

The Importance of Classical Language Study

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The opening verses of the book of Genesis inform us that God is a speaking God, a God who communicates. He spoke at creation and brought into being, *ex nihilo*, that which previously had not existed (Hebrews 11:3). In the Garden of Eden there was close communication between God and Adam and Eve as they carried on daily fellowship with one another. These two creatures, created in God's image and therefore image-bearers responsible for mirroring or reflecting this image, were commanded by God to subdue the creation, to discover new ways to use it for their good and God's glory. This included the gift of language, which reveals both man's unique humanity and his creation in God's image. This language man was to make productive for himself and pleasing to God as he exemplified the proper use of language set forth by God Himself. Prior to the creation of woman, the man was even entrusted with the task of *naming* the animals that the Lord had formed out of the ground and brought to him 'and whatever the man *called* a living creature, that was its *name*' (Gen. 2:19).¹ The serpent, however, used language in a seductive manner for evil purposes and thus helped to sever this close relationship between man and his Creator. Language would now be used in a redemptive sense to reconcile man to God, which is seen in its most glorious manifestation, the incarnation of Jesus, the *Word* made flesh (John 1:14). At the Tower of Babel, because of man's persistent disobedience to God, He caused the one common language at that time to become unintelligible, thus bringing into being different languages and dispersing

¹ I am indebted to my colleague, Mr. Greg Lynch, for reminding me of the significance of *naming* the animals performed by Adam prior to the creation of the woman. This is important because it shows us that Adam had a certain acquaintance with the multi-faceted natures of the animal world and, as such, had the capacity to attach to each a designation, which denoted the peculiar qualities of genus and specie. Of course, the context suggests more than language and naming; the primary factor here is that man was unable to find a suitable creature among the animals to satisfy his needs of social companionship with a being of superior intelligence like himself, namely, עֵץ קַיִן, 'a helper corresponding to him'. This context, nevertheless, lends prominent weight to the language theme.

mankind throughout the world. When the biblical narrative records the events surrounding Pentecost, we find a supernatural reversal of Babel. Luke records that the Jews living in Jerusalem at that time who came from many different nations kept hearing and understanding [the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ in] their own language spoken by Galileans.

Language is an indispensable tool, indeed a gift from God, used to bind communities together in their common pursuit of a fully developed cultural experience. It is also an articulation of thought and of society's cultural mores and values. A corollary of this then is the serious study of language, how it impacts a civilization and, in turn, is impacted by that same civilization, positively or negatively. In the framework of classical education, the focus is more directly placed upon the study of the classical languages: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

Numerous benefits arise from the careful study of these three classical languages. Greek and Latin are highly inflected languages, with special forms typically attached to some part of a root word to indicate the type of word and its function within a sentence structure. Hebrew is a remarkably phonetic language with a preference for verb roots of three consonants (radicals). Despite the fact that there are thousands of languages (as well as dialects) throughout the countries of the world, a student of classical languages will learn the general principles of language construction. This same student also more greatly comes to appreciate his/her own language as the close lexical and linguistic relationships between Latin, Greek, and English become evident.

Similarly, students of classical languages gain an appreciation for all great literature as they are driven back to the original sources (*ad fontes*). For centuries, the great poets and literary giants of their respective ages have shown the gravitational pull of

the enduring literature of ancient Rome and Greece. Students of the classical languages gain an empathetic foothold on what the ancient Greeks called *poiesis*, a making process directed toward an entire cast of mind which encompassed a graceful polish of style, an artful use of language, an envisioning or imagining of fictional analogies, all of which was governed by *mimesis*, or imitation.² From their study of classical languages, then, students learn how to express themselves more eloquently in language composition. In short, they become more poetic. Their vocabulary increases dramatically, as does their knowledge of synonyms, nuances of meaning, and etymology (the origin and history of words). They also acquire the rhetorical ability to employ literary figures and stylistic variation in their writing.

An understanding of the Graeco-Roman influence of Western civilization comes from the study of these languages. Students learn concepts connected with government, the legal system, medicine, currency, astronomy, architecture, music, science, math, *et cetera*. They receive a crucial historical link between the present and the past that serves to provide timely perspective to events recurring in modern times. Someone has commented that since students are further removed from the ancient civilizations they are better able to shed their emotional biases and become more objective in perceiving consequences and drawing conclusions that are simply unavailable in the modern world. All of the issues we struggle with today-economic, political, religious, social-are present in the ancient world in their simplest form. In Greece and Rome, in particular, the perennial problems of the human condition can be seen at their beginning while it is still possible to grasp them, to understand them and to really see the heart of the matter.³ In

² Louise Cowan, "The Necessity of the Classics," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Vol. 37 No. 1, Fall 2001, 3-11.

