

# Look at Sunday School through the Lord's Eyes

[Keynote address at "Sunday School for Today and Tomorrow" a WELS Sunday School Conference, Wisconsin Dells Holiday Inn, Saturday, January 23, 1999]

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## Introduction

### I. How does history view the Sunday School?

- A role in reform
- A role in revivalism
- A role often resisted

### II. How do people view the health of Sunday School today?

- Consider contemporary statistics
- Consider the plaguing problems
- Consider the challenge of family structures
- Consider the threat of postmodernism

### III. How does the Lord view Sunday School?

- The Lord sees a powerful subject taught in this school
- The Lord sees special students in this school
- The Lord sees supernatural teaching carried out in this school
- The Lord sees eternal goals achieved in this school

Four decades ago Life magazine called Sunday School "the most wasted hour" in the United States. More recently, a superintendent of a WELS Sunday School lamented, "if only we could get all our children enrolled in the day school, then we wouldn't have to bother with a Sunday School." Sound encouraging? On the other end of the spectrum comes the quote from a Baptist Sunday School director. "I sincerely believe that the Sunday School, properly organized and functioning, is the best way to accomplish the Great Commission in the ministry of the local church." This man, Thomas J. Cook, served eight years as Bible teaching director of his local church and he witnessed the Sunday School organization there grow from an average attendance of 80 to dual Sunday Schools supporting an attendance of 600. Where do you find yourself standing on the spectrum of enthusiastic support for the importance of Sunday School in the work of the local parish? I'm sure all of you have strong feelings about the critical importance of this aspect of Gospel work, otherwise you wouldn't be sitting in Wisconsin's summer playground during the middle of a snowy January.

Sunday School is receiving renewed interest and attention in our midst, as well as elsewhere. One writer, Clarence Snelling, believes that in the new millennium Sunday School will be reaffirmed as the source of church growth/evangelism, a role it has played in many denominations since the mid 1800s. In the absence of extended families in our society due to the plethora of marriage and family break-ups, others view Sunday School as becoming an important fellowship/relationship group within the body of believers. Just type Sunday School into an internet search engine, and see how many "hits" you come up with. I got 2,826,344. Talk about interest in the Sunday School?

But I would like you to take a moment and examine your personal attitudes about Sunday School. What is your favorite memory from attending Sunday School? Your least favorite memory? What is your favorite memory from teaching Sunday School? Your least favorite memory? Take a moment with your neighbor and relate your impressions. Was Sunday School important in your spiritual life?

As we conclude this introduction to the topic assigned for this keynote address, we dare not manufacture an importance for Sunday School that God never intended. Sunday School is not mandated Biblically as a God-ordained way of nurturing and instructing children. Read through the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy and Ephesians, and you see the Lord encouraging parents to be primary in the spiritual training of children. Elsewhere, the Lord calls upon the body of believers to assist each other in the Scriptural training of the next generation. One need only recite the Great Commission to see God urging his Church to teach all nations, souls of all ages included. The *what* of the teaching the Church is to accomplish is not debatable: “everything I have commanded you” says our Lord Christ. Yet the manner and method of *how* the Church does this teaching is left open in the Gospel freedom we so cherish. Is Sunday School the best way of teaching the saving message of the Messiah Savior? What role does Sunday School have in relation to the Commission? Just how important is this tradition in training our children and/or adults? Are there other alternatives? I submit to you that Sunday School can be used mightily by God the Holy Spirit in direct relation to the amount of contact achieved between the Holy Word and a child. To that end I would encourage us to take a moment and look at Sunday School through the Lord’s eyes. Then, and only then, will we be given a perspective on Sunday School that can excite and encourage each one of us to renewed energy in this aspect of Gospel service. First, though, it might be helpful to put on a few other pairs of eyeglasses and see Sunday School the way others have viewed it.

### **How Does History View the Sunday School?**

The origin of Sunday Schools is most often credited to Robert Raikes, an Anglican laymen who lived in Gloucester, England. In 1780 he developed schools for poor children living in the central slums of the city. Some authors recognize the work that a Methodist, Hannah Ball, began in 1769. Actually, we Americans could try to claim one of our countrymen as the initiator of efforts to educate children on Sunday. Christopher Sauer, a member of the pietistic Church of the Brethren, immigrated to America from Germany, and for many years before either Ball or Raikes, he was printing Sunday School lesson cards.

