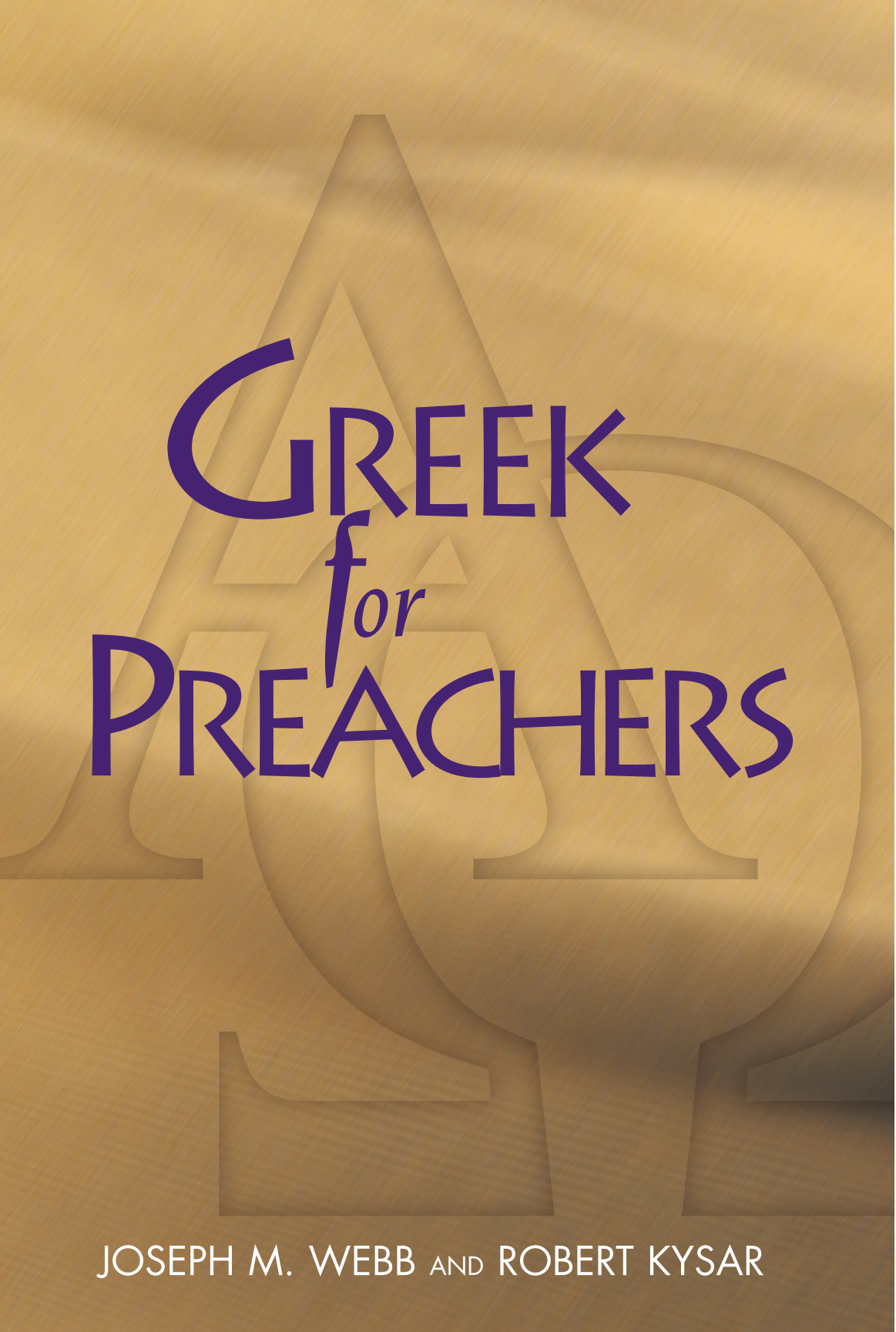
Greek
for
Preachers
Joseph M. Webb and Robert Kysar

All Bible quotations, unless otherwise marked, are the author's translation.

