Teaching Greek at the Seminary

JOHN G. NORDLING

HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF TEACHING BEGINNING GREEK AT CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY SINCE FALL 2006—MOST OFTEN, BUT NOT ALWAYS, TO MEN WHO HAVE NOT STUDIED GREEK BEFORE, AND QUITE OFTEN HAVE NOT STUDIED A FOREIGN LANGUAGE BEFORE. COMPARABLE TO UNDERGRADUATE GREEK MAJORS, SEMINARY STUDENTS ARE MORE HIGHLY MOTIVATED TO LEARN AND TYPICALLY DO EVERYTHING WITHIN THEIR POWERS TO LEARN AND MASTER GREEK. MANY STUDENTS HAVE GIVEN UP EARLIER CAREERS IN LACRATIVE PROFESSIONS, SOLD HOUSES, CARS, OR ENJUDGES (SOMETHINGS AT 420) TO COME TO SEMINARY AND WILL NOW SUBSIDIZE AT A LOWER STANDARD OF LIVING THAN PREVIOUSLY. NOW THEY ARE HERE, WITH ALL THEIR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, AND THE ONLY THING STANDING BETWEEN THEM AND THEIR FORMAL THEOLOGICAL STUDY IS THE TEN-WEEK GREEK CLASS.

The entire situation is fraught with danger. For example, what if the student sells his house in good faith, moves with his wife and family to Fort Wayne, tries to begin a new life here—but just cannot learn Greek? This has happened. And what about the student adept at programming computer algorithms as an engineer, but who now discovers how much memory work is involved in learning Greek—and all in ten weeks? Or the young enthusiast, assured by congregational and district personnel that he has a knack for drawing outsiders to Christ—now facing Greek for the first time, a challenge he had not dreamed existed? These are the situations, indeed, that give considerable distress.

Thankfully, however, the beginning Greek class at the seminary has accommodated each type of student mentioned, and many more besides. At present, Greek stands as the portal for all subsequent learning at the seminary for at least a sizable minority of students attended here. And to those who say such "crush courses" in Greek cannot succeed, in fact by far the vast majority of such students can learn Greek in ten weeks—and quite adeptly, in some cases. I claim, further, that the way Greek is being taught and learned at our seminary may well be a harbinger of how the classical languages will be taught, learned, and cultivated in many places that value Greek and Latin in the not-so-distant future. In what remains of this paper, then, I would like to comment on what is involved in teaching Greek at the seminary and what benefits students receive from this study. My point throughout is that Greek remains essential for the office of the holy ministry, not only for the church of today, but also, more importantly, for the church of tomorrow.

By the end of the first day Greek students are hard at work learning the Greek alphabet. It does not take long for them to learn their alpha, beta, gamma, and alpha in a day or two with little effort. At our seminary we use Voeltz’s Fundamental Greek Grammar; this textbook lays out the alphabet in the order in which students are supposed to memorize it and requires students to read John 1:15 in Greek vocables—"pronouncing each word carefully"—long before they understand, correctly, what the script means, ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐν λόγῳ ἐγένετο πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦς ὁ λόγος λόγος (John 1:1), and so forth.

On the morning of the second day I usually write ἀφαίρετον on the board, and ask a volunteer to pronounce it. With a little effort, and after perhaps several attempts, a student stammers ἀφαίρετον. I explain to the perplexed students that, insomuch as ἀφαίρετον occurs eleven times in the Greek New Testament, most often as a joyful greeting, I shall be addressing them thus at the beginning of each day: ἀφαίρετον ἅπαντι ("greetings, all"). One of the most important occurrences of ἀφαίρετον appears at Philippians 4:4 which I adapt slightly as follows: ἀφαίρετον ἅπαντι πάντων ἅπαντι ἅπαντι.
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Learning Greek in the manner described exacts a toll on students—even on students who, in their earlier lives, were extraordinarily adept at what they did. It helps to have a young, flexible, and retentive mind—preferably one under thirty-five hours a week, which was his approach to the Greek tongue.

