Why the Words Still Matter

Recovering Biblical Languages as an Act of Pastoral Love

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Introduction

In many ministerial settings, expectations for clergy proficiency in the original languages have softened. Seminaries are under pressure to revise their curricula to place greater emphasis on developing competencies in leadership, counseling, and missiology. Churches ask pastors to be generalists who can move quickly from text to talk to task. Bible software has matured, shortening the perceived distance between Hebrew and Greek and the reader's eye.

None of this is inherently problematic. Yet taken together, these forces provoke a shift in how the Church handles Scripture. The ordinary work of proclamation begins to rely on second-hand determinations about meaning. A sermon crafted from competing English translations and a cascade of study-Bible notes can still be edifying, but it subtly relocates authority from the preacher's living engagement in the original languages with the biblical text to an ecosystem of editorial decisions that the pastor is inadequately equipped to evaluate firsthand.

This shift touches the pastor's three central tasks, namely, preaching, catechesis, and sacramental practice. In preaching, the lack of linguistic competence can foster confidence where there should be patience and can generate caution where the text speaks with bracing clarity. In catechesis, the Church's doctrinal memory risks becoming derivative of standard reference voices rather than responsive to the precise way Scripture speaks to the contemporary theological and cultural horizon. In sacramental practice, textual nuances that shape the Church's identity (for example, covenant language in the words of institution) may be muffled by translation choices that, while excellent, cannot carry the full semantic weight.

A pastoral vignette illustrates the problem. A minister plans a series on Romans. Consulting several English versions, she notices disagreement over "propitiation/atoning sacrifice/mercy seat" in Romans 3:25 and decides to avoid the term altogether, offering a vague statement about "God dealing with sin." The sermon is earnest, but the congregation never hears how Paul's word choice weaves Old

Testament temple imagery into the announcement of grace. A modest investment in Greek would have enabled the pastor to explain the options succinctly, show why the context tilts in one direction, and proclaim God's cruciform mercy with greater clarity.[1] For Luther, the original languages functioned not as academic badges but as instruments of reform and pastoral care. He warned that the Gospel is not long preserved without proficiency in Hebrew and Greek, precisely because the Church's proclamation is bound to the particularity of the biblical text: real words, in real syntaxes, about the real Christ given for the real Church.[2]

The main thesis of this essay is as follows. Competence in scholarly exegesis anchored in the original languages is essential to the customary practice of ordained ministry. This is because it guards doctrinal integrity, enables faithful proclamation, and animates sacramental ministry in continuity with the Church's confession. The claim is ecclesial, not merely academic. The Church's truth-telling depends on its truth-hearing, and truth-hearing requires attentiveness to the form in which God gives Scripture.

With respect to the essay's methodological approach, the argument proceeds in three movements. First, a historical-theological sketch (patristic through Reformation) demonstrates that attention to Hebrew and Greek has long been understood as a pastoral necessity rather than a scholarly luxury.[3] Second, a theological-

1. For a detailed, incisive discussion about this issue, see the following: C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 214–18; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., 2nd ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 252–59; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 198–203. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, © 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved.

2. For example, see the following two representative observations made by Luther: Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 36: *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 304; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45: *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 360.

3. For a survey of ancient interpretive manuals, see Tarmo Toom, "Early Christian Handbooks on Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 109–25. For a profile of the qualifications of exemplary exegetes in the early church, see Peter W. Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 149–65. For a discussion about how the Reformers explicitly recentered Hebrew and Greek as instruments for pastoral reform (for example, Bible translation, preaching, catechisms), not as scholastic hobbies, see Esther Chung-Kim, "Reception in the Renaissance and Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 686–703.

hermeneutical account clarifies what scholarly exegesis is (and is not), locating it within the Church's doctrinal life and the economy of triune self-communication.[4]

Third, a practical-ecclesial section traces implications for preaching, catechesis, and sacramental practice, illustrated by specific examples where linguistic decisions directly shape pastoral outcomes. Throughout, the tone aims to remain sympathetic to genuine constraints (for example, time, finance, accessibility), yet resisting the misperception that adeptness in Hebrew and Greek may be safely outsourced to algorithms or entrusted to a shrinking cadre of specialists. The Church's speech about God is most itself when it is accountable to Scripture's actual words.[5]

The Historical-Theological Imperative

Luther's Warning and the Schooling of the Church

For Luther, the original languages were means of grace insofar as they enable the Church to hear Christ's voice with clarity. The languages safeguarded the Church against doctrinal additions by tethering one's argument to the literal (that is, grammatical) sense of Scripture. At stake was catechesis, not just controversy: pastors formed by Hebrew and Greek could bind consciences with precision, instructing the laity on justification, sacraments, and Christian freedom without rhetorical fog. In Luther's call that cities maintain Christian schools, Luther envisioned an ecosystem—municipal, ecclesial, and academic—ordered to the pastor's daily work of teaching. In this vision, an emphasis on the original languages discipline debate without weaponizing it. They make polemic less personal and more textual, even as they animate preaching with confidence that claims are warranted by the text itself.[6]

Timothy Wengert clarifies that this was not anti-tradition biblicism. Luther's method honored the Church's rule of faith while constantly returning to the words and syntax through which Christ is preached. Wengert shows how Luther's pedagogy

4. In *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), John Webster deliberates this issue. For instance, in chapter 3 (pgs. 68–106), he develops the idea that reading Scripture is God's triune self-communication, so that interpretation is not only a human act but also part of God's saving work. Also, in chapter 4 (pgs. 107–135), Webster argues that theological accounts of Scripture clarify the nature and limits of scholarly exegesis by situating it within the church's doctrinal life.

5. On this point, see Luther's statement: "The truth of Scripture comes first. After that is accepted, one may determine whether the words of men can be accepted as true"; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 282.

6. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 343, 351–52, 355–56, 358–68.

integrates grammar, rhetoric, and theology, so that ministers do not simply quote authorities but can argue from the text. Luther's insistence that reform requires schools—staffed, funded, and disciplined—remains poignant. A Church that trims original language study from pastoral formation can celebrate mission today and lose the grammar of the Gospel tomorrow.[7]

Two examples from Luther's work underscore the point. His lectures on Galatians linger over Paul's prepositions and genitives. Also, Luther's translation choices in the German Bible are often accompanied by marginal notes that teach lay readers the sense of a passage. The trajectory runs from grammar to doctrine to pastoral care. Here, exegesis becomes proclamation.

