

The Value of Language Study in My Parish Ministry

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Parents still ask the same questions before sending their sons away to study for the holy ministry. They don't ask, "Does my son possess the Christian character and the spiritual graces to enter the fulltime work of the church?" They seldom say, "My little Jimmy's so shy; I wonder whether he will ever be able to get up in front of somebody and talk." What they do ask is this: "Will my son be able to handle the languages?"

That's the question I hear most often from parents of young men we encourage to enter Northwestern Prep or other synodical prep schools to train for the public ministry. Add there's a corollary question I've been hearing more frequently from my own brothers in the ministry: "Do our young men have to be able to handle so much language study in order to be qualified for the ministry?" No doubt you have been hearing the same kind of questions, or we wouldn't be here today. I can't say how pleased and excited I am to have been asked to give an answer to this question about the need for language study. I am a graduate of Northwestern College. I came to Northwestern after graduating from the junior high ninth grade of one of our Christian day schools and three years of Martin Luther Prep School in New Ulm. I was an average student at Northwestern. I can't remember being in any grade trouble, but I don't remember being asked to give a speech on graduation day either. I started Latin in ninth grade and formally studied languages until I graduated from the Seminary. History and languages were always my toughest assignments.

I am not going to make you wade through ten pages of essay before I tell you how I feel about the language program in our pastor training schools. I'm for it. I suggest we change very little. I hope that any changes that might be made in the curriculum retain for language study the strong position which it has now.

I am not glorifying the role of language study to patronize my alma mater. It is too late for me to be designated valedictorian. I do not suggest retaining the present emphasis on languages as a sort of initiation rite for the new generation into the parish ministry. I don't have an I-suffered-now-you-suffer complex. I am involved in recruitment on the lowest level, and I could serve myself well by depreciating language study and softening those stifling questions about the need for so much language study. Nor do I vote for languages merely because I have enjoyed my ministry beyond measure and perceive that all of the Spirit's blessings have been channeled through the language emphasis of my liberal arts training. Any of these reasons would make my endorsement rather subjective and of little value to your consideration.

Now that I have listed my disclaimers, allow me to list six reasons why I do strongly urge a continuing emphasis on language study at Northwestern College. Please forgive the tendencies of a thematic preacher to make parts, and give me permission to put numbers on my reasons so I do not lose my place.

One

The pastor I had while I was growing up was man of letters. He could speak intelligently on most any subject. He seemed to know about everything—the arts, science, history, culture, economy. But my pastor seldom had to prove himself. All he had to do is wear his suit, and people respected him for what he was—a religious man. Yes, but even more than that—an intelligent person who did not sound foolish even when the subject was something other than religion. In twenty-one years of growing up I cannot remember anyone but my pastor wearing a suit in Larson's Garage.

Today a pastor needs more than a good suit of clothes to be respected as a man of letters. He must be a man of letters. There are more people in his congregation with more education than ever before. It is not that the Gospel is served by the words which man's wisdom teaches, or that we despise the wisdom which God has ordained out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, or that we judge the Carpenter for choosing simple fishermen. It is rather that we must remember we are to be all things to all men. Then we will not forget that the secular training of Moses, the wisdom of Solomon and the formal education of St. Paul were also sanctified for use in God's kingdom.

Pastors need a thorough training in liberal arts more today than ever. And the heart of the arts is language study. One cannot study languages without learning history, social culture, drama, poetry, philosophy and politics. Language is the medium through which every art is either explained or conveyed through history. As a farm boy in first year Latin class I remember marching to war, being drawn into history, marveling at sculpture and painting and learning that rhyme and poetry were not synonymous.

A liberal arts education based upon a strong language curriculum is not a license for eligibility into the modern, urban parish ministry. If it is flaunted or advertised it will be instead a hindrance to the Spirit's Gospel. Rather it may serve the Lord in providing a setting in which the Gospel is not prevented and offense is not given. Those who are educated will not turn away from the church merely because the pastor cannot speak their language. At least in a mechanical or outward way they will be drawn by the fact that the minister knows what they know and yet has chosen the Gospel as the highest wisdom. So reason number one for keeping a strong emphasis on language is that it is the foundation for a top notch liberal arts program needed more than ever as a background for the public ministry.

Two

Logic is the next reason. Being logical is like playing shortstop. From the stands it seems easy to know what to do. But from the field it is hard to handle the liners shot off the end of the bat. We all deplore sermons that wander and are hard to follow, but we all wrestle making our own sermons logical without doing violence to Scripture.

What a blessing a logical mind can be in the service of the Lord: How many church council meetings have dragged on endlessly because of an argument over semantics? A pastor's daily schedule requires logic in setting priorities. His catechetical instruction, his Bible classes, his society topics, his private counseling all require a presentation that is logical as well as theological.

