

1-1-1936

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Recommended Citation

Painter, F. V. (1936) "Luther on the Study and Use of the Ancient Languages," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 7 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol7/iss1/4>

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Luther on the Study and Use of the Ancient Languages.

From his treatise *To the Mayors and Aldermen of All the Cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools*, as translated by F. V. N. Painter in his book *Luther on Education*.

But, you say again, if we shall and must have schools, what is the use to teach Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and the other liberal arts? Is it not enough to teach the Scriptures, which are necessary to salvation, in the mother tongue? To which I answer: I know, alas! that we Germans must always remain irrational brutes, as we are deservedly called by surrounding nations. But I wonder why we do not also say: Of what use to us are silk, wine, spices, and other foreign articles, since we ourselves have an abundance of wine, corn, wool, flax, wood, and stone in the German states, not only for our necessities, but also for embellishment and ornament? The languages and other liberal arts, which are not only harmless, but even a greater ornament, benefit, and honor than these things, both for understanding the Holy Scriptures and carrying on the civil government, we are disposed to despise; and the foreign articles, which are neither necessary nor useful and which besides greatly impoverish us, we are unwilling to dispense with. Are we not rightly called German dunces and brutes?

Indeed, if the languages were of no practical benefit, we ought still to feel an interest in them as a wonderful gift of God, with which He has now blessed Germany almost beyond all other lands. We do not find many instances in which Satan has fostered them through the universities and cloisters; on the contrary, these institutions have fiercely inveighed, and continue to inveigh, against them. For the devil scented the danger that would threaten his kingdom if the languages should be generally studied. But since he could not wholly prevent their cultivation, he aims at least to confine them within such narrow limits that they will of themselves decline and fall into disuse. They are to him no welcome guest, and consequently he shows them scant courtesy in order that they may not remain long. This malicious trick of Satan is perceived by very few.

Therefore, my beloved countrymen, let us open our eyes, thank God for this precious treasure, and take pains to preserve it and to frustrate the design of Satan. For we cannot deny that, although the Gospel has come, and daily comes, through the Holy Spirit, it has come by means of the languages and through them must increase and be preserved. For when God wished through the apostles to spread the Gospel abroad in all the world, He gave the languages for that purpose; and by means of the Roman Empire he made Latin and Greek the languages of many lands that His Gospel might

24 Luther on the Study and Use of the Ancient Languages.

speedily bear fruit far and wide. He has done the same now. For a time no one understood why God has revived the study of the languages; but now we see that it was for the sake of the Gospel, which He wished to bring to light and thereby expose and destroy the reign of Antichrist. For the same reason He gave Greece a prey to the Turks in order that Greek scholars, driven from home and scattered abroad, might bear the Greek tongue to other countries and thereby excite an interest in the study of languages.

In the same measure that the Gospel is dear to us should we zealously cherish the languages. For God had a purpose in giving the Scripture only in two languages, the Old Testament in the Hebrew and the New Testament in the Greek. What God did not despise, but chose before all others for His Word we should likewise esteem above all others. St. Paul, in the third chapter of Romans, points out, as a special honor and advantage of the Hebrew language, that God's Word was given in it: "What profit is there of circumcision? Much every way; chiefly because that unto them [the Jews] were committed the oracles of God."¹) Likewise King David boasts in the Hundred and Forty-seventh Psalm: "He showeth His Word unto Jacob, His statutes and His judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation; and as for His judgments, they have not known them."²) Hence the Hebrew language is called sacred. And St. Paul, in Rom. 1, 2, speaks of the Hebrew Scriptures as holy, no doubt because of the Word of God which they contain. In like manner the Greek language might well be called holy, because it was chosen, in preference to others, as the language of the New Testament. And from this language, as from a fountain, the New Testament has flowed through translations into other languages and sanctified them also.

And let this be kept in mind, that we will not preserve the Gospel without the languages. The languages are the scabbard in which the Word of God is sheathed. They are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; the cask in which this wine is kept; the chamber in which this food is stored, and, to borrow a figure from the Gospel itself, they are the baskets in which this bread and fish and fragments are preserved. If through neglect we lose the languages (which God may forbid!), we will not only lose the Gospel, but it will finally come to pass that we will lose also the ability to speak and write either Latin or German. Of this let us take as proof and warning the miserable and shocking example presented in the universities and cloisters, in which not only the Gospel has been perverted, but also the Latin and German languages have been corrupted, so that the wretched inmates have become like brutes, unable to speak and write German or Latin, and have almost lost their natural reason.

1) Rom. 3, 1. 2.

2) Ps. 147, 19. 20.

The apostles considered it necessary to embody the New Testament in the Greek language in order, no doubt, that it might be securely preserved unto us as in a sacred shrine. For they foresaw what has since taken place, namely, that, when the divine revelation is left to oral tradition, much disorder and confusion arise from conflicting opinions and doctrines. And there would be no way to prevent this evil and to protect the simple-minded if the New Testament were not definitely recorded in writing. Therefore it is evident that where the languages are not preserved, there the Gospel will become corrupted.

Experience shows this to be true. For immediately after the age of the apostles, when the languages ceased to be cultivated, the Gospel and the true faith and Christianity itself declined more and more, until they were entirely lost under the Pope. And since the time that the languages disappeared, not much that is noteworthy and excellent has been seen in the Church; but through ignorance of the languages very many shocking abominations have arisen. On the other hand, since the revival of learning such a light has been shed abroad and such important changes have taken place that the world is astonished and must acknowledge that we have the Gospel almost as pure and unadulterated as it was in the times of the apostles and much purer than it was in the days of St. Jerome and St. Augustine. In a word, since the Holy Ghost, who does nothing foolish or useless, has often bestowed the gift of tongues, it is our evident duty earnestly to cultivate the languages, now that God has restored them to the world through the revival of learning.

