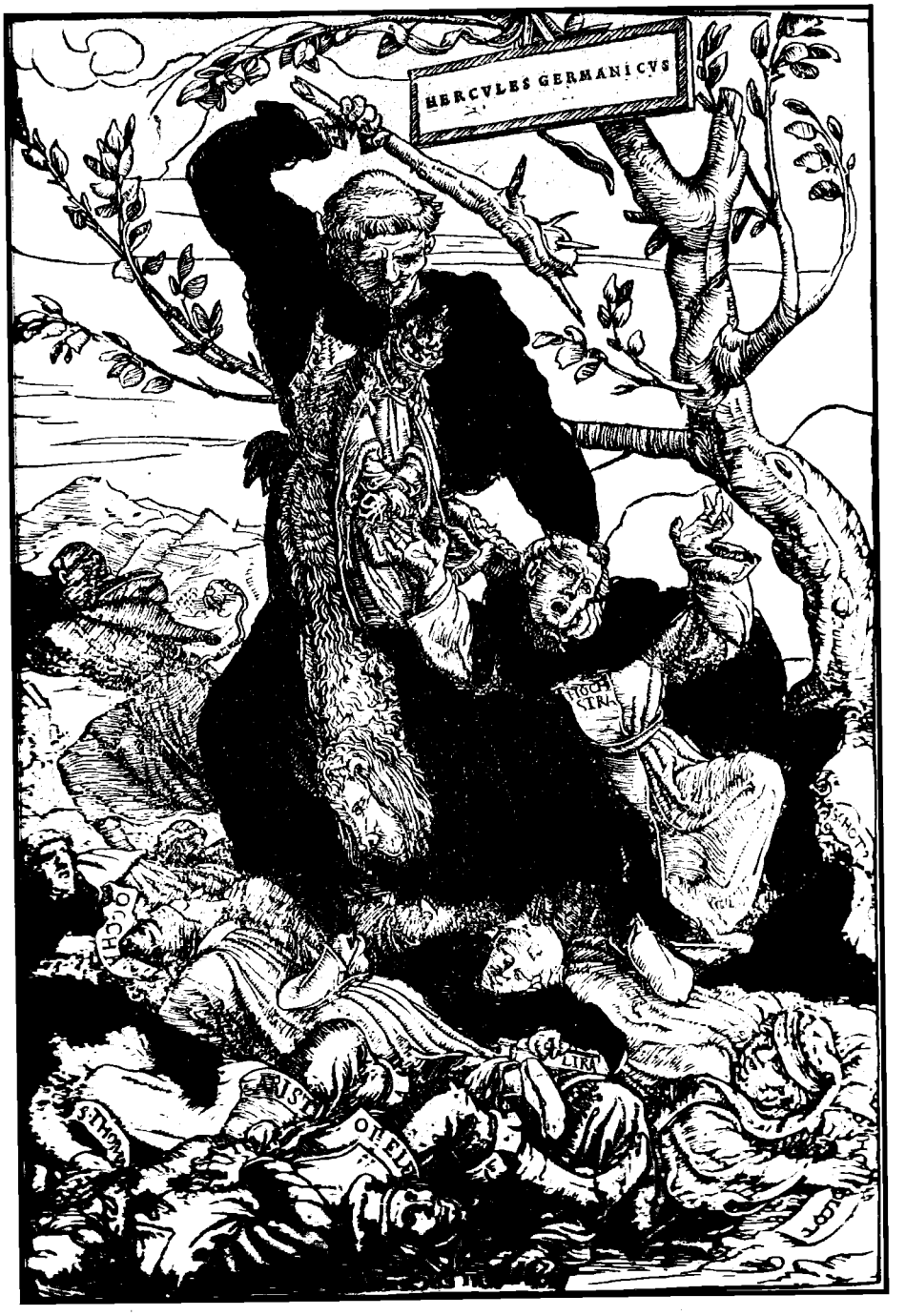
LOGIA

A JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY



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CONTENTS

Teaching Greek at the Seminary

JOHN G. NORDLING

I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF teaching beginning Greek at Concordia Theological Seminary since fall 2006 — most often, though not always, to men who have not studied Greek before, and quite often have not studied a foreign language before. Compared to undergraduate Greek learners, 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 lucrative professions, sold houses, cars, or entire businesses (sometimes at a loss) to come to seminary, and will now subsist 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 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 attracted here. And to those who say such "crash 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,* and *gamma*s in a day or two with little effort. At our seminary we use Voelz's *Fundamental Greek Grammar;*[1] this textbook lays out the alphabet in the order in which students are supposed to memorize it[2] and requires students to read John 1:1–5 in Greek vocables — "pronouncing each word carefully"[3] — long before they understand, cognitively, what the script means, ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (John 1:1), and so forth.

