

## How I Use Greek and Hebrew in My Teaching

By Tim Nichols

I am writing this because a number of people have noticed that in my preaching I mention the languages rather less than some of the other teachers that they've listened to. I'm not talking about the occasional reference to a word once or twice in a sermon—although I usually don't do that, either. I'm talking about giving the congregation a steady bludgeoning of Greek and Hebrew words for the entire sermon, even going so far as to project the words, in the original script, onto a screen so everyone can see them. For someone who hasn't gotten used to that sort of teaching, well, he won't miss the lack of it in mine. But the folks who have grown accustomed to hearing a sermon liberally salted with Greek and Hebrew words and grammatical terms tend to miss that when I don't do it. In fact, they miss it so much that usually, they stop listening to my preaching. When someone stops listening to my preaching, he usually doesn't tell me why, but more often than not, he will tell *someone*, and over time, what he said gets back to me through the grapevine. Now I realize that the grapevine is not the most reliable source of information, but this has happened often enough for me to see a pattern. The wording varies from a general “not serious” or “not deep enough” to the more specific “He doesn't value the languages,” or “He doesn't preach based on the languages.” In addition, two or three courageous souls have worked up the nerve to talk to me directly, and similar concerns have come up in those conversations. Do I actually *use* the languages, they want to know. If so, how come I hardly ever talk about what the Greek or Hebrew says? Don't I think the languages are important?

Well, yes, I do think the languages are important. As a matter of fact, I think the languages are so important that when my Bible college scheduled all the courses for my major opposite the Greek classes, I dropped my major so I could take Greek. After college, I moved clear across the country, leaving my home, my family, all my friends, and a full-tuition scholarship at a nearby seminary to study under John Niemelä, who still gives the strongest master's-level training in exegesis that you could get in this country. I took 4 years of Greek and 3 years of Hebrew. When I graduated, they hired me to teach—Greek, among other things. I have since taught Greek regularly here in California (including third- and fourth-year classes), and in concentrated doses in Colorado and Australia. When some folks in my church asked me to start a Greek class out here in Hemet, I did that too. So I think my track record with the languages speaks for itself pretty eloquently.

Do I use the languages? Constantly. Hardly a day goes by that I don't refer to my Greek and Hebrew texts. So, if I think the languages are important, and if I use them constantly, how come I can go weeks without talking about them in my preaching? Because that way is better. I'll explain why, but in order to avoid confusion, I'd like to start by describing what I do. Once we're clear on exactly what I'm defending, I'll explain why I do it that way.

## What I Do

**In my teaching, I refer to the languages when there is a danger that you will miss the point otherwise.** When I talk about “missing the point” here, I mean either what the passage says (interpretation) or a way of putting it into practice (application). For example, there may be an important translation error, as in Romans 8:17,<sup>1</sup> or a mispunctuation, as in Revelation 3:10.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps there is a pun or untranslatable feature that is important, as in Genesis 2:23.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps there is a significant text-critical issue, as in James 2:18.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the argument of the passage (or a key application of it) hinges on the nuance of a particular word, as in Hebrews 10:24.<sup>5</sup> In cases like this, you’ll hear me refer to the languages. I won’t get into the technical details any more than necessary to help you see the point, and then I will move on.

**In my teaching, I do not refer to the languages when you’ll get the point from English, which you usually can.** Let me stress that I’m not saying I only *use* the languages occasionally in my own preparation. I use them constantly, and in the seminary classroom with other people who know the languages, I refer to them constantly. But in church with people who do not know the languages, you won’t hear me use Greek and Hebrew vocabulary or grammatical terms when the English

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<sup>1</sup> Nearly all English translations are vague on whether heirship with God and joint-heirship with Christ are one thing with two conditions (being God’s child and suffering with Christ), or two separate items, each with its own condition. The Greek is *very* clear on this point, and could be translated, “...and if children, then heirs: heirs, **on one hand**, of God, and **on the other hand**, joint heirs with Christ if indeed we suffer with Him...” This makes it quite clear that Paul is speaking of two separate things, each with its own condition. To be an heir of God, one only needs to be God’s child. To be a joint heir with Christ, one also needs to suffer with Christ.

