

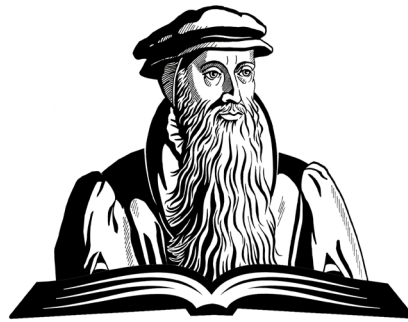
Video Lecture Series

Classical Christian Education

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

LECTURE #7

The Importance of Language in Classical Education



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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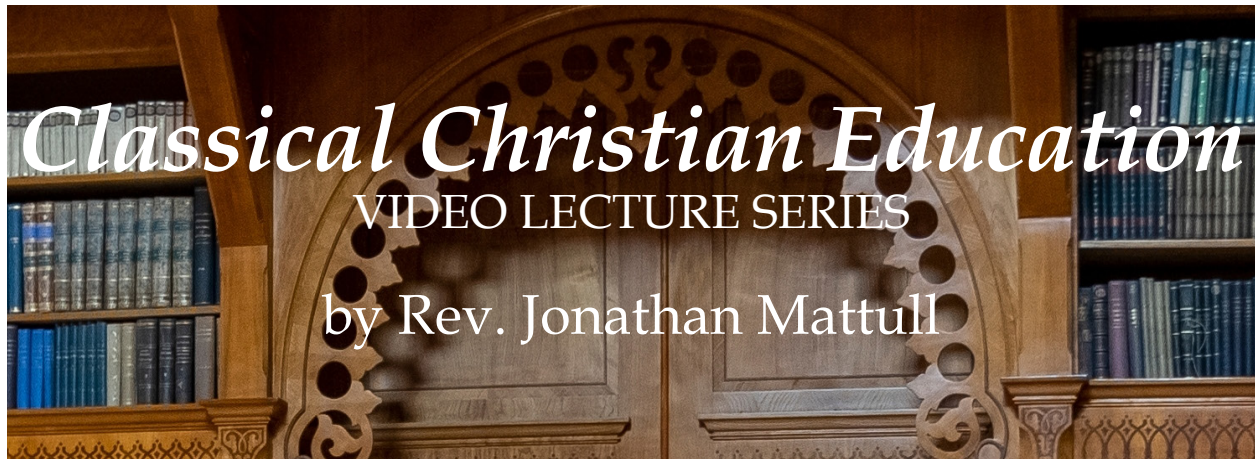
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i) Introduction

1. The Goal of Mastering Language
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Introduction

Few people see the need to give much attention to learning languages today, much less the need to try and master a language. After all, with the assistance of online support, a poorly written essay can be corrected and edited after a few clicks on the keyboard. Apart from very few exceptions today, most schools consider diagramming sentences to be a waste of time. This contrasts with the long-standing practice of prior approaches to education, where the bulk of education focused on learning parts of speech, diagramming sentences, and other such related work. With the advent of artificial intelligence, there are programs being developed that allow for nearly instantaneous translation. Some look at the hard work of mastering language as a foolish waste of time today. Most disappointing, increasingly, schools and even church-affiliated schools share this view.

Acknowledging our current culture, in this lesson, we give attention to *The Importance of Mastering Language*. So in our lesson today, we consider this importance. But mastering language is a goal of Classical Christian Education. And by “language,” we refer both to our vernacular, but also, and preeminently, to the Classical languages of Greek and Latin. We can summarize our thought in three points. First, *The Goal of Mastering Language*; second, *The Pathway for Mastering Language*; and third, *The Relationship Between the Classical Languages and Mastering Language Itself*. First,

