

The Importance of the Biblical Languages

Martin Luther

An excerpt from: "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524)

(**Emphasis** added throughout by [Rod Decker](#))

(Notes added in **red** by [Ryan D. Richie](#))

"All right," you say again, "suppose we do have schools; what is the use of teaching Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and the other liberal arts? We could just as well use German for teaching the Bible and God's word, which is enough for our salvation." I reply, Alas! I am only too well aware that we Germans must always be and remain brutes and stupid beasts, as the neighboring nations call us, epithets which we richly deserve. But I wonder why we never ask, "What is the use of silks, wine, spices, and other strange foreign wares when we ourselves have in Germany wine, grain, wool, flax, wood, and stone not only in quantities sufficient for our needs, but also of the best and choicest quality for our glory and ornament?" Languages and the arts, which can do us no harm, but are actually a greater ornament, profit, glory, and benefit, both for the understanding of Holy Scripture and the conduct of temporal government--these we despise. But foreign wares, which are neither necessary nor useful, and in addition strip us down to a mere skeleton--these we cannot do without. Are not we Germans justly dubbed fools and beasts?

Truly, if there were no other benefit connected with the languages, this should be enough to delight and inspire us, namely, that they are so fine and noble a gift of God, with which he is now so richly visiting and blessing us Germans above all other lands. We do not see many instances where the devil has allowed them to flourish by means of the universities and monasteries; indeed, these have always raged against languages and are even now raging. **For the devil smelled a rat, and perceived that if the languages were revived a hole would be knocked in his kingdom which he could not easily stop up again. Since he found he could not prevent their revival, he now aims to keep them on such slender rations that they will of themselves decline and pass away. They are not a welcome guest in his house, so he plans to offer them such meager entertainment that they will not prolong their stay.** Very few of us, my dear sirs see through this evil design of the devil. *(Many would say that this is no longer applicable to us today, because, they say, "The Scriptures are universally distributed today in a way they were not back then." Sadly, this thought stems from ignorance, for the NT was already translated into several languages at the time, one being English. We have our English Bibles today only because of Hebrew and Greek. The moment the languages disappear, the Word of God does. Having a variety of good translations does not in any sense negate a necessity to study the languages, but rather reveals the need for it all the more.)*

Therefore, my beloved Germans, let us get our eyes open, thank God for this precious treasure, and guard it well, lest the devil vent his spite and it be taken away from us again. **Although the gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages, was spread abroad by that means, and must be preserved by the same means.** For just when God wanted to spread the gospel throughout the world by means of the apostles he gave the tongues for that purpose. Even before that, by means of the Roman Empire he had spread the Latin and Greek languages widely in every land in order that his gospel might the more speedily bear fruit far and wide. He has done the same thing now as well. Formerly no one knew why God had the languages revived, but now for the first time we see that it was done for the sake of the gospel, which he intended to bring to light and use in exposing and destroying the kingdom of Antichrist. To this end he gave over Greece to the Turk in order that the Greeks, driven out and scattered, might disseminate their language and provide an incentive to the study of other languages as well.

In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. *(We should have a zeal for the gospel that is proportionate to that which we have for the languages. The two cannot be divorced. If we have zeal for the gospel we should have zeal for 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. St. Paul declared it to be the peculiar glory and distinction of Hebrew that God's word was given in that language, when he said in Romans 3, "What advantage or profit have those who are circumcised? Much indeed. To begin with, God's speech is entrusted to them." King David too boasts in Psalm 147, "He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation or revealed to them his ordinances." Hence, too, the Hebrew language is called sacred. And St. Paul, in Romans 1, calls it "the holy scriptures," doubtless on account of the holy word of God which is comprehended therein. Similarly, the Greek language too may be called sacred, because it was chosen above all others as the language in which the New Testament was to be written, and because by it other languages too have been sanctified as it spilled over into them like a fountain through the medium of translation."

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; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out, they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. **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.** *(Today we would say that "We read and write English just fine. We can speak and write English no doubt, but to speak about and write about the Scriptures in English while neglecting the languages is something which cannot be done correctly. Without a personal experiential knowledge of the Biblical languages, we will always be fully dependent on translation and second and third-hand sources.)* As proof and warning of this, let us take the deplorable and dreadful example of the universities and monasteries, in which men have not only unlearned the gospel, but have in addition so corrupted the Latin and German languages that the miserable folk have been fairly turned into beasts, unable to speak or write a correct German or Latin, and have well-nigh lost their natural reason to boot.

For this reason even the apostles themselves considered it necessary to set down the New Testament and hold it fast in the Greek language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us there safe and sound as in a sacred ark. For they foresaw all that was to come, and now has come to pass; they knew that if it was left exclusively to men's memory, wild and fearful disorder and confusion and a host of varied interpretations, fancies, and doctrines would arise in the Christian church, and that this could not be prevented and the simple folk protected unless the New Testament were set down with certainty in written language. **Hence, it is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish.** *(This is the heart of the matter – namely the gospel. The reason, if for nothing else, to learn the languages is for the sake of the gospel of our Lord. Where the languages disappear, the gospel will follow, among other things, even in the soundest preaching of churches, as we will always be dependent on second and third hand knowledge.)*

