

New Testament Greek in a Theological Curriculum

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The question of retaining study of New Testament Greek as a compulsory part of the B.D. course is one which seems to come up for debate at regular intervals. Those responsible for framing the regulations are compelled to take decisions, for the degree is there and study for it goes on. Yet it does not appear that a fully satisfying solution has been found and it would be helpful to have the issue examined carefully and dispassionately.

First, let us set aside as irrelevant and even frivolous any suggestion that the study of Greek or Hebrew should be kept to ensure that the course is difficult enough! In theological study we are engaged in a vital part of the Church's work, and there is enough crying out to be done in the limited time available to make such a suggestion preposterous. We are to 'make the most of the time' (Eph. 5:16), to use to the best advantage the three short years which a graduate spends on this course, and whatever the difficulties are that the student must surmount, they are to be no artificial hurdles set for him as in an obstacle race, but the difficulties inherent in the task to which he is committed. We are to consider only what are, and are not, important subjects to be studied in his period of preparation.

Secondly, we must keep in mind that this is not a discussion of what could be claimed to be necessary for the training of all pastors. Anyone with the minimum acquaintance with the conditions of the Church in India must know the need in the pastoral ministry for a variety of persons, with training by no means uniform. The backbone of the pastoral ministry is probably provided by those who have the L.Th. or some equivalent diploma, some of whom have studied Greek, but by no means the majority. None would question their high contribution to the ministry.

What is under debate is the content of the syllabus for the B.D. degree, an academic qualification in Theology intended to be taken by persons already holding another degree or its equivalent. As the B.D. course itself covers three years of intensive study, its holder will be a person with the equivalent of seven years of work at collegiate or university level. Such a person may be called to a variety of responsibilities which should be kept

in mind in mapping out his course. But, no matter what his particular task may be, his academic attainment will be such that any interested person, Christian or not, will feel that he can turn to him for an informed answer to questions about the Faith. The question is whether or not ability to refer to the New Testament in the original language is something that ought to be assumed to be part of his equipment.

The question is not being discussed only in India. Much thought has been given to it, not least in western countries with a long tradition of theological study. In these countries it is understood that the end product should be a person capable of interpreting the Gospel to his generation and of rendering effective ministerial service amid the challenging pressures of our rapidly-changing age. In this situation, it is pointed out that, so far as study of the original documents of the Faith is concerned, scholarship has made immense advances and the fruits of it are abundantly available in the students' own language. This being so, and time being a scarce commodity, it has been urged that it is a shocking misuse of the students' time to require of each one that he master the original language. Let that be left to a few, the potential linguistic scholars of the future; for the rest, let there be room for a variety of studies, each with its own significance, so that holders of the B.D. degree will be a balanced company, equal in academic standing, but complementing each other's skills by a variety of attainments.

Such arguments are worthy of the most careful consideration, and it might be well to have them elaborated more fully in our Indian setting. Yet they have not proved convincing to all, for many theological institutions of higher training retain certain 'core' subjects, including Greek, and sometimes also Hebrew, as compulsory. Presumably the upholders of this more conservative view consider that, no matter what the conditions in which the theologically qualified person is to fulfil his ministry, it is essential that he have a clear grasp of the Faith itself which came to men in a particular historical setting. To apply the Gospel to life's situations is a demand which will come upon each one, and this must never be forgotten in the time of preparation. Yet the biggest element in preparation is to ensure that each one knows the Faith itself and is equipped with the capacity to return again and again to the original as he meets the challenge of his situation.

A second consideration is the peril of neglect of the study of other languages, especially of classical languages. For an educated man, this carries with it a danger of parochialism of outlook and superficiality if he is confined to his own tongue, even if it be a language as widely spoken as is English today. Not to have direct access to the cultural and religious values expressed originally in another language is a serious handicap.