Patristic and Medieval Continuities

The Reformation's retrieval did not emerge from a vacuum. For example, Jerome insisted that the Church must not be captive to mistranslation. His attention to Hebrew and Greek served the Church's comprehension and the doctrinal integrity of its preaching.[8] Also, Augustine teaches that languages, history, and rhetoric are indispensable tools for interpreting Scripture, yet their use must be governed by humility, patience, and above all charity. For him, the aim of all learning is to build up the love of God and neighbor, so that even eloquence and linguistic skill serve truth rather than pride.[9]

As de Lubac explains, medieval interpreters never treated allegory as a detour from the text's historical grounding. The literal sense was the indispensable base upon which spiritual readings were built. Allegorical meaning did not bypass linguistic precision; it grew out of it. To separate spiritual interpretation from careful attention to language is to sever it from its sustaining root.[10] By the high Middle Ages, the university curriculum prioritized grammar and rhetoric as preliminary to theology. This arrangement was not only administrative but also goal-oriented, reflecting the conviction that divine revelation is mediated through human language and thus requires interpreters who attend to its formal characteristics.[11]

7. Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 21–22, 32, 53, 92–94.

8. Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, translated by W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 113.

9. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine and Selected Introductory Works*, ed. Timothy George, Theological Foundations (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2022), 37–38.

10. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 84–85.

11. Franklin T. Harkins, "Medieval Latin Reception," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 651, 663–64.

Confessional Echoes and Early Modern Consolidation

Early modern confessional documents presuppose a textually disciplined ministry. For instance, Philip Melanchthon's humanist trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—was designed to form ministers who can analyze, articulate, and argue responsibly.[12] Also, post-Reformation exegesis maintained a consistent partnership between linguistic precision and theological clarity, ensuring that doctrine remained anchored in Scripture. In a time of disputed authority, requiring ministers to engage directly with biblical languages helped preserve the Church's fidelity to Christ.[13] Moreover, confessional schools cultivated habits of public debate, where exegetical claims had to be substantiated by textual evidence. The rhetorical pressure of such exercises formed pastors who could teach, not just assert.[14]

What Scholarly Exegesis Is and Is Not

In accordance with what has been stated so far, exegetical theology, when understood correctly, is the Church's disciplined practice of listening to God's voice as he has chosen to communicate, specifically through words, grammar, and syntax. It is neither a preliminary step before "real" theology, nor a technical exercise reserved for specialists. Instead, it is theology's native posture: patient, faithful listening to Scripture's literal sense so that doctrine, proclamation, and pastoral care arise from the text rather than being imposed upon it.

In this sense, exegetical theology is the Church in prayerful attention, receiving the triune God's self-communication in Hebrew and Greek, and allowing that communication to shape its confession, preaching, and ministry of the Sacraments. Because God binds his promises to linguistic signs, exegetical theology safeguards the Church from drifting into abstraction by anchoring its speech in the concrete form of divine address. Thus, the work of exegesis is not academic elitism but pastoral fidelity. It is a way of ensuring that what is proclaimed in the pulpit, taught in catechesis, and enacted at the altar arises from the very words through which Christ gives eternal life.

Definition and Scope

Scholarly exegesis is a linguistically responsible reading situated within the Church's confession and mission. Its heartbeat is the literal sense: meaning as generated by words in their grammatical, semantic, and discourse contexts. Yet, the literal sense

12. Philipp Melanchthon, *Philip Melanchthon: Orations on Philosophy and Education*, ed. Sachiko Kusukawa, trans. Christine F. Salazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3–8, 79–83.

13. See A. C. Neele, "Post-Reformation Reformed Exegesis: Continuity or Discontinuity of John Calvin?" *Koers – Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 79, no. 4 (2014): Art. #2148, 8 pages.

14. See David Luy, "Martin Luther's Disputations," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

is not diminished; it is enhanced by attention to genre, intertext, and canon.[15] Building on Brevard Childs, exegesis approaches the text in its canonical form as Scripture within the life of the Church, attending to the way individual passages interrelate within the whole. Such a canonical perspective protects against fragmentary proof-texting and historicist reconstructions that strip the text of its theological substance.[16]

Scripture's sanctification as divine self-communication calls for an interpreter formed by the Church's faith and virtues. The exegete is not a detached observer but a participant in the Spirit's work within the ecclesial community. In this context, humility and patience are not optional dispositions but necessary knowledge-related virtues for hearing accurately. Thus, scholarly exegesis transcends mere technique. It becomes an embodied practice shaped by tradition and oriented toward proclamation, accountable to the Church and animated by grace.[17]

Genre awareness belongs here. Whether it is narrative, poetry, apocalypse, or epistle, each literary type sets expectations for how meaning is signaled. For example, in Hebrew poetry, parallelism and terseness do semantic work. In Pauline discourse, conjunctions and clause structures carry argumentative force. Genre sensitivity is not a bonus round. Rather, it is part of the literal sense.[18]

Exegesis and Dogmatics in Mutual Service

Detaching biblical interpretation from theological reflection results in superficial readings; separating theology from Scripture leads to speculative systems without grounding. These two disciplines are interwoven in a dynamic interpretive process: the framework of faith shapes how Scripture is read, while careful reading reshapes and deepens doctrinal understanding. When the plain sense of the text is replaced by abstract concepts, the narrative integrity of Scripture begins to unravel. As a result, interpreters lose sight of how the Bible articulates its claims about God.[19]

Vanhoozer reimagines doctrine as a guide for faithful enactment. Doctrine instructs the Church in how to speak and behave in ways that align with the roles and

15. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), I.A.3; II.B.1.

16. Brevard Childs, "Introduction to the Old Testament. Chapter 3: Canon as Criticism," in *Theology, History, and Biblical Interpretation: Modern Readings,* ed. Darren Sarisky (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 258–61.

17. Gregory Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 8–10, 12–14.

18. Jeannine K. Brown and H. Daniel Zacharias, *Embedded Genres in the New Testament: Understanding Their Impact for Interpretation*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 19–24.

19. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 1st ed. (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 372–73.

storyline of the biblical narrative.[20] Hays demonstrates how intertextual echoes shape theological imagination by anchoring interpretive claims in the text's figural language, namely, its recurring motifs and patterns woven throughout the canon.[21] In practice, this means that creeds and catechisms function as both guardrails and guides, not substitutes for Scripture. The Church's theological grammar is cultivated by speaking from and about Scripture, in the Spirit's power, and for the sake of the world.

Tools, Fallacies, and the Interpreter's Virtues

People in the Global North now live amid a renaissance of digital tools that provide unprecedented access to lexica, grammars, and corpora. When used responsibly, these tools democratize scholarship and facilitate accurate interpretation; when used carelessly, they amplify misunderstanding. Carson identifies several interpretive pitfalls that arise when readers mistake gloss lists for meaning. These include illegitimate totality transfer, the root fallacy, and semantic anachronism.[22]

Illegitimate totality transfer occurs when an interpreter assumes that a word simultaneously carries all its possible meanings in every instance. For example, the Hebrew noun *hesed* can mean "covenant loyalty," "steadfast love," "mercy," or "kindness," depending on context. The error arises when one imports the entire semantic range into a single occurrence, such as insisting that *hesed* in Psalm 136 must encompass every theological nuance the term bears elsewhere, rather than allowing the immediate context to determine its sense. Similarly, the Greek noun *logos* can mean "word," "reason," "account," or "principle." Reading John 1:1 as though *logos* necessarily includes all Stoic philosophical connotations, instead of attending to how John employs the term in his prologue, exemplifies this mistaken understanding.

The root fallacy assumes that a word's meaning is determined by its etymology rather than by its actual usage in a given period. For instance, some interpreters claim that the Greek noun *ekklēsia* ("church") must always mean "called-out ones" because it derives from *ek* ("out") and *kaleō* ("to call"). In reality, by the first century *ekklēsia* simply denoted an "assembly" or "congregation," without implying the notion of "calling out." Likewise, in Hebrew exegesis, one might argue that *'elohim* ("God") fundamentally means "mighty ones," and therefore always carries polytheistic overtones. This overlooks the fact that in most Old Testament contexts, *'elohim* functions as the standard designation for the one God of Israel, irrespective of its root form.

Semantic anachronism involves retrojecting later meanings of a word into an earlier text. For example, the Greek verb *baptizō* ("baptize") in the New Testament

20. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (La Vergne: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2005), 59–60.

21. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 193.

22. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 12–17.

period meant simply "to immerse" or "to wash." Reading into these occurrences the full sacramental theology that developed in later Christian tradition commits this fallacy. Similarly, interpreting the Hebrew noun *qāhal* ("assembly") in Deuteronomy through the lens of later rabbinic technical usage, rather than according to its plain meaning in its eighth- to sixth-century BCE context, represents the same error. In both cases, meaning from later stages of linguistic or theological development is wrongly imposed on an earlier text.

As Green observes, the meaning of a word in Scripture emerges from how it functions within its immediate literary and historical context. Significance arises not from etymology or aggregated glosses, but from usage within the text itself.[23] Whether analyzing the semantic range of Hebrew terms in Leviticus or tracing Paul's use of Greek vocabulary in his letters, responsible interpretation depends on attending to contextual meaning rather than relying on decontextualized word studies or oversimplified definitions derived from digital tools.

These cautions are not solely academic concerns but serve as vital pastoral safeguards. When preaching relies on superficial lexical analysis, it risks distorting the biblical message by overstating the semantic weight of individual terms. For instance, the frequently cited assertion that Greek clearly differentiates between *agapaō* (often associated with divine love) and *phileō* (typically seen as either a lesser or more affectionate love) in John 21 is exaggerated, as actual usage reveals considerable semantic overlap.[24] Similarly, the Hebrew term *yôm* ("day") in Genesis 1 carries substantial literary and theological significance regardless of one's stance on chronology, and its interpretation is shaped more by narrative context than by lexical definition alone.[25] Such missteps can burden hearers with misplaced certainties or obscure the rhetorical flow of a passage. Responsible interpretation, therefore, must attend not only to lexical data but also to the broader textual and theological context in which meaning is shaped.

The character trait of virtue brings the whole into focus. Here, Augustine's counsel remains instructive: exegesis is a craft and a moral posture.[26] Language shapes not only one's intellect but also one's character, cultivating patience (because syntax resists haste), purity of thought (because context constrains creativity), and love (because understanding requires attentive listening). For ministers, the issue is not pedantry but pastoral credibility. Congregations can sense when clergy persons have lingered long enough to be shaped by the Word they proclaim.

23. Gene L. Green, "Lexical Pragmatics and Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 4 (2007): 799.

24. Paul Aaron Himes, "Loving Wisdom: The Ἀγαπάω–Φιλέω Exchange in John 21:15–17 as an Allusion to LXX Proverbs 8:17," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 30, no. 3 (2020): 401–02.

25. Rick Wadholm Jr., *The Theological Meaning and Significance of Yôm in Genesis 1* (Master's thesis, Providence Theological Seminary, 2012), 88–90.

26. Mark Ian McDowell, "Augustine, Virtue, and the Moral Field," *Reformed Faith & Practice* 7, no. 2 (December 2022): 10–11.

Linguistic Depth: Aspect, Syntax, and Discourse

Greek verbal aspect serves as a compelling illustration of how linguistic analysis can enhance pastoral discernment. Whether one adopts the perspective that aspect constitutes the primary semantic feature of the verb system or favors a more traditional framework that incorporates *Aktionsart* (a term referring to the inherent nature or type of action expressed by a verb), pastors stand to gain. Imperfective forms generally portray actions or states as ongoing or incomplete, while perfective forms typically present events as complete wholes. Though not a subject for homiletic exposition, verbal aspect remains a valuable exegetical tool for sermon preparation.[27]

Similarly, Hebrew grammar—particularly the use of *wayyiqtol* forms (a verb form typically used to convey sequential past actions in narrative) and linked clauses—shapes the rhythm and highlights within narrative texts. Scholars have demonstrated how discourse features like topicalization and emphatic particles signal what the author wants the readers to notice. Paying attention to these linguistic signals helps pastors avoid reading too much into minor details while ensuring they do not overlook key structural transitions.[28]

Lexicons remain tools, not masters. Hebrew and Greek dictionaries, when employed thoughtfully and in light of literary context and genre, assist pastors in steering clear of eccentric or misleading interpretations. Still, lexicons do not dictate meaning; usage does. The pastor's task is to weigh options, articulate a reasoned choice, and move expeditiously to proclamation.[29] For insights at the level of discourse, Runge's analysis of Greek features, such as emphasis, contrast, and progression, can help preachers discern how paragraphs cohere.[30] The aim is not to deliver grammar lessons from the pulpit, but to allow grammatical understanding to support clarity and conviction.

