

**COUNSEL TO  
NEW MISSIONARIES**

**From Older Missionaries of the  
Presbyterian Church**



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### III

## MISSIONARIES AND THE LANGUAGE

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**O**NE of the tasks, and to many one of the trials, of missionary life is the learning of a new, and often a difficult, language. So far as the message of the gospel is concerned, the tongue is tied until the language is learned. I set it down as a first principle that every missionary should go out with a distinct and fixed determination to learn the language, and to learn it well. Let there be no shrinking from it, no aversion to it, no half measures with it. Laxity of purpose in this matter is unworthy of any one who is called to be a missionary. When I hear a young missionary, after a few years or months on the field, saying, "I hate this language; who can learn such outlandish gibberish as this?" my opinion of his fitness for the work at once suffers a heavy discount. Every young missionary should consider it his or her special business to fall in love with the language as quickly as possible.

EVERY MISSIONARY CAN LEARN THE LANGUAGE.

Some languages are harder to learn than others; but anyone who is deemed worthy to be a missionary, can, if he sets himself steadfastly to the task, learn any language in the world. Many are unnecessarily appalled at the thought of learning to speak a foreign language. They have dug at

Latin and Greek with grammar and dictionary, until they have gotten the idea that it is a wonderful feat to learn a new language so as to speak it, quite forgetting that the Greek and Roman children learned to speak their language as easily and glibly as possible, without either grammar or dictionary. No doubt a good memory is a great advantage, but an ordinary memory with a steady purpose is quite equal to the occasion. A faint heart courts failure. A vigorous and determined effort always brings success.

Not only learn the language, *but learn it well.* No other thought should be entertained for a moment by either man or woman. Other things being equal, a missionary's success will be in direct proportion to his skill in handling the language. There is no excuse for half measures. It is nothing less than a shame for a missionary to stammer his way through life, exciting by turns the ridicule and disgust of his hearers. Such talking and preaching is not only a shame, but it is an enormous waste of time and force, as well as a serious handicap to the message itself. He whose knowledge of the language is inadequate, has to resort to continual circumlocutions and awkward make-shifts in order to express his ideas at all; and when at last the shot is discharged, it is often little better than a spent ball. The heathen are none too eager to hear, so that the man who halts and blunders in his use of the language will be unable to hold his audience or impress his message. He who commands the resources of the language will say the same things in one-fourth of the time, and say them far more effectively.

If a man is to live and preach and teach for a

score or two of years, it is a wise economy for him to spend an extra year at the start studying the language, by which he will ultimately save the equivalent of several years of time, to say nothing of gaining a very great addition of power in delivering his message. Some men, eager to begin their real work, take to preaching on a very slender stock of words; and finding the work less irksome and more to their taste than digging at the language, they neglect their studies, and step by step they fall into the habit of doing business on a very small capital. They go on grinding the same grist of words over and over again for all customers, and so, without realizing it, go laboring through their lives at an immense disadvantage for want of an adequate command of the language. Others allow themselves to be drawn aside from the study of the language by secularities, such as house-building, housekeeping, accounts, etc., which break up their habits of study, and they presently lose their taste for the language, and before long grow content with their meager vocabulary and their makeshift manner of speech.

A special word needs to be said with regard to ladies. Other things being equal, they generally at the start learn the language with greater facility than men. What they need is the ambition and the perseverance to keep on. Married ladies are, of course, more or less handicapped with household cares, and by and by with children; nevertheless, with reasonable health, it is quite practicable for them to learn the language, and learn it well. Many have done conspicuously well in this regard, not always those who have had the best opportunities, or the highest gifts, but always those who had

a high sense of their duty in this regard, and who had a mind to succeed. In most heathen lands domestic service is plentiful and cheap, so that ladies may generally be relieved of much of the work of housekeeping, though not, of course, of its cares. Every woman who marries a missionary ought to do it with the distinct purpose that she is going to be a missionary herself. She is generally so regarded and so called, and she ought to fulfil her calling, *which she cannot do without the language*. I once examined a young wife with her husband after six months at the language. I was much impressed, and a little amused, at the set determination of the lady not to fall a whit below her husband. Nor did her after-life fall below the start she made. In an experience of nearly forty years, I have occasionally seen missionary wives grow somewhat discontented, and all too willing to go home and remain there, but I never saw one such who had learned the language, and put her hand to mission work.

