

Toward a Lifetime of Fruitful Preaching: Equipping Preachers to Regularly Engage the Biblical Languages

Brandon Cash

Oceanside Christian Fellowship, El Segundo, CA
Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA

MDiv course requirements at evangelical seminaries (as opposed to course requirements at non-evangelical seminaries) reveal that evangelical pastors are trained to use the biblical languages. There is the recognition and commitment, and even eagerness on the part of students, to be trained in the use of the biblical languages so that they can handle the Word of God with accuracy and depth. But often when confronted with the demands of pastoral ministry, pastors neglect the use of their biblical languages. This paper will explore how homiletics departments can strategically prepare students for a lifetime practice of engaging the biblical languages so that the preacher is able to handle the Word of God with ever increasing accuracy, depth, humility and confidence.

The theme of this year's conference, *Toward Excellence in Equipping Preachers: A Future Focus and a Backward Glance*, immediately brought to mind my seminary experience. While my entire seminary education was preparation for the pastorate, it was my homiletics courses, particularly, that best prepared me for a preaching/teaching ministry. My homiletics courses were the "capstone" of my seminary education.¹

My experience is not unique. For most students seminary is preparation for vocational ministry, and because a majority of those preparing for vocational ministry ultimately desire a preaching/teaching ministry, it follows that most students in our classes, irrespective of what a course catalog may say, view homiletics as their capstones.

At this point in my life I am a full-time pastor who has the occasional opportunity to teach these capstones at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. My limited experience as a professor has only confirmed what I sensed as a student – homiletics courses are viewed by students as the capstone courses. And because they are viewed as such, they have a unique credibility and opportunity to influence students, and by extension influence the Church. I would like to suggest that one of the most strategic applications of this unique credibility is to influence our students to regularly engage the biblical languages. It is one of the most important things we can do to positively influence Christ's Church.

The Unique Emphasis of Evangelical Seminaries

The doctrine of the authority of Scripture has taken a beating over the last one hundred years. Nowhere is this more evident than in the seminaries themselves. MDiv requirements at various seminaries make it obvious that, for many seminaries, the authority of Scripture is an antiquated doctrine. One obvious example is evident in the fact that the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which is the accrediting body of all North American seminaries, does not require the

study of biblical languages in the MDiv program. That this accrediting body, which requires many things in the MDiv curriculum, does not consider the study of biblical languages essential in the training of pastors is indicative of the declining role of Scripture in seminaries and, by extension, churches.²

For reference, listed below are the language requirements of several seminaries. Notice the difference between those that are evangelical (the first three) and those that are not (the last three). This list is by no means exhaustive, but a fair representation of two types of seminaries.

- Talbot School of Theology requires 22 credit-hours of Greek and Hebrew (MDiv)
- Dallas Theological Seminary requires 27 credit-hours of Greek and Hebrew (ThM)
- Trinity Evangelical Divinity School requires 23 credit-hours of Greek and Hebrew (MDiv)
- At Harvard Divinity School “MDiv students must complete three semesters of study (three half-courses) in one language relevant to their program...Many students take this opportunity to learn a scriptural language and to work with the sacred texts of their tradition in the original language. Others choose to study a modern language.”³
- At Yale Divinity School biblical languages “will be accepted for elective credit,”⁴ and to be fair, they are encouraged. Nonetheless, they are not required in the MDiv program.
- At Union Theological Seminary, New York City, it is recommended, but not required, that students make a “study of Biblical Hebrew or Biblical Greek early in the student’s seminary career.”⁵

While evangelical seminaries continue, in theory and practice, to make the biblical languages foundational, many liberal seminaries have made them foundational in theory and optional in practice. Wayne Strickland, a theology professor, has given some thought to the correlation between biblical language requirements and a school’s view of Scripture.