Raikes, however, is the man most commonly associated with the rise of the modern Sunday School. It is helpful for us to understand the background of his work. Raikes was distraught by the social evils associated with the industrial revolution. Children were employed in harsh labor conditions for six days a week. Sunday was a day of freedom for the children that found many of them roaming in gangs and creating chaos and vandalism. Sunday School was originally intended as a protest and reform movement against the social conditions of the time. Raikes wanted to get children off the streets and engaged in worthwhile pursuits, so he developed this school on Sunday around the three R’s of reading, riting, and religion. Eight full hours of instruction were offered on Sunday. Not everyone viewed Sunday School as enthusiastically as Raikes did. Rather, he faced some stiff opposition from society’s elite and from “organized religion.” Nevertheless, within four years there were 250,000 students in Raikes’ Sunday Schools. Within three decades the Sunday School movement was ministering to 1,250,000 children in Great Britain, approaching 25 percent of the total population. During this

initial phase of the history of the Sunday School, the movement was characterized by three distinct features. First, there was strong lay leadership and involvement. Indeed, the movement was para church for most of its early years, both in England and in America. Secondly, there was an emphasis on a compassionate response to social evils and the need to take action to correct such evils. Thirdly, the Bible was to be a focus of study.

To summarize this brief historical sketch of the first phase of the Sunday School movement, we could say that Raikes viewed the Sunday School through the glasses of social reform as well as the moral transformation of children. Sunday School was important to him, because he wanted to use it as a vehicle to make significant changes in the living conditions of the children he served.

By 1785 William Elliott had established the first Sunday School in America on his own plantation in Virginia. The emphasis shifted slightly. No longer was protest or reform the driving impetus. Elliott's concern was that children learn to read, and he used the Bible to achieve that goal. Within the decade Sunday Schools were fairly well established in the new country. Again, it was almost exclusively a lay movement, with many pastors in almost all denominations speaking against it. Sunday Schools were organized in various areas, and only gradually did the schools become identified with a nearby congregation or parish. Parents began to discover that children could attend Sunday School while they were attending Sunday worship. (Is there nothing new under the sun?)

By 1820 the American Sunday School Union was formed in Philadelphia. Its goals were simple. Plant a Sunday School wherever there is a population, and distribute religious publications throughout the country. Again, note that Sunday Schools were being founded and formed outside of congregational sponsorship. A prime example of this para church approach is Stephen Paxson. Commissioned in 1840 by the ASSU to plant Sunday Schools on the American frontier, Paxson spent two decades establishing 1200 schools. From these Sunday Schools many congregations organized, exactly the opposite from what we would think the norm. As a para church endeavor, the ASSU strove to be non-denominational in practice and to ignore doctrinal differences. Consequently, their materials and publications reflected this watered down approach to Biblical study. In the decade before the civil war Sunday Schools played an important part in the urban revivals spreading through America. In many congregations the Bible class overshadowed the regular worship hour. More and more people "found religion" in Sunday School, and gradually preachers begin to emphasize the evangelistic opportunities that Sunday School provided.

Yet not every denomination warmly embraced the Sunday School movement, at least without modification. Among Lutherans in America the Sunday School movement gained a grudging acceptance, and for various reasons. As early as 1829 the Lutheran Sunday School Union was organized in direct response to the ASSU mentioned above. Reasons for the formation of an independent Sunday School union centered on several concerns. Early on Lutherans viewed the Sunday School movement as a threat because of concerns over unionism within the ASSU. In a non-denominational movement doctrine naturally is placed on the back burner, while cooperation and tolerance is stirred together on the front one, without regard to Scriptural mandates to "mark and avoid" those who teach "contrary to the teaching you have learned." Publications and materials of the ASSU were suspect, and often rightly so. There was a marked effort then, by the LSSU to produce distinctively Lutheran instructional materials. And since the ASSU was a para church organization, Sunday School was often divorced from congregational identity and hence also pastoral supervision. As shepherds of the flock, pastors

naturally were concerned about the type of spiritual and Biblical training their members were receiving. Within Lutheran congregations of the Synodical Conference, Sunday Schools were also viewed as a threat to the promotion and preservation of parochial schools. Many church leaders publicly stated that Sunday Schools were unnecessary where parochial schools were established. As late as 1914 the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis opposed efforts by Concordia Publishing House to publish Sunday School literature because they felt that Sunday Schools would undermine the day schools. One final concern centered on the role Sunday School should occupy within the work of the Church. In the latter half of the last century, most American Protestants were caught up in a pervasive revivalism that swept over the continent. Sunday Schools often adopted the methods of revivalism and were viewed primarily as instruments of evangelism and conversion. Lutherans generally viewed Sunday Schools from the perspective of training and nurturing those already baptized into the faith.

