

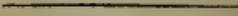
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ON THE
NECESSITY OF A KNOWLEDGE
OF THE
ORIGINAL LANGUAGES
OF THE
SCRIPTURES.



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ON
THE NECESSITY, &c.

THE clergy have ever been one of the most influential classes in society. They address themselves to the most powerful and universally operative feelings of the human heart. As the great dispensers of moral and religious truth, their power over the opinions and principles of their fellow-men, is such as to involve the most solemn responsibility. In the dark ages and portions of the Church, this influence was, and still is, mainly official. The fact that a man is a minister of religion, with the ignorant and superstitious, secures for him respect, and often reverence and submission. This is not the case where the people are enlightened; and especially, where they have been taught to revolt at all kinds of authoritative dictation. Under such circumstances, the influence of the clergy depends much more upon their personal qualifications, than mere respect for their office. An ignorant or immoral man can pretend to no right, and has no prospect of being able, to guide the opinions, and form the character of men, superior to himself, merely because he may be invested with the sacred

office. It is only by being superior in intellectual and moral culture, that he can secure any salutary influence over his fellow-men. The usefulness of the clergy, the progress of religion, and the best interests of the Redeemer's kingdom, depend, therefore, under God, in a great measure on the intellectual and moral character of the Ministers of the Gospel. That this is really the case, experience abundantly proves. Wherever Ministers of the Gospel have been ignorant, religion has degenerated into superstition or fanaticism. The uneducated have been the victims of one or other of these forms of error; and the cultivated portions of society have fallen a prey to infidelity. On the other hand, wherever the teachers of religion have taken the lead in intellectual and moral excellence, there piety has flourished. How solemn, then, is the responsibility which rests on every candidate for the sacred office, to attend to the cultivation of his mind. It is not for his personal advancement, for his own happiness or honour, that he is bound to labour in this vocation, but it is because by becoming a Minister he identifies himself with the cause of religion, and he has no right to degrade that cause by allying it, in his own person, with imbecility and ignorance.

There are many who endeavour to free themselves from this responsibility, as to mental improvement, by saying they expect to spend their days among the poor, where much learning will not be requisite. But who has revealed to these men where they are to spend their days? The providence of God may cast their lot among

the most educated and refined classes of society. A friend of the writer, who made this the excuse for neglecting a regular and faithful course of theological study, has had a succession of charges in which intellectual culture was peculiarly desirable. His usefulness and respectability have suffered materially, and for life, from the false step of his youth. Besides, in our country, the rich and poor, the educated and ignorant, are so intermingled, that a congregation or community formed exclusively of either class is not to be met with. Wherever you may go, you will find your usefulness depending, next to piety and zeal, mainly on your knowledge. The candidate for the Ministry, therefore, cannot but be regarded as criminally negligent of his duty to his Master, who neglects any opportunity of intellectual improvement.

As to the kinds of knowledge which a minister should cultivate, they ought undoubtedly to be principally professional; and in this class are included subjects of sufficient compass and importance, to occupy the most devoted attention and comprehensive talents. But among professional subjects, there is ground of preference. Some are intrinsically more important than others; and some become especially important on account of the peculiar character of the age, or state of the church. On the ground of intrinsic value, and peculiar adaptation to the circumstances of the candidates for the Ministry of the present day, there is no department of knowledge which more imperiously demands their attention, than

THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES OF THE SACRED SCRIPTURES.

To evince the justice of this assertion, let the following considerations be duly weighed.

I. No translation can make a full and fair exhibition of its original. This inadequacy results from the necessary difference which exists between different languages, which renders it impossible that words can be put for words, so that the meaning, force, and beauty should be unchanged. This difference includes a variety of particulars. In the first place, there is a general disparity, which it may be difficult to define, yet is sensibly felt. Any person acquainted with more than one language, needs no other proof of this than his own experience. He is constantly sensible that there is something in the original which his translation does not reach. And it is evident this must be the case, because, much of the excellence of every writer depends on his style—all this is lost in the version. You have, necessarily, the style of the translator, not that of his author. If the former be on a par in the talent for writing with the latter, and if the two languages be in all respects equal, the translation may, as a composition, be equal to the original. But even if the advantage in each respect was on the side of the translator, it does not affect our position. The version is not, and cannot be an exact representation of the original. It may be better, or worse, but it is not the same. It is with the mind of the translator we have to do, in every translation. Who knows any thing of Homer from Pope, or Cowper, or Voss, or Sotheby? It is not the