Traditionally, the Biblical languages have been a foundational structure in the complete and adequate training of the ministerial student. Every seminarian was expected to include enough Hebrew and Greek in the course of his studies to be able to accurately exegete the Biblical text. Harvard in its early days was exemplary of this classical model with its requirement that the students learn to read the Bible in the originally received languages. The philosophy underlying this emphasis was sound...the reason for including Greek and Hebrew was very practical and necessary. It was believed that Scripture was the key to changing the lives of people. Since the Bible was deposited in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, they should be mastered in order to give the most accurate understanding of the life-changing book. Systematic and pastoral theology were built upon this foundation in the seminary curriculum. (Strickland, 1989, p. 227-228)

In addition to the positive correlation between a high view of Scripture and rigorous language requirements, Strickland convincingly shows that there is a negative correlation as well. Using Princeton as an example, Strickland argues that a reduction in the language requirements led to a lower view of Scripture, which ultimately led to a liberal theology. He concludes, “Biblical orthodoxy depends upon men and women who are firmly grounded in exegetical skills such as those provided in a seminary curriculum that adequately stresses the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew...the two (exegetical and practical) should not be inseparable in the pastoral ministry” (Strickland, 1989, p. 235).

By maintaining high standards in biblical language requirements, evangelical seminaries, in theory and practice, communicate a high view of Scripture, which is now more necessary than ever before. As Michael Wilkins noted in his plenary address at the Far West Evangelical Theological Society meeting, “For evangelicals, the biblical languages contain the meaning of Scripture down to their form and semantics. The concursive theory of inspiration recognizes that the Spirit of God guided and superintended the writers of Scripture so that the very words, and all of the words, contain without error the truth that God intended to communicate to humans” (Wilkins, 2006, p. 1).

Teaching Homiletics at Evangelical Seminaries

I doubt that anyone in this society needs to be persuaded that there is benefit in knowing the biblical languages. (Haddon Robinson has compared it to the clarity of a DVD [Robinson, 2001, p. 61-62]; Ramesh Richard has compared it to color television [Richard, 2001, p. 151-152]; Steven Mathewson has convincingly shown the benefits in his book on preaching Old Testament narrative [Mathewson, 2002, p. 227-255].) The question is not so much, “Is there benefit in knowing the languages?” Rather, the question is, “How can homiletics professors encourage and equip students to engage the biblical languages for a lifetime of fruitful preaching?”

Once students leave seminary they are faced with a plethora of choices as to how they will spend their time. Two choices seem particularly dangerous to the hard work of biblical preaching, pragmatism and fads. It takes great conviction and discipline on the part of a young pastor to resist the pull of pragmatism and the fashionable nature of fads. And while it is not the purpose of this paper to lay out a detailed argument against pragmatism or fads, two warnings are appropriate. In regards to pragmatism Ajith Fernando has rightly observed, “...a major shift has taken place in western evangelicalism where truth has been replaced by pragmatism as the major influencer of thought and life. This path is suicidal.” (Fernando, 1995, p. 112-113)

And regarding fads Edward Curtis has accurately noted,

There is something about a mass movement that, though it repels some people, attracts others and attracts them with their unquestioning agreement. Most of us feel compelled to “jump on the bandwagon” without asking where the bandwagon is going. Western society has made so many sharp turns in the past four hundred years that we have been conditioned to accept change as soon as it seems to be the potential “wave of the future.” Some of us even go further and try to predict the next wave before it takes hold of the world, thus putting us (to use a cliché) “on the cutting edge.”...And why is such faddism a hindrance to spiritual growth? Because spiritual growth is primarily internal, whereas most fads are external; because spiritual growth is hard work, whereas most fads require little or no effort on our part; because spiritual growth is a long process that requires our daily attention, whereas most fads distract us with their promise of instant gratification. And once we have been distracted by such promises and then enjoyed a brief period of gratification, the quick pleasure dies with familiarity, and we have wasted precious years when we could have been cultivating our souls in preparation for the great heavenly reception. (Curtis and Brugaletta, 2004, p. 95-96)

These tugs toward pragmatism and fads lead many well-intentioned pastors to treat the biblical languages like a classic car. They relegate them to the garage and eventually they become more of a burden than a blessing. The longer they sit the more useless they

become. Biblical languages are meant to take us somewhere, to be used; if they sit they too become useless. We have to drive this point home in our homiletics classes. Knowledge of the biblical languages is not an end in itself; it is a means to a much greater end, accuracy in proclaiming God's truth to His churches.