Logic's sisters are simplicity and clarity. The pastor needs these mental tools today more than ever before. Our parishioners no longer walk great distances to stand for hours under our pulpits. They come in at five to the hour and begin checking their watches when the sermon extends past eighteen or nineteen minutes. Their demand for logic and clarity has been heightened by thousands upon thousands of carefully thought out commercials on television, radio, newspapers and magazines. Whether we like it or not, the people we serve have been trained by our society to be time sensitive, impatient and demanding of a well planned presentation. People don't want to think for themselves. They want everything thought out in advance, neatly packaged and clear enough to be comprehended without such mental exercise. It is not in the nature of Gospel ministry to cater to the weaknesses of the flesh, not even intellectual weaknesses. But we must be aware of the nature of the people we serve to be able to reach them. Only once in a dozen years have I been told that my sermon was too simple. I don't want to admit how many times the opposite charge was made. One of the highest compliments I remember receiving was from a mother who spoke to me after a sermon on the Sixth Commandment. She said, "Thanks. My eight year-old knew exactly what you were saying."

I had a logic course in college. I learned a lot of logic from science and math courses. But there is no doubt in my mind where my real training in logic came from. It came from language study. Over twelve years the incessantly demanding logic of declensions, conjugations, rules, order, grammar, meter, cases, tenses and even exceptions and irregularities ingrained into my mind a sense of order and propriety. When I went to college the formal course in logic lasted only one semester. The informal yet more intensive course was being taken by all of us without our knowing. It was a side benefit of our language study apart from our learning other arts, apart from our ability to translate, apart from our preparing for biblical exegesis. What a deal! To receive such training without extra tuition, without extra credit hours without calling more faculty members! Let's not give away what we have been receiving as a valuable side benefit for generations!

Three

For all the blessings and joys of the public ministry it is in all honesty sometimes—many times—very hard, tediously difficult. There are days, even weeks, without a decent break. There is correspondence,

newsletters, sermon study, funerals and weddings, endless divorce counseling, perfunctory and soporific meetings, catechism and Sunday School teachers classes, Bible classes and adult instructions not counting conference papers and synodical work.

Such a routine demands discipline. It requires good study habits, persistence and an ability to work through tedium and routine. Yet we've all been doing that before we entered the ministry. While my buddies were driving their hot cars up and down main street in my home town, I was studying German and Latin vocables.

While my peers back home were getting married and getting a head start on their life's occupation, I was just getting comfortable with Greek and starting on the impossible Hebrew. These are still very real and very similar pressures and worldly lures. These are what the collegiate is thinking about when he sits on his window ledge looking into nowhere.

Patience and perseverance in spiritual matters are gifts of faith. But there are intellectual and emotional aspects of persistence which can be developed in the student through certain disciplines which God provides here at Northwestern in the liberal arts curriculum. I believe that language study more than any other specific discipline develops that kind of accommodation to routine and resistance to tedium. The willingness to give attention to detail without being perfectionistic, a love of study without being boringly intellectual, the demand of yourself to be correct in what you say and yet communicate in simple language are all traits which are cultivated by years of language study.

It is hard to put one name on this one. It could be discipline or good study habits. Or maybe we could label it persistence, sticktoitiveness or steadfastness in work. But there is more to it than that. It has to do with one's whole attitude toward happily accepting and doing work he knows ahead of time to be difficult, tiring even drudging. There is a lot of that kind of work in my ministry. There is and will be in every parish ministry. That's why those who train for this ministry will want to continue to learn languages as a preparation for it.

Four

Preaching Christ crucified implies communication. Fortunately contrary to popular opinion, good communication is much more than being a good talker or a good public speaker. When it is the precious Gospel of Jesus Christ that we are communicating, two special qualities of communication immediately come to mind.

One is the ability to reproduce carefully and accurately a message that did not originate with ourselves. "We speak not in the words which man's wisdom teaches." I do not mean only translating the Bible text into correct, readable English. I mean communicating the message and application of that text in a way that is both meaningful to the person in the pew and diligently faithful to the word and spirit of the Scriptures. First a pastor must translate the original into words, terms and ideas he can understand. Then he must translate his knowledge and appreciation of the text into real, everyday words that will lead his people to know and understand God's words. It's that second translation that many pastors wrestle with more than the first. That second translating also requires just as much faithfulness to words and meaning and language as the first.

