

10. TRANSLATE BY TRAINING TRANSLATORS

For anyone who desires to know the writings of scripture as intimately as possible, there is no better way than to learn to read them in the language in which they were first written: Koine Greek. Translators who have had the incredible privilege of learning the language used by Jesus' students to record his teachings should never hesitate to offer this same privilege to others. It is one thing to read a translation of the words of Christ, but it is quite another to read the very words the authors actually wrote. No closer contact with the original writers is possible. Reading the Greek text is like looking over the shoulders of Paul and Peter and James and John as they wrote. This is a realization that helps to transport a reader back to the time of Christ and his students.

People who value the scriptures should consider learning Greek. Given the importance and the immeasurable worth of the scriptures, it is actually difficult to explain why so few people have made the effort to read them in Greek. It is quite normal for people to learn the source languages of other important areas of knowledge. Doctors, scientists, teachers, technicians, and dozens of other knowledgeable individuals spend years at universities learning how to access the factual sources of their fields, and that always means language learning—whether it's foreign languages or the languages of mathematics, science, computer programming, or whatever other languages are needed for acquiring the source level understanding that makes a person an expert. Why shouldn't a serious student of the scriptures be just as ready and willing to gain access to the facts of the writings that record the teachings of Christ?

Language learning is in fact one of the main differences between a person who is casually interested in a matter and one who could truly be considered a student. Language learning in this sense does not always mean a foreign language, but it does mean learning languages that are every bit as challenging as a foreign language. The languages of the many sciences require years to learn. Computer programmers consider it standard procedure to learn several programmer languages. The languages of law, mechanics, construction, and business are mastered by individuals who need years of training and more years of experience.

Even in areas that are often considered hobbies or interests there is a clear difference between those who are only marginally involved and those who are the true students. I remember talking to a twelve-year-old boy who was quite a student without even knowing it. Like many boys his age, he expressed more disdain than interest in school. But when the conversation came to his hobby—baseball cards—it was obvious that he was no casual collector. He was a true student. He knew the history of the cards, the most important literature dealing with them, the going prices, AND he knew the content of the cards. He could spout off the rosters of whole teams. He knew hundreds of players and all the stats from their best years. I asked him when Mickey Mantle won the triple crown and he immediately answered *1956*.

This young boy didn't show much interest in learning languages in school, but when it came to baseball he could speak the language of it like a major leaguer. He was a linguistic wonder. His linguistic prowess was proof that baseball had won his heart. Isn't it in fact true that people almost always become students of their true interests? And isn't it true that they will do this in spite of barriers that might deter others?

Genuine interest spurs language learning

I once met a man who had never finished high school and considered himself to be almost illiterate. He never read books and was always quick to point out that he was not very good with words. He worked as a mechanic in a small auto repair shop. I asked him what he did in his spare time, and he said that he rebuilt antique cars. Then he took me out into the back yard of his home and showed me a workshop. We walked in, and I was dumbfounded. It was a marvel of organization, and two beautiful "old fellers," as he calls antique cars, were up on mounts in the shop.

I looked at his work bench and saw a pile of catalogues. I asked what they were. He explained they were the sources of parts for old cars. He said it is a complicated undertaking to locate parts for automobiles built over sixty or seventy years ago. He showed me the entries in the catalogues and the research he had to do to trace the parts. I understood absolutely nothing of what I was reading. It was thousands of pages of information in small print. He perused through it as though he was reading a children's book. I saw I was standing next to another master of a source language. He was a true student of antique cars, and his love for them had made an expert reader and researcher out of him in this field.

It's interesting that neither the boy with the baseball card collection nor the man who rebuilt old cars thought that they were capable of being good students in school, and neither thought they could ever learn a foreign language. Both clearly demonstrated, however, that they would be just as capable as anyone to learn another language.

Ability is not the issue when it comes to languages. Genuine interest is. What sort of interest could possibly motivate them to learn a language? One thing is sure: It would have to be something as valuable to them as baseball cards or antique cars.

Over the years, in my efforts to help people understand the scriptures, I have always suggested that they consider learning Koine Greek. The suggestion almost always comes as a surprise. For some, it's the first time to hear that the scriptures were originally written in Greek. Others think I'm joking. When people realize I'm serious, I often hear a long list of reasons why learning Greek would be impossible for them. Most people are simply convinced they have neither the time nor the ability to learn a foreign language, and for some reason learning Greek sounds particularly daunting.

Nevertheless, I seldom let a person's protests go unanswered. I've always thought that being a student of Christ is the greatest privilege that could ever be offered a person. And since reading Jesus' own words in Greek is as close as you can get to his thoughts, why not offer a person that opportunity?

Following is a list of additional reasons that I often share with individuals to jog their thinking and to motivate them to consider learning Koine Greek:

1. The need for access to source-level information is in direct proportion to the worth and importance of the information itself.

Let's say you're going to bake a cake. When the ingredients are in a bowl you reach for an electric mixer. Question: Do you need to know the language of mechanics or be acquainted with minute details of electric current to properly use the mixer?