In making the course my own I have added two sets of quizzes, administered four days out of five, and composition exercises—that is, two sentences per day from English into Greek. A virtue that emerges from the necessity of going through the material so quickly is that students do not have time to forget it. At the rate of one chapter per day, we complete the forty-two chapters of Voelk’s Fundamental Greek Grammar by the end of the week, leaving the final week to read 1 John in Greek and prepare for the final exam. By then students are ready to begin the required exegetical sequence, approved in the seminary’s new curriculum—Gospels 1 (Matthew), Gospel 2 (Luke & Mark), Pauline Epistles (Galatians/Romans selections), Gospels 3 (John), and Greek Readings (Ecclesiastes). For the students’ exceptional interest and ability, Advanced Greek. As for the beginning Greek course, morale is for the most part high, and students complete the ten weeks with the impression that they have understood the course’s great accomplishments, such as graduating from high school, or (more like it) surviving boot camp in the U.S. Marines.

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to the crushing and repetitive process of learning Greek well. Learning Greek with one’s mind is a lot like lifting weights or running with one’s body; which is to say that one works up to learning Greek well over time, and students—even of quite moderate ability—are often asked to say something about what normally successful can be achieved over the long haul by devotion to routine. Thus the beginning Greek class sets a foundation for, and establishes attitudes for, learning, which professors believe this seminary will become a life-long submission to the word of God for which reason congregations call, or at least should call, pastors. The parable of the growing seed in Mark’s Gospel puts the matter well.

Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, he knows not how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

Our students, unlike learners in more traditional Greek programs, are not pulled in several directions at once. Incoming seminarians are supposed to be single-mindedly dedicated to the task of learning Greek—which means, practically speaking, that we adjust our airplane service, no job, and any reasonable schedule in the summer, no field work responsibilities in local congregations. Instruction consists of two to three hours per day with me in the morning, followed by a mandatory study session every afternoon taught by my student tutor, who also serves a grade and go-between. If I may link my task of presentation to that of a plow, busting through the sod, cloths, and hardpan that typically resist cultivation, my tutor’s role is to caress the soil by removing obstacles and helping the students, helping especially those who experience the most difficulty in learning. Self-absorption and despair are two problems with which we must deal. I think it essential for the struggling student who daily gets beat by the quizzers, what about that gifted student who, if you let him, will keep his abilities only to himself, and to others of his kind?

Our challenge is not to put relatively weak and strong students together in the buddy system. Such group work inspires the class to think collectively about itself and its members, instead of just a bunch of guys and gals going through Greek individually. It leaves the task of learning Greek to be done in undergraduate classrooms. At seminary the gifted ought to share their abilities with others who have been gifted differently. Students are primarily responsible for the learning that goes on in the Greek classroom—not the professor or the tutor. Our task is to set the process up and keep it going. Of course, it goes without saying that mutual help and enabling others to succeed is exactly what should be going on in Lutheran congregations, too— to cite St. Paul, “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2 RSV). Paul envisions here a communal bearing of the load of being a Christian:

When the burdens of life become simply unbearable for any member of the community, the others, if they are truly spiritual, will lighten his load by sharing his burdens and thus enabling him to stand. 8

This is what we want for our Greek students too: to keep Greek from becoming “simply unbearable” for any member of the class, and to enable him or her “to stand.” So Greek inspires students to be mindful of others, not just themselves, a good attitude for a pastor or deacon.

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So far I have been describing how to help and retain students who are “Greek-challenged,” if I may refer to them thus; but an equally, or even more pressing concern is how to motivate and challenge, and stimulate those who have a particular ability at Greek and who—alas!—learn otherwise—may form the impression that Greek is easy at best, if not requirement for more lofty courses in theology later on. Greek professors ought to expect more of gifted students—by putting them on the spot or sparring with them intellectually—while also comforting, consoling, and encouraging the more challenged students without insulting them by accepting mediocrity. Indeed, a successful Greek class is kind of a combination of chair rehearsal (where the voices of singers of varied ability meet and mingle harmoniously) and karate workout (where students should expect to get beat sometimes). Thus it behooves the enterprising Greek professor to know the names and relative abilities of all the students as soon as possible—to encourage the weak, challenge the strong, and ignore no one. 9 Students who put on airs of superiority need to be humbled, quickly; yet I believe each student needs the opportunity to strut his stuff, flap his

