

A Reaction to Mark Braun’s “What Our Father Taught Us about Lutheran Schools”

Thank you Dr. Braun for your thorough overview of the attitudes and convictions of our Lutheran fathers toward Lutheran elementary school education. I appreciated your research and the documentation of your sources very much. Your research has demonstrated an historic continuity in stressing the importance of Lutheran schools and has also revealed some shifts in attitudes, expressions, and practices in our circles. Please allow me to make some random observations and ask a few questions to direct our discussion.

Braun begins by looking at passages in Scripture that our fathers saw as encouraging Christian education. He rightly notes that these passages place the primary emphasis for the education of children on their parents. It should not surprise us that studies have shown that parental influence is supreme in the life of a child. If what is taught at school is undermined or contradicted at home, the home generally wins out.

God commands us to train our children, but he gives us freedom in determining the best ways to do this. The Jews, no doubt inspired by many of the same Old Testament passages cited in this essay, developed elementary schools in connection with the synagogue to assist parents in the religious education of the young. It is worth noting that the synagogue schools confined themselves to religious education and did not teach what we would call secular subjects or courses intended to prepare children for a trade or occupation.¹

Education is essential to Christianity by the very nature of God’s revelation to us. His truth comes to us in a book, the Bible. Because teaching God’s truth is essential to Christianity, Luther and his colleagues were in the forefront of educational endeavors throughout the Reformation.

Braun rightly points out that one must always be careful about picking and choosing quotations from Luther. One must read broadly in the great Reformer. Yet an overview of the Reformation reveals the centrality of education. Humanly speaking there would not have been a Reformation as we know it without the University of Wittenberg. Because of his efforts in improving the educational system in German, Luther’s colleague, Philip Melancthon, has been called the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, the teacher of Germany. Luther’s Reformation was a *doctrinal* Reformation requiring education. Luther wrote to instruct and to oppose false teaching.

Luther’s concern for the education of the young in the truths of the Bible and in “secular” subjects is well-documented. Luther set the stage for a Lutheran emphasis on the liberal arts, including the study of pagan authors, an emphasis which can still be seen in our circles today.

Lutherans coming to America in the 19th century made the education of children a priority as Braun demonstrates. Our Lutheran fathers in the Synodical Conference saw Lutheran elementary schools as an essential component in their ministry, providing perhaps the best way of giving youth the Christian education that the Bible encourages.

Concern with Christian education led some of our Synodical Conference fathers to speak in the strongest of terms, suggesting “aggressive—even legalistic—methods designed to move churches that did not have schools to open them” (p. 12). Congregations could also become legalistic in their zeal for their schools. One instance of such legalism that comes to my mind is the Cincinnati case in the late 19th century when a father was excommunicated by his Missouri

¹ See Armin Panning, *Life in the New Testament World: Understanding Professions, Practices and Politics*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011) 41-43.

Synod congregation in part for sending his son to a public school so that he could have better instruction in English. To the Missouri Synod's credit the pastors and congregation were dealt with decisively for improper church discipline. Nevertheless there were those in the Wisconsin Synod who were quite sympathetic with the actions of the congregation and thought that Wisconsin ought to accept the congregation and its pastors into membership when they were suspended by our sister synod. One of the lessons of church history is that we must watch out for legalism when zeal for what in itself is good becomes overblown. The desire for what is good can become destructive when it degenerates into a hyper-Lutheranism.

Braun points out that our fathers stressed the importance of Lutheran schools because of the daily religious training aimed at the salvation of immortal souls and Christian living. The regular proclamation of the gospel, the instruction in Christian doctrine, the development of a Christian mindset when every course is taught in the light of God's Word, and the training in Christian living are incomparable blessings. Our fathers also deplored the apparent lack of appreciation of Lutheran elementary schools in the congregations of our synod. In 1936 an author was concerned that fewer than half of our congregations had parochial schools and that half of the children in those congregations that had schools actually attended them. Although the percentage of children attending an LES in a congregation that operates one has grown, today the percentage of our congregations that have an LES has dropped to approximately 26 per cent. This symposium is evidence that we have concerns about the current state of our Lutheran schools and their future.

That 1936 article stated that "we must first of all become convinced of the intrinsic value of Lutheran Christian day schools ourselves" (p. 16). His words are still applicable. When we are convinced of the value of something, we will more likely be willing to bear the cost.

Stressing the blessings of Christian education is the proper way to promote and encourage Christian education. Yet our fathers often tried to promote Lutheran elementary schools by criticizing the public schools.

Braun observes that in recent decades we have toned down our criticisms of the public system. He writes, "We do not generally hear such overt attacks on public schools today. If anything, we are more likely to hear statements of concern, even sympathy for public schools, who must deal with unruly students, disinterested parents and self-interested educational unions" (p. 19). There may be a number of reasons for this shift. Many WELS members serve admirably as public school teachers. Some of our WELS pastors and teachers have received all of their primary and secondary education in the public system. Many of our faithful WELS members received their education in the public system without apparent harm.

Although we have appropriately backed off on the way we speak about public schools, I hope that we have not backed off from the concern for the spiritual welfare of our children that lay behind the criticisms our fathers offered. When it works well the public system provides solid academic training and promotes the civic righteousness that makes an orderly society possible. However, Christian parents can never be satisfied with the promotion of civic righteousness in their children. Their goal is Christian sanctification which public schools cannot encourage. Academic subjects taught from a humanistic point of view reinforce the natural inclinations that lie in the sinful nature of every human being. Evolution taught as fact rather than a theory to be tested can be quite compelling to young minds.

