

# **New Testament Studies in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Curriculum**

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In the very first sentence in which the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Catalog speaks of curriculum, it enunciates the general principle: “All training at the Seminary is carried out in the light of the Gospel under the full authority of the Holy Scriptures as the inspired and inerrant Word of God.”

Obviously the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, dominate our curriculum. It is self-evident therefore that the study of Scripture should receive a major portion of both the faculty and students’ attention, and that it should comprise a large part of our curriculum.

The manner in which Old Testament studies are handled at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is being treated separately in another presentation. Our discussion at present will restrict itself to New Testament study. What do teachers of the New Testament hope to accomplish, and what objectives are envisioned by our curriculum? The 1978 Self-Study states: “Since reverent, thorough, and scholarly study of the Holy Scriptures is considered to be fundamental in realizing the Seminary’s practical purpose of training and equipping men for the practical tasks of the public ministry, the New Testament Department is committed to the nurture of such study in all of the courses which it offers and conducts.

In keeping with this commitment the student is:

1. To grow in the conviction that the New Testament is the Word of God;
2. To acquire a thorough knowledge of the New Testament;
3. To develop methods, skills, and aptitudes for a lifelong study of the New Testament as God’s Word;
4. To gain ever more certainty that the Savior’s work has been accomplished for him and all mankind;
5. To anticipate with joy the work of sharing that certainty with others through participation in the public ministry.”

Essentially, New Testament courses fall into three categories. There are first of all the introductory or foundation courses - what the Catalog calls “Theological Propaedeutic.” These include the New Testament offerings of Hermeneutics, Grammar and Syntax, and Textual Criticism. Of these more will be said later. Next are the Isagogical courses, where a brief overview and introduction to the individual New Testament books are given. That is supplemented by the more thorough verse by verse and word by word work done in the exegetical courses.

One of the overriding principles which actually makes its effect felt in all of the three above-mentioned areas is the attempt to have every student attain the goal of having translated the entire Greek New Testament by the time he graduates. With a minor concession or two, that goal is generally realized in the three-year on-campus program at Mequon.

Many of you (probably most) will remember Theological Propaedeutic as three separate courses—all two hours per week and running for the full three quarters of the junior year. Those three courses, Hermeneutics, Grammar and Syntax, and Textual Criticism, have now been combined into a one-quarter course meeting five times per week. The strongest argument for the consolidation of these courses into one was that if they were truly pro-paedeutic, i.e., introductory disciplines, then they really should come as early as possible in

a young theologian's seminary career. Hence, under the somewhat misleading title of "Hermeneutics" all three of those are now offered as one course offered to the juniors either in the first or second quarter, depending on scheduling considerations.

Perhaps it is because I personally happen to share in the teaching of these courses, but I would venture to suggest that particularly the hermeneutics and textual criticism components of this course have become very important in our present theological climate. In the hermeneutics portion of the course, outlining as that does the proper principles of genuinely Christian interpretation of the Scriptures, it is possible to give an antidote to the pervasive and misleading claims that adherents of the historical - critical method make in virtually all of the current New Testament literature. Regardless of the guise under which it goes or by what name it is called, existentialism is a force we must reckon with in our day.

Another useful aspect of the course is the opportunity it gives seminarians to learn some practical textual criticism. The adjective practical is intentionally chosen. The point of the course is not to make professional text critics, or even to elevate that discipline as though the true theologian must perforce be lost without it.

Rather, textual criticism serves two purposes. In his own work with the text, it gives the pastor some basis on which to make a decision regarding variants, so that he can confidently say, "Thus saith the Lord." A second consideration is that more and more lay people are turning to modern translations. Providing an answer to their questions or objections almost always requires at least a fundamental knowledge of textual criticism.

It might almost seem that grammar and syntax are the "stepchild" in this course. If that is true, and I'm not necessarily granting that it is, it's because we are in the fortunate position of receiving young men excellently prepared for Koine Greek. Certainly they could do better, and we'd always like to get a bit more from them, but we need occasionally to remind ourselves—and you men in outlying seminaries will be quick to help us with that—we need to remind ourselves how fortunate we are to be permitted to work with young men who come in with nine semesters of classical and Koine Greek. How many other seminaries have that privilege?

Incidentally, the opening twelve chapters of Acts serve as the material by which text critical principles and grammar points are illustrated. The opening chapters of Acts were chosen because that portion of Scripture is not covered anywhere else in our curriculum.

All three branches of the course that has come to be called "Hermeneutics" find their application particularly in the discipline of exegesis or "biblical Interpretation." the Catalog states: Certain books of the Bible are taught with special thoroughness in the courses in Biblical Interpretation. In this study every individual word, phrase, and sentence is thoroughly examined on the basis of the original."