7. Monday and Friday: brief vocab quiz; Tuesday and Thursday: para
digms quiz; Wednesday: no quiz; “Brief Vocab Quiz” (8 vocab words); “Advanced Vocab” (10 words); “Vocabulary” (10 words); “Paradigm Quiz” (8); “Nominal declension or verbal conjugation” (10); “Passive of Life’s Use” (6-8 words); “Translation (Greek to English).”
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lum at Concordia Tubingen (English to Greek), “Paradigm Quiz” (8); “Nominal declension or verbal conjugation” (10); “Passive of Life’s Use” (6-8 words); “Translation (Greek to English).”
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The required exegetical sequence, approved in the seminary’s new curriculum—Gospels 1 (Matthew), Gospels 11 (Luke/Mark), Pauline Epistles (Galatians/Romans selections), Gospels 16 (John), etc.—reflects the confines of the didactical basis. As the acute, circumflex, and grave, and these may fall only upon the final three syllables of any Greek word—the ultima, penult, and antepenult. Verb accent is recessive, like the receding haloine of a middle-aged man (several of whom may sit in the classroom and so serve as living object lessons!), but noun accent is persistent—meaning the accent will stay on the same syllable on which it begins in the nominative case, unless the ultimate turns long in some pedagogical cases. I might well as be speaking Mandarin Chinese to those who have never had the privilege of studying Greek before; but my reason for bringing this up now is that the students can absorb quite complicated rules of accentuation before they know a whiff of Greek—that is, before they can tell a nominative from an accusative, or a genitive from a dative.

Learning Greek represents constant passage from the relatively simple to the more complex, from what students know to what they do not know yet—but what they can learn by analogy: hence, mastery of the noun declensions from what has been learned about accents, the first declension on the basis of the second, present active participles on the basis of the third declension, more difficult vocabulary on the basis of cognates already known, etc. Fundamentally, Greek Grammar is hard work, and there is no easy way to learn it. What wisdom comes with it, and in their exalted hours, teaches students that the ability to learn Greek easily. To be sure, an older person can learn Greek, but the process becomes more difficult—sometimes much more difficult. A lot depends on how the student actually uses his God-given brain earlier in life; has it been twenty-five years since the student darkened the door of a classroom, or did the student live in French-speaking Ghana, gnila, or Arabic through the formative years? The student must do an adequate job of laying out the material progressively, then reinforcing what has been learned by constant exercises. Greek-to-English sentences, and thorough—indeed, exhaustive—exegesis in copious prose.

In making the course my own I have added two sets of quizzes, administered four days out of five, and composition exercises—that is, two sentences per day from English into Greek. A virtue that emerges from the necessity of going through the material so quickly is that students do not have time to forget it. At the rate of one chapter per day, we complete the forty-two chapters of Voeltz’s Fundamental Greek Grammar by the end of week nine, leaving the final week to read John in Greek and prepare for the final exam. By then students are ready to begin

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The classroom—not the professor or the tutor. Our task is to set the process up and keep it going. Of course, it goes without saying that mutual help and enabling others to succeed is exactly what should be going on in Lutheran congregations, too—to cite St. Paul: “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2, 5-6). Paul envisions here a communal bearing of the load of being a Christian:

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This is what we want for our Greek students too: to keep Greek from becoming "simply unbearable" for any member of the class, and to enable him or her to "stand." So Greek invites students to be mindful of others, not just themselves, a good attitude for a pastor or deacon.