In this presentation we cannot adequately address one of the primary differences that faced Lutherans then and now. On the basis of Scripture we cheerfully and joyfully accept the Sacraments as an efficacious means of grace. Children baptized as infants are brought into the family of God purely by the powerful work of a gracious God. Such believers need to grow and mature in the Word. It is no wonder that we emphasize an instructional approach. Other Protestants, by and large, are confused about conversion. Becoming a believer is something they feel an individual has to consciously decide to do. One must yield himself to the working of the Spirit of God. It is no wonder that in such a theological setting, Sunday Schools become classrooms in which teachers are encouraging young students to accept Christ, and to receive the faith. Let us also forcefully insist that God receive all the credit for every aspect of our salvation and preservation and protection. Even in regard to my faith, I offer a thank you to the working of God's grace. Luther's wonderfully succinct explanation bears repeating by teacher and student alike. "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, nor come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

Some German Lutheran churches embraced the Sunday School movement early on, but for a reason that we would consider misplaced at best. Sunday Schools were used to teach the children Scripture and the catechism, but in the German language. "If the children had not had the opportunity on Sunday, they would probably never have learned to read German." (Comments of a Sunday School "missionary" sent out by the Pennsylvania Ministerium.) Conservative Lutheran congregations often identified Biblical confessionalism with maintaining the teaching and preaching in the "Muttersprache." It would take a world war to finally break down the language barrier often erected in misguided zeal for the truth.

#### Impact questions:

1. A/D Some denominations still expect Sunday School to play an important role in reforming society.
2. Explain how Sunday Schools are still used as vehicles of "revivalism."
3. It is not too uncommon among larger WELS congregations with a LES to have a policy or practice of not expecting LES students to attend Sunday School. How does an historical perspective help us understand (not necessarily support) this tradition?
4. One web site listed the benefits of Sunday School under the three f's of friends, faith, and family. Sunday School is an important time to make friends, for "it is not good for man to be alone." Sunday School is also important for faith life. "Have you ever considered that your

life could be more pleasing to God if you attended Sunday School?” React to these gleanings from that web site.

5. Demonstrate how WELS churches might fall into using Sunday School for a “reform role” or a “revival role.”

### **How Do People View the Health of Sunday School Today?**

Let’s put on a contemporary pair of glasses and briefly peruse the situation of Sunday Schools in our day. There will be more people in Sunday School this coming Sunday than the entire population of the United States in 1865. On any given Sunday, the teaching time of all Sunday School classes in the United States would equal 376 years. 98% of all congregations in the United States have a Sunday School, yet two thirds have fewer than 100 students. The average class size in an American Sunday School is 12. If one could line up all Sunday School students in the U. S. hand to hand, the line would crisscross our continent eight times from LA to New York. Sound wonderful? Permit a brief statistical sketch of Sunday School enrollment in America during the first three-quarters of this century.

1900 - 8 million students, 1 million teachers  
US population was 75 million; 12% were in S.S.

1969 - 40.4 million student, peak enrollment  
US population was 203 million; 19.9% were in S.S.

1986 - 26.6 million students  
US population was 241 million; 11% were in S.S.

The author of this statistical review claimed that 1986 was the latest year for complete and comprehensive statistics for all of America. He also made the following observations. During the decade of the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, total Sunday School enrollment in America declined by a net of almost 600,000 pupils. A breakdown of that net result shows that 10 denominations grew by 2.3 million enrolled in Sunday School. Of those 10, the vast majority of growth (2.1 million) occurred in 3 denominations: Mormons, Assemblies, Southern Baptists. Sunday School enrollment declined by 2.9 million in 23 denominations. Of that figure, the vast majority of decline (2.5 million) occurred in 8 denominations, 2 of which were Lutheran churches—the LCMS and the LCA, which is now part of ELCA. This author states that the attendance drop has not stopped yet, although I was unable to verify this claim or to find more recent statistical information.

