

The Ministry Of John C. Jeske:
Language Skills for the Sake of God's People

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I. Historical Background

Education

It is pertinent to this paper to give a general background of Pastor Jeske's years in the ministry. Before doing so, however, it will also serve this paper to include a few notes on his educational background.

Every pastor approaches the subject of ministerial education from the same presuppositions. Traditionally, in the Wisconsin Synod we have included in the training of pastors - and teachers - a vigorous four year preparatory system. Although that system has taken different shapes and atmospheres, it has always required a high standard of language training, along with a background in liberal arts. The college system continues that same training with an even greater emphasis on the biblical languages and those liberal arts which provide a foundation for learning at the postgraduate level on the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

John C. Jeske's preparatory and college training followed this same pattern, although he did have a different preparatory experience from

many of his contemporaries. His preparatory and junior college years were spent at Concordia College, then located on 33rd and State Street in Milwaukee, WI. Pastor Jeske remembers this experience as vital for a firm foundation in language skills. He began his study of German as a ninth grader and Latin as a tenth grader. The striking difference was the fact that Concordia students at this time started Greek studies in the eleventh grade. The study of Hebrew started in the junior college year.

Upon enrolling at Northwestern College in Watertown, WI, Jeske had a foundation in Greek and Hebrew, and six years of liberal arts education. Most students to this day enter the ministerial college level without any biblical language skills and with little theological Latin or German. This educational experience remains significant to Jeske. It was then he acquired skills which are cherished and used by him to this day.

Years in the Ministry

Pastor Jeske has been serving in the public ministry for nearly 50 years. Upon graduation from the seminary in 1948 he was assigned as tutor at Doctor Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN. He served there one year and was then assigned to be the assistant pastor at St. Marcus Evangelical Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. In 1953 he was called to serve as pastor at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church at 68th and Forest Home Avenue, also in Milwaukee. During several decades of parish ministry, Pastor Jeske became more convinced of the need for constant use of biblical language skills. As a general rule, a daily contact with these languages, Greek and Hebrew, was vital for him in his work. The basic reason for this, of course, is the fact that God in his wisdom chose to reveal his written word originally in these two biblical languages.

In 1969, after 20 years of parish ministry he received a call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to teach Old Testament courses. At this time, Northwestern College, the "feeder" school to WLS, maintained a strong Hebrew program. The students whom Professor Jeske would be instructing were well prepared in their Hebrew skills. In fact, the Seminary Board of Control encouraged him, before beginning his work at the seminary, to take time to brush up on the skills he had striven to maintain already in his parish ministry. Heeding this advice, he spent the 1969-70 academic year doing graduate work in the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

While at the Seminary (the fall of 1970 through the summer quarter of 1995) Professor Jeske was active especially in the Old Testament and homiletics departments. For Jeske, these two areas were a perfect marriage. Both of them required an extensive use of language skills.

From September, 1995 to the present, Pastor Jeske has been serving as an assistant pastor at St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Watertown, WI. His responsibilities include shut-in visitations, Bible classes, and monthly preaching.

Pastor Jeske also served three congregations during separate vacancies: St Mark's, Brown Deer; Risen Savior, Milwaukee; and Our Savior, Grafton.

Other Areas of Service

It is fitting to mention a few other areas in which Jeske served throughout his ministry. They serve to stress two major points which will be brought out in the rest of this essay. These two points are Jeske's emphasis on 1.) the fact that ministry is about people and 2.) the importance of language skills in the ministry, especially the biblical languages.

During his years as a pastor in Milwaukee he had the privilege of serving on the synodical stewardship committee, the Board for World Missions, and the Board of Control of Wisconsin Lutheran High School. Each of these experiences supported Jeske in his strong conviction that ministry is about people. As we spoke, he recalled some of the people who served with him on those boards, as well as the people whom those boards served. You can hardly serve in World Missions without realizing that the “white fields” are fields of people. One can hardly ignore the spiritual needs of teenagers if you are to serve on an education board for a Lutheran high school.