In the teaching of a modern Greek program, we are not pulled in several directions at once.Incoming seminarians are supposed to be single-mindedly dedicated to the task of learning Greek—which means, practically speaking, no baseball, no air travel, no job, and, at least in the summer, no field work responsibilities in lieu of congregational instruction. Instruction consists of two to three hours per day with me in the morning, followed by a mandatory study session every afternoon taught by my student tutor, who also serves as a grad student and go-between. If I may liken my task of presentation to that of a plow, busting through the sod, clouds, and hardship that typically exists, my tutor’s role is to caress the soil by running through the basics, leaving the students, helping especially those who experience the most difficulty in learning.

Absorption and desire are two problems with which we must struggle. How do we identify the struggling student who daily gets beat up by the quizzes, what about that gifted student who, if you let him, will keep his abilities only to himself, and to others of his kind?

Our challenge is to put relatively weak and strong students together in the buddy system. Such group work inspires the class to think collectively about itself and its members, instead of just a bunch of guys and gals going through Greek individually. The buddy system can be quite useful in undergraduate classrooms. At seminary the gifted ought to share their abilities with others who have been gifted differently. Students are primarily responsible for the learning that goes on in the Greek classroom—not the professor or the tutor. Our task is to set the process up and keep it going. Of course, it goes without saying that mutual help and enabling others to succeed is exactly what should be going on in Lutheran congregations, too—to cite St. Paul: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2,5-6). Paul envisions here a communal bearing of the load of being a Christian:

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6. Voeltz, Greek Grammar, 8-12.
7. Sunday and Monday, brief vocab quiz; Tuesday and Thursday, paradigm quiz; Wednesday, no quiz, "Biblical Vocab Quiz I" (positive verbs 1-5 words); Thursday, "Biblical Vocab Quiz II" (positive verbs 6-10 words); English-to-Greek "Passage Quiz".
8. For the impact most of these courses have had on the new curricula at Concordia Theological Seminary see Charles A. Gescheke, "They Bear Witness to Me". Christ, the Scriptures, and the New Curriculum, "For the Life of the World", no. 3 (July 2005): 48-59.
wings, cry "cock-a-doodle-don," and otherwise demonstrate a rapidly developing proficiency in Greek, to the joy and admiration of all.

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gage beginning Greek students on a daily basis. Thus I relate a
historical detail here, a point of grammar there, some episode that
happened years ago when I was a Greek student — nor am I
above making some hapless student who is not as well
pared as he should be squirm a bit. Wisecracks should
not suffer but put to the test immediately. An effective ploy
for dealing with cockiness is a game I call "converting plurals
to singulars, and singulars to plurals." For example, if given
a sentence ποιός τοῦ δρέπανου τοῦ ἄραξος καὶ ἄραξον τι
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mates are supposed to do the conversions silently on their
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dent can! This and similar exercises force students actually to
think Greek thoughts, instead of merely decipher sentences
mechanically — which is the epitome of tedium, trite, and tedious
Greek instruction. It behoves Greek professors nowadays to
expect more, better, and faster of students, while guarding every
student's pride and dignity — a tall order indeed. A little orality in
the classroom also makes for more effective class time. And, in
the interpretive task necessarily enter a "labyrinth of methods, con-
cepts and terminology."14 When all is said and done, however,
the only acceptable reason for learning Greek at all is to enable
one better themselves and one another when standards are high and ex-
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11. The Greek sentence (not the translation) appears as Practice Sen-
tence F.1.e in Voelz, Greek Grammar, 41.

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12. Matthew S. DeMoss, Dictionary of the Speech of New Testa-
ment Greek (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 5.

13. See DeMoss, Dictionary, 100, target language. The language
into which a translation is made, as opposed to the source lan-
guage. Also called the receptor language.

14. I excerpt the dating of David P. Scaer, Discourses in Matthew (St.
Louis: Concordia, 2004), 26, 40.

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two thousand years ago for a churchly community consisting of
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tended for any and all subsequent ecclesial communities that
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disciple of the nations" (Matt 28:19–20). Today's called and ordained
pastor represents a culmination of the process, although his faithful preaching both magnifies the
original preaching unleashed millennia ago and sets a founda-
tion for still other pastoral continuators, until Christ Himself
returns in glory: "Behold, I am with you [τῇ παρουσίᾳ] all
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Matthew's Gospel to the incarnation of the Lord Jesus (2:23) and
to the institution of the Lord's Supper (26:28): "The continual
presence Jesus promised [at the conclusion of Matthew's Gosp-
el] was real in the local church.