Of course not. More than a general knowledge of the safe use of such an appliance is not necessary.

Now change the scene. There's a jetliner sitting out on the runway; hundreds of passengers are on board; it's ready for takeoff. You're supposed to be the pilot. Question: Do you need to know the language of aviation and be acquainted with minute details of the operation of airplanes to adequately fly the machine? Dumb question. Who would want to fly with a pilot who knows little more about airplanes than he does about mixers?

The answers to both questions are obvious, simply because of the issues of worth and danger. Cakes have little worth and mixers are low risk contraptions, so why bother to become a mixer expert? But flying such a complex machine full of people is a vastly different matter. Years of the most detailed preparation are not too much to require of the person who takes the pilot's seat.

The point is this: It's standard procedure for people to go to the details of the sources in all the high-risk areas of life. Medical doctors, commercial pilots, and financial managers, for example, first learn the intricate and demanding language of their professions before they are trusted to make real-life decisions.

What about the worth or the importance of the message of Christ? Is it low-value information comparable to the instructions of how to use an electric mixer? Or is it crucial information like that needed to fly airplanes?

2. Learning to read detailed information at the source-level demonstrates interest and commitment.

What's the difference between a highly-skilled, knowledgeable computer enthusiast and a casual user? Wouldn't you say that *attention to detail* catches the essence of the difference?

Just think of the people who exhibit high interest and commitment in any area of life. Isn't their passion often recognizable in the amount of serious literature and information they have collected and mastered?

Consider the man I met who taught himself the skill of rebuilding old automobiles and in the process learned to research the location of difficult-to-find parts. Doesn't his involvement with the language and literature of antique cars confirm and demonstrate his intense interest?

What about the man who has a large library of cookbooks, files full of recipes, and an impressive array of cooking skills? Is there any doubt about the kind of information he values?

Or what about individuals who amass resources related to the health and well being of their families—often reading extensively, attending classes, and even challenging the conventional wisdom of the medical society? Don't they demonstrate how important they consider health-related information to be?

What would we think of the same people if they were just casual readers in these areas? What if they were unable to discuss cars, cooking, or health in much detail? Would we conclude that they were serious students of these subjects?

The fact is that people usually recognize what is really important to a person by observing that individual's degree of involvement with relevant information sources. This is true of all kinds of information. A father, for example, who spends hours in front of the TV is showing his children the kind of information he values. And if he reads the Sunday paper from cover to cover every week, he's announcing to his children that the information contained in it is worth the time invested in it.

What message do I want to send my children about the scriptures? What do I want people to conclude about my estimation of the worth of the teachings of Christ? Are they as important as the Sunday paper? As important as any list of TV programs? As important as recipes or personal health? As important as research pinpointing where a carburetor for a 1931 Jaguar sedan can be purchased?

3. Linguistic accuracy is the essence of love.

The writers of the scripture, *What It's Like With Christ*, traditionally called *I John*, (see Appendix A), wrote the following words: *This is the love of God that we do what he tells us to do* (5:3). Why would the writer describe love in this way? How can love be following instructions? This is certainly foreign to the love-is-a-good-feeling or love-is-always-being-nice concepts that are so typical of today. It is very easy, however, to demonstrate the relationship between true words and true love.

Let's say you need an operation. Would you rather have a very nice and lovable, but sloppy and unconcentrated surgeon operate on you, or a gruff and unfriendly, but very accurate and experienced surgeon? No question about this decision, right? Anyone would opt for the gruff ol' guy, preferring to have all that accuracy and concentration available particularly when sharp instruments are in the equation. The warm, friendly doctor might *seem* more loving, but if he has no skill in following medical instructions, he is not in a position to do what the patient most needs. And if that's not an essential part of love—doing for a person what they most need—then what is it?

Love isn't an external show of emotion. It is essentially an internal *care* and *commitment to the truth*. It always does what is best in God's eyes for the person in question. It can only do that, however, if it's drenched in truth, and that can only come from the scriptures.

4. The way we deal with information reflects directly on our credibility.

Let's say, for example, that a man thinks of himself as an excellent golfer, and yet neither plays golf well nor is able to discuss technical aspects of the game. Won't such a person quickly be perceived by his peers as a casual golfer and not as a credible source for golf-related information?

Now, pick any topic—chess, baseball cards, Wall Street, computers, herbs, knitting, hunting—aren't the real students the ones who are constantly on the lookout for the best possible information concerning their interest? And isn't it the serious devotees who go to great lengths to educate themselves in the intricacies of their beloved activity? The casually interested or superficially informed dabbler is obviously nothing more than a detached observer.

What kind of person then is a credible follower of Christ? To what lengths does that kind of person go in his or her desire to understand Christ and play the game of life as Jesus would expect it to be played?

5. Learning foreign languages is not normally considered strange and unusual behavior.

Is it logical for a person who claims to follow Christ to think it laudable for his children to learn a foreign language such as Spanish, French, German, or Latin, and yet at the same time think it impractical to learn Koine Greek? Does it make sense that a person committed to Christ would consider mathematics, geography, typing, chemistry, music, economics, physical education, and all the other school subjects worthy of learning, and yet scoff at the idea of learning the original language of the writings of scripture?