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Contents

Preface

One of the most significant developments in preaching as we enter a new century is the revival of concern about the Bible's role in the sermon. This is true across the spectrum of theological traditions, both Protestant and Catholic. It is true particularly in the so-called mainline traditions, where the relationship between the Bible and the sermon has become problematic over the past few decades. Even though the effort to "rediscover" the Bible takes many forms these days, its urgency in both pulpit and pew is growing, as most preachers can readily tell. In short, if preaching is to become a viable, even influential, force within Christianity again, it must somehow become more biblical. That is the conviction of the authors of this book and the primary motivation behind this work.

This book has been several years in the making. As both preachers and teachers, we have both been lifelong students of the Greek language. Both of us have been concerned in different ways about the problem of making the Bible—and the New Testament in particular—more accessible both to preachers and to thoughtful lay Christians. Our paths converged over these matters during a series of conversations that Joseph Webb initiated at the annual meeting of the Academy of Homiletics in 1997.

It should be said at the outset that though we are both committed students of the New Testament, we are not literalists with regard to its texts in Greek or in English. We do not believe there is anything intrinsically magic or even necessarily sacred about the original language of the New Testament, even though we both assert the importance of biblical language for the Christian tradition. We are also convinced that the New Testament stands at the heart of our Christian faith; in other books and publications we have both explored in some detail what we believe its role is and should be in both church and pulpit. Our sincere hope is that however we interpret or theologize its content, we treat the New Testament's language with scrupulous care and honest study so that what we say it says comes reasonably close to what it does, in fact, seem to say. And as preachers we can only move toward that high, if admittedly impossible, ideal by turning to the language in which the New Testament was written.

Over the years, textbooks on Greek for New Testament scholarship have appeared often; new ones are still being published. However, books

on the Greek text of the New Testament designed specifically for preachers and preaching have been much rarer. The book that is the "immediate" predecessor to this one—the book, in a sense, that inspired this one—was written by the Greek scholar Kenneth S. Wuest and published by Moody Press in 1946. Titled *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament,* it was revised in 1982 by Donald L. Wise. But it has long since been out of print. This book sets out to do what that one did: to bring the Greek text of the New Testament within reach of anyone who wishes to explore its riches.

We wish to acknowledge with deepest gratitude our friend and editor at Chalice Press, Dr. Jon L. Berquist. A meticulous scholar in his own right, he prods and cajoles until everything in a complex project of this nature is done correctly. He sets high standards and expects them to be met. This book would never have become a reality without his patience and unending encouragement. The book benefited greatly from the painstaking work of the Chalice Press staff and also the close attention to detail of Marianne Blickenstaff of Vanderbilt University.

Finally, when Webb originated this project almost twenty years ago, it was because of insistent prompting from a few laity concerned about a number of troubling matters of church polity and practice. They insisted on being taught, as they put it, the Bible and not just what the preacher thought about the Bible. They wanted to know for themselves what the Greek said. That led to a long series of small group Sunday afternoon meetings around the kitchen table with interlinear New Testaments and lexicons. From that came Webb's devotion to a project of teaching Greek to both lay and clergy who had never studied Greek. It culminated years later in courses in "Greek for Preachers" at the Claremont School of Theology. Shortly after that, Kysar, the Bandy Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology, joined Webb in bringing the complex task to fruition in this book.

Even though the project proceeded quietly over the years, special thanks go to Jerry and Lela Adams, two of those around that first kitchen table. They provided significant financial assistance so that time and energy, at several points, could be devoted to the work. Gratitude is also extended to several preaching scholars who read the manuscript at various stages of its development, Rev. Richard Eslinger and Prof. Greg Heille, O.P., in particular.

