent translation in any language. To argue (as I have above) that the pastor should be competent in the original languages to have confident access to all the details of the text does not denigrate the place of a translation in life and ministry of the church. The last thing a pastor should do is to undermine the confidence in

On the other hand, we ought not make the biblical languages, as important as they are, into a mantra (the last part of my subtitle). Some people, being firmly convinced of the general argument that I have proposed thus far, use the biblical languages, not as a *mellon*, but as a mantra. They are certainly sincere and they have commendably placed a high priority on the biblical languages, but they then go one step too far in making the tools of exegesis into the gadgets of homiletics. Just as a mantra refers to something repeated continually, so these preachers continually inflict their audience with Greek and Hebrew. They preach Robertson and Danker and Wallace in their efforts to preach Christ. Their sermons contain profuse reference to Greek and Hebrew words, to technical grammatical description, to diachronic etymologies, and even verb parsings. Some even imply to God's people that they should (or even *must*) learn Greek if they are going to understand Scripture and become spiritually mature. Their churches become language institutes and their pulpits become lecterns.

On one hand I applaud such preachers for being serious about the languages. In that sense I say, "May their tribe increase!" On the other hand I must wonder if these preachers are as serious about the church as about their languages. What I mean is that as pastors our charge is to communicate the Word of God clearly, effectively, and helpfully to God's people. Our commission is not to train pastors, at least not primarily. (Yes, the church should train pastors, but that is not their primary mission.) When we make the church into a seminary,³⁵ we shift the focus of what God intended.

Most of the people to whom the church ministers are not seminary students (not even prospective or potential ones) nor do they have any desire to become such. They do, hopefully, desire to know God better, to learn to serve and obey him, and to grow spiritually. To do that they do not need to learn Greek and Hebrew. To tell them, either explicitly or implicitly, that they really do need to learn foreign languages can be terribly discouraging. Most people have neither the desire nor the aptitude for foreign languages.³⁶ Perhaps if someone ministers in an

the Bible by the people entrusted to his care. There must be a balance here that was sadly lacking in my discussion partner's view of ministry. We *must* emphasize the importance of the languages for pastoral ministry (with that he would agree), but we must also emphasize that English-speaking Christians have the Word of God available to them in English (and the same is true of any other language). This is not to create a clergy-laity distinction; every Christian stands equally before God. It does recognize that God has appointed some as pastors and teachers on whom greater responsibility lies in the public proclamation of the Word of God. The duties of the pastor require different skills than those whom God has chosen for equally important service in other aspects of ministry.

³⁵ This is different from a church founding or operating a seminary. I have no objection to that. I profited greatly from my studies at such schools (two of the three seminaries from which I graduated, including both my ThM and ThD, were sponsored, taught, and governed by local churches).

³⁶ To suggest that if someone speaks one language he or she can learn another one misses the point entirely. Yes, human beings possess the image of God which includes the capabilities of rationality and language. And yes, many people in the world (though probably fewer Americans!) have learned and speak multiple languages. But that is not at all the same thing as teaching someone to read Greek and Hebrew. Those are different skills entirely and they are taught and learned quite differently since we do not teach the biblical languages as spoken languages. There are far more issues involved here that I can address in this essay.

upper/upper-middle class, highly educated community, there will be more people who might be curious about such things, but that is not the typical church. Real church must minister to and for real/average people. We must design our church ministry, including our pulpit ministry, for Sally who works a full time job as a secretary, for Bill who drives a forklift at the warehouse, for Mrs. Smith who is an elderly widow, Sam who pumps gas part time and flips burgers the rest of the week, Sue, a single mom on welfare, Gary who owns a small business washing windows, Ruth, an elementary teacher, Ray who drives the FedEx truck, and the list goes on. It is not likely that most of these folks have the time to learn Greek.

Oh yes, your church is certainly different—an exception to the rule. (Aren't they all!) You have a group of people who are “really serious” about studying the Bible. Most are college grads and professional people. You've already taught first year Greek several times³⁷ and have some great Bible studies that “go deep” into the Greek. Certainly you're entitled to use Greek as you preach aren't you? No, I don't think so. Why would you? Even if everyone (or at least most of the people) have taken your Greek classes, do you ever intend to minister to other people in your community? Do they all have to learn Greek to follow your profound sermons? I hope not. I would hope that you would preach for average people.

And if you are preaching to average people, what does the citation of Greek words and grammatical technicalities accomplish? The people do not understand them. The only purpose they serve is to impress people with your ability, but is that a proper goal for a minister of Jesus Christ?³⁸ There may be one other purpose served by “preaching Greek.” You have perhaps heard the old preacher's adage that is too often written in the margins of sermon manuscripts, “Point weak. Shout loud!” The way some preachers use Greek might suggest that they would write in their margins (if they were honest), “Point weak. Quote Greek!”³⁹

I often tell my students that if you cannot show a local church audience the meaning of a passage from an English Bible, then should think twice as to whether you really want to insist on a particular interpretation. That caution says nothing about your use of Greek in your study; you should. It will make your exegetical work far more efficient and save you from many irrelevant bunny trails. It says everything about how serious you are about communicating God's truth to

³⁷ I do not have an objection to teaching Greek in a local church; I have done that myself at times. But the situations in which that is a wise choice are not common.

³⁸ “I know it is tempting, especially for younger preachers, to show that they have done their homework and know what they are talking about, but putting yourself up on a pedestal by flaunting Greek is never a good idea.” And again, “I discourage my students from ever saying, ‘In the Greek....’ Why would you want to say that? To impress your listeners with your academic acumen? To convince them that you are right when you can't prove your point with biblical logic? ... [a pedestal is] not where servants belong” (Bill Mounce, “The Pastor and His Study,” 488, 490).