Canon and Figural Reading in Practice

Biblical clauses do more than transmit information; they carry communicative force. They assert, exhort, and promise, often signaled by particles, verbal aspect, and literary context. Recognizing this safeguards preaching from reducing God's Word to mere advice or data. For instance, Psalm 23:1 declares, "The Lord is my

27. Andrew David Naselli, "A Brief Introduction to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007): 17–23, 25–26, 28.

28. John A. Cook, "The Semantics of Verbal Pragmatics: Clarifying the Roles of *Wayyiqtol* and *Weqatal* in Biblical Hebrew Prose," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 49, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 247–250, 269.

29. Cilliers Breytenbach, "The Task and Future of New Testament Studies," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 79, no. 2 (2023): 3–4.

30. Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 1–5.

shepherd; I lack nothing." This statement not only affirms God's care but also invites trust. Similarly, Psalm 100:4 commands, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving." In Hebrew, this imperative is not a harsh order but a gracious summons into God's joy, drawing hearers into the worshipful songs of his people.[31]

Figural reading—a hallmark of canonical interpretation—attentively discerns how earlier biblical texts are prophetically echoed, fulfilled, and brought to completion in later ones, all while preserving the historical and literal integrity of the original contexts. Likewise, figural reading grows from the literal sense under the Spirit's guidance. For example, Psalm 8:5 in the Hebrew text describes humanity as made "a little lower than God" (*elohim*), whereas the Septuagint translates it as "a little less than the angels."[32] Hebrews 2:7 and 9 adopt the Septuagint's wording to proclaim Jesus as the ultimate representative of humanity—the true Son of Man—who, through his incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection, brings many redeemed sons and daughters to glory (v. 10). This interplay between the Hebrew and Greek versions is not a textual discrepancy to resolve but a divine gift to receive, exemplifying how Scripture interprets Scripture in pointing to Christ.[33]

The Gospel writers' use of Israel's Scriptures—such as Mark's new exodus motifs and John's temple imagery—emphasizes that preaching must be deeply theological and Christ-centered.[34] The Messiah is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, and this reality shapes how ministers proclaim the text. Faithful interpretation attends carefully to the original languages and the unity of the biblical canon. Linguistic work is not an end in itself. Instead, it serves the Church's confession by illuminating the typological and figurative patterns through which the Gospel is revealed.

Common Myths and Pastoral Corrections

Word studies can deepen preaching, yet they often succumb to popular misconceptions. When misused, Greek and Hebrew terms can obscure rather than clarify meaning, misleading congregations. The following corrections aim to tether inter-

31. Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 1.

32. Literally, "lesser him little something"; see Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Ps 8:6.

33. John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews*, ed. Curtis P. Giese, *Concordia Commentary* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 129–30.

34. Rikk E. Watts, "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 112; Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 422.

pretation to context and authorial purpose, offering sound guidance for pastors who do exegetical work in Hebrew and Greek.[35]

"Etymology determines meaning."

Correction: Etymology points to a word's historical origin, not its current sense. Words evolve over time. For instance, the Greek *dýnamis* means "power" or "ability," not "dynamite," a modern invention. Similarly, as noted earlier, *ekklēsia* refers to an "assembly" or "gathering," not mystically to "those called out."

"Every occurrence carries the full semantic range."

Correction: Meaning is determined by usage within context. Assuming every nuance applies in each appearance leads to distortion. For example, as noted earlier, *logos* ("word") in John 1 does not encompass every philosophical connotation but conveys what the Evangelist intends in that passage. Likewise, *sarx* ("flesh") in Galatians 5 denotes the sinful nature, not simply bodily tissue.

"Greek has many 'loves' that imply hierarchy."

Correction: The Gospel of John often employs *agapaō* ("love") and *phileō* ("love") interchangeably. In John 3:35 and 5:20, the Father's love is expressed with different verbs, yet without distinction in depth or quality. In John 21:15–17, as noted earlier, the focus lies not on a gradation of affection but on Peter's threefold restoration to ministry.

"The Hebrew *yôm* in Genesis 1 must mean a 24-hour day."

Correction: *Yôm* ("day") draws its sense from a passage's literary and theological context. Genesis 1's pattern of forming and filling emphasizes divine order and human vocation rather than chronology. In Psalm 90:4, by contrast, *yôm* ("day") depicts an extended span of time, showing the word's semantic flexibility.

"The lexicon settles the question."

Correction: Hebrew and Greek lexicons are invaluable aids but not final authorities. Meaning arises from usage shaped by context, genre, and authorial intent. For example, *dikaiosynē* ("righteousness") in Romans 4:3 (further explained in vv. 4–5) functions differently from its use in James 2:23–24, where the discourse context shifts the sense of "righteousness."

"Discourse markers are incidental."

Correction: Particles and conjunctions are structural cues that connect arguments. Overlooking them disjoints the logic of the text. For instance, *oun* ("therefore") in Romans 8:1 and 12:1 signals conclusions drawn from prior reasoning, anchoring theology in flow and cohesion.

35. In this regard, see William D. Barrick, "Exegetical Fallacies: Common Interpretive Mistakes Every Student Must Avoid," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 15–27.

Faithful preaching therefore demands careful attention to language without succumbing to linguistic shortcuts. Words exist within sentences, sentences within paragraphs, and paragraphs within discourse. By resisting the tendencies exposed above and attending to each passage's immediate context, pastors both honor the text's intent and serve their congregations with clarity and truth.