1. The Goal of Mastering Language

Now why should this be our goal? The first reason we can provide is that God made man to communicate verbally—that is, by means of words. God’s ways are mysterious. We are left to search the things he has revealed, and leave his secrets to himself. When we search the revealed record, we find that it is God who made man after his own image. God has been pleased to

communicate with us, that is, he has shared with us his will. His knowledge has been put into a form we can understand, and he has shared with us by words. So it is that we have his written Word. And before his Word was written, as we now have it by inspiration of God, he spoke his Word to his people. Thus, he spoke with Adam and Eve. He spoke with Abraham and Moses. Even after he began to have his Word recorded in writing, he continued to speak. Thus, he spoke with David, and Isaiah. He spoke to Zachariah and Malachi. Even more wondrous when it is that God the Son should come, of whom we read in John chapter 1: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God” (verse 1). When he should come, he came preaching the kingdom of God. He spoke—the living and eternal Word incarnate spoke. It is this God whose image we bear—the very God who spoke in a variety of forms: history, poetry, commandments, appeals, promises, stories, parables, and so on—is the one who made us after his image. As such, we, as humans, are creatures who communicate verbally. This distinguishes us from the rest of earthly creation. And as it is something that distinguishes us, it’s a reason we ought to pursue mastering language.

A second reason, for man to communicate truth well, he must use words well. To discern truth, if he’s to communicate it, he must understand the meaning of words. Now, words exist in context: phrases, sentences, paragraphs, books, in discourses, and discussions. And so, not only particular words, but how those particular words relate to other words. How one thought relates to a whole body of thought. So, while it is true one may observe things with his senses and learn things about the world, when we desire to know something deeply, we begin to use words, and pay attention to the meaning of those words. We see this in a child. Instinctively, a child begins making sounds. Over time, the sounds are trained by parents and others to express words, which are symbols of thought. As soon as the child has any use of words, however imperfectly, the child begins asking questions. And what are these questions? They’re attempts to understand the world. So even by nature, so soon as we have the symbols of words and speech to express our thoughts, we start asking questions with words. As our minds develop, our questions develop. We begin to ask questions like, “What is the difference between lust and love?” “What is wisdom?” “What is the difference between sophistry and rhetoric?” “What’s the difference between justification and sanctification?” Now, it may be that we never ask these precise questions, but these are the kinds of questions, as we mature, that we begin to ask. All of these attempts to discern and understand truth demand a good use of language.

But to understand the truth is but a step in the direction of communicating the truth. If to understand the truth, we must use language well, in order to receive the input of others, to communicate the truth to others, likewise, we must use words well. We make simple distinctions: “This is sweet, however, it does not taste like sugar; it tastes like honey.” These are words we’re using. We’re employing them to refer to concrete things, but they’re communicating verbally distinctions that we’re trying to make. And we do so by words. Of course, the more involved our thought becomes, the more precise and developed our language must become. Perhaps you, as I, have seen attempts in our day to simplify the language of the Bible into something other than its actual words. Now certainly, pastors, and Bible teachers, parents, and other Christians need to use other words than the Bible to explain the Bible’s meaning. However, while that’s the case, we should not take the Bible’s words themselves and change them, in order to, as we think, present the Bible itself. We should not edit the Bible’s text. Why?—because these are words that God has chosen to communicate his truth to us. The language that God has given us is language communicating truth in the way that he meant it to be communicated. He’s chosen his words well,

to communicate to us his thoughts.

Now, as important that is, he also models for us the important pursuit of expressing ourselves with the right words. The right words express words not only themselves well, but thought well, and clearly. Mark Twain,¹ a famous author in the United States, made popular an illustrious statement. He said, “The difference between the almost-right word and the right word is really a large matter. It is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” Now, anyone who’s familiar with what a lightning bug is—this flying insect that, at night, glows intermittently—will realize that, though there’s a similarity in the words used—*lightning bug*, and, *lightning*—the difference is extraordinary. The right word fits both the truth being communicated, and the people to whom we are communicating—the message, and the audience. To find and use the right word demands intimate acquaintance with the truth itself, as well as intimate awareness of the audience. This will make the words both accurate and beautiful. To manage this well leads to persuasive communication.