Experience too has proved this and still gives evidence of it. For as soon as the languages declined to the vanishing point, after the apostolic age, the gospel and faith and Christianity itself declined more and more until under the pope they disappeared entirely. After the decline of the languages Christianity witnessed little that was worth anything; instead, a great many dreadful abominations arose because of ignorance of the languages. On the other hand, now that the languages have been revived, they are bringing with them so bright a light and accomplishing such great things that the whole world stands amazed and has to acknowledge that we have the gospel just as pure and undefiled as the apostles had it, that it has been wholly restored to its original purity, far beyond what it was in the days of St. Jerome and St. Augustine. In short, the Holy Spirit is no fool. He does not busy himself with inconsequential or useless matters. He regarded the languages as so useful and necessary to Christianity that he oftentimes brought them down with him from heaven. This alone should be a sufficient motive for us to pursue them with diligence and reverence and not to despise them, for he himself has now revived them again upon the earth.

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.** *(This is a sad but true statement. Where the languages are known and employed by the guiding of the Spirit, error will be scarcely found. Exegetical Fallacies are rampant in the land today by those who do not know the languages, but rather rely solely on other sources, commentaries, lexicons, and computer programs, but who cannot themselves teach from the languages. Exegetical Fallacies are no less present in some Reformed pulpits than Arminian pulpits. In other words, just because someone is reformed or holds to sound doctrine, does not mean that they do not*

commit exegetical fallacies.) Let me give you an example It is rightly said that Christ is the Son of God; but how ridiculous it must have sounded to the ears of their adversaries when they attempted to prove this by citing from Psalm 110 "*Tecum principium in die viftutis tuae,*" though in the Hebrew there is not a word about the Deity in this passage! When men attempt to defend the faith with such uncertain arguments and mistaken proof texts, are not Christians put to shame and made a laughingstock in the eyes of adversaries who know the language? The adversaries only become more stiff-necked in their error and have an excellent pretext for regarding our faith as a mere human delusion.

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. (*And how often is this the case today? How often are our errors to blame for a negligence of the Biblical 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, as in the case of the verse mentioned above, "*Tecum principium,*" etc. 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.** (*Many would disagree with this paragraph, and claim that we can be "close enough" to the languages through ample translations and computer software today. I imagine that if Luther, and Owen, Spurgeon and others could hear the excuses hurled against the languages today, they would rebuke us for our laziness in taking shortcuts, making excuses, and using crutches.*

Thus, it has come about that since the days of the apostles Scripture has remained so obscure, and no sure and trustworthy expositions of it have ever been written. For even the holy fathers (as we have said) frequently erred. And because of their ignorance of the languages they seldom agree; one says this, another that. St. Bernard was a man so lofty in spirit that I almost venture to set him above all other celebrated teachers both ancient and modern. But note how often he plays (spiritually to be sure) with the Scriptures and twists them out of their true sense. This is also why the sophists have contended that Scripture is obscure; they have held that God's word by its very nature is obscure and employs a peculiar style of speech. But they fail to realize that the whole trouble lies in the languages. If we understood the languages nothing clearer would ever have been spoken than God's word. A Turk's speech must needs be obscure to me--because I do not know the language--while a Turkish child of seven would understand him easily.

Hence, it is also a stupid undertaking to attempt to gain an understanding of Scripture by laboring through the commentaries of the fathers and a multitude of books and glosses. Instead of this, men should have devoted themselves to the languages. Because they were ignorant of languages, the dear fathers at times expended many words in dealing with a text. Yet when they were all done they had scarcely taken its measure; they were half right and half wrong. Still, you continue to pore over them with immense labor even though, if you knew the languages, you could get further with the passage than they whom you are following. **As sunshine is to shadow, so is the language itself compared to all the glosses of the fathers.**

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. (*Today we have countless more resources and ease of access to learn these languages than in the 1500's, even more than we did 20 years ago. If men were without excuse 500 years ago: How much more so now? In the words of A.T. Robertson, "It ought to be taken*

for granted that the preacher has his Greek Testament.) 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. *(Two things are to be noted from this paragraph: First – where a man without the languages preaches to a people without the languages, his errors are soon to become their errors, for they will follow what he confidently asserts, not knowing that he is wrong nor when he is wrong. When men commit Exegetical Fallacies due to a lack of knowledge of Greek for example, they do not know that they have committed an error, nor do the listeners. How can we deeply and truly judge a teaching or preaching without a knowledge of the original tongue? We can't. Second – Without an experiential knowledge of the languages, our preaching and teaching will not be original, but dependent on others. We will be closer to the commentary and computer program, we will be more like parrots and less like prophets.)*

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.** *(It is a grave and serious thing to teach the Scriptures on any level, says James 3:1. We will be judged for every word we utter to others from the Scriptures. How terrifying to think that we may be speaking of the things of God differently than He intended, due to our own lack of a knowledge of the languages. So many men could learn the languages; they "could do this but will not". They refuse to even attempt to study them, but rather make endless excuses for not doing one of the very first things that a minister of the Word should do.)*

The material above may be found in several places, including an annotated edition in *Luther's Works*, ed. W. Brandt and H. Lehman (Philadelphia Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 340-78 entire article (this selection = 357-66); in the 1915-43 Philadelphia edition (often cited as *PE*), 4103-30; and in the German edition, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Deutsche Bibel (Weimar, 1906-).