Exegesis for Mission and Culture

As Phan argues, translating the Gospel into different cultures is not a compromise but a necessary act of obedience to Christ's commission to "gather disciples from all nations" (Matt 28:19).[36] Throughout history, Christianity's vitality has depended on its capacity for translation. The Gospel is planted in local languages, both affirming and transforming them according to the Word. This mirrors the Incarnation—God's Word became flesh and spoke into human contexts (John 1:14)—demonstrating that divine truth meets people where they are. Pastors who grasp this dynamic become more effective communicators, recognizing how to move faithfully from the biblical text (source) to their contemporary audience (receptor), without sacrificing meaning or theological integrity.

Biblical Foundations for Translating the Gospel

Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11): At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's gift of tongues signaled that the Gospel is not confined to a single language or culture. Everyone heard in their "own languages the wonderful works of God," foreshadowing a Church called to bear Christ's message to all peoples.

Paul's Missionary Method (1 Cor 9:19–23): Paul's willingness to "become all things to all people" reflects strategic flexibility, but his core message—Christ crucified—remains unchanged. Cultural adaptation is always subordinate to the lordship of Christ and fidelity to the Gospel, not mere accommodation.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15): Gentile converts were received into the Church without being required to adopt Jewish ceremonial law. The Gospel undercuts cultural and ritual distinctions, welcoming all who trust in Christ, while upholding what strengthens faith and love in the community.

The Church's Rhythms: Indigenizing and Pilgrim Principles

Wall portrays the Church living by two complementary principles: the indigenizing principle (the Gospel genuinely inhabits every culture) and the pilgrim principle (the Gospel critiques and relativizes all cultures beneath Christ's lordship).[37] Here, exe-

36. Peter C. Phan, "Mission as Inculturation: Contextualizing God's Message in Local Cultures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, ed. Kirsteen Kim and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 420–36.

37. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 7–9.

gesis in Hebrew and Greek equips ministers to enter the biblical world on its own terms, and then faithfully rearticulate its message in today's idiom, preserving both the scandal of the Cross (1 Cor 1:18–25) and the consolation of grace (Eph 2:8–10).

Practical Implications for Ministry

- Pastors must avoid false verbal correlations—words that sound familiar across languages but diverge in meaning. For instance, the biblical term *charis* ("grace") refers to God's undeserved favor, distinct from notions of elegance or courtesy.
- Catechists should measure translated creeds and liturgies against Scripture's patterns, ensuring that every confession keeps Christ at the center and remains clear in meaning.
- Mission leaders must not uncritically borrow theological terms from secular culture. Christian proclamation follows the grammar of Scripture, which protects the promise of the Gospel. Biblical narratives should continually reformulate concepts like "justice" or "freedom" around Christ's cross and resurrection.[38]

The Lutheran Imperative for Translation

Alawode explains why translation is not an optional task; it is central to the Gospel's mission.[39] The Word that justifies sinners by grace alone, through faith alone (Eph 2:4–7), must be clearly proclaimed in every language. Paul emphasized that "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17), which requires faithful and accurate rendering of the biblical message. For pastors and missionaries, attentiveness to the original biblical languages is not academic indulgence but vital preparation for proclaiming Christ crucified in ways that are both understandable and transformative.

Exegesis as a Ministerial Competency for Word and Sacrament

Preaching That Says What the Text Says

Preaching stands as the Church's central act of truth-telling. It is not a performance or rhetorical display but the faithful articulation of God's Word in human language. Authentic proclamation renders divine speech audible within the Church's time and place, expressing the Gospel in contextually sensitive, contemporary language without compromising fidelity to the biblical witness. In this sense, preaching transitions from exegesis to proclamation. This shift occurs not by simply transferring lexical data into the pulpit, but rather by discerning the text's central theme and

38. See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 9–11.

39. Akinyemi O. Alawode, "Understanding Christian Translation and Its Missiological Relevance," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): 1–6.

purpose. By understanding both the text's focus and its function, the preacher can effectively shape the sermon's structure and tone.[40]

The pastor, then, serves as a living bridge: one foot rooted in the world of Scripture, the other in the present world of the congregation, with the minister's full weight resting on the biblical text. Such a stance ensures that the sermon's authority derives not from rhetorical skill or personal charisma but from the Word that speaks Christ into the midst of sinners.[41]

Why Language Matters

Romans 3:21–26 offers a pertinent example of why linguistic precision and theological care belong together in preaching. As discussed earlier, terms such as *dikaiosynē* ("righteousness") and *hilastērion* ("propitiation") convey theological depths that no single English word can fully express. So then, when a pastor weighs rendering *hilastērion* as "propitiation," "atoning sacrifice," or "mercy seat," the interpretive choice becomes an act of confession. Each possibility opens a different vista on Paul's vision of divine righteousness, namely, God's initiative to restore covenantal faithfulness and reconcile the world to himself.

Likewise, the debated phrase *pistis Christou*—whether "faith in Christ" or "the faithfulness of Christ"—is not a grammatical curiosity but a theological lens. The former locates righteousness in human believing; the latter discloses it as Christ's own obedient fidelity on behalf of sinners.[42] From a Lutheran perspective, this distinction underscores that the Gospel is fundamentally about divine initiative: faith does not activate justification but receives the gift of righteousness already accomplished in the crucified and risen Christ.

Tracing the Logic of the Text

Attention to linguistic connectors clarifies how the Spirit's reasoning unfolds through Scripture. As noted above, Greek particles and Hebrew conjunctions signal the movement of thought and the development of argument. Noticing these small words often reconfigures a sermon's outline, transitions, and pastoral applications. This is not pedantry but pastoral attentiveness, guiding the congregation to follow how God's logic of mercy arises within the text itself. Through such precision, the

40. See Abraham Kuruvilla, "Christocentric View," in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 57–95; Paul Scott Wilson, "Law-Gospel View," in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 133–171.

41. See Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who a Pastor Is and What He Does* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 25–27, 56–61.

42. See B. J. Oropeza, "Justification by Faith in Christ or Faithfulness of Christ? Updating the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Debate in Light of Paul's Use of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2022): 102–24.

pastor serves both the Word and the hearers, ensuring that Christ's action, not human interpretation, drives the sermon's momentum.