Consider, then, how important one's command of English is
for articulating the Gospel. Not just any random thought or
sentiment in the target language will do, but only that English
thought that has been previously checked against what has
been given in the Greek original. Sloppy, inaccurate, and
indefatigable thinking in English must constantly be<br3>
drubbled out of beginning and intermediate Greek students by
exercises whose only purpose, as far as I can see, is to make
the students speak in the vernacular magnificently, clearly,
eloquently and in the target language. Salt is also.

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A widespread problem in the church today is preoccupation with the horizontal dimension, that is, in getting the Gospel out to others: people groups, foreign tribes, and mission fields, across the linguistic and cultural divides. But at least as pressing
a concern should be for the church to keep her proclamation connected to the past and looking forward to the future, which is Christ's future (vertical dimension). The proclamation I envi-
nion is essentially cross-shaped, uniting the horizontal and ver-
tical dimensions in one office holder, the "pastor," who will<br5>
serve both Greek and English well. Both languages — and the vertical and horizontal dimensions each represents — are essential to the task of preaching.

Not long ago there was a complaint in the Lutheran Witness
that some of its articles were written in "a pedantic style and
language" that only seminary professors and pastors could un-
derstand, and that it should "come down to earth" and "reach
out" to the laity.15 Point well taken. But we should watch out
for the opposite problem, too — language too folksy, homely,
and in tune with what people think in 2012 that it never ris-
es beyond the familiar and the mundane. Luther maintained that there ought to be a distinction between what he called "simple preacher[s] of the faith" and one who truly expounds Scripture — or, "as St. Paul puts it, a prophet" (Acts 4:36). The preaching Luther had in mind digs deeply into ancient texts and engages them. It is such engagement, in fact, that keeps preaching lively, delivers the whole treasure that is Christ, and goes on the offensive by waging battle against darkness, error, and human unbelief. The "pastor-layman" can carry on quite well by using vernacular translations and living a holy life.

But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and work-
ing with it on your own, and dispatching with those who

wings, cry "cock-a-doodle-doo," and otherwise demonstrate a rapidly developing proficiency in Greek, to the joy and admiration of all.

Ironic banner is the best way professors such as I should engage beginning students on a daily basis. Thus I relate a historical detail here, a point of grammar there, some episode that happened years ago when I was a Greek student — nor am I above making some hapless student who is not as well pared as he should be squirm a bit. Wisecracks should not be suffered but put to the test immediately. An effective play for dealing with cockiness is a game I call "converting plurals to singulars, and singulars to plurals." For example, if given the sentence ἔτοι μὲν τὸ ἀλήθεια τὸ δόξαν καὶ ἀλήθεια τῆς ἡμέρας ἕκαστος ἐμοὶ ἀλήθειαν ἐκ τῆς ἡμέρας ("The son of man sends the righteous and good child from [the] house into the church.").1/ change plurals to singulars and singulars to plurals, keeping everything else the same — and do so immediately! After initial shock sets in, most students rise to the challenge and eventually stagger: τίνος καὶ τοῦ τὸν ἄλλον καὶ τοῦν καὶ τῆς καὶ τῆς τῆς ["The sons of the man sends the righteous and good children from [the] houses into the churches."]