<sup>2</sup> 3:19-20 should read, “Indeed I will make *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie -- indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you, **because you have kept My command to persevere**. I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” Most translations have the period before the portion in bold here, instead of after.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrew uses the suffix -ah to designate feminine gender on its nouns, somewhat like English uses -ess (e.g., actor, actress; baron, baroness; mister, mistress). Thus, the Hebrew for a male horse is *sus*, and for a female horse is *susah*. The Hebrew word that Adam uses for *man* here is *ish*, and the word for woman is *ishah*. It sounds like the feminine form of the word for *man*, which would be appropriate. However, the linguists tell us that *ishah* is not actually the feminine form of *ish* at all, because it comes from a different root word. This means that in the middle of the poem in which Adam names Woman, he is also making a pun—a very sophisticated use of language for a man less than a day old.

<sup>4</sup> The Alexandrian manuscripts read “Show me your faith **without** your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” The much more reliable Majority Text manuscripts read “Show me your faith **by** your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” Within the context, the change in preposition makes a substantial difference.

<sup>5</sup> The word usually translated *consider* means *to think carefully, to examine closely, to contemplate*. So believers are to carefully contemplate each other, to study each other, in order to discern how best to stir each other up to love and good works. This is a far cry from “respecting someone’s privacy” so thoroughly that you know nothing about him, and try to have no influence on him. It is also a far cry from simply walking up to a fellow believer and doing a “truth dump” where you just lay out the facts impersonally, as you might do to anyone. Rather, if you know what truth your fellow believer needs to hear, your job is only half done. The other part is to consider how best to communicate that truth to him *so that it actually does stir him to love and good works*. For examples of this sort of wise communication, consider Nathan’s approach to David in 2 Samuel 12 or Esther’s approach to the king in Esther 5-7.

equivalents will serve. The wonderful works of God can be translated and explained in any language (see Acts 2), and we have a 600-year tradition of English Bible translation.<sup>6</sup> That's a long time for God's people to work the kinks out of the translation, and usually, they've done reasonably well. In those cases, I don't give you my translation; I teach from the translations we already have in front of us.

### **Why I Do It This Way**

First and foremost, **I teach this way because it follows the biblical pattern.** The whole Old Testament was originally in Hebrew (except for a few sections in Aramaic), so the language issue doesn't really enter into the ministry of the Old Testament prophets. However, the Hebrew Old Testament is the Bible that the New Testament authors were using. They wrote in Greek, and when they refer to the Old Testament—which is often—they quite often use the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that their Greek-speaking audience would have used. You'll scour the New Testament in vain for the words, “In the Hebrew, it says....” Occasionally, a writer will offer a translation of a place name, personal name, or expression, or a teacher will teach a lesson that depends on a fine point of grammar, as Jesus did to prove that there is resurrection from the dead.<sup>7</sup> But the vast majority of the teaching is simply delivered in the language of the readers—Greek—using the translation that was available, or translating from Hebrew as required. There may be various reasons for liberally salting one's preaching with Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and grammatical terms, but following the biblical models of teaching and preaching is not one of them. I have a hard time believing that I can go wrong by following the pattern laid down by Jesus, Peter, John, Paul, and the other New Testament teachers.

**I also teach this way because it models a way of studying the Bible that you can emulate.** I teach from the context and the argument of the book rather than from the minutia of the grammar. The grammar is important, but usually your English translation, or the translation I provide, will communicate the meaning of the salient grammatical features without the need for technical discussion. As my Greek students learn the hard way, the minute details of grammar are important, but they pale in comparison to the context and the argument of the book, which usually come through just fine in translation. For me to divert your attention away from the context and argument and onto my linguistic expertise not only switches your focus away from the most important and

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<sup>6</sup> If we're counting partial translations, the history is actually more than twice as long. Venerable Bede and Aldhelm were translating portions of Scripture into Old English by the end of the seventh century. But a *complete* English translation was not available until Wycliffe's Bible in the late fourteenth century. A grand army of intelligent and devoted saints has worked for centuries so that you can understand the Bible in English. Many of these people devoted their whole lives to translation work, and some of them were martyred for doing it. For a pastor today to scorn the translations does a grave injustice to our brothers and sisters in Christ who gave so much for so good a cause—and reflects a severe lack of grace and gratitude in the pastor. (Not that I haven't made more than my share of snotty comments about translations; I have. No doubt I'll get to answer for them at the Judgment Seat. But I hope I don't do it again.) There are errors and they do need to be corrected, but we must do that graciously and respectfully.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 22:31-32. Jesus' argument here hinges on the tense of the (implied) verb: it doesn't say “**I was** the God of Abraham...” but “**I am** the God of Abraham....,” therefore, Abraham is still alive, even though his earthly life has ended.