Movement and Tone in the Sermon

After making one or two decisive linguistic decisions, the minister should express the text's focus and function in succinct, transparent sentences. These summary statements act as navigational points, orienting the sermon's path and ensuring coherence between exegesis and proclamation.[43] Clear transitions, which are carried by active verbs and concrete imagery, allow the sermon to progress naturally, tracing a single thread of Gospel promise that culminates in a pastoral summons to faith. In this way, the sermon mirrors the dynamic of justification: from divine action to human trust, from proclamation to response.

Clarity for the Ear

Because preaching addresses living hearers rather than academic specialists, clarity must govern both language and tone. Words that are simple, vivid, and concrete communicate theological truth most effectively.[44] For instance, "God set forth Jesus as the place where mercy meets justice" speaks more directly to the conscience than "the *hilastērion* ('place of propitiation') refers to the cultic *kapporeth* ('mercy seat')." Scholarly insight serves proclamation best when it clarifies rather than obscures the Gospel. The pulpit, therefore, is not an arena for linguistic display but a place where the mystery of God's mercy becomes audible for sinners in need of grace.

Catechesis and Pastoral Care

Catechesis is the sustained and deliberate instruction of Christian doctrine in accordance with the form and texture of Scripture. It is not an extrinsic moral program but an immersion into the grammar of divine revelation. For example, in the instructional life of the Church, the Lord's Prayer redirects human desire toward the will of the Father; the Decalogue orders the moral imagination within God's law; and the Psalter shapes the affections in lament and praise. Exegetical attentiveness to language reinforces this process by safeguarding the text's sacred otherness.[45]

To reduce Scripture to just paraphrase or moral maxims obscures the divine agency that speaks through it. So then, when the petition "hallowed be your name" (Matt 6:9) is taught in its passive construction, its grammar testifies that holiness is God's act, not a human achievement. Likewise, when "You shall not give false testimony" (Exod 20:16) is read within its juridical context in Israel's law, its ethical

43. See Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 124–30.

44. See Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 125–27.

45. See B. D. Espinoza and Beverly Johnson-Miller, "Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision for Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (2014), 15–21.

implications emerge from rather than replace its legal character. Such instruction resists moralism precisely because it keeps the text's forensic structure intact, thereby returning hearers to Christ as the one who fulfills the law's righteousness for them.[46]

Luther's hermeneutical principle that the clarity of Scripture serves the Gospel provides the theological foundation for this approach. The divine Word is clear, not in abstraction but in its concrete function: God speaks clearly to justify sinners by grace through faith in Christ. Consequently, catechesis must be understood not as general ethical formation but as participation in evangelical freedom, namely, the life constituted by the forgiveness of sins. Proficiency in the biblical languages contributes to this work by cultivating a posture of theological patience. Slow, meditative attention to grammar and syntax allows pastors to first receive the text as promise before they proclaim it as command, thereby preserving the evangelical order of gift preceding obligation.[47]

Sacramental Practice Grounded in the Text

Pastoral practice, rightly understood, presupposes a sacramental theology disciplined by careful exegesis and rooted in the living Word of God. For example, in Romans 6, Paul's language of burial and resurrection with Christ in the waters of baptism is not a detachable metaphor but an integral part of the apostle's argument about union with Christ. Attentive reading of *baptizō* ("baptize") and the passage's verbal aspect supports preaching that avoids two distortions: magicalism, which treats the sacrament as automatically effective apart from faith, and minimalism, which reduces baptism to only a symbol or human confession. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10–11, attention to the socio-rhetorical setting (particularly the divisions of status reflected in communal meals) reveals that Paul's exhortation to "recognize the Lord's body" (11:29) calls the Church to a communal recognition of Christ's real presence and to mutual regard within his body, rather than to isolated introspection.[48]

Within this scriptural horizon, Lutheran theology offers a steady guide. The Word of God gives the Sacraments their promise and meaning, while the Holy Spirit unites sign and reality in the Church's worship. The Sacraments are neither substitutes for proclamation nor appendages to it, but the Gospel made visible. It is Christ's own promise delivered under tangible signs. Their intelligibility depends upon the Church's speech, continually reformed and shaped by Scripture. Thus, sacramentality belongs at the very center of the Church's life, orienting the congregation toward the joy of God's right-hand kingdom, where Christ gives and sustains faith.

46. See John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 43–44.

47. See Erling T. Teigen, "The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (1982): 147–50.

48. See Nicholas Perrin, "Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 52, 55–57.

Competence in the biblical languages enables ministers to confess and teach this sacramental theology with clarity and depth, avoiding polemical excess while guiding the faithful to receive Christ's gifts with understanding, trust, and thanksgiving.[49]

Parish Formation: Cultivating a Language-Aware Congregational Culture

At its core, Lutheran theology stands on the conviction that God works through means, and the foremost means of grace is the Word spoken, written, and proclaimed. Because the Gospel arrives clothed in human language, attentiveness to that language is not limited to linguistic curiosity but involves pastoral fidelity.[50] Several theological principles clarify this conviction.[51]

Fundamentally, just as the eternal Word assumed human flesh, so the divine promises are bound within ordinary human words. Here, God binds himself to the external Word so that faith may grasp something tangible. Language awareness honors this incarnational truth. The Spirit does not transcend grammar, syntax, or vocabulary but employs them as instruments to deliver Christ.

Moreover, the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity does not imply that every verse is immediately self-evident, but that the Gospel shines clearly through the text. When readers attend to conjunctions, repetitions, and patterns, they discern how the biblical language itself proclaims Christ. Such attentiveness does not cultivate elitism but expresses confidence that God speaks plainly through words of the Spirit's choosing.

Crucially, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, which is the hermeneutical keystone of Lutheran theology, depends on hearing precisely what the text says. A careless verb tense or overlooked connective can veil the difference between accusation and promise. Linguistic attentiveness safeguards the pure proclamation of justification by faith alone.

In practice, preaching is not instruction alone but a means of grace. When pastors disclose how a Greek verb or Hebrew image guided their proclamation, they demonstrate how the Spirit operates through words to impart Christ. Such transparency cultivates congregational trust that the proclaimed Word is not arbitrary but anchored in the text bearing God's saving promise.