Grecian poet we learn by reading these versions. They are indeed all excellent, all, to a sufficient extent, faithful; yet each and all fail of bringing us acquainted with the father of profane poetry. We learn what Pope, and Cowper, and Sotheby were as poets, but we are ignorant of Homer. The facts, indeed, of his story are retained, but he is not the narrator. We have, as it were, the body without the soul. This is a point at once so obvious, and so important, that it has ever been acknowledged and regarded in respect to classic authors. No one pretends to an acquaintance with these writers, who is indebted for his knowledge to translators. It seems to be on all hands conceded, that a knowledge of what the author has himself written, is necessary to qualify any man, in that department, to speak of the merits of an author, and much more to authorize any one to expound his meaning. But why should this be conceded in reference to the writers of Greece, and not to those of Palestine? Why should the lecturer on the classics, who could not read a word of them, be an object of ridicule, and the equally ignorant lecturer on the Bible, an object of respect?

There is therefore such an acknowledged difference between languages, that all translations must differ materially from their originals. The vital characteristic spirit of the one, cannot be infused into the other. The mind of the translator is interposed between the reader and the original author. The thoughts and sentiments are transmuted by the process of translation; divested of their characteristic impress, they fall chilled and enfeebled

on the heart of the reader. If this were the only evil of a translation, and if the only advantage of a knowledge of the original was, that it secured us immediate access to the minds of the sacred writers, it would be enough to compensate for all the time and labour which the acquisition requires. To have their language a direct medium of thought, and to be admitted to immediate communion with minds "moved by the Holy Ghost," is a pleasure and a benefit sufficient to recompense the severest toil.

But this, which may be considered as merely a matter of enjoyment, is not all. There are more solid benefits to be derived from reading the Scriptures in their original languages, than the vividness of impression, and the freshness of the truth as it comes from the lips of the servants of God. The difference between languages extends beyond the attributes of style. It pertains to their general character and structure, to the precision and compass of the meaning of terms; and is so serious as to render every translation defective as to its meaning as well as its manner. Some languages are rude, others polished; some are highly figurative, and others the reverse; some remarkably precise in the use of words, in the force of particles, in the use of the tenses and other grammatical forms; others the reverse in all these particulars. It is obvious, therefore, that the translator must often express, literally, what is conveyed by figure; must render definite, what is ambiguous; must use a form which may express various modifications of the meaning of a word, for one which admits of no such latitude. He may be right or wrong

as to the sense which he expresses, but whether right or wrong, he is different from his author; for he renders definite what was left undeterminate, or makes ambiguous what admits of but one interpretation. Again, all the characteristic peculiarities of a language must be passed over, or very inadequately expressed. The particles, which add so much, not only to the grace, but also to the precision and force of the Greek writers, must, in Latin and English, be almost entirely neglected. Phrases properly idiomatic, must be new modified, or remain uncouth deformities in the version, and often lead the reader into error. Again, very few words belonging to different languages are precisely synonymous. Some classes of terms, of course, more nearly correspond than others. In a few, the correspondence may be considered as complete; as in those which express simple ideas, or natural objects, or the necessary relations of life. But beyond these, and a few other classes, it will be almost impossible to find any two words belonging to different languages which exactly agree. The one either expresses more or less than the other, or admits of applications which the other does not allow. Hence we see foreigners constantly making the mistake of using our terms in all the extent of meaning, and variety of application, which the nearest corresponding word of their own language admits. This too is a source of endless error to the readers of mere translations of the Scriptures. Because the word "hell," for example, in a certain connexion, may mean the abode of lost spirits, how natural the in-