On a practical level, this means that someone teaching children is going to use words suitable to children. Someone teaching post-graduate students is going to use words suitable for such a class. An ordained man teaching a theological class will use more technical language than that same man preaching a sermon to his congregation. We understand these things. But in order to do these things well, there must be a mastery of language. Now, this is not just true of the minister of the gospel, it’s true of parents. Could you imagine a parent speaking to his or her two- or three-year-old child at the same level as he might speak to his peer. He necessarily uses simpler language to communicate well. But we would also consider it strange were that parent to speak to his peer with the same language he would speak to his two or three-year-old. There’s a mastery of language, at least the skillful use of language, if not mastery, that’s needed to communicate well. Well, second, we look at,

2. The Pathway for Mastering Language

The ancients discerned a need to provide both comprehensive training and intensive training for mastering language. First, *Comprehensive Training*. We’ve already handled this by referring to the Trivium—the three ways, or the three roads of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Fundamentally, the Trivium provides a comprehensive training in learning what language is, how language functions, and how to use it well. Classical schools in history prioritized diligent, focused study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. As the Roman Empire began its rise, the rise of Latin began as well. In the Classical school prior to the 1900s, grammar would almost universally refer to Latin grammar, or Greek grammar. Diligent, focused mastery of letters, sounds, vocabulary, meaning, cases, parts of speech, and so on were the things that were focused upon. Why? Well, in order to speak well, one must master words, sounds, meaning, implications, forms. This demands careful attention to grammar. Grammar was not an end in itself, but it was a means, and it was considered to be a fundamentally and necessary means to the more beautiful and useful forms of speech. In order to speak eloquently, one must discern truth and the arguments to defend and advance it. To present sound arguments and explanations requires training in logic. In order to speak eloquently, even when one understands the right sounds and words, and right arguments, one must understand the occasion and the audience. This requires rhetorical training. A student led through the subjects of grammar, logic, and rhetoric received comprehensive instruction in the language arts. They would

¹ “Mark Twain” was the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835–1910). He was an American writer, humorist, and essayist, who was praised as “the greatest humorist the United States has produced.”

emerge well prepared to encounter the world, ready to learn, ready to discuss, ready to defend, ready to persuade, ready to engage with others about the truth.

But they did not only provide a comprehensive training; second, they provided *Intensive Training*. By “intensive,” we mean deeply involved, deeply focused and thorough. The ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as Christians, understood that students needed to pursue a course of intensive training throughout their comprehensive training. If ever they were to master language, they needed this intensity. We don’t have time, of course, to survey every way this was done, but in order to illustrate the point, we can look very briefly at how the ancient student developed his ability to write. After learning the letters and syllables, the case endings, and parts of speech, the students graduated to exercises for learning how to use words well. They moved on to what was referred to as the *progymnasmata*. This word translates for something like “the before exercises.” Through a sequence of often fourteen phases of exercises, the student would develop skills of storytelling, description, comparison, argumentation, among other rhetorical skills, all preparing them for formal rhetoric in higher education. These exercises would teach all manner of writing skills, and doing so in such a routine and regular way, that they would come from those exercises having mastered those skills.

This approach used material intentionally to cultivate the student’s understanding of virtue as well as vice. This is an important point. The intensity of focusing upon the development of language skills was not separated from the intention of cultivating virtue. And so, the types of things they were modeling their speech after were models exemplifying virtue, wisdom, patience, all of these different things; heroism, self-denial, diligence. And so, when they were looking at fables, they would look at fables which illustrated these kinds of things. And so, as they’re focusing on how the words are formed, and how to imitate those words, they were necessarily taking in certain virtues. This is something we can glean.

Well, there’s much more that could be said, but if we at least glean this, that they provide a comprehensive and intense approach to educating, then it is that we’ll glean the main thing. Well, third,

3. The Classical Languages and Their Relation to Mastering Language Itself

Greek and Latin are the Classical languages. Greek was the language of Euclid,² Socrates,³ Plato,⁴ and Aristotle⁵. Most importantly, Greek is the language of the New Testament. The early church

2 Euclid (fl. 300 BC), was an ancient Greek mathematician, active as a geometer and logician, considered to be the father of geometry, and chiefly known for *The Elements* treatise, which established the foundations of geometry.