On the morning of the second day I usually write χαίρετε on the board, and ask a volunteer to pronounce it. With a little effort, and after perhaps several attempts, a student stammers χαίρετε. I explain to the perplexed students that, inasmuch as χαίρετε occurs eleven times in the Greek New Testament,[4] most often as a joyful greeting, I shall be addressing them thus at the beginning of each day: χαίρετε, πάντες! ("greetings, all!"). One of the most important occurrences of χαίρετε appears at Philippians 4:4 which I adapt slightly as follows:

χαίρετε ἐν (τῷ) κυρίῳ πάντοτε·
πάλιν ἐρῶ χαίρετε.

This I reluctantly translate as follows: "Rejoice in (the) Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice!" But there is a certain euphony to the way the statement stands, untranslated, in the Greek. After speaking it through in Greek several times, the class discovers that the Greek words can be set to melody![5] This is the famous "song" that I use to begin the Greek hour precisely at 8:00 A.M. every day no matter what: "REJOICE in the Lord always; again, I will say, REJOICE!" These few words might stand as the polestar of the students' entire existence, as we blaze through beginning Greek at the rate of one chapter of Voelz per day. We will be meeting the manifold challenges of Greek together, sing-

JOHN G. NORDLING is Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.

1. James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar,* 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007).
2. Ibid., 1–2.
3. Ibid., 6.
4. Matt 5:12; 28:9; Luke 10:20 (twice); 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:18; 3:1; 4:4 (twice); 1 Thess 5:16; 1 Pet 4:13.
5. The melody used is the one commonly set to the song, "Rejoice in the Lord Always, Again, I Say, Rejoice!"

ing the while — first with the Χαίρετε "song" every day, then with the Lord's Prayer, Jesus Loves Me, Doxology, Beloved, and Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man — all in Greek. I am open to still other Greek songs and ditties the students may henceforth discover. So singing hackneyed Greek songs together is a very good way of keeping all the students together, and I shamelessly resort to this tactic.

By the third day, when students have been introduced to the alphabet and can scarcely sound out the words, Voelz's *Fundamental Greek Grammar* introduces another great step in the acquisition of the Greek language — namely, accenting and punctuation.[6] Greek has three basic accents: 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 hairline 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 ultima turns long in succeeding cases. I might as well 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 whit 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 learned, and so on. Voelz's *Fundamental Greek Grammar* does 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 — explication in copious prose.

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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 years of age. Wisdom comes with advanced years, but not necessarily 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 used 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, pilot an airplane, or serve as an Arabic translator for the Marines on reconnaissance in Iraq? The latter three activities, I submit, will have prepared students well for learning Greek at the seminary, although generalizations are not easily made: one of the best students I ever taught constructed props for a drama company out of college; another was a middle-aged wheat farmer from South Dakota. God bestowed on each a flexible mind and near photographic memory, enabling them to write nearly perfect quizzes, missing an occasional accent, if that.

Still, the overall goal is to turn every student who enters the M.Div. track into a competent Hellenist, regardless of background, ability, desire to learn, or even attitude — which, at first, can be quite negative. It always breaks my heart to lose a student by the end of the first week, right when the process of learning Greek begins to take hold. Students soon find that while native intelligence and a good memory certainly help in the learning of Greek, in the final analysis it is dogged determination and stubbornness that enable the student to submit

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

Ironic banter is the best way professors such as I should engage 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-prepared as he should be squirm a bit. Wiseacres should not be suffered 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 the sentence πέμπει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ δίκαιον καὶ ἀγαθὸν τέκνον ἐξ οἴκου εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ("The son of man sends the righteous and good child from [the] house into the church"),[11] 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 stammer: πέμπουσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ δίκαια καὶ ἀγαθὰ τέκνα ἐξ οἴκων εἰς τὰς ἐκκλησίας ("The sons of the men send 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 on their own: can they meet the challenge correctly before the flustered 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 orality in the classroom also makes for more effective class time. And, believe it or not, some of the students — not all — enjoy the satisfaction 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, often for ideological reasons, are excluded from the classics canon. 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 reports, an eight- to ten-page research paper, 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 germane to the office of the holy ministry — yet, preferably, not restricted to that office. 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 increasingly well-educated clergy. This direction, I submit, would be a strong indicator of our church's vitality in the world, and represents a wholesome way for our church to grow at present and in the future.

