

Shepherding the Sunday School

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Almost three decades ago one author confidently proclaimed that the seventies could be the decade of the Sunday school (Nederhood, 1972). This prognosticator listed several reasons for his forecast. One of the "jet stream" forces he felt would impact Sunday school attendance was the growing availability of leisure time enabling people to get involved in church activities. Another "barometer" to indicate sunny days ahead for the Sunday school was the growing desire among people of all ages for meaningful Bible education. How did this forecaster fare? I doubt that we would trust the weather reports to him. A brief look at indicators of Sunday school activity in America would indicate stormy times, rather than clear sailing, are the spiritual weather pattern. A WELS pastor need only look to the inside front cover of the latest *Lutheran Leader* magazine (Winter, 1998) to see the dramatic "low pressure system" afflicting the Sunday schools in our church body. In the last three decades enrollment in WELS Sunday schools dropped by about 30%. Within the LCMS the last five years saw a drop in Sunday school enrollment of 50,000 students from the 1990 total of 597,318. (Statistics from the Department of Child Ministry, LCMS Board for Congregational Services.) Is this enrollment decline simply a matter of dropping demographics? I think not. The Sunday school needs our prayerful attention.

It has always been thus and it will always remain so until the glorious return of our Lord Jesus. Working this side of heaven, human efforts at sharing and teaching the gospel are always imperfect. Thanks be to God for the power of the gospel, which is "the power of God unto salvation" (Ro 1:16). Yet we dare never allow a confidence in the efficacy of Scripture to lull us into lazy and lackluster efforts in proclaiming that saving Word. Rather, to the glory of Christ and for the salvation of souls we strive to preach and teach that Word to the best of our abilities, with the prayer that the Spirit will bless our feeble efforts and allow the strength of the Lord to shine through our weakness. A faithful pastor and concerned congregation will always be on the alert for ways to improve the human element of the Sunday school proclamation.

Are we as a church body spending time in prayerful analysis of our Sunday school efforts? Consider a diagnosis of the weaknesses of Sunday school that one Lutheran author enumerated almost four decades ago, and see whether the diagnosis still rings true today. Arnold Mueller, then editor of Sunday school materials for the LCMS, identified the following six areas of weakness. First, there is a failure to enlist a sufficient number of the talented members within the congregation for participation in this vital task of teaching the Word. Second, Mueller lists a lack of interest in teacher preparation. Third, there is a lack of in-service training for Sunday school teachers. Fourth, there is a woeful neglect of ongoing evaluation of the teaching ministry of the Sunday school. Fifth, there is the irregular church attendance of students and of the parents of those students. We allow students to come to Sunday school yet not stay for the worship service of the parish. Finally, there is a weak program of evangelism emphasis in and through the Sunday school (Mueller, as quoted in Haendschke, 1963). Do any of those problems face you, dear brother? We take slight comfort in realizing the repetitive nature of the follies of the sinful flesh. Yet we do realize that others before us have struggled and prayed and laid before the throne of the Lamb similar problems and concerns. As the Teacher says, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ec 1:9). Shepherds, it is our turn to wield our staffs.

Indeed, it does not take much of a discerning eye to see storms battering the Sunday schools in our midst and in our time. Teacher morale and student excitement can be affected when classes are held in dim, makeshift rooms. Parents sometimes feel that being a taxicab driver is the extent of their necessary involvement. Church boards responsible for education in the parish often gloss over Sunday school issues, content if there is a full roster of warm bodies listed on the teaching staff. Issues of teacher training, curriculum, visuals and pictures are often left in the hands and pocketbooks of individual teachers. Even where congregations have functioning

Sunday school staffs, sometimes the climate is described as cloudy and gloomy rather than basking in the sunshine of the Son. Frustrations over poor attendance, lack of parental participation, noisy basements, and discipline dilemmas foster fatigue and a sense of failure. If asked point blank, I wonder how many congregational leaders would point to their Sunday school as the most effective and consistent agency for evangelism in their parishes.

