

Piper on Luther on Greek

Excerpt from “Martin Luther: Lessons from His Life and Labor”

<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/martin-luther-lessons-from-his-life-and-labor>

Luther spoke against the backdrop of a thousand years of church darkness without the word, when he said boldly, “It is certain that unless the languages remain, the Gospel must finally perish” (Kerr, 17). He asks, “Do you inquire what use there is in learning the languages? Do you say, ‘We can read the Bible very well in German?’” And he answers,

Without languages we could not have received the gospel. Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit; they are the casket which contains the priceless jewels of antique thought; they are the vessel that holds the wine; and as the gospel says, they are the baskets in which the loaves and fishes are kept to feed the multitude.

If we neglect the literature we shall eventually lose the gospel ... No sooner did men cease to cultivate the languages than Christendom declined, even until it fell under the undisputed dominion of the pope. But no sooner was this torch relighted, than this papal owl fled with a shriek into congenial gloom ... In former times the fathers were frequently mistaken, because they were ignorant of the languages and in our days there are some who, like the Waldenses, do not think the languages of any use; but although their doctrine is good, they have often erred in the real meaning of the sacred text; they are without arms against error, and I fear much that their faith will not remain pure (Martyn, 474).

The main issue was the preservation and the purity of the faith. Where the languages are not prized and pursued, care in biblical observation and biblical thinking and concern for truth decreases. It has to, because the tools to think otherwise are not present. This was an intensely real possibility for Luther because he had known it. He said,

If the languages had not made me positive as to the true meaning of the word, I might have still remained a chained monk, engaged in quietly preaching Romish errors in the obscurity of a cloister; the pope, the sophists, and their anti-Christian empire would have remained unshaken” (Martyn, 474).

In other words, he attributes the breakthrough of the Reformation to the penetrating power of the original languages. The great linguistic event of Luther’s time was the appearance of the Greek New Testament edited by Desiderius Erasmus. As soon as it appeared in the middle of the summer session of 1516, Luther got it and began to study it and use it in his lectures on Romans 9. He did this even though Erasmus was a theological adversary. Having the languages was such a treasure to Luther, he would have gone to school with the devil in order to learn them.