Why the vast decline, and what’s happening in the WELS? Everyone here could recite their own favorite list of bogeymen that terrorize any efforts to reach children with the Word. So many congregations struggle with lack of space; lack of teachers; lack of money; lack of congregational support and excitement; lack of parental involvement due to divorces and blended families, etc.; lack of enthusiastic students; lack of effective and up-to-date visuals, maps, and resources; lack of computers and CD ROM media resources; lack of quiet and warm rooms; lack of blackboards and chalk. The “lack list” could go on and on, and pretty soon the “lackings” loom larger than the Lord! Perhaps the real lacking is a lack of faith in what we are using during that 50-minute period on Sunday. Maybe the real lack is a lack of focus on the true role and purpose of the Sunday School as the Lord sees it, not as we conceive it. Oh, how important it is to see the Sunday School the way the Lord sees it and to remind ourselves of what we have in Christ Jesus, not what we lack. We need to see the resources God pours out, not the

limitations we use for excuses. How critical it is for the Church of Christ to remind herself that the same Lord who called us to faith promises to provide everything we need to proclaim his saving Word. We are not lacking in resources from the Lord, we are lacking in trust. As Pastor Paul says, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurable more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 4:20-21)

Please permit two observations before we move on to viewing matters through the eyes of faith. One observation deals with the reality of the frail family structure in contemporary American society. There is no question that all of us struggle to find ways to keep children in Sunday School, and to get make-up lessons into their hands when they are absent. Sometimes Sunday School records don't even reflect the latest mailing address of the custodial parent in divorce situations. Children sometimes find themselves enrolled in two different Sunday Schools, going one week with a biological parent and step-parent to one church, and the next weekend with the other biological parent and perhaps a step-parent to a different church. Or when they come forgetting assignments and/or materials, perhaps it is not just childhood forgetfulness or carelessness. Perhaps those children in blended families have a difficult time remembering which house to call home on which weekend. How empathetic are we as pastors or teachers and especially as Christian friends? Perhaps the following chart can be a helpful visual in explaining why 50% attendance sometimes represents 100% commitment on the part of a member and parent. The chart represents a true case study from a congregation I served. (Please see the chart on the next page.)

What do we do about the reality? Do we wring our hands and wish for the nonexistent utopia of the good old days? Why not see the opportunities the Lord places in front of us? How many more doors might the Lord be opening for us that would otherwise be closed? The Sunday School Christmas service, the class singing in church, both might be a nudge to bring a step-father or a step-grandparent into contact with the Word. Work hard to keep contact with that student, no matter where custody battles might place him or her.

The other observation I would like to make is to remind us to open our eyes to the turmoil of the end times in which we live. Paul told Timothy and tells us: “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (1 Timothy 4:1-2) One evidence of Satan's successful prowling about is the stalking he has done in education and philosophy. Some authors have coined the term “postmodern” to describe the cultural climate that we live in, a climate that shapes and molds the impressionable youth as well as challenging the convictions adults learned years earlier. Postmodernism could be a lengthy discussion in itself, yet permit me to list here a few summary statements relevant to our work as teachers and guides of students into the saving truth. Our culture is very relativistic; that is, it rejects the idea that there is any absolute truth. Public opinion poll morality sits well with this thinking. Since there is no moral absolute postmodernism is also intolerant of anyone not showing tolerance for the human “differences” in religion, race, gender, sexual orientation. How do we then communicate the gospel of Jesus—who is the Way and the Truth and the Life—to a society predisposed to believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth? How do we teach for one hour on Sunday that Scripture is inspired and inerrant and therefore infallible and absolute to students who hear on a daily basis that truth is what they are to construct relative to their life experiences? How do we proclaim that God is final authority when our students live in a culture that produces bumper stickers proclaiming

“Challenge all authority”? One author summarizes the effect of postmodernism in educational curriculum with the following principles:

- Rejection of the notion of absolute truth (“It ain’t necessarily so”).
- Each individual must construct his own meaning in life (“The most important person in the world—you!”).
- Resistance to power which limits freedom (“You can’t make me!”).
- Respect and tolerate the differences of others and accept as a viable option (“I’m OK, you’re OK”).