Joseph M. Webb
Robert Kysar

Introduction

You have been assigned, let us say, to preach a sermon on John 21:15–17, the post-resurrection encounter between Jesus and Peter. It is not a welcome assignment. The text is familiar—all too familiar—but it is one that you have avoided for years. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, and three times Peter says that he does. Still, the story has a bad feel to it, an unhappy ending, and you are not sure why. Something seems to be missing. You have consulted commentaries, some of which suggest a problem with the word "love" in the text, but overall it is still not clear. Now a sermon has to be preached on the text. So you read it again from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV):

> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

The puzzle remains. What sense is one to make of the text, a text that has produced thousands of sermons over the years, along with countless theories about its significance? Ironically, the actual meaning of the text is startlingly simple and straightforward. But not in most English translations. Only in the Greek text of the New Testament, the language in which these documents were originally written, do we find some meaning to the passage. To see this, we will look at the same three verses by using what is called a Greek-English interlinear New Testament, which is a kind of running translation of the Greek text into English. We shall, however, only be *looking* at Greek words. In the text that follows, an English translation appears *under* the Greek words. Find the times where the English word "love" appears and note carefully the Greek word that appears over it:

Ὅτε οὖν ἠρίστησαν λέγει τῷ Σίμωνι
Then, when they ate (breakfast) says to Simon

Πέτρῳ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με
Peter - Jesus, Simon, son of John, do you love me

πλέον τούτων; λέγει αὐτῷ, ναὶ κύριε, σὺ
more than these ones? He says to him, "Yes, Lord, you

οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε. λέγει αὐτῷ, βόσκε τὰ ἀρνία
know that I love you." He says to him, "Feed the sheep

μου. λέγει αὐτῷ πάλιν δεύτερον· Σίμων
of me." He says to him again a second time, "Simon

Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς μὲ; λέγει αὐτῷ· ναὶ
son of John, do you love me?" He says to him, "Yes,

κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε. λέγει αὐτῷ·
Lord, you know that I love you." He says to him,

ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου. λέγιε αὐτῷ
"Shepherd the little sheep of me." He says to him

τὸ τρίτον· Σίμων Ἰωάννου, φιλεῖς μὲ;
the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

ἐλυπήθη ὁ Πέτρος ὅτι εἶπεν αὐτῷ τὸ τρίτον·
Was grieved - Peter that he said to him the third time,

φιλεῖς με; καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· κύριε, πάντα
"Do you love me," and he says to him, "Lord, all things

σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε. λέγει
you know, you know that I love you." Says

αὐτῷ (ὁ Ἰησοῦς)· βόσκε τὰ πρόβατά μου.
to him (- Jesus), "Feed the little sheep of me."

What did you see? If you looked for the English word "love," you discovered, even visually, that the first time Jesus asks Peter his question ("Do you love me?"), he uses the Greek word ἀγαπάω (the verb form of ἀγάπη, pronounced *agape*) with the ending grammatically altered to fit the sentence. When Peter answers, though, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," he uses a *different* word—φιλέω, with a slightly altered ending to fit the sentence. Then, a second time Jesus asks him: "Do you love me?"

and uses the same word, ἀγαπάω. Peter answers the second time, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," but again with φιλέω. Finally, we are told that Jesus presses Peter a third time, except that this time when Jesus asks Peter the question, Jesus drops the word ἀγαπάω and himself uses the word φιλέω. This time, the text says, Peter was grieved, or hurt, but he replied, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you," again the word φιλέω, which is the one Jesus has just used.

What is the significance of all this? It is very straightforward, but much more powerful than an English translation is able to render it. The Greek language has multiple, very different words for love, while in English we have only one. If you look up the nouns ἀγάπη and φιλία (from which the two key words of the John text, ἀγαπάω and φιλέω, are constructed) you will see that ἀγάπη is the word for divine love, for the love that is "of God" or "from God." On the other hand, φιλία is the word for friendship, good friends. It is the source from which the English word *philadelphia,* "brotherly love," is derived. So in the text, Jesus asks Peter if he has that divine love for him, but Peter avoids the question and answers, in effect, "Yes, Lord, you and I are very good friends." But that is not the question Jesus asked! He wants to know if their relationship goes beyond friendship to what might be called a divine level. Peter avoids the question the second time and repeats that he and Jesus are "good friends." Then Jesus turns the table, and the third time asks Peter if they really are "good friends." No wonder Peter is grieved—it is not just because Jesus has asked a "third time"; it is because this time Jesus has questioned their friendship. And all Peter can do that third time is reassert that they are "good friends." Peter never answers, in this text, Jesus' question about ἀγάπη.