But many of the Church Fathers, you say, have become saints and have taught without a knowledge of the languages. That is true. But to what do you attribute their frequent misunderstanding of the Scriptures? How often is St. Augustine in error in the Psalms and in other expositions, as well as Hilary, and indeed all those who have undertaken to explain the Scriptures without an acquaintance with the original tongues! And if perchance they have taught correct doctrine, they have not been sure of the application to be made of particular passages. For example, it is truly said that Christ is the Son of God. But what mockery does it seem to adversaries when as proof of that doctrine Ps. 110, 3 is adduced: "*Tecum principium in die virtutis,*" since in the Hebrew no reference is made in that verse to the Deity. When the faith is thus defended with uncertain reasons and proof-texts, does it not seem a disgrace and mockery in the eyes of such adversaries as are acquainted with the Greek and the Hebrew? And they are only rendered the more obstinate in their error and with good ground hold our faith as a human delusion.

What is the reason that our faith is thus brought into disgrace?

26 Luther on the Study and Use of the Ancient Languages.

It is our ignorance of the languages; and the only remedy is a knowledge of them. Was not St. Jerome forced to make a new translation of the Psalms from the Hebrew because the Jews, when quotations were made from the Latin version, derided the Christians, affirming that the passages adduced were not found in the original? The comments of all the ancient Fathers, who, without a knowledge of the languages, have treated of the Scriptures (although they may teach nothing heretical), are still of such a character that the writers often employ uncertain, doubtful, and inappropriate expressions and grope like a blind man along a wall, so that they often miss the sense of the text and mold it according to their pious fancy, as in the example mentioned in the last paragraph. St. Augustine himself was obliged to confess that the Christian teacher, in addition to Latin, should be acquainted with Hebrew and Greek. Without this knowledge the expositor will inevitably fall into mistakes; and even when the languages are understood, he will meet with difficulties.

With a simple preacher of the faith it is different from what it is with the expositor of the Scriptures, or prophet, as St. Paul calls him. The former has so many clear passages and texts in translations that he is able to understand and preach Christ and lead a holy life. But to explain the Scriptures, to deal with them independently, and oppose heretical interpreters, such a one is too weak without a knowledge of the languages. But we need just such expositors, who will give themselves to the study and interpretation of the Scriptures and who are able to controvert erroneous doctrines; for a pious life and orthodox teaching are not alone sufficient. Therefore the languages are absolutely necessary as well as prophets or expositors; but it is not necessary that every Christian or preacher be such a prophet, according to the diversity of gifts of which St. Paul speaks in 1 Cor. 12, 8. 9 and in Eph. 4, 11.

This explains why since the days of the apostles the Scriptures have remained in obscurity and no reliable and enduring expositions have anywhere been written. For even the holy Fathers, as we have said, are often in error, and because they were not versed in the languages, they seldom agree. St. Bernard was a man of great ability, so that I am inclined to place him above all other distinguished teachers, whether ancient or modern; but how often he trifles with the Scriptures, in a spiritual manner to be sure, and wrests them from their true meaning! For the same reason the papists have said that the Scriptures are of obscure and peculiar import. But they do not perceive that the trouble lies in ignorance of the languages; but for this, nothing simpler has ever been spoken than the Word of God. A Turk must indeed speak unintelligibly to me, although a Turkish child of seven years understands him, because I am unacquainted with the language.

Hence it is foolish to attempt to learn the Scriptures through the comments of the fathers and the study of many books and glosses. For that purpose we ought to give ourselves to the languages. For the beloved Fathers, because they were not versed in the languages, have often failed, in spite of their verbose expositions, to give the meaning of the text. You peruse their writings with great toil; and yet with a knowledge of the languages you can get the meaning of Scripture better than they do. For in comparison with the glosses of the Fathers the languages are as sunlight to darkness.

Since, then, it behooves Christians at all times to use the Bible as their only book and to be thoroughly acquainted with it, especially is it a disgrace and sin at the present day not to learn the languages when God provides every facility, incites us to study, and wishes to have His Word known. Oh, how glad the honored Fathers would have been if they could have learned the languages and had such access to the Holy Scriptures! With what pain and toil they scarcely obtained crumbs, while almost without effort we are able to secure the whole loaf! Oh, how their industry shames our idleness; yea, how severely will God punish our neglect and ingratitude!

St. Paul, in 1 Cor. 14, 29,³) enjoins that there be judgment upon doctrine — a duty that requires a knowledge of the languages. For the preacher or teacher may publicly read the whole Bible as he chooses, right or wrong, if there be no one present to judge whether he does it correctly or not. But if one is to judge, there must be an acquaintance with the languages; otherwise the judging will be in vain. Hence, although faith and the Gospel may be preached by ordinary ministers without the languages, still such preaching is sluggish and weak, and the people finally become weary and fall away. But a knowledge of the languages renders it lively and strong, and faith finds itself constantly renewed through rich and varied instruction. In the First Psalm the Scriptures liken such study to “a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season; its leaf also shall not wither.”

Der Schriftgrund für die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria.

(Fortsetzung.)

Titus 2, 14. (Siehe S. 748 f. dieses Bandes.)

1 Petr. 1, 18. 19: Wissend (da ihr wißt), daß ihr nicht mit vergänglichem (Dingen), Silber oder Gold, erlöset werdet von eurem eitlen, von den Vätern überlieferten Wandel, sondern mit köstlichem Blut, als

3) “Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge.”