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When I pick on the one hapless student, remaining classmates are supposed to do the conversions silently so their own can they meet the challenge directly before the hapless student can? This and similar exercises force students actually to think Greek thoughts, instead of merely decipher sentences passively — which is the epitome of tiresome, trite and tedious Greek instruction. It behooves Greek professors nowadays to expect more, better, and faster, of students while guarding every student's pride and dignity — a tall order indeed. A little orthodoxy in the classroom also makes for more effective class time. And they'll be left alone, or not — enjoy the satiagnosis of surviving one of my barrages by providing correct, rapid-fire answers to every question asked. Students surprise themselves and one another when standards are high and expectations clear. But beginning Greek is not the be-all and end-all of Greek instruction at the seminary. M.Div. students face a raft of graded exegetical courses in Greek, purposely set in the curriculum to keep students engaged in Greek throughout their years here and into the first call. For the best Greek students on campus we offer Advanced Greek. The main difference between Advanced Greek and any upper-level classics course in the country is the types of texts read. At the seminary, we stick to texts related to the Bible: Septuagint, Greek fathers, and Josephus — texts that form the foundation, are framed by the classics canons. At the seminary, however, we are not ashamed of Koiné or of the Greek literature related to the New Testament, of which there is a massive amount. Otherwise, however, Advanced Greek is run the same way any graduate seminar in classics was at UW-Madison — three to four pages of Greek per session, demanding midterm and final exams, seminar papers, eight-to-ten-page research papers, and finally the delivery of the same at my house in the company of their peers who critically engage the scholar over ice-cream sundaes.

We Lutherans should cultivate the students who are really capable in Greek and help them along to peak potential. Professors need to identify early which students will one day likely be teaching their own Greek students, presenting papers at SBL, writing articles and commentaries, and using Greek faithfully to teach the church of tomorrow, when today's Greek teachers are dead and gone. A wholesome knowledge of Greek is not some luxury from a bygone age intended for a few specialists at the seminary, but rather a way the entire church transmits her teachings well and faithfully to present and future generations through activities germaine to the office of the holy ministry — politically, ecclesiastically, or otherwise. And the question should not be how little Greek can we get into a man and still call him a pastor in some sense, but rather how we can use today's technology and educational advancements to teach the Greek like it has never been taught before in the history of Lutheranism and thus bring philological competence to increasing numbers of laypersons and children — not just to an increasing number of ecclesiastical leaders and seminary students, but to all of us, so that the church will, in fact, be joined by all as a whole in our understanding and enjoyment of the Word of the Lord.

14. See DeRooise, Dictionary, loc. 17, target language, etc. The language into which a translation is made, as opposed to the source language. Also called the recipient language.
15. I accept the dating of David P. Searce, Discourses in Matthew (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 26-40.
17. Ibid., 40.
18. See Searce, Discourses, 271.
19. Ibid., 407.

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As it were, that moved through subsequent historical epochs to our own time. The message was "launched" by St. Matthew two thousand years ago for a churchly community consisting of the faithful and catechumens then and there, but it was intended for any and all subsequent ecclesiastical communities that would ever spring up as a result of the faithful ministrations of Matthew's apostolic and pastoral continuators: "Go . . . discourse of, all the . . ." (Matt 28:19-20). Today's called and ordained pastor represents a culmination of the process, although his faithful preaching both magnifies the original preaching unleashed millennia ago and sets a foundation for still other pastoral continuators, until Christ Himself returns in glory: "Behold, I am with you [ἐκεῖθεν ἐστίν] all the days, until the consummation of the age." (Matt 28:20). Meô lειπόν in Christ's climactic promise is formally connected in Matthew's Gospel to the incarnation of the Lord Jesus (1:23) and to the institution of the Lord's Supper (26:26): "The continual promise Jesus promised [at the conclusion of Matthew's Gos- pel] was realized in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Consider, then, how important one's command of English is for articulating the Gospel. Not just any random thought or sentiment in the target language will do, but only that English thought which has been carefully checked against what has been given in the Greek original. Sloppy, inaccurate, and inelegant thinking in English must constantly be drubbed out of beginning and intermediate Greek students by exercises whose purpose is, preferentially, not to be directly taught by instructors, but who should be truly at home in the source language. Greek. At the same time, English thoughts and phrases which do in fact clearly accurately convey what the source language transmits need to be identified as such, nourished, strengthened, and above all practiced — like a difficult passage in a Bach chorale, or a deft move on the basketball court. The goal is for students speaking the vernacular to magnify clearly, elegantly, and eloquently in the target language what the source language conveys. In other words, translation is necessary.

