

New Testament Greek in the B.D. Curriculum

J. R. CHANDRAN

The question of the place of New Testament Greek in the B.D. curriculum of Serampore College has been under discussion for many years. The majority view among those responsible for taking decisions about the academic programme of Serampore University has been that New Testament Greek should be a compulsory subject. But this policy has been questioned by many including the Faculty of the United Theological College, Bangalore.

The manner in which the Senate of Serampore College has dealt with the question is not very satisfactory. Instead of boldly examining the fundamental issues involved they have been trying compromise solutions. What they have done is to make quantitative concessions to students unable to make the proper grade in Greek. Some years ago every candidate for the B.D. degree was required to take four papers in Greek, a paper on Elements of New Testament Greek, an advanced paper on Greek Grammar, Syntax, and Compositions, and two papers on Exegesis, one on St. Mark and the other on St. John and the Epistle to the Ephesians. Because of repeated complaints from candidates the advanced paper on Greek Grammar and Syntax was made optional. Later another concession was given by which a candidate could do St. John and Ephesians in the English text instead of the Greek one. The latest position is that when a candidate is, in the opinion of his College Faculty, seriously handicapped because of his inability to cope with Greek he could be permitted to offer an alternate English New Testament Exegesis paper in the place of St. Mark in Greek. But such a candidate will be awarded the degree only if he has a final average of 50 per cent taking into consideration all Senate-examined subjects. This is certainly an unrealistic condition. Candidates confident of securing 50 per cent average will not normally ask for exemption from Greek. Those who have doubts about the 50 per cent will want to do Greek even though they may not really benefit from the Greek studies, lest they should lose the degree. It is unfortunate that instead of asking the fundamental question of the place and function of New Testament Greek studies in the Theological curriculum, the Senate of Serampore College has been taking decisions from time to time steadily reducing the minimum quantity of

Greek required, as though the crucial question is: What is the minimum amount of Greek a B.D. degree holder should know? At present, of course, the absolute minimum is only the knowledge of the alphabet and ability to read and write Greek! The rule does not require *passing* in the paper on Elements of Greek!

Now, the Faculty of the United Theological College, Bangalore, has been pressing for making New Testament Greek an optional subject for the B.D. curriculum. The following are the main reasons for this:

(i) The most important reason is our concern for producing good New Testament scholars for the Indian Church. The present system has not proved adequate for this purpose. Because every one is asked to do Greek the standard reached is rather low. The teacher has to keep pace with the average student. We need only to compare the number of M.Th. men we have produced in the New Testament field during the past several years with the corresponding number for Old Testament. The very fact that Hebrew is optional has meant that those who chose it did so because of their real interest and ability and did exceedingly well. It was possible to maintain high standards and we have comparatively more Indians qualified to teach Old Testament than New Testament. This also became obvious at the last meeting of the Serampore College Senate when we were trying to find people for the different Boards of Studies. Even though we could not fill the Old Testament Board entirely with Indians we were able to mention several names for that Board. But for the New Testament Board we had only one or two Indians. This certainly does not speak well for the policy we have followed in the past.

- It is important that we should revise the policy and develop the highest possible standards for New Testament scholarship. This can be done only by making the New Testament Greek an optional subject. Only those who are capable of linguistic work and are interested in Greek studies will offer it and those who take it can be expected to reach quite a high standard even within the B.D. curriculum. In Bangalore we do not allow a man to do his exegetical studies in Greek unless he has scored at least 50 per cent marks in the paper on Elements of New Testament Greek. We would like this made a general rule for all students of Serampore University. A candidate who fails to get 50 per cent in Elements of Greek has not really grasped the principles of the language and it is unwise to expect him to do exegetical studies on the Greek text of the New Testament.

Secondly, it is wrong to assume that the B.D. level of scholarship should necessarily be judged by the knowledge of New Testament Greek. While the B.D. is certainly distinct from L.Th. it is good to remember that the B.D. level also is marked by comprehensiveness of scholarship rather than intensity in any particular branch. Even without knowledge of N.T. Greek it is possible to acquire a good comprehensive theological training suitable for leadership in the Christian ministry. There are many universities

and theological seminaries in the West with high academic standards where one can do a B.D. degree without Greek or Hebrew. Some of those places like Harvard, Chicago, Yale, Union Theological Seminary, etc., have also made outstanding contributions to the study of Biblical languages.

Thirdly, insistence on Greek has disastrous effects on many candidates who do not have linguistic interests. In India hardly any student would have done Greek or Hebrew before he starts his theological training. Some candidates are in their late twenties or early thirties when they come for B.D. studies. Such candidates have extra difficulties in learning a new language unless they are specially interested in linguistics. Even the younger men are not all gifted with linguistic abilities. Therefore most candidates have to spend a great deal of their time in learning Greek, with the result that the other equally important subjects like Church History, Theology, etc., are neglected. Even after spending so much time for Greek many students do not acquire any high proficiency in the language and once they complete the B.D. course they seldom use their Greek in their ministry. For such students it would be far better if the time spent without profit in Greek studies is available for other essential subjects.

Those who have no linguistic talents can very profitably use their time for wider reading of exegetical commentaries on the English text. This is certainly very important. While knowledge of Biblical languages is a great help for exposition of scripture, good preaching and scholarship in Greek or Hebrew do not necessarily go together. A man can develop into a good preacher of the Word even without knowledge of Greek, if he knows how to use the scholarship of others. Further, the present situation of the Indian Church, from the point of view of both the life within the Church and the Church's task in the world, calls for a review of the emphases we place on different subjects in the Theological curriculum. Biblical studies should certainly continue to be the main part of the 'Core subjects'. But much greater attention than at present should be given to preaching, apologetic theology and Christian education. We have to work out a better balance between grasping the content of the Gospel and the effective communication of the Gospel. In the Church in India today preaching and Christian education or the teaching ministry of the Church are terribly weak. They are weak partly because theological training has not given sufficient attention to these. If we are to have adequate time for these subjects we should discourage candidates doing Greek or Hebrew who because of their difficulties with language studies are likely to neglect other key subjects. Candidates really capable of linguistic studies will not have to spend too much time for languages and they can also be expected to reach much higher standards than at present.