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Teaching Our Education Students to Teach Christianly

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Introduction

What does it mean to teach *Christianly*? We may not always agree on what it means. There can be no doubt, however, that the calling of teacher education departments in Christian post-secondary institutions is to prepare students to teach Christianly, whether in public or Christian schools. But how do we do this? I shall address this question by considering four themes:

- current conceptions of what it means to teach Christianly,
- an alternative model,
- the context of teaching Christianly, and
- some implications for our teacher education programs.

Some Current Conceptions

Some time ago the Dordt College Center for Educational Services conducted a survey of some 200 teachers in Christian schools in Iowa and surrounding areas. One question we asked was, “What, in your opinion, does it mean to teach Christianly?” The responses were surprisingly, even disturbingly diverse. Interestingly, what was central to one teacher seemed peripheral to another. No uniformity could be detected.

It was especially worrisome to note that some of the teachers—among them some who graduated from Christian teacher education programs—bluntly admitted they had no idea of what teaching Christianly really means. “I know it’s an important issue,” they acknowledged, “but, frankly, I am so busy teaching, I have no time to think about it.” Yet there are at least six commonly held even if implicit conceptions of teaching Christianly, each of which I describe below.

Conception #1. A teacher who is a sincere, Bible-believing Christian will automatically teach Christianly. Members of boards of Christian schools frequently display this belief. When appointing a new teacher, they are primarily concerned about his or her Christian commitment—

rightly so, of course—but they think it is not necessary to inquire about the candidate’s concrete teaching practice.

Being a Christian does not automatically lead to Christian teaching, however—just as being a committed Christian does not automatically turn a philosopher into a Christian philosopher. Examples abound of Christians who, while professing Christ, uncritically adopt secular patterns of thought and practice, often unwittingly. Augustine, for example, was a Neoplatonist; Thomas Aquinas, an Aristotelian. Similarly I sometimes see committed Christian teachers uncritically adopt questionable perennialist, positivist, pragmatist, or progressivist teaching practices. Besides, even when we reject such practices in our minds, our practice may still show their influence. Paul complains that the good he wants to do he does not do (Romans 7). In sum, commitment to the Lord is a prerequisite to but not an automatic guarantee of teaching Christianly.

Conception #2. Teaching Christianly is essentially the modeling of Christian love, virtue, and morality. It is difficult to imagine how one could teach Christianly without modeling Christian values. There is more to teaching than setting a good example, however. Limiting Christian teaching to modeling overlooks the fact that there is content to be taught, teaching strategies to be employed, and classroom management to be exercised. About these components of teaching, too, we must ask: What is the will of the Lord? How does a biblical perspective affect these aspects of our instructional practice? Sometimes I see questionable behaviorist discipline practices implemented under the cloak of Christian love and morality. It is quite possible, in fact, that Christian morality can hide a multitude of sins. For example, curricular materials such as those published by Accelerated Christian Education are thoroughly positivistic. Contrary to a Scriptural perspective they reduce knowledge to objective facts, all the while lovingly adding Bible texts.

Conception #3. Teaching Christianly consists of devotional exercises such as prayer, Bible reading, and the singing of appropriate hymns (along with the study of Bible as a curricular subject), to be added to a standard, more or less objective curriculum and teaching practice. If this conception were true, one could not teach Christianly in a public school—a highly problematic position! A more fundamental problem is that this sort of dualism leaves curriculum and the actual teaching activity untouched. It compartmentalizes Christianity and boxes it in, as it were. But there cannot be an area of schooling where the Lord does not make a claim. As someone once said, “If Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all!” Prayer and Bible reading do not make a school or classroom Christian, any more than Sunday worship attendance sanctifies what we do during the week. The objective-curriculum-plus-devotions dualism not infrequently controls an entire Christian school. The Christian character of the school is then attributed to the presence of chapel exercises and a Bible course. For good measure, a hefty dose of strict rules—to ensure moral behavior—is added to the mix.

Conception #4. Teaching Christianly means to imprint truth on impressionable minds. The basis for this position is God’s injunction that, “these commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children . . . In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?’ tell him . . .” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 20-21). To some Christians, these biblical injunctions settle the matter once and for all. Teaching Christianly means to imprint, to impress and to tell through direct instruction (e.g., Adams 1982:103-4). After all, our students are sinners who need to be told and corrected. Let’s reject cooperative learning and constructivist whole-language activities that are little more than student-oriented fuzzies.