Do we notice this way of thinking ever being espoused by our students? How about coming from our own mouths? Is there a temptation to spiritually “dummy down” our Sunday School to match the spirit of the times?

Impact questions:

1. For some Protestant churches, 65% of all members come through the Sunday School. For Assemblies, Nazarene, Southern Baptist, the rate is over 80%. What is the role Sunday School plays in our congregation’s evangelism efforts? For that matter, what role is more important for the Sunday School to fulfill, outreach or nurture?
2. Prioritize in your own congregational setting the list of problems that you seek God’s guidance and power to overcome.
3. Explain how this statement is true: 50% attendance represents 100 commitment.
4. Mentally chart the Sunday School enrollment in your own congregation. If the trend is downward, what reasons might be causative? What are you doing as a congregation to address the issue? If the trend is upward, how recently have you offered a public prayer of thanks to the Good Shepherd? What are you doing as a congregation to plan and prepare for the growing pains?

### **How Does a Gracious Lord View the Sunday School?**

#### **The Lord Sees a Powerful Subject Taught in this School**

When the world examines Christian education efforts connected with Sunday School the examination is only surface deep. Those who cannot observe with eyes of faith see a pedagogical setting that sometimes screams ineptitude to human standards of evaluation. There is not enough time for teachers to carefully present the lesson and develop understanding through age-appropriate questions. Opening devotion, singing practice, taking attendance, gathering an offering, passing out materials and supplies what can get done in only 50 minutes between services? The world sees classrooms often makeshift at best, and wonders how little ones can learn if there aren’t enough chairs to go around. The world sometimes sees tired teachers who have to purchase supporting visuals and teaching crafts from their own billfold since the congregation’s billfold is not deep enough to spring for the “extras.” But the world does not have the vision that is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Believers can look at Sunday School and see great things being done by the Lord. “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Co 4:18)

Yet do we? Time for some searching questions for each person present. How do I personally view the role of Sunday School in my congregation, in my life? Do we do Sunday School just because we’ve always had Sunday School? Do we send our children to Sunday School because we want them to have the same memories and traditions we grew up with? After

all, it just isn't Christmas Eve without the children's service! Do we consider Sunday School a last ditch effort for those children whose parents decide on the negative side of LES enrollment? Do we think that the way we've always done it is good enough? Does our congregation ever allot quality time on the council agenda to consider issues of teaching training, student retention, Biblical materials, and so forth? Do we think a quick announcement in the Sunday bulletin and the August newsletter is all that is needed to tap a few more bodies to teach come September? Do we consider Sunday School as an integral part of a unified plan for Bible study for adults and children? Do we think Sunday School is a way of babysitting two and three year olds so that parents can go to Bible class? Do we find an inordinate percentage of Sunday School enrollment in the lower grades, with few if any students in the junior high level? Are parents incorporated into our Sunday School efforts, or viewed as a taxi service at best? Is it worth the effort? Is Sunday School still important?

Sunday School teachers need to joyfully remember the awesome power of the message they share. We do not just tell stories to children, nor relate dry history. We don't just teach catchy camp songs and train little fingers to color within the lines of pictures. We don't try to produce elaborate pageants to showcase children before proud parents. Sunday School teachers are firmly convinced that we are mouthpieces for the living Lord God, who speaks to children and to us through the Bible lessons we share. We see the critical importance of Sunday School in the powerful subject that serves not only as the core of the curriculum, but the entire curriculum. We dare never forget that it is an act of profound grace that the omnipotent God has deigned to reveal himself and his plans to sinful humans. God does not leave us in ignorance about himself, about ourselves, about our problems, about his solution. Through Scripture God does speak to us and to the children we serve. Through Scripture the God of all creation pulls back the curtain and allows sinful humans a glimpse of his essence and knowledge of his will. To his Old Testament prophet the Lord commanded, "This is what the *Lord*, the God of Israel says: 'Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you.'" (Jer 30:2) The Bible is the written revelation of the eternal Lord. God does speak to us. We worship a Lord God who communicates, and his communication is always Truth. "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (Jn 17:17) It centers in the Truth. "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." (Jn 5:39) Thus spoke Jesus, who claimed to be "the Truth" (Jn 14:6). Beware the modern gnosticism in America that portrays some vague and unresponsive force or essence in the universe. How many souls are searching in vain for some message within self to gain insight and wisdom? God must intervene or we all would die in our delusions. God does intervene every time the Scripture is opened and proclaimed. God does speak. Clearly and forcefully he speaks through an inspired message we call the Bible.