Jeske has also served as Old Testament Editor for the Northwestern Publishing House series entitled *The People's Bible*. In addition to editing each Old Testament volume, he has also authored two commentaries, Genesis and Daniel. These areas of service were, of course, in addition to other writing and speaking expectations any other WLS professor would have. It is also widely known that Jeske was an active participant in the translation of several Old Testament books of the New International Version of the Bible. Others have written entire term papers on this topic. For our purposes the emphasis on language skills is important.

II. Comments from our Interview

In preparation for our personal discussion several questions were addressed to Pastor Jeske: What sorts of things did you experience in the parish ministry which dramatically influenced your ministry in the seminary classroom? In what ways, if any, do you feel God shaped you during your parish ministry for the work at the seminary? How similar/dissimilar was the call to parish ministry from the call of a

seminary professor? Now that you have had an opportunity to serve again in the parish, how have these thoughts been changed and/or strengthened?

“How a WLS Professor Used His Parish Ministry Experience”.

(All the statements quoted in this portion of the essay are taken from Pastor Jeske’s written preparation for the interview. They include his own emphasis).

Here are his first thoughts:

Over the years it’s been almost a rule of thumb that a man is not called to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary unless he has spent ten years in the ministry (though there have been exceptions). By contrast, some seminaries like to keep a student with special gifts on campus after graduation.

The point for both Pastor Jeske and the essayist alike is that the parish ministry is where these gifts ought to be utilized and nurtured. What would be better - a gifted man with no experience, or a gifted man who has used those gifts “where the rubber hits the road”, so to speak? In other words, it is beneficial for the seminary classroom to have experienced pastors training candidates for the pastoral ministry. It is also beneficial for these gifts to be scattered into parish ministry as well.

Pastor Jeske emphasized two major issues under our theme. The first, as exegete and teacher of Old Testament, and also as one who served in the parish ministry for 20 years, he comments on the importance of language skills. These gifts ought to belong to all of those entrusted with the gospel and public ministry to some extent or another.

The pastor who regularly uses his Greek and Hebrew skills to enhance his private devotions and his sermon text studies is going to be much more convincing as he seeks to train future pastors to do that. This may very well be what makes WLS training unique. Everything God has told us (about himself, and about ourselves, and about his plans for us, and about what

we've done to mess up that plan, and about what he has done to restore it) is contained in the vocabulary and the syntax of the Old and New Testaments. Luther: "As dear to us as is the gospel, so hard must we hold on to the ancient languages. They are the sheath into which God has put the sword of the Spirit. We will not long retain the gospel without the languages."

Pastor Jeske used this quote from Luther several times in conference papers. How insightful of Martin Luther to write such a seemingly bold statement! How insightful of Jeske to capture the use of its truth! This issue has become so very evident in the denominations around us which claim the same father as our own synod (Luther). The extent of language requirements and training in our fellowship surpasses by far any other church body. Perhaps it is no coincidence that those Lutheran denominations which have lost the languages have also been quickly influenced by the dangers of the Evangelical and Modernistic thought of our day.

However, there are many positive angles which Pastor Jeske spoke about. Rather than always focusing on what could be lost without the biblical languages, there are plenty of things a pastor will gain from a fresh use of them. A constant grasp of Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and grammar will enable the pastor to give the people on shut-in and sick calls a firmer grasp of God's enduring strength and love in their lives. An ability to brush up on word order and sentence structure will add meaningful insights to Bible classes and sermons. The closer in tune to God's word we become, the more capable we become as teachers, counselors, preachers, yes even listeners, for God's people.

Aside from the language skills, Pastor Jeske also emphasized the importance of ministry being about people. These are his comments:

Anybody who has spent years in the parish knows that the ministry centers around people. The congregation is no more and no less than a disciple factory. The pastor who forgets that the members are not there for his sake, but that he is there for theirs, is not going to get along well. A sermon that sounds like a dogmatics paper, a sermon that never gets beyond exegesis, won't cut it in the parish. When preparing a sermon, the pastor learns to ask: "What does this sermon text have to say to the people who will hear it next Sunday?" "What specific help can it offer them?"