3 Socrates (c. 470 BC–399 BC), famous Greek philosopher from Athens, he is credited as the founder of Western philosophy, one of the first moral philosophers of the ethical tradition of thought. Accused of impiety and corrupting the youth, Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking poison.

4 Plato, *nee* Aristocles (c. 428–348/347 BC), famous ancient Greek philosopher of the Classical period, considered a foundational thinking in Western philosophy, and innovator of written dialogue and dialectic forms. His main studies were Epistemology, Metaphysics, Political philosophy. He was teacher to Aristotle.

5 Aristotle (384–322 BC), Ancient Greek philosopher and polymath. His writings cover a broad range of subjects spanning the natural sciences, philosophy, linguistics, economic, politics, psychology, and the arts. He founded the Peripatetic School of philosophy in Athens, and began the Aristotelian tradition which set the groundwork for development of modern science.

fathers, of course, many of them were conversant in Greek—Justin Martyr,⁶ Basil,⁷ Athanasius,⁸ and many more. Latin was the language of Cicero,⁹ but also of Jerome,¹⁰ and Augustine.¹¹ “However, unless one pursues the ministry,” someone might ask, “why should someone study ancient Greek or Latin today?” In addition to what we’ve already applied, it’s worth noting that Latin remained the language used in the West for all scholarly and international concerns through roughly the eighteenth century. Names familiar, likely, to you wrote in Latin—Luther,¹² Bullinger,¹³ Bucer,¹⁴ Calvin,¹⁵ Knox¹⁶. Yet still, as many say today, “Latin is a dead language today. Whatever it was in those years, why should *we* study it?” Well let me begin by identifying what reasons do not motivate us to study these languages.

Today, many present reasons for studying these languages in very pragmatic ways. If you speak a “romance language” (so-called because of the Romans), Latin set the foundation for that language. This is true of languages like Spanish, and Italian; and though not directly a romance language, English borrows many words from Latin; similarly, German, which English is related to, borrows words from Latin. Latin has influenced most Western languages in an amazing way. And because of this, people argue that we ought to study Latin in order to understand better our own language. As one example, more than fifty percent of English words come from Latin—they’re related to Latin words. Now, while this is true, it’s also true that one doesn’t need a thorough mastery of Latin to cultivate English vocabulary. One could simply focus on English itself. The

6 Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–c. AD 165), aka, Justin the Philosopher, was an early Christian apologist, writer, and philosopher, who was martyred, along with some of his students, for refusing to sacrifice to Roman gods.

7 Basil of Caesarea (AD 330–379), aka Saint Basil the Great, was an early Roman Christian prelate who served as Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia from 370 until his death. He was an influential theologian who supported the Nicene Creed and opposed heresies in the early Christian church, such as Arianism and Apollinarianism.

8 Athanasius I of Alexandria (c. AD 296–373), aka Athanasius the Great, was a Christian theologian and the 20th patriarch of Alexandria. His episcopacy of 45 years included 5 exiles. As an early church father, he was a proponent of Trinitarianism, against Arianism, and a noted Egyptian Christian leader of the fourth century. The Athanasian Creed is named after him, but only because it espouses the doctrines he fought to uphold.

9 Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC–43 BC), a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, philosopher, orator, writer, and Academic skeptic, who tried to uphold optimate principles during the political crisis that led to the establishment of the Roman Empire. He’s know for treatises on rhetoric, philosophy, and politics, and he served as consul in 63 BC, and was assassinated by Mark Antony’s followers.

10 Jerome (c. 342–420), aka Jerome of Stridon, was an early Christian priest, confessor, theologian, translator, writer, and historian, best known for translating the Bible into Latin, which became known as the Vulgate.

11 Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), was a Christian theologian of Berber origin, was the bishop of Hippo in Numidia, Roman North Africa. His prolific writings influenced the development of Western Christianity, and is viewed as one of the most important church fathers in the patristic period.