This living Word of the living Lord cleaves human hearts. The law of God, the message of his holiness and the demands he has established in accord with that holiness, leaves human hearts in a terrible condition. "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb 4:12) Through the law the Holy Spirit peels back my soul and leaves the ugliness of sin exposed, not for God to see but for me to see. The law convicts and condemns, and pronounces the "cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law..." (Dt 27:26) Sunday School teachers proclaim this law, and little children need to hear it. Children, as well as adults, need to understand that sin is not a plaything but a poison that damns. Children, as well as adults, need to grasp the great need every human has for a Savior. Children, as well as adults, need to understand that God loves them not because they are lovable,



but because God is love, and sent his Son Jesus as the ultimate expression of that love. Children, as well as adults, need to understand law before they can begin to comprehend the depths of pure grace as being something undeserved.

There is power in the law message, power to condemn and convict, power to crush souls and leave a human despairing and despondent. There is power to turn a soul angry at a God who demands something we could never achieve. The law message is an awesome and frightening message to handle. No teacher should ever carelessly or thoughtlessly use it, for the law will never create faith. The law creates fear and frustration. The law kills. (2 Co 3:6: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”) How careful we need to be in using the law message. It needs to be taught, otherwise our children we never seek the Savior. It needs to be taught in America, in a society that knows neither sin nor any accountability to a Creator. Yet it dare never predominate in the lesson or drown out the glory of the Gospel, for only the Gospel saves.

The Word, then, is also the power to bring healing to the crushed soul, hope to the despondent heart. The Word creates faith in the place of fear and contentment in place of frustration. The Word creates new life where once only death existed. How? “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.” (Mk 9:2, KJV) The Gospel is the Good News that God takes matters into his own hand and sends his Son as Savior of all. “This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1Jn 4:10) For the Sunday School teacher, nothing is more important than the proclamation of the Gospel of the Savior Jesus Christ. What joy there is in handling the Gospel. Children, as well as adults, need to hear that they are loved no matter what. Children, as well as adults, need to hear that God calls them his own, thanks to Jesus Christ. Children, as well as adults, need to hear that God has prepared a place for them in heaven, and the door is wide open through the blood of Christ. Children, as well as adults, need to hear the promises of protection and providence from a gracious Father. What a glorious joy to be a teacher in a Sunday School. No one could pay you enough money for the happy privilege of telling souls the comforting news that all is right with God through Christ. Is Sunday School important?

Sunday School is critically important, eternally important, but only in direct relation to the amount of contact there is with the Word of God. The Word, and only the Word, works. You can recite the passage as well as I. “So is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.” (Is 55:11-12) When the Word of the living Lord God is taught and explained, the Holy Spirit is unleashed to do marvelous things. There is power in those 50 minutes between services, power from God himself through the spoken word. “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation...” (Ro 1:16)

### **The Lord Sees Special Students Attending this School**

How many are enrolled at your school? Ask any teacher in an elementary or junior high school and you will get a body count. Ask a Sunday School teacher or a pastor, and you will have talk about the number of souls. Enrollment statistics dare never cover up the uniqueness of our Christian confession about the preciousness of each and every child as an immortal soul. Sunday School provides a wonderful opportunity to practice as well as preach the comfort of the First Article. Small children, teens and adults, all need to hear that “God made me...giving me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my abilities.” Students in Sunday School are not under the pressure to conform to academic standards of grades and tests. They are not in competitive

situations in which they have to try to match another's ability or understanding. Nor will they be measured to see if they earned the right to play in the game on Friday night.