Obviously speaking as a pastor concerned for souls, Pastor Jeske is also speaking here as an experienced homiletics professor. He continues his emphasis on people by demonstrating the same need for that emphasis in the classroom of a seminary.

Ideally, it's that sympathetic interest in people that the ex-pastor will bring with him to the seminary campus. It's possible to be just as straight as a gun barrel theologically but just as cold. (Remember Elihu, in Job 32-37? He qualified more as a lecturer than as a friend). The ex-pastor who is called to teach dogmatics knows that you don't teach doctrine for doctrine's sake. (There's nothing more boring than that). You teach doctrine for people's sake.

A homiletics instructor would want to make clear to his students that every time they preach they communicate in two languages simultaneously. One is the language of the intellect; that's the message typed out on the pastor's manuscript. The other is the language of the feelings; that's the emotional message of the sermon. As the pastor speaks, his hearers must be able to sense that he loves them and sympathizes with them as they try to live for Christ in an ungodly world. (By contrast, the wrong emotional message to send out would be: "Look what a fearless defender of the truth I am")!

At the close of the personal interview with Pastor Jeske several different issues were emphasized. At the same time, all of these different issues came full circle to each other in both parish ministry and ministry in the seminary classroom. A love for the gospel, as it is revealed in the grammar and vocabulary of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, does not belong separated from a love for people. A genuine love for people requires a genuine attempt to be faithful with these biblical languages.

That love, which can come only from God and his message to us, serves an important role in all phases of parish ministry: counseling, sermons, Bible class, shut-in calls. All these areas and many more require the union of God's word with God's people. The pastor who is called to the seminary, as Pastor Jeske was, does not change that principle. The teaching, training, leading, example setting, counseling and other areas of ministry there require the same union of God's word with God's people.

III. An Essay by Jeske

The primary goal of this paper is to show how Pastor Jeske's service in the public ministry produced valuable convictions in his own heart that are beneficial to all those who aspire to the ministry. Part of his service was delivering conference papers at teachers conferences. These essays among others may be found among the essay files in the Seminary library.

When opening the essay files in the WLS Library, it becomes evident that Jeske wrote quite a few things. From pastoral conference papers on Homiletics and Old Testament, to an extensive work on Christian stewardship, Jeske has offered many Scriptural essays for fellow called workers as well as for any of God's people who have had the opportunity to come in contact with him or his writings. One of these essays in particular helps to drive home several key points related to this paper.

The essay which will be cited in the following pages is titled A Student Desirable For The Ministry, an essay given at a faculty conference in Prairie du Chien, WI, on June 13, 1980.

It was mentioned earlier that, before beginning his work in the seminary classrooms, Jeske was advised to take a year out to sharpen his Hebrew skills in order to teach Old Testament at the seminary. The obvious reason for this was to be prepared for the aptitude of students who were coming out of Northwestern College with four years of Greek and two years of Hebrew. The seminary juniors who would be attending Jeske's exegetical course on Genesis had more Hebrew capability than most graduate students in the nation. We dare not (and neither did Jeske) take for granted the blessings God has given to the collegiate level of our ministerial education program. Therefore this tangent is included:

Permit a digression for just a moment, just long enough to record publicly what a superb job is being done by those men who have equipped each new first-year class with the language skills they bring to the seminary. Ours is the more rewarding job of reaping where they have sowed; theirs is the thankless, usually unrecognized, often unrewarding job of laying the foundations. Foundations aren't all that glamorous, because they aren't spectacular. But the unsung work of those who lay the language foundations is indispensable for a language program which is the envy of many other denominations (p. 4).

As a product of that program, the essayist appreciates these comments and recalls with fond memories the servants of Christ to whom these comments refer. It is a humble and thankful attitude of Jeske to remember the collegiate level as well as the preparatory level. For decades gifted men have spent hours teaching conjugations, vocabularies, alphabets, sentence structures, hophals, piels, chiasms, dagesh fortes,

participles and the like. These types of skills were the foundations for doing the work required at the seminary. For this we say “Thank you!”