If homiletics professors will use their unique credibility to encourage students to regularly engage the biblical languages, the students sent off as biblical preachers will more likely stay biblical preachers and resist the temptation to morph into pragmatists and fad followers.

How to Strategically Use this Unique Credibility

First, homiletics professors should help students to see what it looks like to regularly engage the biblical languages.

Regularly engaging the biblical languages is not reaching the level of proficiency required for professors and doctoral candidates. The reality is that professors are paid to study so that they can write commentaries that pastors can use. I would argue that one way for the pastor to "regularly engage" the languages – especially the larger chunks of Old Testament narrative passages as opposed to shorter sections of epistolary literature – is to research what the best technical commentaries are and then spend time standing on the shoulders of those scholars. By standing on these scholar's shoulders, pastors are able to look out at the landscape they see and reap the benefits of a lifetime devoted to study and research. In many such instances this type of study forces one to "engage" the original language because of the technical nature of the commentary.

Though one does not need to reach the level of proficiency a professor needs, there is a level of proficiency that must be attained if technical commentaries, monographs, and journal articles are going to be used effectively. There is a minimum threshold that must be crossed before a pastor will ever be motivated to use these technical resources. If one does not have a basic grasp of Greek and Hebrew many of these commentaries will be inaccessible and a pastor's ability to dive deeply into the text will be hindered.

Two primary experiences have led me to this conviction. First, in my limited teaching experience at Talbot I have repeatedly found that those who have had the language and exegesis courses generally have superior bibliographies; as a rule their grasp of the text and depth of sermon are better, too. Those who interact with the most technical commentaries, monographs, and journal articles are able to utilize the best scholarship.

The second experience that leads me to this conclusion involves a group of pastors with which I fellowship. This is a group of evangelical pastors who gather monthly for prayer, encouragement, and cooperation in community service. At one particular meeting we discussed sermon preparation. I was astounded to find that in a group of roughly 20 pastors, only four regularly used commentaries (three of the four had received MDiv degrees from evangelical seminaries). As I probed to find out why they were not reading commentaries the consensus was that commentaries were too technical and therefore not useful. The reason they found commentaries too technical was because they had never been forced to learn the biblical

languages. Had they been required to learn, early in their ministry, the basics of Greek and Hebrew then reading commentaries would be much less cumbersome.

An example of engaging the Hebrew text: Most pastors are not capable, especially in the usual time allotted for sermon preparation, to open a Hebrew Bible and do a textlinguistic analysis of Genesis 39-48. But, with a basic grasp of Hebrew, they are able to read Robert E. Longacre's textlinguistic analysis of Genesis 39-48 in *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence* and follow his logic and reasoning and make an informed decision about whether or not they agree with his conclusions. In this instance, engaging the biblical language is not total translation, but interacting with a scholar who has spent countless hours studying the Hebrew text. A pastor who doesn't have a basic grasp of Hebrew will find this resource useless. One who has a basic grasp of Hebrew will not just find it useful; they will find it incredibly rewarding as well.

An example of engaging the Greek text: At the end of second Corinthians (13:11) the apostle Paul writes,

Greek: *Λοιπόν, ἀδελφοί, χαίρετε, καταρτίζεσθε, παρακαλεῖσθε, τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖτε, εἰρηνεύετε, καὶ ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ εἰρήνης ἔσται μεθ' ὑμῶν.*

NIV: *Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.*

ESV: *Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*

NAS: *Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.*

It is obvious that there are differences of opinion among the translators. A pastor who is able to engage the biblical language is able to see (especially with all of the language tools available) why each translation has made a particular decision. He is able to look at the word *χαίρετε* and decide whether or not translating it as an imperative (ESV, NAS) makes the most sense. He understands the implications of translating something in the middle versus the passive (*παρακαλεῖσθε*) and he is able to make an informed decision as to which translation makes the most sense. When the people on Sunday morning, some of whom are holding the NIV and some of whom are holding the NAS, hear it communicated clearly, they are able to see why there is a difference and why their pastor believes one is preferable.

By helping students to see the practical benefits of regularly engaging the languages and by helping them to see that it is a realistic expectation, homiletics professors will be launching students on a trajectory of lifetime learning.