Sunday School teachers are in a unique position to convey through words and actions the preciousness of every human soul in their class. Students are special to the teacher because each is special to the Lord God, "who wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Ti 2:4) Teachers look past the rambunctious child and see a child who seeks attention not given at home. Teachers look past the disobedient child and see a soul struggling with temptation, not just somewhat wishing to disrupt the class. Sometimes a child has to watch turmoil between mom and dad, and the heartache at home displays itself in class through silent withdrawal or loud interruptions. The teacher recognizes that each and every student is an immortal soul that someday will face the Creator. What a precious opportunity to be used by God to reach a soul with the Good News of unconditional love and acceptance. Each Sunday School class is important because of the time God allows us to bring the Word to a person. Who knows if we will have another opportunity before the Lord's return, or before a child is prematurely struck down in this violent and wicked world? "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (2 Co 6:2). What is important is reaching an immortal soul with the love of Jesus the Savior. To that end Bible lessons are taught and Bible passages memorized. Worksheets are completed and coloring projects finished. Each and every hands-on activity in Sunday School needs to be Gospel centered and conveying the message of Christ Jesus. We encourage children to "do the work" not because we hang the threat of grades or quizzes or expulsion in front of them. We encourage them to get into the Word because there and only there will they ever learn about the love of Christ. Only in the Word will students learn to see just how valuable they are in the sight of God, so precious that he invested the blood of the Lamb for each and every one of them.

Only in the Word will students also see and appreciate the Scriptural truth that God gifts people in many different ways. "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." (Ro 12:5-6) Variety of talents and abilities is another outpouring of a gracious God who is gifting his Church with all the manifold talents needed to witness Christ to the world. Students then learn praise not pride. A classmate's obvious talents in one area elicits not jealousy, but joy. In Sunday School the foundation is laid for students to begin to see and live the wonderful unity of the body of Christ and rejoice in the marvelous diversity of gifts and talents that the Lord bestows. This is an important foundation in training souls to serve. It is also an important foundation in learning to accept my self according to the way a good and wise, gracious and loving Creator made me. Children need help coping with issues of identity and self-worth. Don't turn them inside to search for inner worth. Point them to the Creator, and to the Crucified One, and to the Comforter. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Ro 8:31-32)

### **The Lord Sees Supernatural Teaching Carried on in this School**

Not many teachers view themselves as effective conveyers of truth, especially the divine truth of the Word of God. Who of us feels adequate to teach a child about the Trinity? About the Incarnation? About the Sacraments working faith? Who of us feels competent to explain to a child the dual nature of Jesus Christ? The indwelling of the Spirit? The Real Presence in the Holy Supper? Who of us hasn't winced when that kindergarten student asks "Where did God come from?" Which teacher doesn't squirm when the child innocently inquires, "how long is

forever?” How often don’t we shake our heads and wonder what to say? How many Sundays don’t we go home after church and Sunday School and review the teaching period with a sense of failure? The students were loud; we ran out of time; I couldn’t answer questions well enough. We honestly question if we got through at all. How many times do we think it’s time to resign and let someone else “have the joy of serving” for a while? How many times do we question our abilities and honestly feel like the kingdom is not advancing in my little corner?

Beware Satan’s attacks. They are vicious distortions of the truth. Bringing a child to faith is not my job, nor is it yours. Explaining the mysteries of the saving doctrine is beyond any human’s ability. God does not ask us to convert a soul. Nor does God ask us to explain everything to a child so that reason can understand it all so logically. Faith is not mere understanding. If we equate the two, what are we saying about our baptized infants and about our Alzheimer shut-in? Watch out for the reformed error on conversion that equates a reasoned decision on my part with Christ being accepted in faith.

Scripture is not always “reasonable” to my mind. All God asks a teacher to be is a mouthpiece of the Word through which the Spirit works. God does indeed see supernatural teaching going on in this school, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit through you, not because of you. Let’s always give credit where credit is due. Only the Holy Spirit can create saving faith, for “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Co 12:3) The Holy Spirit uses the Gospel in Word and Sacrament as his tool or instrument in regeneration. Jesus says, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life.” (Jo 6:63) Paul says, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Co 2:12-14) Finally, we trust Scripture’s promise that God uses weak humans as mere instruments through which the Spirit works in the Gospel taught and proclaimed. It becomes evident to all, then, that the power indeed rests with the Word and the gracious work of the Spirit, not in any human ability. With Paul, Sunday School teachers joyfully (and with a sigh of relief) confess, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Co 4:7)