Again, many of you will no doubt recall an introduction to exegesis that consisted in a Galatians course that ran two hours per week for the three quarters of the junior year. The first exegetical course offered at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary still remains Galatians, but it's offered as a five-hour course in the last quarter of the junior year. That allows the student to take full advantage of the propaedeutic courses he's taken in first and second quarters. Since it is a first attempt at exegesis, considerable teaching by example is done in that the instructor takes the opening portion of the letter. After that some verses are assigned for student presentation. Generally the students work in teams, and presentation to the class is made only after consultation and discussion of the section with the instructor has taken place.

In their second year on campus, middlers work intensively with Paul's letter to the Ephesians. While eminently useful in its own right, speaking as it does of the relationship between Christ and the church, that letter also provides an excellent introduction to the pastoral theology work scheduled for the middler year. Since the letter serves as an introduction and support for the P.T. assignment, it has seemed logical to schedule the Ephesians course into the first quarter of the middler year. Like the Pastoral letters that follow in the second quarter, Ephesians has been allotted four hours per week.

In the Ephesians course there is considerable independent exegetical work done, but the students' class presentations on assigned sections are still discussed with the instructor prior to their being given in class. Considerable attention is given to helping the student see the applicability and general usefulness of this epistle in the life of a pastor and his congregation.

Romans is the book studied exegetically by seniors. That course retains the older, traditional format of being offered two hours per week over the three quarters of the school year. Although there are guide questions to stimulate the students' thinking, the exegetical work done here is largely independent work, with the various points of exegesis and doctrine being handled in class discussion.

A major concern to the instructors of this course is the bulk of material. Intensive work is done only on the first eight chapters. That does, of course, allow for a thorough discussion of Paul's classic treatment of the doctrines of justification and sanctification. The disadvantage is that it allows only a relatively light treatment of some key passages in the remaining chapters. Not only is important content treated lightly, but the final chapters of Romans are one of the portions of the New Testament that the student is likely not to have translated when he graduates.

We have a number of times referred to the desirability of having the student work through the entire New Testament in Greek by the time he graduates. To achieve that goal, a considerable amount of the New Testament material needs to be taught isagogically. The WLS Catalog recognizes this when it states: "Those books of the Bible that are not studied in exegesis courses either at the Seminary or during the student's college years must of necessity be covered in a more cursory manner. This is done in the courses in Old and New Testament Introduction. Here emphasis is laid upon becoming acquainted at least with the line of thought of all the other Biblical books. The courses also cover what is known about the inspired writers and the time and circumstances of their writing."

The Catalog calls our attention to an advantage that we at WLS enjoy. Some of the student's theological work has, in fact, been completed already in his college years. Both Northwestern graduates and Bethany men have worked through the Gospel of John, the life of Paul (Acts 13-28) and First Corinthians. This lightens appreciably the amount of material that needs to be covered in isagogics courses.

Incoming juniors are required to take a course in the Synoptic Gospels. Where there are parallel accounts in the Synoptics, the student is asked to translate the "lead account," which is usually the longest one, and to compare that with the other account(s). Of the material which the student has prepared at home, selections are translated in class and there is discussion of the rest.

A considerable amount of time is devoted to immunizing the student against the various modern theories of how the Gospels came into being—the so-called "Synoptic problem." Attention is also given to helping the student with alleged "contradictions" in the parallel accounts and with difficulties in the interpretation of various passages. Five hours per week for one quarter are devoted to this study of the Gospels.

The same amount of time (five periods per week, one quarter) is allotted to those Pauline epistles which are not treated at other places in the curriculum. That quantity of material (Second Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, and Philemon) is somewhat lighter. Hence the whole of it can be translated in class and discussed.

The final quarter of the junior year is devoted to the General Epistles. A considerable portion of the time is allotted to the book of Hebrews. Experience has shown that rushing through that book tends to leave students thoroughly confused. The price to pay for a more thorough treatment of Hebrews is that the book of Revelation needs to be read in English. Students with special facility in Greek have been able to keep up in the relatively easy Greek John uses, but generally the Apocalypse must be added to that portion of the New Testament which doesn't get translated.

While that shortfall has to be something of a disappointment to an Isagogics teacher, on balance we need to be most grateful to a Synod that has provided the level of undergraduate linguistic training which makes it possible to spend as much time in the original as we are enabled to do. I am inclined to think that at virtually any other American seminary such concentration on studying Scripture in the original would be impossible. While at present it is obviously impossible also for our sister seminaries on the world field to study Scripture in the original to the degree that is possible at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, yet it is heartening to hear of the interest and ability in the languages shown by these students. We commend the faculties and students for the work done so far, and we would urge them to continue to strive for the ideal of making it possible for pastors in the national churches to do sound exegetical study of Scripture on the basis of the original languages.