But, of course, these Christians face a problem. Jesus, the Master Teacher, did not teach in this way. He taught mostly in parables that his students had to interpret. Jesus seldom gave pat answers or responded to questions directly. To take a teaching-is-impressing position requires the elimination of other important biblical givens.

Conception #5. Teaching Christianly means to imitate the way Jesus taught. This approach, like the previous one, is eager to do justice to the Scriptures. Since Jesus is the Master Teacher, his example should suffice for us as we seek to teach Christianly. Now it’s true that we must be Christ-like: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). And indeed, as his disciples, we need to take Jesus’ model very seriously. Nevertheless, I am somewhat uncomfortable with the Jesus-as-Master-Teacher paradigm. After all, Jesus was the Son of God, the Incarnate Word through whom all things were created and in whom all things cohere (John 1:3; Colossians 1:17). He is my Savior and my Lord. There are things He did (and does) which I cannot imitate. I cannot save from sin, as He did. I cannot sit at the right hand of God, as He does.

Perhaps more serious is the difficult transfer problem that confronts us when we seek to use Christ as the model. After all, his teaching was very much historically colored. To transfer his methods to our day and age of formal schooling is no easy task. Should we, for example, give up on chalk and overhead projectors and write with our fingers in the sand (John 8:6)? Would Jesus have used video? What sorts of lab manuals would He approve of? How would He view curriculum? Would He support back-to-the-basics? Phonics? Whole language? Would He like a subject-centered or an integrated curriculum? To answer these questions requires so much interpretation and inference that no clear judgments are possible. In some ways, looking at Jesus as a model for teaching is a bit like looking at the psalms as models for Christian poetry.

Conception #6. The essential of teaching Christianly is to impart a Christian perspective on subject matter. This view tries to overcome the relegation of curricular content to a supposed neutral, objective, factual area. It urges us to see that Christ is Lord, also over curricular content. It is an approach common among teachers of Christian schools in the Reformed tradition, especially those associated with Christian Schools International. Indeed, this statement is the ground for establishing separate Christian schools. In public schools, Christian teachers are severely restricted. They are not free to teach the children that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. In Christian

schools, on the other hand, teachers have the freedom to interpret the world as the work of God. At the same time, this approach does not pay enough attention to the question of how such a perspective is to be imparted. It overlooks the critical role of teaching methods and classroom organization. Nor does it adequately consider: How will the students bring the perspective into their daily life? How will understanding lead to practice?

What shall we say about these six conceptions? Are they misconceptions? Are they wrong? I would be very hesitant to make such a judgment. After all, we all see through a glass darkly. So, I see these views of teaching Christianly as incomplete. They are reductionistic: they recognize an important dimension of teaching Christianly, but overlook others. Needed, it seems to me, is a more holistic view of teaching, one that takes all the aspects mentioned into account and integrates them into a totality view. To such a totality view of teaching, I now turn.

Teaching Christianly: An Alternative Model

Students often use metaphors to describe their teachers. For example, they may think of a teacher as a bear, a drill sergeant, a clown, or a friend. The effective teaching movement sees the teacher as an efficient manager, an expert and judge. Metaphors, then, seek to identify some essential ingredient that captures the entire style of a teacher. Though always reductionistic, metaphors can help us get to the heart of the matter (Van Brummelen 1988:19-20).

The metaphor I propose is teaching as a journey of teacher and students jointly traveling through the curricular terrain towards a predetermined destination. Let me unpack this metaphor a bit.

Basic is the idea of a journey. Teaching is taking the students traveling. The teacher is the guide. The countryside to be traversed is the curriculum, with all its side roads and detours. To function as a guide, the teacher must know the lay of the land, how to negotiate the land, and the destination. What is the destination? This question brings us to the issue of the purpose of Christian teaching.

Both teaching itself and its purposes involve much diversity. Some think that Christian teaching must prepare students to enter heaven. Others see the purpose as a combination of a moral life and a successful career. Still others believe that Christian

teachers should encourage their students to become pastors, missionaries or evangelists. Some teachers in public schools argue that their basic aim is to convert students to the Christian faith. While all of these goals are laudable, I think teaching Christianly aims at a larger goal (Van Dyk 1995).

