

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
2011 Symposium

Reaction to President Mark Zarling's Essay
Christian Education: A Matter of Life or Death

REFRAME THE QUESTIONS

You have accomplished something simple but incredibly profound. You have reminded us why Lutheran schools are such a blessing.

And I think you succeeded so ably at this because you properly reframed the question. In a similar but slightly different vein, one might ask, for example, "Can you say that the only way to be a true Christian is to join regularly with other Christians, so that you can worship together often?" Surely we would grant Christianity to a converted inmate in solitary confinement. But would not even—and maybe especially—such an inmate appreciate and long for the treasure of Christian fellowship? The question is not, "Could such a scenario exist?" Rather, the question is, "With all things being equal, would we prefer that such a situation exist?"

While we would never say that the only way to be a Christian parent is to send your children to a Lutheran elementary school, yet after hearing Mark's paper, one feels so much better prepared to help all Christian parents appreciate just what God offers them via a Bible-centered educational walk. Such Spirit-filled persuasion pulls powerfully at the heart. Perhaps too often we flee to the refuge of Christian freedom regarding the education of our children, overlooking the fact that while the decision of whether to send our children to a Lutheran grade school certainly includes elements of freedom, we risk employing freedom in spiritually risky fashion if we are not fully aware of the purpose, value, and benefits of such an educational approach. We have been re-equipped for such personal reflection and for conversations with and presentations to others. For that we thank you.

You also highlighted, and then reframed, the question regarding nurture and outreach. If lung function were under discussion, we'd puzzle at a debate over the relative value of inhaling and exhaling. You moved us quickly past the unproductive question and positioned us both to embrace the opportunities and to address the challenges that come when aggressively pursuing the Great Commission.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Aim not first to save the institution, but to serve Jesus
- Understand the real enemies
- Mission of the school = mission of the church
- Christian education = Great Commission
- Objective truth rather than simply secular knowledge
- The world is very different from us
- Students learn lifetime lessons
- Make disciples
- Build up parents
- Apologetics—prepare students to defend the truth
- Serve the community
- Market, but not in a way that changes your Lutheran identity
- The Lutheran school is a great tool for penetrating and ministering to a community
- The heart of Lutheran education is properly viewed as a matter of life and death

Step back and see the whole paper not in intricate detail, but in broad strokes. There is a clear theme. The philosophy of the world remains opposed to Jesus. We have the greatest treasure in Jesus. Lutheran elementary schools serve as a light in our world when they eagerly proclaim Jesus. Looking at it that way, there's no question that Lutheran elementary schools can serve God's purpose. That's the point.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Mark helpfully broaches territory that benefits from careful consideration, occasions where brothers see openings to present Christian education to a broader audience and in a new fashion. No doubt there is eagerness to take full advantage of every opportunity, even as there is a desire to measure and then position such pursuits so that the Lord is honored in all respects. Such issues need to be contemplated with care, with penetrating and guiding Spirit-wrought principles front and center.

THE BLESSING OF CHILDREN

Mark cites, in eye-opening fashion, the impact of birth rate on enrollment. His comments call to mind the many Scripture verses highlighting children as blessings, and his discussion of the issue leads us to ask, “Are we being influenced by the spirit of the times more than we realize?” One thinks not simply on the immediate impact it can have on enrollment numbers. Were that the focus, we’d fall into the trap of viewing Lutheran elementary schools as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. So, one thinks not simply on enrollment numbers, but on numbers of gospel tellers. Every godly offspring given to Christian parents is also one more soul ready to carry a cross and confess. The Lord gives moms and dads the privilege of raising up not simply Christians—as if Christians were ever *simply* that—but missionaries, more voices to witness to earth’s ends. How easily we can lose focus. How sharply, when Spirit truths are brought to our eyes, can focus return.

FOCUS

And perhaps that would serve as a final thought. Mark, I think you have done us and our synod a service, the service of bringing things into focus. If the other listeners were as I, I wasn’t reading your words and saying, “I’ve never heard anything like that before.” Yes, there were surely many new and insightful observations, but that wasn’t the general effect. Rather, in reading your words, I had a rush of clarity. Sometimes it can feel hard to know what to say to parents who perhaps are not yet understanding precisely what Christian education offers. Sometimes one is even hesitant to engage the issue, thinking that inevitably we will step inappropriately on the toes of Christian freedom. Because of the clarity your words bring, I think we’re all better equipped to have such a conversation, as your words ring with gospel allure rather than legal compulsion. They ring not with frustration, but with humble and heart-felt passion to bring Jesus to more. They ring not of uncertainty combined with fear, but of clarity combined with humble confidence.

You’ve reminded us of what we have and what we have to offer. With God’s blessing, let’s strengthen our hold and proceed with purpose. Then we will know, whatever the future of our Lutheran elementary school institution, that we have identified the real issues and moved forward with Spirit-consistent solutions. For us, to do this is peace enough. Surely we also pray that contemporaneous with and through such action, the Lord would graciously preserve and blossom the blessing of Lutheran elementary schools for children now and yet to come.

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