Now we see the significance of the text, as profound and moving an encounter as one can possibly imagine. You can only see it, however, by seeing the Greek text itself—and then having some idea of what to look for in the text. Recently one of us was teaching an adult class on the gospel of John and pointed out the difference between these two words, both translated "love." A laywoman was indignant that she had no way of knowing this from the English translation. She felt betrayed by her English Bible. The value of knowing the Greek text was obvious, and for the preacher armed with some Greek, the difference becomes the basis for a sermon on this text.

Look at another important text, this time from an epistle, from 1 Timothy 2:11–12. In the NRSV, it reads like this: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have

authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Here is how one finds these two verses in a Greek-English interlinear:

Γυνὴ ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ μανθανέτω ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ·
(A) woman in silence let learn in all subjection;

διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω οὐδὲ
to teach but (a) woman I do not allow nor

αὐθεντεῖν ἀνδρός, ἀλλ᾽ εἶναι
to exercise authority (over a) man, but to be

ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ.
in silence.

This is a text to which we shall return at several points in this book, so we will focus on only one element of it here. Look for the word ἡσυχία, which appears twice in the space of these two short verses. Each time, it is translated *silence,* both in the NRSV and in the interlinear. But there is a very serious problem. If you look ἡσυχία up in a lexicon, you will find that its primary meaning is not "silence" at all. In fact, if you look up the four other New Testament texts in which ἡσυχία or a variant of it appears, you find that the word only sometimes means "silent" or "silence." Often its sense is "at peace" or "peaceable" or "to be left in peace" or "quiet" (meaning at peace). For instance, in Hellenistic Greek outside the New Testament, writers used it to describe "peace and harmony" among citizens of a city. Ironically, the same Greek word, ἡσυχία, appears only a few verses earlier in 1 Timothy 2:2. Even without knowing Greek, you can see the word in an interlinear text, though its ending is slightly different. In verse 2, the writer urges that prayers and supplications be made for kings and all those in positions of esteem, in order that readers may live "peaceful and quiet" lives. In this verse, the word translated "peaceful" is ἡσύχιον which is the equivalent of ἡσυχία.

The same two words also appear in Acts 22:2, 2 Thessalonians 3:12, and 1 Peter 3:4, and in each case mean "quiet" in the sense of "peace" or "peacefulness." For instance, 1 Peter 3:4 describes the inner spirit as "gentle and quiet." First Timothy 2:11–12 should be read to mean that women are encouraged to learn and to do so "in peace," or to be "left in peace" in order to learn. The word σιγή, means more strictly "silence," and the writer could have used it in 1 Timothy 2 if that was the intended meaning. The "traditional" meaning of the passage, however, has been provided by the translators and not by the writer; and the only way one discovers that is by looking up the words that appear in the text.

The point is that 1 Timothy 2:11–12 *does not* in any way direct women to be silent. They are to be "learners," "disciples," and the implication of the statement is that the women are being harassed while they are trying to learn. So the instruction is striking: "Let a woman learn in peace"—with the "subjection" being that of the good student to one's teacher. There are, to be sure, other elements in this verse that go on from this statement, and we shall come to some of those at various points later in this book. Notice that understanding the use of a word in one passage may entail looking for how it is used elsewhere. However, we should never assume that a word is used in the exact same way in different passages. The context in which a word is used is more important than how another writer in a different document might use the same word (as we will see more clearly later).

Of course, not all of the texts of the New Testament are as dramatically in need of examination as the two examples we have used. But you will be surprised at how many of the so-called "problem texts" become clarified when you look at them in a Greek interlinear Testament. What is most important, however, is that virtually every text in the New Testament holds ideas and secrets, nuances and turns of meaning, that can only be seen and appreciated in the Greek text. These are things that do not necessarily call for entirely new translations, but that add insight and precision that are highly valuable for preaching and teaching.