Likewise, in Lutheran theology, prayer and exegesis belong inseparably together. So then, to read the Psalms with attention to form, imagery, and rhythm is to pray

49. See Mickey L. Mattox, "Sacraments in the Lutheran Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 269, 273–81.

50. See the *Smalcald Articles* (Part III, Art. VIII, 10) in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1959), 312.

51. See Johannes von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–55.

God's Word back to him. Language awareness, therefore, nurtures a devotional life attuned to hearing Christ in the text and responding in faith.

Ultimately, language awareness in the parish does not aim to produce exegetical experts but to form a community that listens closely to the Word through which the Father grants the Son. Such attentiveness flows from the Lutheran assurance that the Lord hides himself in humble means—ink, paper, and syllables—and yet reveals himself fully for the parishioners' salvation.[52]

Contemporary Objections to Biblical Language Study and Constructive Lutheran Responses

The Lutheran Case for Biblical Languages Today

In the Lutheran tradition of seminary education, the study of Scripture's original languages holds a central place in pastoral formation, rooted in the Reformation's emphasis on the *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") principle and the priesthood of all believers. This commitment stems from a Christ-centered hermeneutic, where the Word of God is not solely a historical artifact but the living vehicle through which the Holy Spirit conveys the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone. Luther exemplified this by translating the Bible into the vernacular while insisting on rigorous engagement with the source texts to ensure fidelity to Christ's message. Melanchthon, in developing the Lutheran educational framework, integrated grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the trivium; Latin for "three ways") as essential for ministers to analyze, articulate, and argue the faith with integrity.[53]

Yet, contemporary objections to require such study in seminary curricula persist, often reflecting practical pressures in an era of compressed training and digital resources. The following sections address these objections constructively, emphasizing how language proficiency serves the proclamation of Christ, safeguards doctrinal integrity, and equips pastors for lifelong ministry in service to the Church. Building on the observations in the preceding sections, each of the following responses reflects theological convictions that emphasize the clarity of the Gospel, uphold the authority of Scripture, and affirm the pastor's ministerial role as a steward of the Word.[54]

52. See Steven Paulson, "Luther's Doctrine of God," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188.

53. See Peter Goeman, "The Reformers and the Original Languages: Calvin and Luther on the Importance of Greek and Hebrew in Theology and Ministry," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 6–10, 12–14.

54. See the comparable discussion in the following: Lodewyk Sutton, "Biblical Languages: Challenges for Postgraduate Supervision in Old and New Testament Studies," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2023); Robert L. Plummer, "The Necessity of Biblical Languages in Ministerial Training," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 25, no. 3 (2021): 197–211.

"There's No Time in the Curriculum"

Curricular constraints in modern theological education are undeniable, driven by demands for broader pastoral competencies in areas like counseling, leadership, and mission. However, abandoning the study of the biblical languages risks diluting the pastor's ability to engage Scripture on its own terms, potentially obscuring the Christological heart of the biblical witness. A Lutheran response prioritizes thoughtful curricular design that integrates languages as an essential component of formation, viewing them not as extraneous but as foundational to accurately handling the Word for the edification of Christ's body (2 Tim 2:15).

Seminaries can strengthen language instruction by adopting tiered tracks (such as basic reading proficiency for parish ministry and advanced exegesis for teaching and scholarship), while embedding study within pastoral formation to show its immediate relevance. Linking Greek exegesis to preaching workshops and Hebrew Psalms to care practicums demonstrates how linguistic detail shapes proclamation and comfort in Christ. Beyond ordination, language should be cultivated as a lifelong pastoral craft through reading groups, institutes, and retreats, echoing the Reformation's vision of rigorous yet accessible engagement with Scripture. By framing languages not as hurdles but as enduring tools for proclaiming the Gospel, seminary education forms pastors whose minds, hearts, and practices serve the crucified and risen Lord.

"Software Gives Me What I Need"

The proliferation of Bible software and digital lexicons offers unprecedented access to linguistic data, yet reliance on these tools without foundational training can lead to interpretive errors that distort the Gospel message. In a Lutheran framework, where the clarity of Scripture is paramount for conveying Christ's saving work, software must function as a servant to human judgment, not a surrogate. Untrained use often amplifies misunderstandings: lexical glosses are conflated with contextual meanings, word frequencies mistaken for theological weight, and etymologies prioritized over actual usage in discourse.

Influential critiques, such as those from Barrick and Carson (cited earlier), remain indispensable: words carry semantic ranges shaped by context; discourse units and genre, rather than isolated dictionary entries, determine sense; and grammatical features like aspect or mood constrain interpretations to align with the text's intent. Pastors equipped with these principles can interrogate their tools critically: Why does this gloss predominate? What defines the broader discourse unit? How does verbal mood illuminate the author's theological emphasis? Such scrutiny prevents software from becoming a crutch that erodes confidence in proclaiming the Word.

"Language Study Is Elitist"

Objections rooted in equity concerns are valid, acknowledging real barriers posed by time commitments, financial costs, and varying educational backgrounds. In diverse congregations, these hurdles can exacerbate divides, seemingly privileging those with prior advantages. However, from a Lutheran perspective, equity in ministry demands

that pastors strive for fidelity to Scripture's original languages as a ministerial act of love that enables clearer proclamation of Christ to all people, regardless of context.

Multilingual and multicultural Churches, in particular, benefit from pastors who navigate between vernacular translations and source texts, ensuring that the Gospel's universal call—salvation by grace through faith in Christ—is conveyed without cultural distortion. This is not clerical prestige but ecclesial service. Ministers undertake the labor of faithfully handling Scripture to nourish the body of Christ with the "pure milk of the word" (1 Pet 2:2). Framed thus, language study embodies the Reformation's democratizing impulse, empowering laity through informed teaching while honoring the priesthood of all believers.

"Theological Interpretation Makes Languages Optional"

Theological interpretation, at its finest, revitalizes reading Scripture through doctrinal lenses, such as the Lutheran categories of Law and Gospel, along with sin and grace. Yet the deeper point is that theological interpretation regards God in his Word and his self-giving, self-revealing acts as the central subject of Scripture. Theology, after all, is talk about God, and the Scriptures are fundamentally about God. This means theological interpretation can become shallow if it ignores the text's linguistic foundations, and it can even profane Scripture if it shifts the focus away from God or fails to lead to a true knowledge of him. Leading voices in this field assume, rather than bypass, careful language study. They recognize that doctrinal insights arise from the text's literal sense, which is the grammatical-historical meaning that the Holy Spirit uses as his instrument of divine address.

