

SOME OF A PASTOR'S MOST USEFUL BOOKS

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During my second year of seminary, I took a class called Public Speaking in the Church. One of the assignments for this class was to give a five minute speech on a book which impacted my life. In preparation for this assignment, I spent a few minutes looking at my small library and thinking, “How much do I use this book?” and “How many times do I think about this book?” The assignment did not allow, as I recall, for us to pick the Bible. After only a few minutes of thinking, I decided on the book which I would speak about: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. When Dr. Battle saw my outline to present this book, he started laughing. While not the typical book to present, I was very serious about the impact on this book on my life.

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of Western Reformed Seminary, I have been asked to speak about the relationship of my seminary training and my current role as a pastor. As a pastor, the only authority I have is to declare the truth of God’s Word. I am to declare the whole counsel of God. The goal of my preaching is that I and those in the congregation will apply God’s truth to our lives. We cannot arrive at a correct application if we do not first have the correct meaning.

This is why I chose this book and why even today I still use it weekly (if I’m teaching from the New Testament). The *Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* is the Old Testament resource that I utilize. Depending on the text and the week, I reference the lexicon for the important words in a text and on occasion I translate most of the passage from the original Greek or Hebrew. If I need the definition of a word, I will always turn to the lexicon as my source for that definition.

For example, in Ps 37:5 we read “commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.” What does it mean to “commit” your way to the LORD? In my New King James Bible, a footnote appears that says this word means “to roll away.” I was at a complete loss as to the real meaning of the phrase, “roll your way to the Lord.” So, I turned to the *Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* and found the Hebrew word on page 165. Reading the entry that is found there, I noticed that this word is also used in Josh 5:9 in a figurative sense. Joshua 5:9a says, “Then the Lord said to Joshua, ‘This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’” The Lord makes this statement on the occasion of entering the Promised Land. After 400 years, the time of being away was over. The idea is that the burden which has been upon the people, the Lord rolled off of them. This insight then helps to explain why the English translation of Ps 37:5 uses the word “commit.” We roll the burden of our way unto the Lord—we give it up wholly to him. You could pick a hiker with a heavy backpack full of equipment, finally find a resting point, and then roll off the backpack onto the ground. The imagery is lost in the translation. Too often, we commit in a half hearted way. Rather than truly

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“rolling our way” from us to the Lord, we hold on to it and spend a lot of time worrying. Instead, we should roll it completely from us to the Lord. This beautiful imagery is lost in the English translation.

In preparation for the Sunday sermon, I generally spend several hours reading commentaries on the text. Following this, I put together some sort of short and rough outline of the text. Then, I turn my attention to the original languages. I focus in on key words. Next, I spend some time refining the outline. After studying the text in the original, I normally change the outline considerably as new insight is gleaned from the text. I have found that having several points to a sermon helps the congregation follow along. I never attempt to have a set number of points, but instead I allow the text to tell me how many points. Furthermore, I try to develop the one overarching theme of the message. On a recent Sunday, I spoke from 2 Cor 5:9-15. I had two points answering the overall question, “Is Living for Christ really worth it?” One of the best pieces of advice I received concerning preaching is to have only one point. Have one overarching point that the congregation will leave thinking about.

In sermon preparation, the original needs to play an important part in understanding the text. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in 1:7 teaches:

“The Old Testament in Hebrew, (which was the native language of the people of God of old,) and the New Testament in Greek, (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations,) being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them.”

The Confession teaches that God inspired the originals and that the text in the original is what ought to be appealed to, not an English translation. I have found it most important to appeal to the original and see the full meaning of the text in order to understand various passages. I have been at times surprised by what I see in the original. While there are many translations which do an excellent job of communicating the meaning of the original to us today and are truly the Word of God, the pastor gains much insight and understanding from studying the original languages.

In my time in seminary, there were many classes which have greatly helped my preaching and pastoring. The classes in English Bible provided a framework and introduction to each of the books of the Bible. The theology courses provided the underpinnings of doctrine and showed how interconnected each area of theology is to one another. However, the classes which I found the most helpful were the language classes.

When speaking with young men, I have often found that they dismiss the importance of the language classes. For anyone serious about being a Bible teacher, I highly recommend learning the original languages. My time in seminary was both a trial and a blessing. The real blessing came in the midst of the trial as the LORD gave strength, endurance, and understanding. Looking back, I consider my three and half years at seminary as invaluable preparation for my ministry.