#### HOW TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE.

Vicious or inadequate ideas on this subject do much harm, and account for many inefficient lives. A few hints on the subject will not be amiss.

1. Make the learning of the language your *sole* business until such time as you have a working knowledge of it. Put away for the time your Greek and Hebrew and theology and history and novels and magazine stories, and then, morning, noon and night, give yourself to the business of memorizing the words and phrases of the new language, saying to all intruders, "This one thing I do—I press toward the mark" of talking and reading this lan-

guage. By so doing, your memory will not be distracted by the intrusion of other things. You will soon become interested in your work, and your mind will presently catch the glow of a new enthusiasm. This will make the work easy and pleasant. You will come to it each day like a hungry child to its dinner. When I see a missionary only giving his forenoons to the language, devoting the rest of the day to English studies and general reading, I expect in a few months to hear him complaining that the language is dry and uninteresting, that he forgets it as fast as he learns it, etc. Such symptoms, once seated, generally grow worse, the result being that the language is never properly learned. Those who do not learn it at first, generally do not learn it at all. You need not be alarmed about giving your whole strength for a year or eighteen months to the language. When you have a good working knowledge of it, it will be time enough to look around and see whether or not you have forgotten everything else.

In behalf of physicians, a special word needs to be said. They are often robbed of the proper opportunity to learn the language, by the too early practice of their profession. Every medical missionary should claim, and his colleagues should accord him, full opportunity to learn the language. Practically, he needs to know it quite as well as his clerical brother, in both its spoken and written forms. On the mission field, preaching loses its technical character. Every missionary, male and female, is a preacher. Doctors should also preach, and if they do not get the language well enough for this purpose, their career is generally short.

2. Practice what you learn, or rather learn by

practicing. Lesson books and dictionaries are a very important help, but they are also dangerous, in that they tend to draw you too much away from your teacher, the living exemplar of the language. The words you learn each day, use in talking to your teacher, asking and answering questions to the full extent of your vocabulary. Teachers of heathen languages are not generally teachers at all. They are simply animated sticks. It is your business to train your teacher as well as possible, and to extract from him all you can get. Insist on his always correcting your mistakes, and then do not get either vexed or discouraged when he does his duty. Out of study hours, every man, woman or child you meet will give you an opportunity to practice what you know. If the opportunity does not come of itself, seek it. Do not be afraid to try. Never stop for mistakes. A child learns to walk only after innumerable falls. Practice loosens the tongue, confirms the memory, and gives zest to the process of acquiring. He who confines himself to a lesson book will learn the language both slowly and laboriously.

3. Take pains to acquire the art of hearing and discriminating new sounds. Many of the languages of the heathen world contain sounds and combinations not known to the English language. It is very important to learn to speak without a disagreeable foreign brogue that will hinder a perfect understanding of what is said, and prejudice the hearer's disposition to listen. The ear must be trained by careful and oft-repeated listening, until every sound can be distinguished and analyzed. A somewhat extended experience leads me to the conclusion that in cases of incorrect rendering of

the sounds the fault does not lie in any disability to produce the sound, but in the failure to hear it correctly. A sound once properly heard will soon be produced by the voice. Careless listening, together with the underlying false assumption that every possible sound must, of course, exist in the English language, account for most of the faulty pronunciation of foreign languages. It need hardly be added that a clean-cut and not too rapid enunciation is of prime importance.