6. Second-hand information is a potential problem in all areas of life.

Think about any profession. Does second-hand information pose a potential danger for them? Do doctors accept the diagnosis of other doctors? Do insurance adjusters want to see original documents? Is hear-say enough for a policeman? Do engineers or contractors ever check the blueprints just to make sure? Do personnel managers ask for credentials or do they simply take the word of job seekers?

Most responsible individuals quickly become uneasy when faced with having to depend on second- or third-hand information. Without a reliable access to sources, a person simply cannot be sure about the facts of a matter.

If second- or third-hand information is a potential problem for responsible decisions in so many areas of life, then how much more so must that be true regarding the scriptures? Few pieces of literature have been so attacked, manipulated, and twisted by so many friends and foes alike.

7. Language learning is the best transport into a new world.

To truly understand a computer, one has to learn the programming languages that make communicating with a computer possible. The many worlds of reality are all like that. They are accessed by languages. Even something as rudimentary as reading maps opens up whole new worlds of geography, distances, directions, topography, AND travel. They are all available to anyone who has the skill of map reading.

Learning Koine Greek provides a fascinating view of the world of the first century. One of the biggest barriers to understanding the scriptures is caused by the distance between the world of present day readers and the world of the writers and the first readers. A Greek learner automatically becomes oriented to different sources and perspectives. It quickly becomes evident to a language learner that the language needs to be understood like the writers and speakers of the language understood it. The learner finds it necessary to depart from familiar ways of understanding words and is forced to venture into new territory, learning new avenues of comprehension.

8. Language learning is a road to confidence.

It's always unnerving not to be able to "read" in a situation. Observe computer illiterate people trying to use even a simple piece of software. They're afraid to push the wrong key and are unsure what they should do. Observe travelers in a foreign country without a map and without knowing the language. They immediately start looking for someone to help them. They are dependent on others. Observe individuals in many consulting situations, be it financial, medical, legal, or social. Many are forced to respond like small children, accepting what they are told because they have no way of evaluating the information given them.

In each situation, the more a people understand the information sources the less their fear and the greater their confidence. Language learning opens the way to facts and sources. Language learning breaks down dependencies. Language learning is the prerequisite to maturity in all areas. Anyone who wants confidence and know-how in an area of expertise turns to language learning.

9. Greek is not more difficult to learn than other languages.

There are good reasons why the task of learning Koine Greek is considerably less challenging than people imagine. Consider the following major tasks of language learning: (1) Pronunciation, (2) writing, (3) learning vocabulary, (4) learning the grammar, and (5) reading.

Of these five, only three have to be learned when learning Koine Greek, and one of them is used to a lesser degree than would be necessary for another language.

Pronunciation, for example, is unnecessary to learn because the goal is not to speak the language. Learners can actually pronounce Koine Greek any way they desire. We don't know how the language was pronounced anyway.

Writing the language is also not necessary. A Koine Greek learner will have no need to write letters or essays. This means that the recall of the language for communicative purposes is not necessary. This is one of the most difficult skills of language learning.

Just think, pronouncing and writing a language are two very big tasks to master when learning a modern language, and neither of these tasks is necessary when learning Koine Greek.

Reading is the main task for a learner of Koine Greek. This is the goal. And any language learner will tell you that reading is the easiest of all the tasks of learning a language. People can usually read a new language far quicker than they can speak it. This is because the ability to recognize words always grows faster than the ability to recall words.

It is necessary, of course, to learn the grammar and the vocabulary of Koine Greek, but the number of words that need to be learned is considerably smaller than would be necessary to learn to be fluent in a modern language. Only about 5,000 words are used in the scriptures. Compare that to the tens of thousands of words that constitute a modern language, and it is obvious that learning the vocabulary of the scriptures is not a comparable task.

Does this mean that learning Koine Greek will be easy? Of course not. It will certainly require hard work and discipline. It does mean, however, that learning the language of the scriptures is not an impossible mission for anyone.

10. Learning Koine Greek is a big step toward becoming a translator of the scriptures.

Christ chose a time to come into the world, he chose a place where he would live, and he chose certain men to be his representatives. The language that was dominant at all of these junctures of choice—the time, the place, the people—was Koine Greek. It became the language in which the teachings of Christ were first written. Documents in Koine Greek are the factual basis for the words of Christ.

What greater sources of information could ever be tapped? What better information could ever be passed on to anyone? The writings of scripture are the words of life. There is nothing virtual or fanciful about them. No words anywhere offer more wisdom, more truth, more substance, more stability, more understanding, and more genuine joy.

In view of the incomparable worth of the scriptures, it is crucial that people have complete access to them. As we have seen, however, the translations in which they are available are deficient in many ways. Knowing this should be motivation enough for serious students of the scriptures to do everything necessary to prepare themselves for the work of translating.