We need some "Son shine" to cheer us and enlighten our Sunday schools with the warmth of his love and growing power of his gospel light. In our synod there is currently a renewed emphasis on examining the purpose of our Sunday schools and remembering the joys and miracles that Christ Jesus can accomplish even in the crowded church kitchen that doubles as a Sunday school room. This practical article will briefly look at the pastor's role in the Sunday school ministry of the local parish. This underlying question begs a positive response: "Can a pastor's participation make a difference?" But before you read on, dear brother, I wish to convey a brother's heart to you. I know full well the immediate guilt trip that can plague a parish pastor when confronted with questions that ask about the health and welfare of his congregation. I submit this article in the spirit of another brother who sympathetically commented on this guilt-trip trend over a quarter of a century ago: "The minister is the object of everybody's education program. Too often he hears about what he is not doing. His sins of omission, it seems, are legion" (Prange, 1970). I do not seek to propose a quick fix or a long pastoral to-do list. Neither is needed. Rather, I hope to remind all of us that the shepherd of the congregation is in a wonderful position to impact the Sunday school of his congregation without additional burdens on his time or duties. How can I be bold to make such a claim? Remember what a pastor is, and consider the shepherd's role in relationship to the Sunday school. Shepherding the Sunday school involves several common sense reminders. The shepherd sees clearly where to lead the Sunday school. The shepherd is clearly seen by the Sunday school. The shepherd keeps constant watch over the Sunday school. And the shepherd speaks lovingly to the Sunday school.

The Shepherd Sees Clearly

Premise: The pastor sees clearly the Great Commission goals of the Sunday school and is convinced that the Sunday school is blessed by the Holy Spirit only in direct relation to its use of the Means of Grace. He constantly shares thus vision with his people.

Centuries ago a gracious God made a remarkable promise to a people who didn't deserve to hear it: "Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding" (Je 3:15). The Old Testament history of God's chosen people did not reflect an obedient flock eager to follow God's chosen shepherds, the prophets. The people eagerly followed false and deceitful shepherds who were leading them away from the Lord. If a shepherd is confused and misdirected, where does the flock end up? The first item of prayer for the pastor today is asking the Lord to give him that "heart of God" so that as a shepherd he can lead with the knowledge and understanding that comes only from the Spirit. By God's grace the faithful shepherd seeks to see things as God sees them. Such sharp, spiritual vision is the prerequisite for knowing where to go and how to lead.

The shepherd sees clearly what God sees when he looks at the Sunday school. God does not see a divine institution that needs to be revitalized. Indeed, God gives no command for a Sunday school structure in Scripture. The issue in this discussion is souls. God sees souls, valuable and priceless souls. Jesus once said, "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?" (Mt 16:26). One soul in Sunday school is worth more than a globe of gold. Picture that valuable soul next time the council spends an inordinate amount of time examining bids for roof repair rather than examining attendance records of the children. Poring over budgets rather than pouring out prayers for the lambs of the flock reflects a clouded vision on the part of congregational leadership. The shepherd sees clearly

what is truly important and is called by God to sharpen the vision of his people. Sunday school is important not because we've always done it that way, but because souls come into contact with the Word of God. Is there a better way to make better contact between souls and Scripture? That question means the shepherd is seeing clearly this first priority of the Sunday school.

The shepherd sees clearly that each and every soul, starting with his own, is a soul that needs to be peeled back by the law of God to expose the utter sinfulness of the old Adam and the desperate need for rescue. The shepherd then understands that Sunday school in a Lutheran parish exists to help children clearly see themselves as God sees them. They are precious souls indeed, but souls born dead in sin with a need for rescue just as desperate as his own need. The shepherd sees clearly that teachers need to be trained to teach the unpleasant but critically important law of God to the children in their care. In an age when some parents do not rebuke and discipline, many children have an unconscious belief that they are so cute they deserve to be loved no matter what they do. Only through Scripture clearly taught can the Spirit open the eyes of these children to see that they are loved not because they are lovable, but because "God is love" (1 Jn 4:16). Only through God's law will souls be brought to contrition and confession. Only when that small soul hurts from the law's rebuke will the Spirit make it ready to listen *eagerly* to the wondrous news of healing in Jesus. And the shepherd sees clearly how vital the role of Sunday school is in presenting that good news of Jesus to children. For some children, it is the first place they hear the good news, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." For other children it is a powerful reinforcement of that gospel message they hear at home. For teachers it is the joy and thrill of sharing the gospel of a forgiving Lord that invigorates and inspires their teaching week after week.