strongest arguments to the lesser ones, it also creates the impression that if you really want to understand the Bible, you have to know the languages. That is simply not true,<sup>8</sup> and the practical consequences are devastating. Giving you that impression will encourage you to rely upon me to tell you what the Bible says, and discourage you from reading the Bible yourself. I will *not* cripple you like that. I am seeking to train you to be better at engaging the Bible, not worse, and that means you need me to model something you can do, and you need practice doing it. “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” At risk of belaboring the obvious, that’s “from the mouth of God” not “from the mouth of the pastor.” Attention to the Word is vital to your spiritual growth. For me to make you dependent on me in order to know anything about the Bible sets up a false priesthood and interposes a very unqualified mediator between God and man. It is fundamentally incompatible with a biblically sound shepherding ministry, and I just won’t do it. I’ll have plenty to answer for at the Judgment Seat already; I don’t need to add *that* to my list of sins.

**Finally, not only would liberally salting my preaching with Greek and Hebrew vocabulary and grammatical terms depart from the biblical pattern and impair your spiritual growth, it’s also completely useless to you.** Let me illustrate. Suppose I were preaching on eternal security, and I referred to Romans 8:24a “For we were saved in hope....” Suppose I tell you that *the Greek expression translated “were saved” is an aorist periphrastic participle, which clearly indicates a once-for-all transaction that can never be undone. You can never lose your salvation, and the Greek of Romans 8:24 proves it.* Sounds pretty cool, huh?

Now here’s the problem with that sort of thing: even if it’s true, you can’t use it, and if it’s not true, you won’t know it. Let me explain what I mean. Suppose you happen, in the course of the next week, to encounter someone who thinks he can lose his salvation. “Oh, wonderful,” you think to yourself, “Tim just preached on this.” So you pull out your notebook, looking for good arguments. Here it is, right from the Greek: “The aorist periphrastic participle in Romans 8:24a proves that salvation is a once-for-all transaction that can never be undone.” So you tell him that.

Now maybe you get lucky, and he’s so intimidated by your display of “knowledge” that he doesn’t have any comeback for it. Maybe. But not everybody is so easy to intimidate. Suppose, when you give him that argument, he asks you what it means? How are you going to explain it? What are you supposed to say?

Suppose he takes a few notes, talks to his pastor, and then comes back and says “My pastor took Greek in seminary too, and he says the Greek doesn’t say that.” Then what are you going to tell him? “My pastor can whip your pastor?”

Even worse, suppose he knows a little Greek? He says to you, “Now, I’ve had three years of Greek, and that doesn’t sound right to me. I don’t think you can prove that.” And he gets out his Greek New Testament, and looks at Romans 8:24, and says to

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<sup>8</sup> See my most recent journal article, “Who Can Understand the Bible?” *CTS Journal* 12 (Spring 2006) 2-18. If you’d like a copy, see me.

you, “Wow, you just really don’t have any idea what you’re talking about, do you?” Then what are you going to say?

Well, let me tell you, if he knows a little Greek, you are in more trouble than a Jehovah’s Witness at a Greek scholars’ convention. Why? Well, remember that statement, “*The aorist periphrastic participle in Romans 8:24a proves that salvation is a once-for-all transaction that can never be undone*”? It’s dead wrong for three very important reasons. First, the aorist tense does *not* prove once-for-all action.<sup>9</sup> Second, there is no periphrastic participle in Romans 8:24. And finally, *there’s no such thing* as an aorist periphrastic participle, because periphrastic participles don’t occur in the aorist tense! But here’s the snag: ***you didn’t know any of that, and probably, you didn’t have any way of finding it out.*** Oh, you wouldn’t have to take a year of Greek or anything that extreme to check it—there are tools where you can look that sort of thing up. But probably you don’t own them, and even if you could borrow them from somebody, you don’t know how to use them. So like I said, if it’s true, you can’t use it, because you don’t really understand what it means. And if it’s not true, you’re not going to know it. Basically, you’d be bluffing.