Nor should there be any room for the notion that pastors and teachers of the church can make out well enough without the source language (Greek, in this instance), but merely approved English translations of the same — or, what is even worse, simply access to various resources that happen to appear on Seminarian Central, or similar internet sites. My vesperal Preaching that convicts sinners and delivers Christ and his gifts moves constantly from ancient text to living expression thereof in the person of the "reintermediated" and "mediated" pastor — the "pastor loci." At the risk of sounding slightly blasphemous, I have thought lately that the properly prepared pastor proclaiming the word of God is a virtual incarnation of the original text he has so meticulously studied: not only has he plumbed the treasure deep, like a sprouting seed putting down a taproot into the "wellsprings of salvation" and sending up stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits into God's future where Christ is "all in all" (vertical dimension); but he must also, and perhaps, even more importantly, use proper and correct English to connect the word to the "here and now" across vast linguistic and cultural distances (horizontal dimension). Good English, then — or rather competence in the vernacular target language (whether English, German, Spanish, Swahili, Russian, Chinese, and so forth) — is what brings the fruit of the ancient text home to us, then and there into the here and now, and connects our history to Jesus Christ and to "the same yesterday and today and forever." (Heb 13:8 RVJ).

Sloppy, inaccurate, and inelegant thinking in English must constantly be drubbed out.

A widespread problem in the church today is preoccupation with the horizontal dimension, that is, in getting the Gospel out to others: people groups, foreign tribes, and mission fields, across the linguistic and cultural divides. But at least pressing a concern should be for the church to keep her proclamation connected to the past and looking ahead to the future, which is Christ's future (vertical dimension). The proclamation I envision is essentially cross-shaped, uniting the horizontal and vertical dimensions in one office holder, the "pastor," who qualifies both Greek and English well. Both languages — and the vertical and horizontal dimensions each represents — are essential to the task of preaching.

Not long ago there was a complaint in the Lutheran Witness that some of its articles were written in "a pedestrian style and language" that only seminary professors and pastors could understand, and that it should "come down to earth" and "reach out" to laity.16 Point well taken. But we should watch out for the opposite problem, too — language so folksy, homely, and in tune with what people think in 2012 that it never rises beyond the familiar and the mundane. Luther maintained that there ought to be a distinction between what he called "simple preachers[f] of the faith" and one who truly expounds Scripture — or, "as St Paul puts it, a prophet" (Acts 4:36). The preaching Luther had in mind digs deeply into ancient texts and engages them. It is such engagement, in fact, that keeps preaching lively, delivers the whole treasure that is Christ, and goes on the offensive by waging battle against darkness, error, and heresy. The "pastor loci" can carry on quite well by using vernacular translations and living a holy life.

But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who...
cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be
done without [the] languages. Now there must always be
such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into
Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly
life and right doctrine are not enough. Hence, languages
are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian
church, as are the prophets or interpreters; although it is
not necessary that every Christian or every preacher
be such a prophet, as St. Paul points out in 1 Corinthians
13:3-4 and Ephesians 4:11. (AE 45: 363)

When Luther expressed these sentiments in Sonn Domini 1534
he was engaging a materialistic culture that was by no means
favorable to the schools of his day. Some parents were asking,
if a youth was not destined for the church or a learned profes-
sion, why he should waste his time on an education that had
no direct relationship to the world of trade and industry. He
should rather learn a trade and thus secure his economic liv-
elihood. The society in which Luther dispensed this wisdom re-
ally was not so very different from our own. Criticisms like the
one above that occasionally appear in the Lutheran Witness re-
fl ects the society of which we are part and should not deflect our
purposes. A pastor should speak at the level of his congregation
and not adopt airs; but he should also make every effort to in-
crease his knowledge of the original languages throughout his
ministry and mine these texts deeply for the benefit of the pa-
rishioners who called him to be their pastor. The pastor needs
to express the profundities of an ancient text in laymen's terms
and bring them home to his congregation, but conscientious
pastors humbly realize that Greek texts are indeed bottomless,
pouring forth the gospel inexhaustibly – like Moses' rock that,
when struck, watered not only the children of Israel but also the
flocks and herds (Num 20:11-13; Exod 17:6; 1 Cor 10:4).