Thus, the shepherd sees clearly that the only effective staff for leading and guiding the flock of God is the staff God provides. Scripture, and Scripture alone, is the staff the Spirit uses to correct and rebuke, to protect and comfort. God sees souls that need to be taught his holy Word, a message that proclaims law and gospel, sin and grace. If the shepherd is convinced, truly convinced, that "faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17), then the shepherd will do all he can to insure that everything connected with Sunday school is connected with the saving Word. He strives to open the eyes of teachers and others to see that connection clearly. Crafts are purchased not because there is a sale on supplies, but because the craft chosen visually reflects the Scripture lesson. Its function is a gospel reminder of the love of Jesus, not just an exercise in hand-eye coordination. Coloring books are not training manuals for improved art skills. Coloring in the lower classes is done with pictures that represent Bible history lessons. Gospel proclamation is still at the heart of the activity. The pastor sees clearly that children do not participate in some Christmas pageant where they take center stage to model the Christmas outfit so carefully sewn or purchased. Rather, the pastor understands that "from the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (Ps 8:2). The Holy Spirit can powerfully use the gospel recitations of small children to melt a dad's cynical heart. The pastor sees clearly that the children's Christmas Eve service centers in the Christ Child, and not in "my child." The pastor understands that Sunday school children singing God's praises in worship are not performing but proclaiming.

Any time the Word is proclaimed God is at work, for the "word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:11). Standing on this sure promise of God, the shepherd sees clearly the tremendous possibilities which God places before the Sunday school. Perhaps more than in any other structured congregational program, the outreach and nurture goals of the Great Commission blend together in an active Sunday school. Sunday school classes are unique. Less formal than the academic setting of a school building, Sunday school allows young children to learn about Jesus from Christian adults who are not interested in grading them or in measuring mental proficiency. These teachers are fellow believers who cherish each and every soul in the class as one also bought by the blood of Jesus. Students learn to interact with these "disciple models" and perhaps ask questions they might be hesitant to ask mom or dad. The openness and interaction provide a ready opportunity for the "Israelite young girls and boys" (2 Kings 5) of

today to continue to speak and to invite others to come and learn. Unchurched parents, because of the impulses of the natural knowledge of God, often readily allow their children to go with friends to "get some religion." Who knows how far the Holy Spirit might open the door to that family through the Word of God brought home with a Sunday school lesson pamphlet or in a song repeatedly sung?

Sunday school, though a less formal academic setting, nevertheless provides a structured and measured way of presenting the truths of Bible history in a sequential manner. The worship life of the child is enriched immeasurably when he is able to place the pericope readings into the historical context of prophetic history. The Sunday school often leads or redirects parents back into the church sanctuary as they come to hear the children sing the praises of Jesus. The Spirit is given another opportunity through the Word of God to reach a family and unite them in worship of the Savior. To take it one step farther, wise is the shepherd who clearly sees the opportunities to combine Sunday school for children and Bible hour for adults. When children see mom and dad taking time to study the Bible just as they do, a priority message is sent that not even Federal Express could outperform. Children watch and learn. Children who grow up in the habit of Sunday Bible study and who see mom and dad likewise enjoying an hour with the Word of life, can be molded by the Spirit's grace into disciples with a life-long love for Bible study and learning.

It is the pastor of the flock, the shepherd of the congregation, who looks at Sunday school renewal with the critical eye of Great Commission priorities. The shepherd sees clearly the role and purpose of a Sunday school in a congregation. The shepherd knows that the bottom line is still souls that need to learn about the Savior, and the shepherd is not afraid to ask the hard question, "Is there a better way to make a better connection between the child and the Word?" When the gospel is proclaimed the Spirit of God is present and active. The shepherd sees clearly the need to sharpen the focus of the congregation and all its members on what really is going on in the hour between services.