The entire ministerial education program of our synod has continued to place a high value on these language studies. This emphasis is important at all levels for laying the theological foundation of ministerial candidates. Jeske felt that his job was actually reaping the benefits of the bottom blocks laid by others. This is true. Yet, the entire foundation includes those seminary years when those skills are put into practice under the direction of the professors. It is important, therefore, that these instructors understand why the skills are being put into practice. Commenting on both the curriculum and its goal, Jeske wrote:

It’s admittedly an uncommon curriculum, because our synod has been uncommonly blessed by a good and gracious God. It’s a curriculum designed not to make life additionally difficult for the future pastor, but designed to equip him to listen carefully to the word God has spoken. After all, the whole art of Christian witness is to listen carefully to what God has said, and then to repeat and apply that word carefully and simply to sinners who need to hear it. With the prophets of old, God’s kind of man for our kind of world is called to announce: “This is what the Lord says.” Really this is the only message 20th century man needs to hear before the deafness of death overtakes him. But how is God’s messenger going to know what the Lord said if he has not read or cannot read the primary sources? (p. 3).

There may be those who feel that Jeske’s views are either too strong or too high in expectation for the students. Let it be known that there are those outside of our circles who dream of our curriculum, but cannot and may never have one like it. Let it also be known that he merely speaks in truths and principles which have always belonged to God’s Church.

Remember Samuel? “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). The Apostle Paul explained that “faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Christ had taught his disciples time and again to listen to his words, to be waiting for the Spirit of wisdom, to be faithful stewards of their gifts as they go about the work of being his witnesses. It is no wonder that Martin Luther regarded the biblical languages so highly. Remember? “...the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained” *. It is a blessing from God that these same principles belong to us as well.

Having said these things it is fitting as well to realize, as did Professor Jeske, that all candidates for the ministry will have different levels of abilities to retain those skills of language.

One can almost predict that there will be those who will respond ... “You mean we can use only language specialists as pastors of our congregation?” The answer is no. God has not made all of our future pastors language specialists. But a man doesn’t have to be a language specialist to be able to read the original languages of the Bible with understanding and with profit - - to be able, e.g., to recognize an inverted word order in a Hebrew sentence, to do meaningful word study with his lexicon and concordance when preparing a sermon or a Bible class presentation, to use a scholarly commentary intelligently (p. 4).

There are quite a few principles in the mix. One is to recognize that different students will have different gifts. Another is that we can and ought expect a strong commitment to excellence in this area. Still another is that these gifts are applied with the care of souls in mind. Finally, we should mention that Jeske considers other types of language skills high on his list as well.

* This quote can be found in Plass (Ed) What Luther Says. Concordia 1959 p.731

A gift for Biblical languages would be nothing without the gift to speak properly in one's native tongue. Jeske writes:

A second group of language skills we must look for in a student desirable for the ministry are communicating skills in English. The first mark of an educated man is surely the correct use of his mother tongue. It seems that in recent years the opinion has been expressed more frequently in our faculty room -- and perhaps in yours, too -- that we're reaping the bitter fruit of years of indifference to correct English not only on the part of elementary grade schools but also across the country as a whole. When in morning chapel services I hear a student who is engaged in postgraduate studies say that "Christ died for you and I," I don't need any more convincing that the problem is widespread and deeply rooted (p. 5).

Without comment on the previous quotation it is possible to mention that other gifts were emphasized in Jeske's essay. In relation not so much to the academic gifts, but more the seat of character, Jeske considers three "traits" to be necessary for the student desirable for ministry. These three characteristics are then also applied to teachers who enter the classrooms where ministerial candidates are trained. The characteristics are humility, love for people, and leadership capabilities.

Humility

The first is humility, a rare gift in our day, when the life's motto of an increasing number of people seems to be: "Look out, world, here I come!" and when all the rallying cry of group after group is: "I've got my rights, and I demand them!" Paul's words indeed sound strange to 20th century ears: "In humility consider others better than yourselves" (p. 8).

One of the best primary sources for the student in the learning process is the personality of the teacher. Because we are the primary sources for our students to study, what we are is far more important than what we say. Am I ashamed to confess in front of my students: "I was wrong" or "I'm sorry?" Am I too

proud to admit:“I don’t know?” As the pastor stands in his pulpit he must tell himself the same thing you and I must tell ourselves in the classroom:“These students are not here for my sake, but I am here for theirs” (p. 8-9).

