

It's Greek To Me

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A recent post raised questions about the value of having a knowledge of New Testament Greek. Some have used arguments based on the translations of words to authorize immorality that the Bible clearly condemns. This usage of the Greek is disturbing; it casts a shadow on an otherwise beneficial field of study. I want to suggest to you that a knowledge of New Testament Greek is helpful for a couple of reasons:

1. A knowledge of Greek is useful in refuting error.

A few years ago, I was asked by my mother-in-law to listen to a series of audio tapes that were made during a series on MDR at her congregation. The speaker twisted clear texts, sometimes with illogical arguments based on human wisdom, sometimes with arguments based on the Greek. He argued that what was being taught at Florida College, that the present tense denotes continual action, is not truly the case. He argued that one who commits adultery does not abide in an adulterous relationship; adultery is committed only at the time of divorce; once repented of, the sin is forgiven, allowing a couple to remain together regardless of the number of or reasons for previous divorces. In this instant, I was glad that I only took one year of Greek at Florida College but two more years of Greek at the University of South Florida. Even in that bastion of liberalism, the present tense of Greek denotes continual action.

The illustration above deals with false teaching among brethren. Of course, Greek has been used quite effectively for years to refute false teaching by denominational and sect/cult teachers. A knowledge of Greek is not necessary to learn the truth; it isn't even necessary to refute error, but it can be helpful.

2. Additionally, a knowledge of Greek is useful to provide insights.

The nature of New Testament Greek is, in and of itself, an interesting study. It is called "New Testament Greek" because it is a distinctly different from the Classical Greek written by Socrates and the philosophers who came after him. The introductions of most Greek textbooks provide a detailed account of what I mention here in brief. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, the Greek of the New Testament was a mystery; no one knew quite what to make of it. Skeptics argued that the difference between the Greek of the Bible and Classical Greek was evidence that the Bible was in some way inauthentic, contrived. Then, at the turn of the century, a discovery was made in Egypt: Archeologists discovered a selection of "non literary papyri"—wills, receipts, contracts, and personal letters. To their astonishment, they discovered that the language of these common documents was the same form of Greek used in the New Testament. Classical Greek was still being read and written by the scholars during New Testament times, but God did not chose to record His word in the language of scholars; he recorded the Bible

in the common language of the day, a language called “Koine,” common Greek. By itself, this fact is insightful. God wrote to the common man, in the language of the common man.

I mention this to clarify another issue as well. It has been asked if preachers today think they know more than the people who originally translated the Bible. Well, as a matter of fact, many of them do. Having taken only three years of Greek, years I have sadly allowed to fade into obscurity, I am hardly a scholar myself, but those who truly dedicate themselves to the study of Greek today often do gain a greater understanding of the language than the King James translators. This statement may surprise you, but the King James translators had only the Bible text itself to work with. The scholars of today also have the “non-literary papyri” discovered in Egypt. The “non-literary papyri” gives a context to many New Testament words, helping us to better understand what the terms meant to the original audience.

Like anything else, Greek can be overused or poorly used, but it has the potential to add insight and interest in sermons and studies. But note: Greek provides some insights, but beware the wolf who hinges doctrinal truth upon a matter of translation.

Do I think that everyone needs to know Greek? Certainly not. I find it helpful but hardly essential. And I would echo for you a statement I heard frequently during the year I took Greek at Florida College: “A little Greek is a dangerous thing.” Peter warned of “untaught and unstable people” who “twist” the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). English or Greek, the Scriptures have always been subject to twisting. God forbid that in our ignorance we become counted among those about whom Peter warned.