The Shepherd Is Clearly Seen

Premise: The pastor understands that by virtue of his call God has placed him in a uniquely visible position as a role model to his people.

The apostles Paul and Peter both spoke words of encouragement to pastors of congregations, words that include the emphasis of modeling the faith to the flock. In 1 Timothy 4:16 Paul writes, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."

Peter pens this encouragement: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pe 5:2,3). I wish to highlight a word that the Spirit chose to use in both references. That word is τυπος is the vocable used in John 20:25, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were..." What Thomas wanted to touch was the pattern of the nails, a pattern formed by the nails driven into the hands of Immanuel. This word τυπος is usually translated as "form, likeness, model, type" (Brown, 1978). Yet the meaning also contains that striking reminder of a pattern caused by a blow, or even a "form which stamps" (Brown, 1978). When the apostles speak to pastors and urge them by the Spirit's power to be "examples" to the flock, it is a forceful visual picture of a pastor leaving a "mark" upon others. By the Spirit's gracious intervention the shepherd of the flock models and molds his people. It is not his persuasive personality or amazing abilities or his enthusiastic energy that leaves the impression of the cross upon others. Through the gospel witness in the words and works of the pastor, the Holy Spirit "stamps out" a lasting impression upon the attitudes and actions of God's people. The pastor is indeed a role model seen clearly by others.

In specific application to a pastor's relationship with the Sunday school, what pattern or example does the pastor "stamp out" upon others in the congregation? A veteran pastor once told me in words that my memory now paraphrases, "Sooner or later, for better or for worse, the flock tends to take on the personality of the shepherd." The attitude with which a pastor approaches the gospel ministry is infectious. His example to the flock tells them whether or not the Sunday school is vital in the congregation's priorities. One author pulls no punches: "There is no substitute for the pastor's part in keeping the Sunday school alive" (Knight, 1972).

Beyond the general example the pastor sets before God's people, we can perhaps also highlight several specific ways that the ποιμην of the Sunday school is also a τυπος. First, consider how the teaching pastor is a pattern or example to the teachers of the Sunday school. Every teacher occasionally questions his or her ability to teach effectively. Every teacher wonders at one time or another whether he or she is reaching a student. Teaching is difficult business. For Sunday school teachers there is great comfort in watching a pastor who takes his Bible teaching ministry seriously and with great joy. The pastor who is seen enjoying the adult Bible hour and who speaks positively of the catechism class sends a message that the teaching of Scripture is not a burden but a distinct blessing. Furthermore, the teaching pastor who during his Bible classes constantly portrays the humble, willing spirit of Samuel ("Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." 1 Sa 3:9) sends a message to Sunday school teachers. By his example he shows that all of God's people always remain students, even the teachers. There is no shame for the servants of God to answer "I don't know" when a student or member brings forward a perceptive or difficult inquiry. It speaks volumes about our respect for the Word of life when we show our members the willingness to go back and search the Scriptures. We do so gladly because "by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (Jn 5:39).

The pastor also displays an attitude about his personal abilities Sunday school teachers who might question their own talents. How often are not recruitment efforts of the Board of Education thwarted by adults who simply do not believe that they have any God-given ability to teach children and who are not willing to explore the potential that the body of Christ sees in them? Far too often, when we allow qualified candidates to decline teaching positions, we only foster the falsehood that human abilities are what make the message of Christ crucified efficacious. Of course, I am not advocating the other extreme that excuses lack of careful preparation. We dare never place barriers to the Spirit's work through a belief that any warm body can simply echo the forms of the Word in lessons poorly planned or carelessly prepared. Careful lesson preparation, training in appropriate methodology, practice in questioning skills are all potential agenda areas for the Sunday school teachers' meeting. We seek to do the best we can in sharing the Word of the resurrected Redeemer. But above all else Sunday school teachers, no less than the pastor, need to remember the confidence Paul encourages: "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).