ference that the Hebrew or Greek word which it represents, may, in the same connexion, have the same meaning; and yet this, to any reader of the original, may be seen to be impossible. And how often are arguments and doctrines built upon the assumption, that the original will bear every interpretation which the version admits. This therefore is a point of vital importance. Translations must, to a greater or less extent, make a false representation. We might submit to a loss of beauty or force, but it appears we cannot have in all cases the precise sense. There can be no doubt that languages do so differ in their general structure, in their peculiar expressions and idioms, in the extent of meaning and variety of application of their nearest corresponding terms, that no version can be a faithful exhibition of its original. It will either say more or less, it will make what is figurative, literal, or literal figurative; what is definite, ambiguous, or ambiguous, definite. If this be so, need the question be asked, Whether preachers and expounders of the Word of God, are not bound to go to what He has himself said, and not trust in the inadequate and faulty reports of others?

II. A second consideration, which should impress on the mind of every candidate for the Ministry a sense of the importance of studying the original languages of Scripture, is but an inference from the preceding, *He cannot otherwise be qualified to explain the Word of God.* The grand official duty of the minister of the Gospel is, "rightly to divide the word of God," and by the presentation of

the truth to instruct, rebuke, and exhort with all long suffering and meekness. How is this to be done, unless he himself knows the truth; and how is this knowledge to be obtained? He finds it revealed through the medium of a written language, which he is to understand, not by inspiration or miracle, but by applying to its interpretation those simple rules of exegesis which govern the exposition of all language. He must examine accurately the meaning of the words and phrases used by the sacred writers, by ascertaining how these writers themselves employ them in other passages, and in what way they were used by the persons to whom they were addressed; and by investigating the etymology as well as usage of every important term. The application of these, and other equally obvious rules of interpretation, of course, suppose a knowledge of the language used by the sacred penman. It may indeed be said, that this process has all been gone through by the translator, who furnishes us with the result. But we are bound to verify his report for ourselves. It has already been remarked, that the best translation cannot be an exact exhibition of the original. Even when most correct, it may be the source of error to the ignorant. The words of the version may answer to the original in one of the various senses which those words will bear, but not in others. The translator may be right, and yet we, by concluding that the original admits of every interpretation which his version allows, may be seriously wrong. We cannot be sure, with any enlightened confidence, when expounding a translation, that we are not wandering far

from the text which it proposes to represent. But versions are very often positively incorrect. Among the thousand translations by churches and individuals, no two precisely agree. Some are so loose and inaccurate, that important doctrines are obscured, and important errors inculcated. Which version shall we choose? Who shall insure us from error in this choice? It is however self-evident, that no man can be qualified to explain an ancient document of which he knows nothing but a translation. He is unavoidably exposed to ludicrous or fatal mistakes, by the faultiness or insufficiency of his guide. This, as we before remarked, is a matter universally admitted with regard to every other document, than the Word of God. That is, it is universally admitted in every case, except precisely the one in which it is most evident and most important. We do not of course deny that the most faulty of the translations of the sacred Scriptures, contain much of their genuine sense, and consequently may convey this saving knowledge to those who peruse them. But the question now is, whether the man, who must expound the Scriptures to the people, is not bound to do all that he can to understand them fully and accurately; and whether the knowledge of something better than a faulty and inadequate translation, is not, of all qualifications, one of the most obvious and important for the discharge of this duty. If this be admitted, (and who will deny it?)—then is it admitted that few obligations are more solemn and imperious, than that which binds the

ministers of the Gospel to study the Scriptures in their original languages.

III. Another of the most important duties of the minister of the Gospel, is to defend the faith, to resist and put to silence gainsayers—for the proper discharge of this duty, a knowledge of the original Scriptures is essential. This is evident, not only from the consideration that this knowledge is necessary to any accurate and well grounded acquaintance with the contents of the sacred volume, but it alone can enable us to meet and answer that large class of objections founded on the misapprehensions or mistakes of translators. Many arguments in which the opponents of the truth most confidently rely, have no better foundation than such mistakes. How then are these to be detected or answered, if we know nothing of the original? Besides, no version is acknowledged by all parties as the standard of divine truth. If we are brought into collision with Roman Catholics, we shall find that they not only deny the authority of our version of the Word of God, but charge its authors with wilfully perverting and misrepresenting the sacred text. Are our lips to be closed by such an assertion? Are those whose duty it is to defend and uphold the truth, to be thus easily vanquished? And yet what can we say. The accomplished Catholic appeals to the original; he affirms that it teaches all the peculiarities of his own faith, and overturns the doctrines of Protestants; and must we sit silent, with the seal of ignorance upon our lips? Is this the