We have a growing number of English-language New Testaments, but there is still no substitute for the biblical documents in their original language. Meaning, we know, is never easily or neatly transferred from one language to another, no matter how good the translation or the translator. This is true with our English-language New Testaments, yet use them we must, trusting that we are doing "the best we can."

But it has not always been this way. The time was, and not very long ago, when anyone who prepared for a life of preaching and ordained ministry was expected, often even required, to learn the original languages, Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew for the Old. Given the importance of the Bible, there was no way to be a pastor without knowledge of the original biblical languages. In a few places, and in a few Christian traditions, that is still the case, but, remarkably, in *very few* places. In most major seminaries, where the next generation of preachers is being taught, neither Hebrew nor Greek is required. They are options in the curriculum, but in our experience of seminary education, they are not options that are pressed in any significant way on students—especially not on students who are preparing for a preaching ministry. Only those who wish to be

"scholars" are required to study the biblical languages. For the rest of us clergy, our English translations are what we work with in our classrooms, in our studies, and, yes, in our pulpits.

However, some who have been in the ordained ministry for a few years or more recognize the problem in a different way. Even when students have studied Greek in their theological preparation, whether by requirement or option, the language is sometimes learned in relative isolation from anything one might actually *do* with the language. This does not mean the student only conjugates, parses, and learns some vocabulary in Greek classes. Learning Greek always entails *reading* from the Greek New Testament as part and parcel of that instruction. One reads the text as a measure of how well one has learned the language. The dilemma is that this, of itself, does not prepare us for working week in and week out with the Greek text in preparation for preaching. As a result, in many cases the preacher who "took Greek" in seminary quickly loses it or puts it away after a number of years in the ordained ministry. The usefulness of Greek as a continuous aspect of a pastor's study and sermon preparation is precisely what is not often taught. So even Greek-taught pastors tend to revert to English translations alone for sermon study and preparation. Sometimes this is because of the pressures of ordained ministry, but other times because of the fact that they were not taught how to put Greek to good use in sermon preparation and teaching.

This book, though, is not a lament over what should be or what might have been in today's theological education. Nor is it one more introductory Greek grammar text (of which there are already a good number) designed to cajole the busy pastor into finally learning, or returning to, the Greek that was available in seminary. Most certainly, what we offer in this book is not designed as an easy way to master Greek. We do not pretend to offer readers the equivalent of a Greek course nor to offer shortcuts to acquire skills that you might gain in an academic study of the language.

This is not, in short, a Greek textbook written by Greek scholars for those who are or would be biblical scholars. It is a book written by teachers of Christian preaching for preachers and those who would be preachers of the biblical gospel. It is written by teachers who believe that Christian preachers can and should be capable handlers of the Greek New Testament—not as scholars, *but as preachers*. It is written in the belief that whether readers have ever studied Greek or not, they can master basic tools and understandings for "rightly handling the words" of the Greek text. This is done primarily by learning to work with an interlinear Greek-English New Testament and a good analytical Greek lexicon. The

method we propose and will describe is for the sheer purpose of preparing sermons that grow from, and interact with, the dynamic meanings of the Greek text about which one preaches.

Our purposes, though, are more specific than that. They arise from two issues related to the loss of the Greek text in the pulpit. The first is that English translations of the Greek New Testament invariably contain problems of interpretation and communication, often problems of considerable consequence. These range from translating difficult words in one language into similar words in another language, to problems of syntax that, when not clarified, fuel ambiguity and controversy, to various degrees of bias within translators, leading them to see the language being translated through the filter of their own perspectives. There is no easy cure for these problems. We always tend to translate the original language out of our own theological perspective. However, when we ourselves can work directly with the Greek, we are more likely to move toward some solutions to these textual matters. With only a basic knowledge of the Greek, we can foster better understanding of the text for ourselves and for those to whom we preach.