The shepherd is also clearly seen by the children of the Sunday school. Little eyes do watch and learn. The pastor who makes time to walk through classes or who occasionally sits down on the carpet and teaches the pre-school class sends a message to children: "I love you. You are important to Jesus and to me. What you are doing here is important." Week after week the pastor can look for countless opportunities to interact with the children of the Sunday school. Call them by name. Encourage them in their memory work by taking a turn listening. Thank them for singing in a worship service. Ask them to tell you what lesson they learned that morning. I know that such simple ideas are automatic to many. Yet pressures of the Sunday morning schedule often preclude even these little avenues of contact between the shepherd of the flock and the lambs. Permit me to offer a practical, and I believe realistic, option to the Sunday morning schedule crunch. As the pastor prepares his curriculum plans for the year's Bible hours, why not include a week intermission after each unit in the curriculum. After six or eight weeks, whenever you have finished a Bible hour unit, take a week intermission. On that Sunday morning have pastor and parents (and others in Bible hour) spend time with the Sunday

school children in the classes or in singing or in the opening devotion. Let the children see adult role models with them in studying the lessons. Let children see the message from adults that Bible study is important and we think Sunday school is important as well. Let teachers see other congregational members encouraging them by their presence. Let teachers understand this unspoken but very loud message that Sunday school is not an afterthought in the congregation's ministry and planning. As a side benefit, perhaps some of those adults who take the "off week" from Bible hour to sit in on a children's class might be moved by the Spirit to consider themselves a candidate for teaching or subbing in the Sunday school. Fostering this close connection between adult Bible study and the Sunday school is a critical priority if we prayerfully hope to overcome the "completion and graduation" mindset that plagues much of our youth Bible education. One author even considers this focus on adult education as a prerequisite for Sunday school revival, and insists on lifelong learning and serving for all members (Gangel, 1991).

Shepherding the Sunday school demands that the shepherd be clearly seen by all involved. Both teachers' and students' eyes do watch and follow the pastor in his work. His Spirit-given enthusiasm will be contagious. His joyful attitude in life-long Bible study is infectious. His humble appreciation for the power of the Word and not reliance upon personal abilities is a confidence builder. The shepherd is clearly seen. His life is a life that preaches. A medieval proverb can be a modern maxim as we consider the pastor shepherding the Sunday school. *Vita clericorum liber laicorum*—"the life of the clergyman is the book of the laymen" (as quoted in Doberstein, 1986). Students, parents, and teachers read the pastor's example and affectively learn much about being eager students of the Word of grace.

One more comment before we leave this topic of the shepherd being clearly seen. The shepherd knows, and sometimes chafes, under the "fish-bowl magnifying glass." He lives visibly to his people. His errors are magnified. Instead of an example of faithfulness, sometimes his people might see laziness. Instead of joy in teaching, there are those long days of questions and doubts. Instead of being an eager student of Scripture, there are times when the pastor presents the saving truth of Jesus after what he knows to be imperfect preparation. In such times the pastor might well wonder what kind of example he is giving. Sin does show forth. Members quickly see our weaknesses and stumbling. Yet even here, the Spirit of God is gracious in the gospel ministry. Members also see their shepherd as a weak human, who confesses his weakness and returns again and again to the love and mercy of Jesus for forgiveness and power to go on. Our people do not need models of perfection to foster some work-righteous idea about attaining perfection in the life of faith. There is no perfection except in the life of Christ Jesus. His death and resurrection are the only source of saving faith. Pastors, when plagued by the "double standard" flu that leaves their ministry listless and empty, need to return to what the gospel tells us: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Co 5:17-19). We who proclaim the message of life and forgiveness to others can find strength and joy only when we daily return to that empty tomb of Jesus. The Good Shepherd of the Church is the Lamb who shed his blood to cover my failings and errors and sins as an undershepherd. Pray for the Spirit's outpouring so that you constantly thrive on that awesome message of pure grace. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co 5:21). Then indeed, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Ph 4:13).

The Shepherd Keeps Constant Watch

Premise: The pastor understands that through the divine call the Lord has entrusted to the shepherd the oversight of the flock.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Lu 2:8). Every Christmas Eve we are introduced to the most famous ranchers ever. Yet as a child, I wondered how the shepherds could see enough at night to do a good job of "keeping watch." The picture Luke provides for us helps us understand the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. The shepherd stayed with the flock, even at night. The shepherd kept constant watch, not only by seeing and looking in the starlight, but more importantly by being there. The shepherd listened for any sounds of restlessness among the sheep. The shepherd knew almost by instinct when the flock was nervous or afraid. The shepherd walked among the sheep, soothing and comforting the flock with his presence. Keeping watch was much more than just having one eye open. It was having both ears open. Keeping watch was knowing the flock so well that any uncharacteristic movement brought his careful scrutiny.