way we are to clear our conscience of the solemn duty of defending the truth on which the salvation of men depends? The common Catholic will show us in his Douay Bible, the frequently reiterated command "to do penance." The Saviour is made to say to men, "Unless ye do penance ye shall all perish." How are we to answer his argument in favour of penances, founded on such passages? Not by appealing to our translation, for to him, it is of no authority. The only possible method is to turn to the original, and satisfy every one, capable of understanding it, that no such doctrine is contained in the Word of God. But this, if ignorant of the sacred languages, we, of course, shall not be able to do. If it is our lot to encounter Socinians, all our arguments are met and answered by the easy assertion, that they rest on false translations. However unfounded the assertion, it is sufficient to silence the ignorant advocate of orthodoxy. Let any candidate for the sacred Ministry put it to his conscience, whether this is the kind of defence which the truth merits at his hands; whether he can justify himself either in the sight of God or man, in assuming the responsibility of a defender of the faith delivered to the saints, and yet be no better prepared for his work.

It is not, however, only in controversy with those who differ thus seriously from us in matters of belief, that the knowledge in question is essential. The English version is not the standard to which appeal is made in any doctrinal discussion. On every subject, the original alone is regarded as authoritative. Any dis-

putant, therefore, can at once carry the controversy beyond our depth, and inflict on us and our cause the disgrace and injury of defeat, at pleasure. Will it not then be admitted that a knowledge of the original languages is essential to qualify us for the discharge of one of the most obvious and important duties of the Ministry; that without this knowledge, no man can defend the truth, satisfy the doubting, stop the mouths of gainsayers, or even in an enlightened manner, satisfy his own mind. How poor an excuse, then, is disinclination or sloth, for the neglect of a duty so obvious and so important.

IV. Ignorance of the sacred languages will prevent our access to the best sources of theological knowledge.

It is so much taken for granted that ministers are acquainted with what are considered the rudiments of their science, that all works of consequence which refer to the Bible at all, refer to the Scriptures in the original. It is the original which they criticise and explain; it is this on which they rest their arguments and found their remarks, if therefore we are ignorant of the sacred languages, such works must be to us uninteresting and unintelligible. The magnitude of this difficulty will be felt by all those who mean to extend the range of their studies beyond the most contracted limits. The standard works in all departments, the best commentaries, the best systems of divinity, the best polemical, and even the best practical writers, must, to all such, remain hermetically sealed. The department of Biblical Literature must be in a great measure neglected.

Every thing which belongs to the first step in theology, ascertaining the true text of the Scriptures, must be passed over, and we be left at the mercy of every one who chooses to assert that this or that passage is a false reading or interpolation. All that pertains to the sciencé of interpretation presupposes a knowledge of the sacred languages; the literary history of the sacred volume, the discussion of the canonical authority and authenticity of every book, requires the same acquisition. In short, without this knowledge, two-thirds of theological literature must remain to us an unknown land. How any one who does not determine to be an ignorant minister, can neglect this subject, it is hard to conceive. And how any man can determine to be an ignorant minister, who admits that the interests of religion depend in a great measure on the character and standing of the clergy, it becomes those who make the determination to explain.

V. In this connexion it may be remarked, that the acquisition of which we are speaking, is becoming so common, that we cannot be expected to maintain without it a respectable standing among our fellow clergymen.