Seminarians do not learn Greek to impress outsiders or snow them with factoids — "This is a genitive absolute, that a potential result clause; this, a jussive noun clause; that, a future more vivid condition," for example. The list of such distinctions seems endless, though admittedly those who engage in the interpretive task necessarily enter "a labyrinth of methods, concepts and terminology."[12] When all is said and done, however, the only acceptable reason for learning Greek at all is to enable one better to articulate the gospel in the "target language."[13] When a New Testament author — Matthew, say — produced a gospel in the mid first century A.D.,[14] he set in motion an arrow,

11. The Greek sentence (not the translation) appears as Practice Sentence F.1.e in Voelz, *Greek Grammar*, 42.

12. Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 9.
13. See DeMoss, *Dictionary*, 120: "target language. *n.* The language into which a translation is made, as opposed to the source language. Also called the receptor language."
14. I accept the dating of David P. Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 20, 40.

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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 understand, and that it should "come down to earth" and "reach out" to laypersons.[17] Point well taken. But we should watch out for the opposite problem, too — language so folksy, homey, 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 preacher[s] of the faith" and one who truly expounds Scripture — or, "as St. Paul puts it, a prophet" (AE 45: 363). 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. Now, to be sure, the "simple preacher" can carry on quite well by using vernacular translations and living a holy life.

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17. So Lesa Harr, *Lutheran Witness* 129, no. 2 (February 2010): 4.

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

Ironic banter is the best way professors such as I should engage 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-prepared as he should be squirm a bit. Wiseacres should not be suffered 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 the sentence πέμπει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ δίκαιον καὶ ἀγαθὸν τέκνον ἐξ οἴκου εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ("The son of man sends the righteous and good child from [the] house into the church"),[11] 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 stammer: πέμπουσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ δίκαια καὶ ἀγαθὰ τέκνα ἐξ οἴκων εἰς τὰς ἐκκλησίας ("The sons of the men send 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 on their own: can they meet the challenge correctly before the flustered 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 orality in the classroom also makes for more effective class time. And, believe it or not, some of the students — not all — enjoy the satisfaction 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, often for ideological reasons, are excluded from the classics canon. 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 reports, an eight- to ten-page research paper, 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 germane to the office of the holy ministry — yet, preferably, not restricted to that office. 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 increasingly well-educated clergy. This direction, I submit, would be a strong indicator of our church's vitality in the world, and represents a wholesome way for our church to grow at present and in the future.

Seminarians do not learn Greek to impress outsiders or snow them with factoids — "This is a genitive absolute, that a potential result clause; this, a jussive noun clause; that, a future more vivid condition," for example. The list of such distinctions seems endless, though admittedly those who engage in the interpretive task necessarily enter "a labyrinth of methods, concepts and terminology."[12] When all is said and done, however, the only acceptable reason for learning Greek at all is to enable one better to articulate the gospel in the "target language."[13] When a New Testament author — Matthew, say — produced a gospel in the mid first century A.D.,[14] he set in motion an arrow,

11. The Greek sentence (not the translation) appears as Practice Sentence F.1.e in Voelz, *Greek Grammar,* 42.

12. Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 9.
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> 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 12[:4–30] and Ephesians 4[:11]. (AE 45: 363)

When Luther expressed these sentiments in *anno Domini* 1524 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 profession, 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 livelihood![18] The society in which Luther dispensed this wisdom really was not so very different from our own. Criticisms like the one above that occasionally appear in the *Lutheran Witness* reflect 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 increase his knowledge of the original languages throughout his ministry and mine these texts deeply for the benefit of the parishioners 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; see Exod 17:6; 1 Cor 10:4).

Language study, then, enables the properly prepared candidate 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 grandma Schmidts of the Missouri 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.[19] 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 begin with and by increasing their knowledge and delight in them throughout their ministry.

I have tried to demonstrate that the seminaries can continue to teach Greek well to sometimes woefully underprepared students in ten short weeks. I have had the gall to suggest that the way the seminaries are teaching Greek — namely, in rapid and intensive fashion, with no opportunity for students to forget (because they are learning so quickly) — portends how the classical languages likely will be taught, learned, and cultivated anywhere else in modern America that values this treasure, not just here. It is very tempting for the church of today — with nary 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 century or the way buggy whips were no longer necessary when the Model A Ford came into production in 1903. 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 congregations. 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).

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This process of "making new" is exactly what an ancient text does when a suitably prepared pastor mines its depths and connects its treasures to modern hearers. Too often we think of language ability as a relic of the past, of a bygone synodical system 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 students 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 synodical 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 worship, 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 guess I shall have to say that Greek — and the learning 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 before — 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 fascination 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 whit of Greek, there 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 her best in the past), and people teaching the classics should be Christian. This conference looks to the day when, forgiven by Christ, all Lutherans and classicists shall rejoice in one another's gifts and give thanks to the One from whom all blessings flow. LOGIA

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

18. See editor's notes, AE 45: 342.
19. See Brian Hamer, "Proclamation and Communication in Lutheran Worship Resources," *Logia* 19, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2010): 41.