Let me explain what I mean. Think of a pastor who is meticulously faithful in translating the original text for his sermon, but one who has trouble translating his good grasp of the text into words for his people. He is true to his God and to his flock, but he lacks a communication skill which may hinder the Gospel. Or think of the opposite problem. A pastor may pride himself on his ability to use the colloquial to touch the minds of his people. He speaks their language. The communication between himself and his people may be good. Yet the communication between himself and God's message is hurting for his failure to use his translating skills or his lack of ability in the area of interpretation.

The way in which the Holy Spirit committed his message to God's people can remind us to continue to train our young men to avoid both weaknesses in Gospel communication. The Holy Spirit has always spoken the language of the people. In the Old and New Testaments God speaks the language of the common man. Men under inspiration of the Spirit have been simple, blunt, clear, casual and certainly at times colloquial. Yet Bible writers themselves labored to be faithful to the message God gave to them. The Bible is therefore consistent and true to itself. Although it communicates well, it is always sober, serious and careful.

Although both kinds of translating I have mentioned are gifts of the Spirit, they are gifts that are discovered, nurtured and cultivated in preministerial studies. And where but in our study of languages are these gifts of the Spirit best encouraged: The endless hours of translating word for word, the reports given on pages and chapters of assignments, the oral questions about content, the class discussions on the intent of the author, the haggling over context and semantics, the near seminar atmosphere of those first Hebrew classes in the Bible all combine to make the two kinds of translating needed in Gospel communication mold into one by the time the student graduates from the Seminary. As the faithful pastor studies tenses and vocables, he is already envisioning the words and word pictures he is going to use to communicate what God said to God's people.

The second special quality needed for communicating the Gospel is good listening. Again a lot of a pastor's willingness to listen is a matter of his individual personality and spiritual gifts. Yet at least we may say that language study gives the pastor the gifts to listen well if he is inclined to try it. Who wants to admit the times he gave the wrong advice just because he did not listen carefully enough? Maybe we asked the wrong questions or did not ask enough questions.

Gospel ministry isn't only being careful to convey God's Word faithfully. It also requires care that the right part of God's message is applied to the right person at the right time. That requires good listening in order to establish the right:: context. Language study helps to give us throughout life a sense of the importance of context. Although this sense may be learned in a very mechanical way most of the time in the classroom, it is something I believe carries through into the parish ministry to serve the Lord's spiritual purposes. Let me add the obvious. Good communication requires many writing skills. Spelling. Grammar. Style. Punctuation. Sentence structure. The obvious is that studying other languages makes one more adept at his own language. The pastor is constantly writing. He writes bulletins, newsletter articles, letters of recommendation, conference papers, agendas, reports, minutes, communion devotions, letters to the editor, and notes of comfort, just to name what easily comes to mind. Members are welcomed to the congregation and released by correspondence. Matters of discipline are almost always concluded in writing. Hurt feelings and mistaken notions often require words carefully thought out and committed to print before they are corrected. Writing is the only way to correspond with some in our care who are out of state, in school, in prison, or in the military.

Sometimes the obvious is not always so obvious. Are years of language study lost when they afford us the ability to say the same thing in more than one way? Have we done too much translating if it allows us to be precise in our writing, to choose exactly the right words, to shade our meanings with careful construction, to avoid the offense of saying too much or too little, and to engage on polemic and apology knowing that the outside world understands what we are saying? I don't think so. Preachers are in the language business. We will not serve ourselves well by giving language the business.

Five

Luther wanted his pastors to know languages. No wonder. His personal faith, his preaching and teachings, his translating of the Bible, his defense of the Reformation were all connected to his work with languages.

Confessional Lutheranism today is a reflection of the reformer's strong emphasis on language. Men and their churches and church bodies are kept faithful to the pure word *sola gratia*. Yet it is not surprising or even remarkable that strong emphasis on language study, especially biblical languages, is a benchmark of conservatism in most church bodies.

It is interesting to note in this regard that not even an outward adherence to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is a guarantee of doctrinal integrity when it is separated from a love and study of the original language of Holy Scripture. Look what aberrations of doctrine come from church bodies and sects that have an anti-clerical posture. The suspicion of trained clergy among the Baptists, Pentecostals and the Jehovah's Witnesses is practically evidenced in the lack of thorough language study for those who serve as spiritual leaders. There is a zeal but it is not according to knowledge. Bible colleges and zip-zip seminaries turn out graduates who know little Hebrew and only enough Greek to explain and defend teachings characteristic of the sponsoring church's theology.

The approach of mainline churches and their theological training systems appears more scholarly but possesses the same fundamental weakness. There are a lot of big name seminaries stretching from Minneapolis to New York. They are thorough and scholarly in a secular sense. But many are teaching system rather than message. They are teaching the “how” of the ministry rather than the “what”. Excellent language study is available in most of their training systems. Yet one may gain the impression that it is scholarship for its own sake from two different tendencies. One is the tendency not to require thorough language study as a requisite for the parish ministry. The other is the emphasis on the real object or goal of language study, the message of the inspired Scripture.