It has already been remarked, that in different ages of the Church, certain subjects have received an importance independent of their intrinsic worth. There was a time when a man's standing depended on his metaphysical acumen; and useless as were the subjects on which that acumen was exercised, yet to obtain the

influence necessary to usefulness, even a good man would be justified in its cultivation. But when the subject which demands our attention, because it is a matter of general interest, is in itself of great value, the motive to exertion is proportionably increased. A knowledge, then, of the sacred languages should be obtained, because public sentiment requires it in the rising Ministry. The inconvenience of ignorance will become every day more seriously felt, as the acquisition becomes more common. Let it be remembered, too, that the enemies of the truth are often the most accomplished in knowledge of this kind, and that it therefore becomes its friends and advocates to maintain a standing which shall place them on equal terms. The appeal we make on this subject is to feelings of piety, to zeal for the truth and honour of religion. It is not for the pleasure or the pride of knowledge, it is for higher objects, and from purer motives we would urge the study of the sacred languages in all candidates for the Ministry.

VI. A knowledge of these languages has been made a requisite for admission into the office of the Ministry by almost every denomination of Christians.

If this should, in any case, become a dead letter, it will be a matter of reproach, and proof of degeneracy, in whatever section of the Church it occurs. These requisitions were enjoined in the purest and most enlightened period of our ecclesiastical existence, and they form an abiding testimony of the estimate which our fathers made of the importance of this subject.

This testimony is sustained by the opinion of the great body of the eminently pious and useful men, who have adorned the Church of Christ. The Reformers were all learned men, men familiar with the Scriptures in the languages in which they were revealed. This was the case with Luther and Calvin, with Melancthon and Beza. It was the case with Knox, though born in a land comparatively ignorant, and although he had to make the acquisition in a great measure, when he was of full age and an exile. It was the case with the English Reformers, and the English Puritans, with Owen and Baxter and How, and in short with almost every man whose memory has come down embalmed in the blessings of his generation. It was an attainment, which these men not only made, but which they highly prized, which they, in many cases, made great sacrifices to secure, and which, as Luther says, they would not exchange for all the treasures of the world. An impression of the importance of this subject, so general, so strong, and so lasting, is not likely to prove unfounded. Shall we, then, be dead to all the considerations which have thus impressed the purest churches and the most favoured of God's servants? Shall we regard an attainment which they so highly prized, as unworthy a serious effort?

VII. This acquisition requires no great labour, and will prove a source of constant pleasure.

It might doubtless be easily made, by every minister in half the number of hours which he has already wasted.

In most cases, the difficulty is in a great measure overcome, with regard to the Greek, before professional studies are commenced. As it respects Hebrew, the difficulty is greatly overrated. It is far more simple in its structure and syntax than either of the classic languages; and the repulsive features of the vowel system become familiar after a few months attention. There is therefore no excuse to be found in the irksomeness of the task, for its neglect. The language of the Old Testament has its own peculiar claims. It was, peradventure, the primitive language of our race. It is confessedly the repository of the oldest literature, of the most sublime productions, of the purest ideas of God and religion of the ancient world. The language in which Moses wrote, in which Isaiah breathed the eloquence of heaven, and through which the soul of David poured forth itself to God. No one can be insensible to the interest which belongs to the language of the patriarchs and prophets, and which has formed the medium of so large a portion of God's communications to men. It is, however, not merely for its own sake, or for the sake of a proper understanding and appreciation of the Old Testament Scriptures, that the Hebrew is important. The New Testament is Hebraic. It is so completely impressed with this character, that no rule in its interpretation is of more frequent application than that which requires us to explain its terms, in accordance with the meaning of the corresponding Hebrew word. It is no extravagant assertion, that an indivi-

dual ignorant of the language of the Old Testament, is incapable of properly explaining the New.

Let candidates for the Ministry lay this subject to heart. Let them feel the responsibility which rests upon them to prepare, not in the easiest, but the best, manner their circumstances permit, to understand, explain, and defend the truth of God. Let them resolve to be Bible men—men mighty in the Scriptures; let them determine to read a portion of the Word of God in the original every day; what they commence as a task, they will soon continue as a delight. If the remarks which we have made are well founded, it must be admitted, that a knowledge of the sacred languages is one of the most essential qualifications for the Ministry; and if this be admitted, then may we confidently hope, that no conscientious candidate for the sacred office, will neglect to make this important attainment.

Hæc eo dicta sunt, ut intelligamus nos evangelium nunquam retenturos esse, nisi fiat linguarum notitia.