³⁹ As Bill Mounce has said, “When I have done my homework in both the Greek text and the critical commentaries, and when I have been able to come to a clear understanding of the text, and when I can see how that text fits into my overall theology, only then am I able to preach with absolute conviction and power. I don't have to be imprecise so as to hide my lack of understanding; I don't have to raise my voice so as to bully people into believing what in fact I neither fully understand nor can defend” (“The Pastor and His Study,” 485).

God's people in language they can understand. We (21st C. Americans) do not communicate in koine Greek. Why would we? Sprinkling our sermons with words or technical grammatical terms our hearers do not know only serves to obscure the message being communicated. It makes the meat tough when it ought to be tender. Nor will it do to appeal to the "solid food" of Heb 5:12. That surely does not justify obscuring the message with (what will sound like) jargon. "Solid food" only indicates the subject matter. The most complex, profound biblical truth, the most challenging passage, *can* be explained with simple language. "Strong meat" (as the KJV translates it) is not *tough* meat. It is not only possible, but essential to communicate God's profound truth in simple language, language that Sally, Bill, Mrs. Smith, Sam, Sue, Gary, Ruth, and Ray can understand. When we miss that goal we almost always end up with a more esoteric lecture that tickles some people's ears and makes them think that they have "gone deep," when all we've done is touched an intellectual nerve. Even those of us seminary profs who are supposed to know Greek can profit greatly from a good sermon preached entirely in English. We may even prefer it that way. Preaching ought to be done the same way a good translation is prepared: in the heart language of the target audience. We must spend all the time it takes in the study grappling with the text in Hebrew or Greek, wrestling with it until the walls between us and the first century become as transparent as we can make them. But then we must leave the tools in the study and expound the text in the heart language of God's people.

Postscript

This paper has dealt mostly with the *what* and *why* of preaching. I have not attempted to address the *how* except in terms of general principle. Nor have I addressed the questions of how a pastor who never learned Greek might seek to remedy his deficiency, nor how a negligent pastor might revive his. Those are questions that go far beyond the limits of this paper. If you have never studied the biblical languages, take advantage of any nearby seminary that offers first year Greek. If you do not have that option, it is possible to learn Greek online.⁴⁰ As for the *how* of using the languages, you ought to read Silva and Carson as well as a good book on exegetical method.⁴¹

⁴⁰ BBS has taught Greek online for a dozen years. If you have an undergrad degree, we'd welcome you to study with us. If you can't even do that, I'd recommend a new textbook that is particularly suited for independent study: *Learning Koine Greek*, to be published by Baker Academic, probably in 2014—and yes, I am the author.

⁴¹ I have in mind here Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Zondervan, 1990) and D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 1996). For a handbook on exegetical method, see Darrell Bock and Buist Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis* (Crossway, 2006) or Craig Blomberg and Jennifer Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Baker, 2010).

Epilogue

Following the Council session presenters are asked to revise their papers in light of the discussion engendered. I have done so at several points in the paper itself. One item remains to be addressed explicitly. My discussion partner's paper was promptly revised and submitted.⁴² Since I have been slower to accomplish that task, I am able to offer a sur-rejoinder to the heart of my partner's response. In the added Addendum he says,

“A chef doesn't bring people into his dirty kitchens and make them eat amongst the greasy pots and pans, instead, he prepares an excellent meal that is both wholesome and aesthetically pleasing.”

Once again, the premise is problematic. So problematic, in fact, that this is the core issue: *we are not chefs!* Ours is not to spoon-feed people beyond infancy (yes, there is a time for spoon-feeding), rather ours is to help them develop the skills to be mature adults in Christ – to be able to feed themselves and others. *Our job is to bring people into the kitchen and show them how to use those pots and pans to prepare their own meals.*⁴³

After paraphrasing (despite the quotation marks) one of my analogies, it is argued that we should not spoon-feed. I would note first that *chef* is only an analogy, not the heart of my argument, but even so, to assume that a chef is one who spoon feeds people misrepresents the situation in a significant way. Neither chef nor pastor spoon feeds those they serve. Nor is it the pastor's job to teach those of God's people gifted in other areas of service how to be pastors. Were I to press the counter analogy offered, I would have to conclude that to be spiritually mature every believer must become a pastor teacher (at least in ability if not in office). Yet Paul asserts that this is not the case: *μη πάντες διδάσκαλοι;* (1 Cor 12:29). The rhetorical question is expressly framed with the negative *μή* which indicates that the author assumes the answer is a negative one. Since this is part of a discussion of the role of the various gifts in the body, the implications seem both clear and relevant.

Is it the pastor's job to help those to whom he ministers “develop the skills to be mature adults in Christ”? Of course. I do not challenge that. What is seriously askew, as I have argued in the paper above, is that doing so requires that pastors teach people Greek and Hebrew (along with the related matters of textual criticism, etc. as Cone asserts in his original paper!⁴⁴) as the necessary means of accomplishing that task.

There are far more issues in Cone's paper which appear to me to be problematic in terms of establishing a biblical theology of pastoral ministry, but since this is not officially a response paper, I will allow the reader to assess both essays and come to their own conclusions.

⁴² The paper in question is by Chris Cone, “Integrating Exegesis and Exposition: Preaching and Teaching for Spiritual Independence.” The revision contains an Addendum titled, “Brothers, We Are Not Chefs: On the Role of Biblical Languages In Understanding, Applying, and Teaching the Bible.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴ “We all need to know how to handle variants, translations, background, rhetorical structure, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and context” (*ibid.*, 8).