12 Martin Luther (1483–1546), was a German priest, theologian, author, hymn writer, professor, and former Augustinian friar, who was the seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

13 Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), was a Swiss Reformer and Theologian, successor of Huldrych Zwingli as head of the church of Zurich. One of the most important leaders of the Swiss Reformation, he co-authored the Helvetic Confessions and collaborated with John Calvin on the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

14 Martin Bucer (1491–1551), was a German Protestant Reformer in Strasbourg who influenced Lutheran and Anglican doctrines and practices, as well as Reformed theology.

15 John Calvin, or, Jean Calvin, (1509–1564) – well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and well-known Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

16 John Knox (c. 1514–1572), was a Scottish minister, theologian, author, and leader of the Reformation in Scotland; founder of the Church of Scotland.

same is true of French or German. Whatever the language is, one could focus almost exclusively upon it and come away with an understanding of that language. And though it's true that we can benefit by studying another language—in fact, we can say it this way: you'll never understand your own language thoroughly until you've started to try and grapple with another language—yet that's not the primary motive for studying Latin and Greek.

Well, others argue that we should study Latin and Greek because of the help they provide with other subjects—for instance, medicine and law. Both of these use words, primarily from Latin, but also from Greek. And so, if we wish to make our way forward in medicine or law, or other sorts of vocations, we should study these languages. Now, of course, it's true, if we understand Latin and Greek, it's going to help us understand what certain terms mean. But that hardly justifies the investment of time required to master these languages. Additionally, plenty of doctors and lawyers have done well in their training without any previous study in Latin or Greek.

Well, among other reasons, some argue that we should study Latin because it develops our critical thinking. Well, first, in response to this, I would ask, what is critical thinking? Most people present this, of course, because no one wants to be an uncritical thinker. No one wants to be brought into a false conclusion. No one wants to make wrong generalizations. Everyone wants to think well. I suppose what's meant is that a critical thinker thinks with discernment and attention. And whereas, of course, the study of any language will help develop discernment and attention, it's not exclusive to Latin and Greek. I would also note that many things develop critical thinking. Plenty of people who have never given themselves to any thorough study of any language have become critical thinkers.

So why, then, should we study these languages in such a way as to promote mastery? Well, we should note, that in all of these arguments we've merely touched on present true claims. However, they aren't the reasons we should devote time, energy, and even money to mastering languages. Let me present, in very short form, two primary reasons why we should. First, *the entrance to and reception of the Classical culture*; and second, *the delight it brings*.

The first reason, *Entrance Into and Reception of the Classical Culture*. Now, I've never been to Spain. I know I would learn a lot about Spain in my own language, and learn much about it. Insofar as what I read accurately represented truths about Spain, I would be getting valuable insights. However, if I wanted to enter with greater depth into Spanish culture, I would need to learn Spanish and read Spanish literature—governing documents, history—not in translation, but in Spanish. The more I read Spanish literature, the more I would pick up the culture, the way of thinking, the patterns of thought, the living, the priorities, the essence of the culture of Spain. Now, surely, visiting would be important. However, even if I visited Spain and did so without having the language, I would not glean as much as I would if I visited with the language.

Now, this is true of Classical antiquity. It's also true we can't go back, as it were, to live in antiquity. However, we can have the language and read those ancient works in their language. One has characterized Historical Classical Education as “Classical immersion.” In order to immerse oneself in a culture not one's own, there is difficult work ahead. We live in the world of Wikipedia, social media, and instant messaging. Even a second's delay while on the internet tests our patience. However, to take in a culture demands time and patience. To master language requires this. Why should we do it? Well, because the mastery of these languages provides access to the thoughts, the ideals, the insights, and the virtues of Classical antiquity. Such a student will benefit from the gleanings of antiquity itself.

However, to have these languages mastered will also enable the Christian student to access

the thoughts, the ideals, the insights, and virtues of Christians writers for the majority of Christian history. It's true. Some of the best works have been translated into modern languages; many exist in English. However, anyone who has mastered another language knows the great insight that comes by reading and thinking in the other language. Some aspects of the truth being communicated cannot be fully communicated in translation. Additionally, the culture—that is, the set of values, ideals, morals, and standards—begins to be cultivated in us.