You might be thinking right now, “Well, of course I wouldn’t repeat that sort of thing to anybody if I don’t understand it. But I’d like to know it just for my own knowledge.” But it won’t benefit you for the same reason that you can’t use it to benefit anyone else. How is it going to help you if you don’t understand it? So again, even if it’s true, you can’t use it. And if it’s not, how are you going to know? I don’t say this to belittle you, but to cause you to honestly examine whether a pastor throwing around technical terms actually increases your knowledge and understanding, or just puffs you up, making you feel as though you know more than you really do, and making you feel more certainty than your comprehension of the material really justifies.

You see, there is a form of flattery going on here. To understand the Bible, you have to be expert in the Greek and Hebrew—so the story goes. Initially, this story would seem to belittle the members of the congregation who don’t know the languages, but

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<sup>9</sup> This is *not* a recent discovery. “The constant characteristic of the Aorist tense in all its moods, including the participle, is that **it represents the action denoted by it indefinitely; i.e. simply as an event**, neither on the one hand picturing it in progress, **nor on the other affirming the existence of its result**. The name *indefinite* as thus understood is therefore applicable to the tense in all of its uses” (bold emphasis added). (Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1976) 16). “The aorist, as will be shown, is not the only way of expressing indefinite (undefined) action, but it is the normal method of doing so.” (A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934) 831). For a more recent treatment, see Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (June 1972) 222-31. When Stagg wrote, the issue was long since settled; no reputable grammarian would have argued that use of the aorist proves once-for-all action. Stagg was simply protesting that preachers and theologians were still clinging to the notion despite mountains of evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, this sort of thing is the long-term trend. In 1882, Winer was already complaining, “The N. T. grammarians and commentators have been chargeable with the grossest mistakes in regard to the tenses of the verb.” (G. B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. W. F. Moulton, 9<sup>th</sup> English ed., vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1882; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997) 330). **This footnote helps make my point about how useless this sort of thing is to you. Do you have access to any of these sources? If you did, could you use them effectively?**

there's more. These esoteric language skills are so difficult to achieve that *even most pastors* don't have them. It follows that if even most pastors don't understand the Bible, then their congregations don't either. By listening faithfully to a pastor who liberally festoons his sermons with the trappings of linguistic expertise,<sup>10</sup> you become one of the very few who *really* understand. By hearing many Greek and Hebrew words and grammatical terms in each sermon, your pride of place is continually reinforced. You are a part of the inner circle, one of the privileged few who listens to a *man who knows*.

At best, this kind of thing is a worthless affectation. At worst, this subtle flattery is exactly the kind of thing that Jude is talking about when it describes certain teachers mouthing "great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage." Jude's readers were not to be seduced by such things—nor should you be.

## **Conclusion**

I played a nasty trick on you with that Romans 8:24 bit. I did the very thing I don't do in my sermons—I took advantage of my specialized knowledge to show you how much *I* know, and how much you *don't* know. I would never have done it, except that I want you to focus on what will be most productive for you, and not be bedazzled by things that are—for the moment—beyond your reach. If you want to come to the point where rapid-fire references to Greek words and grammatical categories are *actually* helpful to you, that's wonderful, and I will happily help you to do that. Anyone can do it; people of all ages learn languages every day. All it takes is time. Specifically, it will take 15-30 minutes a day of drilling time, and about 6-10 hours a week of study time, for 48-64 weeks (that's 1½-2 years on a regular academic schedule, or 11-15 months if you do it straight through). By the end of that time, you'll be able to sit down and do your morning devotions in your Greek New Testament. If that's not your inclination, or you simply aren't able to commit that kind of time right now, then your time will be better spent on the English text, working *hard* at becoming proficient at careful reading and analysis. That is no less demanding than Greek, but you can learn in an hour or two a week, and I'll be happy to help with that, too. (I've found through experience that language study requires a certain "critical mass" of study time; you just can't learn a language in an hour or two a week.) As I said earlier, the major translations are serviceable, and you can receive great benefit by carefully studying your English text.

We're coming to the end of our little chat. If you come from the sort of background I've been discussing, you've probably found this very disturbing reading; I know I would, in your place. Thank you for being willing to hear me out. I've tried to anticipate your questions and answer them, but you may well have further questions or comments that you'd like to discuss with me. Please feel free to raise them; I'd love to talk with you further about this.

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<sup>10</sup> I do mean the trappings, not the actual expertise. Much of what these teachers say about the original languages is provably false. Taken as a class, they abuse the languages far more often than they use them properly.