Anecdotally, my wife, who received all of her education in the public system, once wrote an essay on the novel *Lord of the Flies* for her English instructor. She noted in her essay that the novel served as a good illustration of original sin. Her instructor ridiculed such a belief.

Fortunately she was backed by strong Christian parents. Her father met with the teacher and reminded him rather strongly that he had no right to ridicule the religious beliefs of his students. We can never shield our children from every attack on their faith. Christians have to learn to engage their culture. But how many are lost because they did not yet have an adequate base or understanding of Christian truth to withstand the onslaughts of the world?

I wonder whether some of the criticisms of the public schools were based on the recognition that patriotism and Americanism often degenerate into America civil religion.² Americanism should not be confused with Christianity and, in fact, is often opposed to it. Perhaps Dr. Braun could comment.

Some here today may be surprised that our fathers could be critical of Sunday school. Today we take Sunday school for granted. In the mission congregation I served Sunday school was essential to prepare students for confirmation instruction. Many here today will testify that when a congregation has an LES, a well-run Sunday school can serve as a complement in the instruction of children. Our fathers may have overstated their case, but the truth remains that a Sunday school that offers one hour a week of religious instruction cannot do the job that an LES does with 3-5 hours of religious instruction a week besides daily devotions.

Whether a congregation has only a Sunday school or both a Sunday school and an LES, a pastor and his board of education must pay attention to the Sunday school. Sunday school teachers need training, particularly in the proper distinction between law and gospel. Moralizing in a Sunday school classroom is inimical to the proper instruction of the young.

Our fathers taught us that Lutheran school teachers are called public ministers of the Word. Braun recounts the development of a proper understanding of the doctrine of the ministry in our midst (p. 25-29). A proper understanding of the ministry and the divine call will lead pastors, parents, and congregations to honor teachers for the sake of their office and honor the office in the way they treat teachers. Lutheran school teachers are not hired hands; they are ministers of the gospel. Each generation has to examine its attitudes and practices lest we play fast and loose with the divine call. Has a hiring and firing mentality in regard to teachers begun to raise its head in our circles?

Historically our Synodical Conference fathers insisted that congregations should bear the cost of parochial schools without looking to the government for aid. They feared that the government might exercise improper influence or control of our schools if we would look for direct financial support from the state. A shift in the way we speak as a synod came in the 1967 synod convention when delegates recognized by resolution that church and state had overlapping concerns in regard to education. Consequently the government might find it in the best interests of its citizens to offer aid to parochial schools. Braun points out that the 1967 convention also offered some warnings and guidelines. "Accepting and making use of government aid for parochial schools 'may in itself not be unscriptural,' but the church must still consider the effect of such aid on its schools, such as compromising the school's Christian identity, creating dependency on government aid, undermining Christian stewardship, or bringing with it 'undesirable government control'" (p.31).

² Civil religion is a way of thinking that makes sacred a political arrangement or governmental system and provides a religious image of a political society. It is the general faith of a state or nation that focuses on widely held beliefs about the history and destiny of the nation. It is a religious way of thinking about politics which provides a society with ultimate meaning. America's civil religion was undergirded by both the dominant evangelical Christianity and Enlightenment thought. See *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 281-283.

To date the fears of improper government interference with our schools have not come to pass. A change in the political climate, an adverse judicial ruling, or an overzealous bureaucrat could change that in the future.

Lutheran elementary schools are expensive. The cost of education generally rises faster than the rate of inflation because the rate of inflation is based in part on increases in productivity in the workplace. Schools don't generally experience productivity gains. Funding will therefore continue to be a challenge. At one time government aid other than allowing LES students to use the public bus system or providing surplus food at little cost to hot lunch programs was unheard of. At one time it was rare for a congregation to charge members tuition. Today a majority of our schools do. Has this shift in practice been driven mainly by financial expediency or are we also thinking through the stewardship implications in accepting government aid and charging tuition of our members? Are we still listening to the cautions issued by the 1967 convention?

Braun's last section on Lutheran schools and outreach is noteworthy. I found it enlightening that early records show that children of non-members often exceeded the number of Lutheran students in Missouri Synod schools resulting in large numbers of parents and children gained for Lutheranism. A couple of generations ago we tended to think primarily of the benefit of our schools for our own children. Today we are much more accustomed to look at our Lutheran elementary schools as part of a congregation's outreach program than our fathers were. Yet it should be noted that the nature of a Lutheran elementary school changes to a certain extent as the proportion of non-Lutheran to Lutheran students increases. Have we thought through the implications both for our own children and the ones we hope to reach with the gospel? Are we serious about using our schools for outreach or are we driven more by the income that can be generated by admitting non-member children as tuition students?

Historical studies give us perspective and can help us think through the challenges of the present. We can learn important lessons, both positive and negative, from what was said and done in the past. We must always ask ourselves why our fathers did what they did. Learning from the past can help us formulate the questions we need to ask today. Otherwise expediency may lead to us to do what is permissible without thinking about whether it is wise.

Dr. Braun's historical overview gives us much information to help us formulate those questions and guide our discussions on the important subject of Lutheran elementary education.

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