From both extremes we can see the interdependence of rigorous language curricula and confessional faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures. What an offense it would be both to our own people and to the outside world if we who are steeped in the liberal arts would fail to read the warning so apparent in church history: Maybe there is a change we can make here or there in our course offerings. Maybe we can cut a semester in German or Latin. Maybe it would not be destructive of our noble goals to add a course in Spanish or comparative theology or computer science. But none of these additions is as universally beneficial to every form of ministry from the parish to the classroom, from the mission field to the administrative office as basic language study.

Every form of public ministry that is to be faithful to the Gospel still rests upon the Word. This is still true and will continue to be true even in an era of specialized ministries and dual and triple pastorates. All other gifts being equal, the pastor with the gifts and abilities to faithfully commit God’s message to his charges is still the one who in human terms the Lord can best use to advance the interests of His kingdom. I am in the parish ministry. I am privileged to train vicars from our Seminary every year. There is no greater joy than seeing many young men, all with different personalities and individual spiritual and mental gifts, some with the gift of careful and faithful interpretation of Holy Scripture. Many other weaknesses can be amended, personal quirks can be dealt with. But the lack of ability to interpret and communicate in God’s language cannot be cured by practical training and experience. It must be inculcated and laid into the heart and mind during preministerial training. I vote for language study.

Six

Although I am two years older than the average Wisconsin Synod pastor, by other comparative standards I am a novice with less than twelve years of service. I have yet to spend as much time in the ministry as it took the synod to train me to be a minister. During these short years, however, I have learned anew the value of our Lutheran confessions. I have served on a committee which led to the expulsion of two of our former brothers from the synod. I have worked on two review commissions, one most recently dealing with the doctrine of objective justification. Presently I am working with a committee on the role of teen and women. All of this work and much of my parish work have required at least some attention to the confessions.

“There is nothing new under the sun.” Solomon said. His words can be safely applied to very new heresy and doctrinal aberration. That is why our Lutheran confessions remain so valuable. And that is why language study apart from the Biblical languages remains so valuable. Many treasures of the Reformation will never appear in print in English in the *Quarterly*. We need to know German. If I have a criticism of my years at Northwestern it is that now with the perspective of experience I wish I would have done much more German study in the confessions and received a more demanding instruction in theological vocabulary.

Latin is dead only for those who do not use it. Apart from its obvious value as a foundation language for English and German and Spanish, Latin is the language of the church in the New Testament. It is the language of the early fathers. It is the language of our confessions. It is the language of our early Lutheran theologians. If we allow Latin to become a dead language for our future pastors and theologians, we will have effectively cut off the branches of our church from their roots. Granted that not every pastor spends hours poring over the pages of his *Triglotta*. But some of them do. Many of them have returned to summer sessions at the Seminary to renew their knowledge of our confessional heritage. Our church needs these men. We need men at all times who can do more than read the English translation of the Formula of Concord.

There is nothing new under the sun. But we need men who can apply the ageless wisdom of the church at a time when the wolves are coming in different shades of sheep's clothing. We need the heavenly wisdom of our fathers in these last days when the gates of hell wage their fiercest war against the church. Language is still the key to the door of these treasures of the New Testament church. If we throw away the key, we will be left only with situational approach, the wisdom of the times, sophomoric existentialism and a kind of false security in our own ability to handle today's problems without yesterday's lessons. We've got the key. Let us let loose of our hold on it reluctantly.

These are my six reasons as a parish pastor for retaining the strong emphasis in our prep school and college curriculum on language study. No one was more certain of the irrelevance of too much language study in school than I was. I doubt if many are more convinced of its value and practicality in the ministry than I am. I'd hate to think of going through it all again. But I'd like even less to think about dozens and then hundred of young men entering the ministry and setting the future of our church body without it.

May God grant you grace in your work. May He give you wisdom to do what is right in His sight. May He give you the courage to accept constructive criticism that can lead to a sharper focus on the good that we have in our curricula. And may the Lord bless you with a similar courage to quietly ignore criticism which might be only a part of the patter of the times, and which might be prompted by the mistaken feeling that there is after all something new under the sun in the present or future of the church. With such blessings from our risen and ascended Lord and His Spirit your work in training men for the ministry will continue to prosper. If we throw away the key, we will be left only with a situational approach, the wisdom of the times, sophomoric existentialism and a kind of false security in our own ability to handle today's problems without yesterday's lessons. We've got the key. Let us loose of our hold on it reluctantly.

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