The Christian pastor keeps constant watch over the Sunday school. The shepherd has not only his eyes and ears open, but also his heart. Being with the teachers and students constantly enables the pastor to sense when there is turmoil and restlessness present. Perhaps a teacher is struggling in the classroom. The shepherd who possesses the Good Shepherd's heart is empathic. He keeps watch and looks for the opportunity to listen. Perhaps that struggling teacher has been given additional responsibilities at work. Time pressures in the career now leave him (or her) scrambling to prepare for lessons and to make meetings. He loves to teach but feels like he is not fulfilling his calling. Guilt becomes a double-barreled shotgun. He feels guilty if he resigns from teaching because he is convinced of the vital Great Commission task of the Sunday school. Yet he feels guilty if he keeps teaching because he can not do the type of job he wants to do. The shepherd who keeps constant watch over the flock is present with the Sunday school and senses the agitation in that teacher. The shepherd is there to bring loving guidance and Scriptural perspective to the dilemma. Perhaps a student in the Sunday school presents a discipline problem. The shepherd stands ready to assist the teacher and to examine all issues involved. Is that student an uneasy lamb because of turmoil in his home? That small child who comes to Sunday school might be struggling mightily as he watches mom and dad consider divorce. In his child-like faith he prays to Jesus for his parents, only to see them split anyway. What happens to his faith in Jesus to answer prayer? There is a spiritual struggle going on in that student that might reflect itself during the Sunday school lesson. The shepherd keeps constant watch over the flock with an open heart and ready ears. There is a spiritual dimension to the oversight responsibility that only the pastor can fulfill. He is a *Seelsorger*, keeping watch constantly over the souls in his care.

In addition, there is a doctrinal dimension to the oversight responsibility that God has placed upon the pastor. The diploma of vocation that every pastor holds in trembling hands states this responsibility clearly: "In extending this call to you we solemnly charge you to preach the gospel of our Lord among us in its truth and purity, to administer the sacraments in accordance with the inspired Word of God and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as incorporated in the Book of Concord of 1580, and to establish and maintain sound Lutheran practice at all times; to be faithful in the spiritual care of the young, in particular to instruct our catechumens in the Word of God, as it is taught in the Small Catechism of Doctor Martin Luther, and in general to be diligent in fostering and furthering the educational agencies of our congregation." The Holy Spirit, through Paul's pen, reminds pastors of this critical responsibility: "[An elder] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Ti 1:9).

A pastor who shepherds the Sunday school becomes involved in overseeing the content and curriculum of the courses being taught. Although there might be a superintendent of the Sunday school, the pastor is still the overseer. Sunday school teachers' meetings are scheduled on a regular basis, and teachers are encouraged and expected to attend. At such meetings the pastor can play a vital role in the spiritual growth and training of the staff. Lessons can be taught to the teachers, thus demonstrating appropriate telling techniques and the taxonomy of questions. Questions regarding previous lessons can be discussed and answered from Scripture.

Teachers can also feel comfortable in knowing the availability of the pastor to address their doctrinal concerns. Pastors, use this opportunity to be proactive with the Scripture in your oversight responsibility. Teach and train the teachers. Sit in on classes and observe if possible. Answer doctrinal problems when they first surface rather than hearing about them months later, thus giving time for falsehood to fester. Satan will not clap his hands at pure preaching and teaching. We dare not be so naive as to imagine that our services and our schools and our Sunday schools are ever immune from the wily attacks of that subtle serpent. Paul's goodbye at Ephesus is our watchword: "Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:28-32).

The Shepherd Speaks Lovingly

Premise: The pastor speaks to the Lord Jesus on behalf of the Sunday school through intercessory prayer. The pastor speaks to the Sunday school on behalf of the Lord Jesus as he proclaims to them the words of the Good Shepherd.