Second, homiletics professors should model appropriate use of biblical languages in the examples with which we teach.

Homiletics professors should intentionally use sample sermons that highlight the benefits of engaging the biblical languages. Most homiletics professors have a treasure chest filled with great sermons from the various genres. They should be intentional about using a narrative sermon that highlights the insight gained from engaging the Hebrew. They should use a sermon from the epistles that highlights an exegetical insight discovered by engaging the Greek. They should use a sermon from the gospels that wonderfully illustrates how taking the time to engage the Greek text brought clarity to Matthew's use of a particular word or phrase.

And as they highlight the insights for the students, professors should model the humility pastors should practice as they preach to their people. Too many pastors talking about a Greek word or a Greek tense are like the immature husbands in our churches who use the word "submit" but are clueless as to what it really means to "love" their wives. The ability to engage the biblical languages is not to be used to dominate people, but rather to help people understand and see the truth. Before referencing the original language in a sermon pastors should ask, "Am I doing this because it is absolutely crucial to the understanding of the text or because I want to sound smart?" Most often a reference to another translation is both sufficient to make the case clearly and an encouragement to our people to read more than one translation.

How professors model the use of language skills will have great impact on how preachers proclaim the truth to their congregations.

Third, homiletics professors should require bibliographies that include technical commentaries, monographs, and journal articles.

Though ultimately homiletics professors are concerned with the final product, namely the sermon, homiletics courses are often the last chance for a student to be critiqued on the process. An indispensable part of the process is gaining a thorough understanding of the text. Students have greater access to better resources than ever before. If students are required to interact with technical commentaries, monographs, and journal articles they are forced to see what is available and they will experience, firsthand, the benefits of engaging the biblical languages. The more they experience the benefits of engaging the languages, the more likely they will be to continue this sort of rigorous study and preparation once the demands of vocational ministry hit.

Fourth, homiletics professors should require reflection papers that specifically reflect on the exegetical process, including the use of the biblical languages.

Engaging the original languages will not always produce an "a-ha" moment. But even without the "a-ha" moment there is benefit in lingering over a text in the original language. Most pastors will never be able to read the Bible in the original languages at the same speed with which they read it in their mother tongue. Spending time in the original languages forces one to slow down and think more deeply about what is being read and studied. It is during this reflective study time that one often discovers a valuable nugget. By requiring students to reflect on their exegetical studies, homiletics professors can help them discover the benefit of slowing down and

making time for the biblical languages, thus encouraging them to continue the process once it is no longer a requirement.

Fifth, homiletics departments should be a key link between academia and the pastorate by making up-to-date bibliographic information readily available to pastors.

One of the greatest obstacles pastors face in trying to keep up with the latest scholarship is the sheer volume of information available. It is impossible for anyone to stay on top of it, let alone a pastor facing the daily grinds of ministry. Homiletics departments should take on the responsibility of keeping current bibliographies that are readily available for pastors. There are books available that rate commentaries, but these can be dated very quickly and they are not always helpful for a pastor. Homiletics professors are preachers who have relationships with, and access to, scholars in the fields of Old Testament studies, New Testament studies, and Theology. Most pastors do not have this same access. Let us use these relationships and connections wisely for the kingdom by publicizing what we find out from those with whom we teach.

These are only five suggestions. Undoubtedly there are more. But if homiletics professors were intentional about these five, then more and more pastors would be more motivated to regularly engage the biblical languages.

Engaging the Biblical Languages as a Defense Against Plagiarism

In addition to the obvious benefits of deeper study, one not so obvious benefit of regularly engaging the biblical languages is a reduced likelihood of plagiarism. There seems to be a rising number of pastors who are going to others for their sermons. Good models and good insights that others provide can be invaluable aids in sermon preparation. But they can also lead to plagiarism. If the circles I am associated with are any indication, plagiarism by pastors is on the rise. Continued plagiarism by two pastors, in particular, has led to their forced resignation. There are a number of reasons for this rise in pulpit plagiarism, not the least of which is the availability of other people's sermons. But I believe one contributing factor is a lack of concern for regularly engaging the biblical languages.