We have emphasized already that the standard of Classical Education was the wise men, the virtuous man. The ancient works expose us to questions about the loftiest subjects in the most practical of ways. Both justice as an ideal, and justice in the concrete realities before us are handled in the ancient works. Not only so, but they are beautifully handled, in language truly satisfying. A life steeped in this will take in its beauty, by God's blessing, and have its effect in the desires, and thoughts, and habits of the one so invested. Although it requires diligence, the Greek student who is able to read Demosthenes¹⁷ will be impressed both by the substance of his arguments, the beauty of his words, and the force of his appeal. The same is true of the Latin student who reads Cicero. It is this access to the originals that begins to shape one's understanding, affection, and standards. All must be read with discernment, as we've already emphasized; errors of judgment and commitment exist. However, the works will richly reward the discerning reader with new insight into justice, prudence, courage, and temperance.

For the Christian, there's more. Not only does the Christian derive help from the beautiful and penetrating thought of unbelieving ancients by mastering the Classical languages, the Christian gains access to a goldmine of direct and indirect treasures. The direct treasures should be obvious. There's a rich treasury of theology, sermons, and devotional writings in Greek and Latin. Most of all, the Christian who has gained Greek now may sit at the very fountain of our faith, even the Holy Scriptures. Even though he'll be without Hebrew, if he only has Greek, he'll be able to access the New Testament, as well as the early Greek translation of the Old Testament used during the time of the New Testament, the Septuagint, which is actually quoted in the New Testament. Additionally, having learned Greek, a language not his own, he will be in a better position, should he desire to learn Hebrew. For the Christian, such access to the Bible, even if only limited to the New Testament, will prove satisfying. We acknowledge without hesitation that the translation into modern languages is both lawful and needed. But we also notice that, while lawful and needed, ultimately, we must appeal to the originals—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. It is this original, which, as *The Westminster Confession* says, “Was inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages...so as, in all controversies in religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.”¹⁸ Well, in passing, there's also an indirect treasury gleaned as well, in that the student of Greek and Latin better understands the context of the early church, both during the time of the New Testament, and immediately after.

Well, here's the second, and last of our reasons—*delight*. I'll only touch upon it, for your persuasion of its truth will come only as you engage in the study and use of the language. As one uses these languages by actually reading Demosthenes, Cicero, the New Testament, Augustine, and so on, that one finds delight, a right and honorable pleasure. As one contemporary author put it, “The Classical languages can change and enhance one's intellectual and aesthetic nature, shaping both the mind and the heart.” The Classical languages do this, not only by the learning of the language, but using the language to access the beautiful strivings of men in the deepest and

¹⁷ Demosthenes (384–322 BC), was a Greek statesman and orator.

¹⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), chapter 1, paragraph 8.

most weighty of truths.

Before we move to our closing, let me stress that both of these reasons, for the Christian, are to be under the chief motivation, which is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Mastering Latin and Greek are to be used as ways of doing this. One can master these languages but fail to glorify and enjoy God.

Well, as we close, here's an opportunity for you and for me to examine how well we prioritize language. Do we take care in how we use language? Are we careful in how we express ourselves? Are we careful in our reading of God's Word and in our speaking of it to others. Because, fundamentally, these require skill with language. To do that and to do it well is a part of the Christian's calling. A thing that we can emphasize, though, with reference to, whether it's homeschooling, or teaching at our own schools, is to consider whether or not our approach is emphasizing that to our students or our children. Let us not become victims to the foolish argument that says, "The future is not concerning ourselves with words. Don't worry about exposure to excellent literature. Don't worry about skill with language. Don't worry about these things." We should see something quite clearly. The best thinkers, and the most helpful servants to society have been those who have prized language so they can serve others well. The most practically beneficial thing you can do is to teach your children to use language well, not as an end in itself, but to the end that they may serve the Lord and their neighbor in the cause of truth. And as you do so, you'll be providing them important tools that will serve them in whatever vocation the Lord may call them. And so, may it be that you and I take inventory of ourselves and our teaching, and, by the blessing of God, take up this call to master language to his glory.