Love for people

Christianity would be so much easier if we could simply love our fellow men in theory, if we didn’t have to get involved in the problems of others, if we could simply forget about people who threaten us or bore us. When we’re tempted to raise our “SOLA FIDE” banners in order to claim exemption from such works of love, Jesus draws a strange and shattering picture of the judgment:“Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Mt 25:45). (p. 9).

Again the thought suggests itself that it’s one thing for a professor to tell his students:“You should love one another; God said so. Now be loving!” It’s much more helpful to the student if the professor will strive to help the student attain emotional readiness by living out the love of God in his classroom (p. 9).

Leadership

Still another piece of emotional equipment indispensable in a student desirable for the ministry is the ability to stand on his own feet, In the New Testament a pastor is called a presbyteros, an elder; he’s called an episkopos, an overseer. Both terms describe the pastor as an official, a man with substantial leadership responsibilities. A leader who is by nature a follower is no leader. He may well lack the temperament to respond properly and promptly to a dangerous situation; he may buckle under pressure. In either case , the congregation will lack a shepherd’s leading, and sheep are going to be hurt (p. 10).

It is clear from statements such as these that Jeske had a profound insight into the needs of a flock. He also, thankfully, was able to have some degree of impact on other teachers with his communication of these principles. His largest impact perhaps was in practicing what he preached.

As this paper intends to bring out, linguistics and love for God's people are not just misty ideals of one man who was on the "Hill" for too long. These principles have been intimate parts of the Christian Church as they have been intimate parts of this one man's ministry. It has been a ministry of years in the parish, in the classroom, in the study, in the homes and lives of God's people. So we thank God for the principles. We also thank God for all those who strive to put them into practice.

The closing statements of Jeske seem more matter of fact than profound. They are, however, comments which are on the minds and hearts of the whole Seminary family every spring.

At the seminary there is an ongoing evaluation procedure, to determine students desirable for the ministry. There is a more formal evaluation of each student prior to his vicar placement and following that vicarship. Again during the senior year, before the student's name is submitted to the Assignment Committee, there is an in-depth review of the student's capability for the office to which he aspires. We hope thereby to respond conscientiously to the apostolic directive: "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Ti 2:2). (p. 11)

Summary

This essay has attempted to show how various areas of Jeske's life have played large roles in his work with the languages and with God's people. His educational background held an immense impact on his use of language. Of course, he learned about people all his life, but a year as a tutor perhaps offered experience and perspective in this area. He was also blessed with the opportunity to perceive the needs of others in his positions on school boards and synodical committees. His parish ministry held before him the importance of using the languages to serve God's

people. His gifts were requested in the translating of the Old Testament. Finally, his years in the seminary classroom helped him to perceive the continual need for these gifts. He left the parish with a gift for language and a love for God's people. He entered the classroom with an even richer gift for language and new setting in which to love God's people.

Finally, a personal note by the essayist is inserted. There have been many gold nuggets which the Lord has given to seminary students through the classroom of John Jeske. One in particular, now mentioned, is an aid in homiletics which I pray to never forget. Jeske told us "Get rid of those mayonnaise and lettuce sermon conclusions." ("May we..." or "Let us..."). Humorously put, these words offer valuable insight into preaching. Here Jeske stressed the importance indicative statements when it comes to Christians doing God's will. The Spirit's sanctifying and motivating power rests not in the subjunctives and the imperatives, but in the magnificent indicative verb forms of the Old and New Testaments.

The law condemns us. The gospel saves us. The law is a guide to believers, but is not their power to do it. The law kills that old man who keeps coming back. The gospel is the strength and life of the new man in Christ. It is the difference between saying "May you do this..." and "This is what God has made you to be under the cross!" This understanding of law and gospel is something we will always be striving to understand. It is an understanding only given by the Holy Spirit, even as we thank Jeske for striving to teach it in class. The Lord has truly given to Jeske and our beloved synod language gifts with which serve his people. This is the ministry given to us by Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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