A lack of concern for the languages can be a first step in totally relying on others for something that pastors should be doing. When pastors quit engaging the biblical languages they begin to rely solely on the writings of others for their studies. At first the rationale is easy; engaging the languages simply takes too much time. A pastor may feel that he does not have the time because he has to keep up with this ministry opportunity or that counseling session. Pretty soon even reading the commentaries is taking up too much time. This is time that could be spent in "ministry."

So one week, when the crunch is really on, a pastor preaches the gist of someone else's sermon. It goes well, his preparation time is reduced to a couple of hours, and he has all the time he needs to keep up with the latest ministry fad. Sadly, this exception soon becomes the norm. Eventually he is regularly preaching someone else's sermon and he has lost sight of the fact that God has called him to preach the Word, not someone else's sermons. The pastor forgets that he

is transformed as he discovers more about God in his studies. The great puritan preacher, John Owen, recognized this some four hundred years ago when he wrote, “A man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul. And he that doth not feed on and thrive in the digestion of the food which he provides for others will scarce make it savoury unto them; yea, he knows not but the food he hath provided may be poison, unless he have really tasted of it himself. If the word do not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us.” (Piper, 2006, p. 111)

If we do not prepare students to regularly engage the biblical languages might we be setting them up for such pitfalls?

Conclusion

Just like there are constant demands on a pastor to use his time wisely, there are constant demands on homiletics professors to use their time wisely. Our ultimate goal is to produce biblical preachers. We should constantly ask ourselves how we can do this most effectively in the limited time we have with students. In this paper I have tried to make a case that a strategic use of our time is to encourage and equip students to regularly engage the biblical languages.

In Haddon Robinson’s 1984 presidential address to the Evangelical Theological Society, he closed with these words, “If we cannot be scholarly evangelists, then by God’s grace let us determine to be evangelistic scholars” (Robinson, 1985, p. 8). His point was that, too often, there is a distinction made between those who are academic and those who are practical. Homiletics professors have an incredible opportunity to bridge the gap by encouraging preachers to stand on the shoulders of scholars and view the landscape of their learning. By building into our students a commitment to regularly engage the biblical languages we are equipping them to stand on the shoulders of scholars who would otherwise be inaccessible. We are equipping them to more accurately and effectively preach God’s Word. And that is what will ultimately change lives for the glory of God.

References

- Curtis, Edward M., and Brugaletta, John J. (2004). *Discovering the Way of Wisdom*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications.
- Fernando, Ajith. (1995). *The Supremacy of Christ*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books.
- Mathewson, Steven. (2002). *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Piper, John. (2006). *Contending for Our All*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books.
- Richard, Ramesh. (2001). *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Robinson, Haddon. (1985). "The Theologian and the Evangelist," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, pp. 3-8.
- Robinson, Haddon. (2001). *Biblical Preaching 2nd Ed*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Strickland, Wayne. (1989). "Seminary Education: A Philosophical Paradigm Shift in Process," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, pp. 227-235.
- Wilkins, Michael, J. (2006). "The Pastor and the Biblical Languages," unpublished paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, Far West Region.

¹ Technically a **capstone course** is a course designed to be offered in the final semester of a student's major, a course that ties together the key learning objectives that faculty expect the student to have learned during their program. Though homiletics courses are not technically the "capstone" courses of most MDiv programs, they function as such because, more than any other course, they tie together the language courses, exegesis courses, hermeneutics courses, and theology courses that make up the majority of an evangelical MDiv program.

² This was first brought to my attention in an unpublished paper presented by Dr. Michael J. Wilkins at the plenary session of the 2006 Evangelical Theological Society, Far West Region. I was invited to respond to Dr. Wilkins and it was in preparation for that response that I began thinking about the unique role homiletics courses play in the preparation of pastors.

³ Quoting from Harvard Divinity School's online catalog at <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/afa/mdiv.html>

⁴ Quoting from Yale Divinity School's online catalog at <http://www.yale.edu/bulletin/html/div/programs.html>

⁵ Quoting from Union Theological Seminary's catalog at <http://www.uts.columbia.edu/index.php?id=291>