

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This past year, our school's track team had a very impressive season. In the two track meets we participated in, we won by an embarrassing number of points. We had two things going in our favor at these meets: First, we are blessed with some good athletes. We just have a lot of fast kids! The second factor was simply this: our school was the biggest one at the meets. With more kids in more events, it was pretty likely for us to win the meets.

But there was one event that we didn't win even though we were a shoo-in to win it... the 400 meter relay. We had the fastest kids. Not only would we win, but we'd win big. But we didn't. You see speed isn't the only part of a relay race. There is the baton... and you have to cross the finish line carrying it. The baton has to be successfully passed three times. When the exchange takes place, two things have to happen. The one carrying the baton has to firmly place it into the hand of the next runner. That runner needs to have his hand opened wide and steady for the baton to be placed into. Well, something went wrong in one of the exchanges. Our team lost the race.

This race is a good metaphor for our life as Christians. God has graced us with his word and with a history of his interaction with mankind. In his word and in that history he reveals to us his love and his mercy as they have played out in human history to accomplish the eternal salvation of our souls. That word was given to believers. Those works were witnessed by believers. Now God says "pass it on."

You all are aware that our church has supported a Christian elementary school for over 60 years. That school exists for the specific purpose of "passing on" God's words and works to the next generation. Today, we are privileged to install 3 new teachers in our grade school. Teachers who will assist us and our community in passing along the good news of Jesus to the next generation. What a blessing and what a responsibility.

Let's take this opportunity to remember once again why Christian education is so vitally important. The words of the first 8 verses of Psalm 78 help us see this. This psalm was written by a man named Asaph. He was a Levite, the tribe of Israelites responsible for worship and religious teaching in Israel. He was a contemporary of David, so this Psalm was written about 3,000 years ago. David made Asaph a music leader. As a Levite he was also a teacher. Listen the Psalm he wrote:

**Psalm 78:1-8 O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old— what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. They would not be like their forefathers— a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him.**

Asaph clearly understood how vitally important religious education was, didn't he? You see, Asaph knew history. He knew what happened when God's words and works were not passed to the

next generation. Adam and Eve fell into sin, but God promised them a Savior. As the generations passed, the baton was dropped. Fathers didn't teach their children about God's promise. The people of the world turned their backs on God. He finally sent a worldwide flood that destroyed all but faithful Noah and his family. Again generations passed, and the baton was dropped. God called Abraham out of all the people on earth to be the Father of a nation... a nation that would receive God's laws and promises, and pass the baton until Christ came. That was how it was supposed to work. But Israel kept dropping the baton. And God kept sending judgments to call them to repentance. God's showed tough love to makes sure the promise wasn't lost and the baton wasn't dropped.

So by Asaph's time, he already had about a thousand years of Israelite history to look back on. He saw what happened when the baton was dropped. And so he wrote this psalm to encourage the Israelites... and you and me... to teach the next generation. Pass on the truths of God that we have received. And he particularly mentions children again and again, they learn and know Gods word and works.

For this very reason Good Shepherd operates a Christian elementary school. It is to assist parents if they need it in this vital task of passing the baton of God's word to the next generation. Is it easy to operate such a school? No. Does it take a lot of resources? Yes. Is it worth it? I would suggest to you: absolutely. Let's talk about that more.

### **The importance of religion in our education**

One might argue... but can't people get an education in any school? Do you need to know God to teach math? Or science? Or history? Religion and education really aren't connected, are they? Get educated at school. Learn religion at church. Isn't that sufficient?

Such reasoning separates two things that in reality are inseparable: religion and education. Religion and education are... or at least should be... intertwined. In fact, it could be argued that the Lutheran Reformation was basically an educational movement. Martin Luther firmly believed (and we do too) that any education that ignores God's revelation is not only a waste of education and effort; it is actually no education at all. Everything must be brought back to God. All that we learn, no matter what the subject must be tied to God or it is useless.

Imagine have fallen overboard during a violent storm. Someone throws you a strong nylon rope that will never break. You grab on and start pulling to go toward the boat. The other end of the rope slips off the boat and right into the water. That rope is worthless, isn't it? In fact, it could tangle around you and cause you to sink faster.

This is like education when it is not tied securely to God. A child can learn all sorts of things, pull straight "A's", win spelling bees and math competitions. But if all this knowledge and education isn't connected to the almighty, eternal, immovable creator... it is useless. If all this education is taught such that God is neither the source nor the goal and end, then it's a rope floating in the water. When it comes to eternal life and being able to live life meaningfully and purposefully here on earth, education that's not grounded on true religion is ultimately useless.

For this reason, when speaking of education, the first and most important subject isn't reading, writing or arithmetic... it is religion. In the world, education only addresses human, earthbound wisdom. Man through observation, examination and testing study discovers the laws and ways of the natural world and then teaches them to the next generation.

But true religion addresses a realm of knowledge that is different. True religion is the study of things beyond the natural world. It is the study of mysteries. It is a study of the hidden God... the God who is beyond time and space and human observation. It is a study that shapes the very attitudes of our heart and not just the intellect of our minds.

Now, how can we study that which is beyond human experience and observation? There is only one way: if it is revealed. If the hidden God pulls back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of himself, his ways, his works, his attitude toward us... THEN we can know! And what he reveals can then be taught to future generations. In the Psalm we heard the Psalmist say: **“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old— what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.”** This is exactly the study of religion. Things God has made known and that are then passed along. It must be made known to our children.