The second issue raised by the loss of Greek study in seminary is that it removes from both preaching and teaching a level of originality, creativity, and intelligence that today's struggling pulpit seems badly to need. There is joy to be had in the Greek language, often fun that can brighten up a sermon. Taking account of it at appropriate moments in preaching not only adds insight, past and present, but also gives the Bible a new sense of exuberance and freshness. Of course, we must be cautious not to get carried away with our Greek "learning." One may be tempted to "show off" in the pulpit by claiming to "know Greek." It is highly repulsive when someone does that to excess in public, and especially repulsive when one does it to excess *in the pulpit*. But, judiciously and frugally handled, the joys of the Greek language of our New Testament are as bright as newly cut diamonds sitting in a store window waiting for someone to pick them up and share them with others.

In short, this book represents an effort to make the Greek text of the New Testament both *usable* and *exciting* to preachers who have never studied Greek, to those who studied it at some point in the past but who were never pressed (or taught) to connect its use directly to preaching, and also to those who are now studying Greek and who would like to make it an active part of their future preaching ministries. The tools for such work do exist and have for some time. With minimal expenditure of time and energy, they can be adapted and used as part of one's regular pulpit

preparation. Literally anyone, including lay leaders and church school teachers, can learn to work with the Greek text in a credible and highly original way. The goal of this book is to demonstrate and illustrate how this can be done, not based on "shortcuts" to learning Greek, but based, instead, on one's mastery of the dynamics of the Greek-English interlinear New Testament and the various tools and understandings that support it.

This book is in three parts. The first part is about those various "tools," beginning with the basic reference books one needs. The discussion then moves to the Greek alphabet, which any student must learn. From there we turn to the basic "reading" of the Greek text, by which we mean a reading not yet for meaning, but for sound and pronunciation. These are foundational elements, but they can be done in the course of a few days.

Part 2 is the heart of the book. It contains ten chapters, which present the ten "rules" or "principles" for working with an interlinear Greek-English text. While these are, in a sense, technical matters related to the Greek language, to grammar, and to syntax, they are presented as working *directives* to be used with every text that you might study as a basis for a sermon or lesson. The emphasis is not on learning particular parts of speech or grammatical configurations; it is on becoming familiar with specific aspects of grammar as a way of opening up a text for clarification and enrichment. Each chapter here is amply illustrated with New Testament texts, including sermonic suggestions and observations interspersed with the grammatical explanations.

Part 3 carries the discussion of these grammatical materials toward the pulpit. One section proposes a process by which a preacher might proceed to read, translate and isolate a meaning for a passage, and then continue with devising a sermon theme or focus. There are ways to use the Greek text in preaching and ways not to use it; here, in the third part of the book, are some cautions that are essential in order that the Greek text may enhance preaching without falling into the various pitfalls of scholasticism or egocentricity. Finally, we each offer a sermon to show how an understanding of Greek might lead to preaching. We try to show how certain principles explained in Part 2 contributed to the preparation of our respective sermons.

These three sections of the book lend themselves to different uses, depending on your past experience with Greek and the Greek New Testament. For example, if you have never studied Greek, you will need to start at the beginning, working through the tools and the principles carefully before you get to sermon preparation. However, if you took a

course or courses in Greek at some point in the past, you will need only a cursory review of Part 1, if that much. We would suggest going through the alphabet quickly as a refresher, but then turning to the reading exercises at the end of Part 1. You may find yourself remembering some of your Greek knowledge without much effort.

Then read Part 2, the ten principles. Take some notes along the way, but you will undoubtedly find that much of what you learned in your earlier Greek study will come back to you. Treat Part 2 as a refresher course as well, but with some care. It may take you in some directions that you did not focus on during your study of Greek grammar. Then you will be ready to look closely at Part 3, the process of sermon preparation.

If you are currently studying Greek, you may treat this book as a supplementary textbook. It will not replace the work of your course—which will include not only grammatical detail but also vocabulary learning—but it will enable you to keep the needs of your pulpit work in mind as you go through the various elements of your beginning and advanced Greek courses. The correlations between the various principles and your professor's detailed instruction should not be too difficult to draw.