³ *The Classical Teacher*, "Why Study the Greeks and Romans?", Louisville: Memoria Press, Summer 2005, 15.

this same vein, another classical scholar has aptly stated that classical education [and classical language study] provides a “common ground shared by generations of students. In a society such as ours, whisked along on technology’s conveyor belt, the sense of a cultural core, relatively stable and enduring, is as needed as ever.”⁴

Another benefit which arises from classical language study is training in the essentials of the scientific method of induction, namely, observation, comparison, and generalization and its constant interchange with deduction. The latter is reasoning from a general law to specific or particular instances. Students learn a general principle and work through to a specific conclusion. The former, on the other hand, reasons from the specific to the general. Students proceed from a number of collated instances of forms or paradigms, critically comparing some attribute common to them all, to a general principle. The inductive method is careful and aims to be complete, yet in language study it should be used in conjunction with deduction.

Although Hebrew and Greek are *living* organisms within a community of generations, transmitted from mouth to ear and thus subject to all the vicissitudes of organic life as one could attest with respect to any modern language, they nevertheless provide students with opportunities to learn both the inductive and deductive methods. As mentioned above, these occur as the student makes exacting observation and close analysis of particular models of words or grammatical structures and then infers general conclusions from these particular cases or, in the case of deduction, infers particular instances from a general law.

⁴ James Fowler, “Adventures in Latin and Greek,” *The Classical Outlook* (Journal of the American Classical League), Vol. 78, Number 3, Spring 2001, 94.

Latin, on the other hand, is strictly a *book* language and thus possesses timely stability. Wilson⁵ notes that it takes on the nature of a laboratory where change does not take place. Observation, comparison, and generalization, therefore, are more easily attained in Latin than in living languages. The study of Latin grammar, especially in translation, enables a student to consider the data from multiple points of view simultaneously and, from this, to be decisive and precise. The inductive method and the precision that it produces in Latin in conjunction with its counterpart, deduction, carry over into other disciplines as well, thus attesting to the clear integrating principle inherent in the classical languages.

The study of classical languages provides a tremendous foundation from which to study other modern languages, such as the Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian), and other highly inflected languages like Russian or German. There is substantial educational value in the study of the classical languages. The evidence is both tangible and empirical.

Furthermore, the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther was convinced that reading and using Greek and Hebrew [and Latin] was one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of the Reformation preacher and was a sure guard against the perishing of the Gospel. He maintained that if we neglect the literature we shall eventually lose the Gospel. “Where these languages are not prized and pursued, care in biblical observation and biblical thinking and concern for truth decreases.” In addition, many impediments in study are found without the help of these languages. He concurred with Augustine who, centuries earlier, confessed that “a Christian teacher who is to expound Scripture has need also of the Greek and the Hebrew languages in addition to the Latin; otherwise it is

⁵ Douglas Wilson, *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991, 88.

impossible for him not to run into obstacles everywhere.”⁶ In this same vein, Gregg Strawbridge mentions the likes of Jonathan Edwards who, upon entering Yale College in 1716 at the age of thirteen, had a thorough knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin which made it possible for him to be an effective preacher in the Great Awakening (1740-42), to be recognized by many as America’s greatest philosopher, and to be called as the first president of Princeton College.⁷

In conclusion, someone has stated that those who control the language of a society control its culture. This is a truly revealing, yet sobering observation. Just as Jesus informed His disciples and the Pharisees who opposed Him that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27), so we might also confidently affirm that man was not made for language, but language was made for man. The Scriptures teach us over and over again that the language people use and the manner in which they use it reveals what is truly in their heart.⁸ We have, therefore, a high and noble obligation to our covenant children to teach them the wise and faithful use of language which glorifies God and reflects His image as they, in turn, subdue creation in obedience to Him and thus acquire the many benefits described above. The enemy uses language seductively, in a negative, destructive desire to oppose and tear down the truth which God has established. We, as disciples of the true Word (*ho logos*: John 1:1) and children of our Creator, are called to utilize the good gift of language with which God has blessed us in a reconciling manner for His glory. This involves using language as God *intended* it--rightly, authoritatively, and powerfully by His grace to advance His kingdom in this fallen world, both within the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

⁶ Quoted from John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2000, 96-98.

⁷ Gregg Strawbridge, *Classical & Christian Education: Recapturing the Educational Approach of the Past*, Arabi, LA: Reformed Thought Publications, 1997, 2000, 1.

⁸ Proverbs 10:6, 11, 20, 21, 31, 32; 11:9, 11, 13; 15:2; Pss. 4:2-3; 5:6-7, 9-11; Mt. 12:33-37; *passim*.