God in his wisdom *has* revealed himself. And the revelation of himself... that is, the revealing of divine mysteries... centers in God’s own Son who took on human flesh – Jesus Christ. In 1 Timothy 3:16 we read: **“Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He [God] appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”** The mystery of true religion, the character of the true God, is revealed in Holy Scriptures... revealed in God made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ.

To convey to the next generation the hidden truths of God, we simply need to do this: Repeat to them the promises God has made. Repeat to them God’s deeds which are his promises kept. God’s Word and God’s actions. God said and God did. God says and God does. If we faithfully recount his words and his deeds we are faithfully passing on the truths of God to the next generation.

His words and deeds indicate two things. 1) We have done wrong, are unholy and have angered greatly the creator of the universe. If you read the rest of Psalm 78 (try to do that later today) you see a summary of Israel’s history. In that summary you see their repeated disobedience. Over and over again. And Israel’s behavior is a perfect summary of how you and I behave as well. We keep on disobeying God. You’d think every once in a while we might get in a day of all good... but it never happens. And what’s God’s reaction to disobedience and rebellion? When Israel complained against God... when *we* complain against God... Psalm 78:21-22 says: **“When the LORD heard them, he was very angry; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel, for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance.”** And verse 31-33: **“God’s anger rose against them; he put to death the sturdiest among them, cutting down the young men of Israel. In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe. So he ended their days in futility and their years in terror.”**

And these examples are just a small glimpse of God’s righteous, eternal judgment on all who reject him. God says and God shows that he hates sin and the sinner who will not turn from his wicked ways will fall under God’s judgment... his eternal judgment. Terrifying!

Ben, Andrea, Sarah... God will have you convey this truth to the children you are teaching. God is holy and righteous. He will not tolerate disobedience. He doesn’t smile and look the other way when we do wrong. Sin is a serious offense against the creator of the universe and he hold us accountable. Don’t mince any words when you speak this truth to children.

But don’t you dare let these be the final words you say to your children. For God’s words and his deeds show a second truth. He is patient, loving, merciful and forgiving. In Psalm 78, not only do we have a record of Israel’s persistent rebellion... and a picture of our own rebellion. But we also have a picture of God’s stubborn, persistent love, mercy, grace and forgiveness. In spite of Israel’s rebellion, God protected them and provided for them. He parted the Red Sea as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. He gave them manna in the desert. He gave them water out of a rock. Quail to eat. Ps. 78:37-39 says: **“Their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return.”**

And how is it God can forgive such rebellion? Remember... and teach... God's promise and work in sending his own Son as the perfect sacrifice to permanently remove our sin and guilt forever. He sent his own Son, true God, in the flesh to be our substitute in all things. His holy life God declares is ours. His death on the cross God says is the punishment for sin that we should have received. His resurrection is the proof and guarantee that all of this is true and that we will live forever. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. This is the heart and core the education every human being on the planet need to learn. Make it prominent in your teaching!

But what about the other disciplines: reading, math, science, history, music and the rest? Are they unimportant? By no means! As redeemed children of God, his love is central to our whole life, and gives meaning and purpose to life. Loving God and loving our neighbor is true, joyful living for the believer who knows Christ's love and forgiveness. A good general education serves that goal.

In *science and math* we marvel at the laws of God's creation, the consistency, the interdependency, the beauty, the complexity. When we know math and science better, we gain a greater appreciation for God and his awesomeness, and we learn better how to use and manipulate God's creation for the benefit and help of our neighbor.

In *music*, painting, theater, dance and the other arts, we have human creativity reflecting God's creativity. They are forms for conveying appropriate moods and emotions in response to God's word and works.

A focus on *athletics* teaches us to take care of the body God has given us. Team sports teach us to work with others in God-pleasing, encouraging ways.

*Language and literature* are vital to study and learning. As we read, we are in contact with the culture of the author. We know people better. The better we know our neighbor, the better we can help our neighbor. Reading, grammar and speech are vital skills that lead us to better comprehend God's word and works, and convey God's word and works. With proper language skills, we won't be at a loss for words when we try to explain to others the reason for the hope that we have in Christ Jesus.

A study of *history* is vitally important. History is simply a record of life. We learn to appreciate God's guiding hand in the events of life. History truly is His-story. Luther said, "**History is nothing else than a monument of divine works and judgments, showing how God maintains, governs, hinders, advances, punishes, and honors people.**" History portrays life as it really is with all its warts and disfigurements. It's a testimony to God's incredible patience and his loving guidance.

History is also vital in understanding Scripture. God's word and works took place at specific times and places in human history. To understand this context fills out the meaning of words we read in the ancient text we call the Bible.

Friends, that task before all of us today is to pass on the truths of God. Pass the baton of God's word to the next generation... pass on the revelation of Christ in all its fullness. We have called men and women – teachers – to our congregation to help us with this vital task. We ask God to bless them in this work. Look to God for your strength, for he will equip you to do what he's called you to do. But this message is for all of us. Let us all work together for God's truth. Let us work together to make sure the baton isn't dropped. Let's work together so that the children of our congregation are educated and anchored to Christ now and for eternity.

All glory and honor be to him through all generations. Amen.