In Lutheran theology, Scripture's authority flows from its inspiration as the cradle of Christ, where every word and structure serves to unveil the Savior.[55] Because God is the subject matter of Scripture, interpretation that misses this sacred center fundamentally misunderstands what Scripture is. Paying attention to narrative arcs, intertextual allusions, and rhetorical patterns thus requires precise word study and syntactic analysis, not as ends in themselves, but as pathways to encounter God in his self-revelation. Without this grounding, interpretation can drift into allegory detached from the incarnate Word. The guiding principle is clear: theology begins with the text, and the text is rooted in its languages. By integrating theological interpretation with linguistic study, pastors honor the Spirit's work and ensure that doctrinal reflection returns to Scripture's Christ-centered core, namely, to God himself speaking and acting in his Word.

Budget, Staffing, and Sustainability

To begin with the overarching framework, sustaining biblical language instruction requires prudent resource allocation, viewed through a theological lens as an investment in the Church's enduring witness to Christ. Below, key areas are addressed

55. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), xviii, 396.

with practical proposals, supported by metrics to ensure long-term viability. This framework not only addresses practical challenges but reinforces the Lutheran conviction that biblical languages are indispensable for pastors to feed Christ's flock with the bread of life drawn from Scripture's depths.

Regarding financial stewardship, seminaries can optimize costs by collaborating in academic alliances for shared courses, securing endowments from partner denominations for dedicated language chairs, and leveraging summer intensives to utilize adjunct expertise efficiently. Congregations can contribute through initiatives like funding annual "Languages for Preachers" retreats or providing software licenses contingent on usage, with renewal based on quarterly reflections detailing how textual work informs Christ-focused ministry. These measures transform budgeting from a constraint into an expression of ecclesial stewardship.

Turning to personnel and alignment, seminaries can appoint a Director of Biblical Languages and Exegesis Integration to orchestrate coherence across disciplines, ensuring languages inform homiletics, systematics, and pastoral theology in a unified curriculum. At the parish level, designating a rotating "text steward" (a role for clergy or trained laity) to prepare linguistic briefs for preaching teams fosters collaborative preparation. Doing so reflects the Lutheran emphasis on the communal discernment of Scripture.

Ultimately, to ensure lasting viability, it is important to adopt meaningful indicators such as the frequency of explicit textual connections in sermon manuscripts, the integration of original-language insights in catechetical resources, and the handling of key terms (for example, "justification" as *dikaiosis*) in sacramental teaching. These qualitative and quantitative measures, perhaps compiled in annual reports, promote accountability without reducing worship to pedagogy. Doing so ensures that language study remains a vital conduit for encountering Christ in the Word.

Conclusion: Biblical Languages as Pastoral Love—A Demonstration and a Guideline for Practice

The thesis of this essay can be demonstrated through Scripture itself. When pastors approach the biblical languages as instruments of God's self-giving speech, the Church's doctrine is preserved, and its life is renewed in Christ. Paul's account of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26) makes this concrete. The key terms that carry the Supper's theology—*anamnēsis* ("remembrance"), *diathēkē* ("covenant"), *katangellō* ("proclaim"), and *sōma* ("body")—are not peripheral; they govern the pastoral event.

Anamnēsis signifies more than recollection. The remembrance is covenantal, a re-presentation before God in which the Church is again placed under the promise of the crucified and risen Christ. If translated as only mental recall, the promise collapses into subjective memory. Heard in Paul's register, it anchors the Supper as a Gospel event, namely, Christ's saving act given and received. Thus, preaching and catechesis speak about Christ's giving rather than just human remembering, protecting the meal from moralism or sentimentality.

Diathēkē denotes covenant, not contract. Paul's wording situates the Supper within the saving economy of Exodus and Jeremiah. If the meal is covenantal, its logic is pure promise, enacted by God in Christ alone. To treat it as mutual pledge is to return to the law. Hence the pastor's work at the table—admission, discipline, and consolation—must proceed from the Creator's unconditional love for the lost, not human worthiness, embodying the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel.

Katangellō identifies proclamation, namely, the announcing of the "Lord's death." The Supper is therefore inseparable from the kerygma ("preaching" or "declaration"): the Gospel made audible and edible. The words of institution are not merely decorative but the means of grace. Language-aware exegesis compels pastor and presider to mutual accountability, that the congregation may receive one Christ, one promise, and one gift.

Sōma directs attention to discern the "body." Paul binds sacramental and ecclesial realities, namely, the body given produces the body gathered. Read in Greek, the apostle's admonition resists two distortions: a privatized introspection that isolates and a punitive exclusion that divides. Consequently, pastoral practice embraces confession, reconciliation, and shared participation as essential to the Supper's true celebration.

These are not academic refinements or gratuitous flourishes but the hinges of doctrine and care. If God binds himself to external words to give Christ to believers, and if those words come to them in Hebrew and Greek, then the pastoral office—sworn to preach and administer—must also confess what those words declare. The reasoning follows naturally:

- *Major premise*: The ministry of Word and Sacrament is the ordinary means by which Christ bestows forgiveness and life.
- *Minor premise*: Christ gives these gifts through specific scriptural words whose sense is borne by their original languages.
- *Conclusion*: Therefore, competence in those languages is not ornament but fidelity, a pastoral love that keeps Christ's promise clear and free.

To bring this essay to a close, those ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament are entrusted with the sacred vocation of proclaiming Christ with faithfulness and care. In our age, that calling necessitates a renewed attentiveness to the Scriptures in their original languages, not for scholarly display, but as an act of pastoral love. The Holy Spirit enables pastors who do so to draw nearer to the living voice of the Good Shepherd, so that his saving Word may reach congregants without dimming or distortion. To neglect these languages is to risk exchanging promise for paraphrase. To keep them alive in heart and hand is to confess that God still speaks to his Church: Christ for sinners, here and now, through the very words by which he gives eternal life.

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