Language study then, enables the properly prepared can-
didate of theology to bring home to the congregation the full
glories of the gospel, so that it is not merely folksy, this-worldly,
human-centered – in a word, boring (let us call such preaching
what it is). The farmers and the granddaughters of the Mis-
souri Synod are capable of recognizing good preaching when
they hear it, and such good preaching always reposes upon a
preacher who knows the original languages well and can state
in plain English what they mean.18 The church has need of
prophets also, not only "simple preachers." Or perhaps another
way of putting it is that the "simple preachers" should become
more "prophetic" by learning the ancient languages well to be-
gin with and by increasing their knowledge and delight in them
throughout their ministry.

I have tried to demonstrate that the seminaries can contin-
ue to teach Greek well to sometimes woefully underprepared
students in ten short weeks. I have had the gail to suggest that
the way the seminaries are teaching Greek – namely, in rapid
and intensive fashion, with no opportunity for students to for-
19. See Brian Hamer, "Proclamation and Communication in Luther-

get (because they are learning so quickly) – portends how the
classical languages likely will be taught, learned, and cultiva-
ed anywhere else in modern America that values this treasure,
not just here. It is very tempting for the church of today – with
many a thought for tomorrow – simply to dispense with Greek
as one more cultural artifact, the way German went out of style
in the Missouri Synod at the beginning of the twentieth cen-
tury or the way buggy whips were no longer necessary when
the Model A Ford came into production in 1905. But learning
Greek well is not nearly as optional as many think it is. Pastors
who do not use hard-won language skills in their ministries
frequently embarrass themselves and impoverish congrega-
tions. Conversely, pastors capable of using the languages well
connect calling congregations to God's history, which looks
forward and backwards at the same time. "Behold, I make all
things new!" cries the one seated upon the throne near the end
of the Bible (Rev 21:5).

A pastor should increase his knowledge of the original languages
throughout his ministry.

This process of "making new" is exactly what an ancient text
does when a suitably prepared pastor mines its depths and con-
cects its treasures to modern hearers. Too often we think of
language ability as a relic of the past, of a bygone synodal sys-
tem in which every would-be pastor studied Greek for several
years, not several weeks. But the ancient languages are capable
of being taught more efficiently now than ever before, and stu-
dents nowadays are every bit as intelligent and eager to learn as
they were in the '50s and '60s, the period regarded as the golden
age of the synodal system. And that is good, because there
is as much need now for the languages as was ever the case in
the past – especially now when the emphasis has been placed
rightly on missions and on dealing faithfully with potentially
divisive matters, such as the role of women, the way we wor-
ship, vocation, sexuality, and a host of other issues that perplex
Christians of good will. All such problems are best dealt with
by pastors and theologians who know the languages well and
are as much at home in the biblical world as in the twenty-first
century. I go on to say that Greek – and the learn-
ing it represents – never will go out of style, even if one day
it will be cut from the seminary curriculum or if a critical mass
of people, in both church and society, think classics and the
languages are irrelevant. The barbarians have been at the gates
for a long time already – always with predictable results.

But becoming defensive and waxing morose on these issues is
to allow pessimism to have the final say. This conference and
the people gathered here indicate that there is at least a fascina-
tion for things Lutheran and classical in our circles. At a time
when few classicists are Christian (let alone Lutheran), and
candidates of theology can become ordained without a whirl of
Greek, the church may yet be an opportunity for Lutheranism and
the classics – and the classics and Lutheranism – to help each
other out. Simply put, people preparing for the ministry should
be steeped in the ancient languages (as was the case when the
church was at its best in the past), and people teaching the clas-
sics should be Christian. This conference looks to the day when,
foregiven by Christ, all Lutherans and classicists shall rejoice in
one another's gifts and give thanks to the One from whom all
blessings flow. 19

Good English is what brings the fruit
of the ancient text home to us.