Is Sunday School important? It is a place where God’s on-going work of conversion and sanctification can take place, but only in direct relation to the message of Jesus Christ. In the Large Catechism Luther writes, “For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit, creating, calling, and gathering the Christian church, outside of which no one can come to the Lord Christ.” (p. 74 in the Janzow translation) Remember, the work is not ours but the Lord’s. Is Sunday School important? Again we hear from the Large Catechism: “For the creation lies in the past, and the redemption has been accomplished also, but the Holy Spirit is at work without intermission until the last day. It is for the unbroken continuation of this ongoing work that He has established His community on earth; through it He speaks all His Word and does all his Work. For He has not yet finished gathering all His Christian people or dispensing the forgiveness of sins. We therefore put our trust in Him...” (p. 76 in Janzow)

So what role can human tools be in the teaching process? Pray! Pray for your students. Pray for the Spirit’s grace to rightly present the saving truth of the Scripture lesson before you. Pray that Spirit works on hearts during that lesson presentation, starting with your own. Pray that your lives model your teaching. One author, Roy Zuck, fully recognizes the divine and human

process that God uses in Christian education. He encourages teachers to joyfully consider several responsibilities. First, learn how God has created the human mind to learn and comprehend, but rely on God to work. Secondly, depend on the Spirit to guide and empower your teaching. Thirdly, use and develop your spiritual gifts. Also, be concerned for your students. Motivate your students through genuine love and concern for their souls. Model exemplary Christian lives.

Sunday School teachers are in a position that no other human occupies. Cherish it. You are a tool of God the Holy Spirit every time you open the letter of God's love we call the Gospel. You are an adult role model of the Christian hope and faith to small eyes and ears. Sunday School can be a tremendous disciple factory. Unlike ordinary schools with tight structure and graded objectives, Sunday School provides an informal and flexible interaction between Christian adult and Christian child. Yet Sunday School still provides a structured review of God's saving history through a planned curriculum. Children might also be willing to open up to an adult they have come to trust and respect, even in some instances more readily than they would with their own mom or dad. Cherish what God can accomplish, for it leads us to the conclusion of this presentation. Is Sunday School important?

### **The Lord Sees an Eternal Goal Achieved in This School**

“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels...” (Ma 16:26-27a) Is Sunday School important? God does not consider annual reports or budget overruns on the Day of reckoning. Rather, there will be the final and eternal separation when Judge Jesus will warmly welcome those on his right, “Come, inherit.” To those on his left, he will decree, “Depart from me, you cursed.” The basis of this separation is clear and comes as no surprise to any Bible reader. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mk 16:16) The time is short, and the days are evil. Is Sunday School important? Might not a gracious Lord who has come to seek and to save the lost also use this opportunity to reach a young soul with the saving Gospel? Can we do Sunday School better? Of course, for this side of heaven we sinners still stumble and bungle. Yet look what God can do in spite of our best efforts! God is at work through his Word, and when the Word is used in Sunday School our God is at work. Is Sunday School important? Even if the 1,166 Sunday Schools in our WELS spent all those hours in teaching and training; even if those 1,166 WELS congregations spent all those dollars to run all those Sunday Schools; even if 5,780 Sunday School teachers spent all that time preparing to teach every weekend; and only *one soul* was saved—is it worth it?

Impact questions:

1. A congregation operates both a Sunday School and a LES. What are the reasons and benefits for encouraging students of the LES to attend the Sunday School? What are the considerations sometimes used to discourage attendance by the LES? Where do you side?
2. Evaluate this statement: Since the Holy Spirit is the one active in teaching through the Word, we shouldn't worry about recruiting qualified teachers.
3. Look critically at every aspect of your Sunday School. Does everything said and done tie directly into the holy Word of God? If not, why not? How might the purpose of Sunday School then be diluted?
4. Your congregation decides to begin monthly teacher training meetings. These meetings are not to study and review upcoming lessons. Rather, they are meetings designed to help

teachers develop their gifts to serve in this Gospel ministry. Write up a list of topics/subjects you would like to see studied the first year.

## References

As a keynote presentation, I wrote this paper with an oral presentation in mind. Consequently, I did not include footnotes or APA reference guides to sources used or cited. Resources used in this paper are listed below following APA format.

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