Lastly, there are the values of language study itself available for any one who takes it seriously: (i) There is a sense of immediacy which lights up the Scriptures, even when the student knows only a modest amount, when he encounters the very words in which they were first expressed. (ii) There is the way in which the idiom of another language enables us to enter, at least to some degree, into the thought-form and pattern of those who used that language. We may be told about the Hebrew or the Greek way of thinking, but even as no description of snow can be a substitute for actually seeing it fall, so no explanation can be a substitute for actual experience of what the Greek or the Hebrew has actually said and written. As the Christian revelation came historically through a people who spoke and wrote in Greek, should not the student have the opportunity in some measure to enter into that idiom? (iii) Even a limited knowledge of the language will enable the student to know at least what the scholars are talking about. We must rely on the scholars, but there is a big difference between being a mere spectator at their discussion and having enough knowledge to see the significance of their argument. To have mastered the elements of New Testament Greek is to have been brought into a position in which the discussions in the commentaries and elsewhere take on meaning. (iv) We do not know in advance which student is likely to develop scholarly ability. To cut off any at the B.D. level might be to deprive the Church of the very man it needs for future linguistic work!

Such arguments are used in areas where English is the mother tongue. In our area, though the medium of study is still English, it is not the mother tongue, and we must give full weight to the fact that our students are preparing to serve in a land with vital and developing State languages of its own, each with a literary heritage, and with Hindi accepted as the national language. It is through these languages, and not through English, that an effective ministry is to be rendered.

Our consideration has, therefore, to be linked to a very alert awareness of the values and limitations of dependence on English. Today that language, so widely spoken, is an invaluable means of communication in world theological discussion. Yet it is by no means the only theological language, and there have been times when quite other languages—Latin for instance—have been the great media of theological work. Who is to say what God may have in store in generations just ahead of ours, when it may be some great Asian language which will be used for a penetrating interpretation of the Gospel?

This underlines a warning against identifying the Gospel with the western world and way of life. Continued dependence on the English medium, with students seeking constantly to be able to go to the West for advanced work, must surely be balanced by more thorough work, and exchange, within Asia itself. In that

situation ought not the student to have direct access to the wellsprings represented by the historical documents of the Faith ? Not only so, but within India it is urgently necessary to remember how small is the proportion of those who are literate in English. It is a trained leadership familiar with the languages of India which is so urgently needed, and should that leadership be cut off from the original languages ? Here, too, we may not forget that it is one function of the B.D. colleges to provide men of sufficient calibre and knowledge that they may later teach in regional language colleges, on which we shall more and more depend. We do not know in advance which of our B.D. students is likely to be called upon for such work ; but ought it not to be understood that the students, in the colleges in which they will teach, are entitled to have for teachers persons who themselves are in direct touch at least with the original language of the New Testament ?

Having in mind these reminders that our situation is different, we must look again at the arguments before we assume that they settle the matter for India. The argument that the fruits of much scholarly work are available in English is not so relevant for those who will work in Hindi, Tamil or Telugu. In lands where theological students are numbered by thousands, it may be argued that some of them may be spared the need to spend time on Hebrew or Greek, for they can rely on the scholars. The argument does not come home with equal force in areas in which the students are numbered in fives and tens. Nor can we stop even at that point, for our students also come from linguistic areas in which they are numbered by ones and twos. There are considerable territories in which the Church, within the last decade or two, has been growing very rapidly, but from which only now the first candidates are coming forward to take the B.D. degree. What kind of service shall we be rendering the infant Church in such areas by sending them men, qualified as holders of the B.D., but denied that equipment which will enable them to interpret the Gospel directly from the Greek New Testament into their mother tongue ? In our impatience to solve our problems, we need to be very careful lest once more we propagate the idea that Christianity in its English dress is alone what we have to offer to the peoples of India.

This article makes no claim to settle the issues. It is, however, composed in the conviction that not only have we to share intelligently in the discussion as it is going on in the wider world but that we shall fail seriously in our duty if, within our own specific sphere of responsibility, we do not give full weight to our situation and its demands. Even unanimity in the West—and that has not been reached !—will not lift from us our responsibility to reach our own conclusions in India.