Paul the apostle encourages active and continual prayer as part of our faith life. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Ph 4:6). For the Christian pastor prayer is part and parcel of his ministry. The Christian pastor is convinced from Scripture that people are born dead in sins and "cannot by their own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ nor come to him." The Christian pastor is convinced from Scripture that only God can bring the dead to life. "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Ep 2:4-5). The Christian pastor understands that the instrument God uses for such regeneration is the gospel in Word and Sacrament. The more the Spirit of God convinces a pastor of these elemental truths of the Third Article, the more the Spirit of God moves a pastor to persistent prayer. A shepherd of the flock knows that only God can accomplish the miracle of conversion and the on-going miracle of preservation in the faith. So the pastor pleads in prayer that God achieve these miracles through the Word preached and proclaimed, whether from the pulpit or in the Sunday school room. The Sunday school's priority in the pastor's ministry is reflected in the quiet hours of prayer.

The pastor prays as intercessor for the Sunday school. He prays for the teachers by name, asking God to bless their efforts in sharing the Word of life. He prays for the teachers publicly as well. He brings before the congregation gathered in worship petitions that remind the members to ask for the Spirit's blessings upon the work of the Sunday school. When teachers are publicly installed, prayers are offered, a powerful reminder of the importance placed upon this work done in behalf of the body of believers. Yet such public intercessions are not limited to the kick-off Sunday every fall. Rather, the praying pastor routinely includes the work of the Sunday school teachers in the prayer life of the congregation. The elements of such intercessions can be endless as we ask the Lord to bless these teachers with wisdom and patience; a sense of joy-filled satisfaction; renewed energy; personal growth in the Word; ability to discern law and gospel properly; ability to discipline firmly and lovingly; the eagerness to work with parents in encouraging Bible learning in the home; a spirit of harmony and unity on staff and with other called workers; and on and on. What a joy to remember with Paul that we have divine help in the work of intercession. "We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Ro 8:26). The pastor speaks lovingly on behalf of the Sunday school teachers.

And he speaks lovingly on behalf of the Sunday school students as well. The pastor more than any other Sunday school staff person will undoubtedly know more, and in greater intimacy, concerning the lives and troubles of the sheep in the congregation. The pastor lovingly speaks to the Savior in behalf of the souls entrusted to his care, including Sunday school children. He calls them by name and prays for them by name. Whether the pastor becomes involved because of a discipline situation, or to calm a crying child, or to settle a troublesome conflict, the children of the Sunday school will come to trust their pastor as one who first takes all things to the throne of grace, confident because of the work of Jesus Christ, that we will "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (He 4:16). Small children, who later in life might call upon the pastor at the time of illness or trouble, will know from childhood experience that the pastor will gladly join them in prayer and intercede to the Savior in their behalf. What a powerful bond of Christian love and fellowship the Spirit creates when the pastor speaks lovingly in intercessory prayer.

The pastor speaks lovingly most especially when he relates to the Sunday school the wonders of God as displayed in Christ Jesus our Savior. What glorious news we possess and share with others! The news of free forgiveness through the blood of Christ empowers a teacher who frets whether the lesson was taught correctly, or whether a harsh word spoken in haste might harm the spiritual growth of a child. "Be of good cheer, fellow teacher, your sins are forgiven." When doubts assail Sunday school volunteers about the worth of all their time and effort, we share with them the glorious confidence of the gospel: "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Co 15:58). When others are unclear about the role and purpose of the Sunday school in the congregation, the pastor speaks lovingly about Jesus' promise to achieve remarkable results through the gospel. The congregation has a light factory and a salt distribution center. Those children, baptized into the Triune God and brought into contact with the Word, are lights of the world and salt of the earth. The pastor speaks lovingly to each and every child and teacher every time he says, "As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." What an awesome gift God has entrusted to the called shepherd, to be able to speak in Christ's behalf the news of eternal salvation through the remission of sins which the Savior won for us on Calvary. The pastor speaks lovingly to the Sunday school, and through the pastor the "sheep do hear his voice and they follow him."

Shepherds, to your staffs.

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