4. Cultivate the art and the habit of catching up new words. It is one thing to acquire what is called a working knowledge of a language, and quite another thing to know it well; that is, to command its resources, so as to use it fluently and effectively. To achieve this latter power, at least in the case of cultivated languages, requires prolonged effort. When you hear a native speaking, keep your ears open to catch any new words and phrases you hear him use. If not fully apprehended, note them down, and take the first opportunity to investigate, and so fix them in your memory. For this purpose, a pocket note-book is invaluable. This process will rapidly enlarge your stock of words, while it will make the acquisition easy and pleasurable. The neglect of this principle accounts for the narrow round of words that many missionaries are able to command. I once called the attention of a brother missionary of over twenty-five years' experience to a certain phrase used by a native preacher in our hearing. He expressed his satisfaction at getting the phrase, adding, however, that he had never heard anyone use it before. It is safe to say that it had been used in his hearing many hundreds of times, yet he had never *heard*



it! When a missionary reaches such a stage as this, his progress in the language is at an end. He will remain a dwarf.

#### HOW TO USE THE LANGUAGE.

Three lines of activity open before the clerical missionary: preaching, teaching and the making of books. Which shall engross his time, or what proportion shall be given to each, is an all-important question. Beyond controversy, preaching is the prime business of the missionary. Here all should begin, and while some may by and by teach or make books, none should ever cease to preach as circumstances may permit. For preaching, the spoken language is the prime requisite, and its acquisition should be the first ambition of every missionary. No amount of book learning can take its place, or justify a missionary in neglecting it. In many non-Christian countries the written language is more or less different from the spoken, and in some cases the two are quite distinct. In such countries there is occasionally a danger that men will waste time in trying to reach a high style of speaking, such as literary men affect and admire. Very few foreigners are able to achieve this end, and in the attempt, often lose more than they gain. They shoot over the heads of the mass of their hearers, and so fail to make the gospel message effective. It is quite possible to speak fluently and accurately, without any parade of high-sounding classical elegance.

A greater danger, perhaps, lies in an opposite direction; namely, preaching in a slovenly and uninteresting way. The missionary falls into this serious and all too common fault, from underesti-

mating the intelligence of his hearers and the high responsibilities of his office. He should never allow the pressure of other things, or a low estimate of the capacity of his hearers, or reliance on his ability to extemporize some pious talk that will meet the occasion, to serve as an excuse for indifferent preparation, especially when he preaches to Christian hearers. In missionary life, preaching means more than formal discourse in a church or chapel. It means telling the story of the gospel to all hearers, on all occasions, to men, to women, and to children, at home and by the wayside. For this purpose, there is nothing, aside from the love of Christ in the heart, that is so effective as a fluent and natural use of the language.

This is not the place to discuss the relative claims of preaching, teaching and book-making. Suffice it to say that some should, no doubt, teach, and some make books;—who should do so, must be determined by the conditions of work, and the talents and tastes of the individual. All are not called to the same work. Each has his special gift. It is a great thing for a man to be able to estimate himself for just what he is worth. A few fail to achieve, because they think they *cannot*, when, in fact, they *could*; but many more fail because they think they *could*, when, in fact, they *cannot*. Every missionary should study the situation that confronts him, and, if possible, get himself into the right place. On this depends his highest success. Making books is a very important branch of missionary effort, which I would by no means depreciate; but he who would undertake it should be sure of his call, and should not begin too soon. There is a temptation to forego active evangelistic

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work for the less laborious and, perhaps, more congenial work of sitting in a study translating, or studying the literature of the language. Much precious time is sometimes wasted in this way, especially in the earlier stages of a man's life, before he is quite able to weigh himself against his work. It is a rare thing indeed that a missionary should undertake writing or translating a book inside of five years, and then he should be supported by the advice and approval of his older associates. Translating in a tentative way is sometimes resorted to as a means of learning the language, but, in general, it is not good policy. The beginner is certain to use many foreign idioms, and there is great danger that they will afterward adhere to him to the permanent injury of his style.

The above ideas, in the way of assistance and advice to a new or prospective missionary, are the outcome of well nigh forty years' experience in nearly every branch of missionary work. More might easily be said, but this is as much as, perhaps more than the missionaries just entering the field will be able to understand and appreciate. The place to learn the full lesson is on the field, in the midst of the varied experiences that the work itself brings.