I take the words of the apostle Paul as my basic starting point. Teachers, he declares in Ephesians 4:11-13, are appointed to their task in order to prepare for works of service. Preparing for service can be understood as shorthand for equipping for discipleship. Teaching Christianly, then, aims for training in discipleship. Do not take such discipleship to refer narrowly to so-called spiritual matters and sacred things. On the contrary, teachers are to prepare for knowledgeable and competent, responsible discipleship, the sort of discipleship that equips our students to function as God's children in all areas of life: in their careers and professions, in their home and family life, in the political marketplace, and in their leisure hours. All of life is to be lived in response to the claims of the Lord. Everywhere our students are to be reformingly busy.

Discipleship can be described as the relationship between hearing and doing. Everywhere in life we are to hear the Word of the Lord and respond. But how are we to respond? I remind you of the great commandment, the commandment on which all the law and prophets depend: Love God above all, and your neighbors as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40). As Paul points out, to love God and neighbor is equivalent to serving God and neighbor (Galatians 5:13-14). Servanthood is the essence of our response to the will of the Lord.

Now such servanthood expresses itself in two ways: in stewardship (i.e., taking care of ourselves, of each other, and of God's beautiful garden), and in reconciliation (i.e., healing and peace-making; counteracting brokenness wherever we find it). We were created to be caretakers. The reality of sin, however, now requires us to be redemptively busy as well. To function as disciples of Christ in this way in an increasingly complex world requires much knowledge and much competence.

Equipping for service, I believe, is the ultimate destination towards which the teacher guides his students, his fellow-travelers. Now the metaphor of the journey allows us to identify three important

aspects of teaching Christianly. One of these I have already suggested: teaching is guiding. But there are two others as well, to be postulated in order to avoid a progressive-type view of teaching as merely facilitating. These are unfolding and enabling. In short, teaching Christianly consists of guiding, unfolding and enabling.

Component #1. Guiding: The teacher is indeed a guide. That is, the teacher nudges the students towards the goal of knowledgeable and competent discipleship. This can be done in various ways. One important way is modeling. By setting a good, Christian example the teacher is in fact saying, “I want you to go this way. Follow my example!” Another form of guiding is encouragement. When I encourage my students, I am saying, “You are on the right road (towards the right destination)! Keep it up!” Discipline, too, can be regarded as a guiding function. When I discipline students, I tell them: “I want you to go this way and not that way.” Finally, critically important to our guidance are the ways I structure my classroom and design the learning activities.

Component #2. Unfolding: The teacher guides the students by means of unfolding curricular content and skills—the terrain to be traversed. I define unfolding as, “opening up to the children what as yet they do not know or cannot do.” Unfolding the curriculum is a bit like unfolding a map: at first we see only a small part, but as we continue to unfold, we eventually understand the lay of the land.

What is to be unfolded? Here we encounter the debate about what is to be taught. I shall not consider this issue at this point. Suffice it to say that the matter of a Christian perspective is significant here. Ideally, we should teach our teachers to unfold curricular content in at least three ways. First, the students should see that the content they study reflects God’s creational design and intentions. We live in God’s creation, not in a world concocted by chance laws of nature. Secondly, unfolding the curriculum should help our youngsters to see the distortions brought about by sin and evil. Finally, teachers should help students understand how they can heal the sinful brokenness and restore life to God’s intentions. These three aspects should be taught in every component of the curriculum.

Clearly, because of legal constraints already referred to, it will be difficult for Christian teachers

to unfold in this way in public schools. Much of Christian teaching in public schools will have to be confined to guiding. Yet I suspect that in public schools, too, a good deal of unfolding of the right sort is possible, particularly in these times of growing concern about immorality and godlessness. Christian teachers who, feel called to work in public schools, should be ever alert to opportunities. They should press a Christian perspective to the limits of the law.

Component #3. Enabling: Christian teaching cannot be content with guiding and unfolding. There must also be concern about enabling. Enabling here means “equipping for knowledgeable and competent discipleship.” Enabling is to characterize our guiding and unfolding. “Will my guiding and unfolding be enabling or disabling?” is the question continuously confronting the Christian teacher.

If we ignore the element of enabling, our guiding and unfolding can easily get enmeshed in purposes other than those of servanthood. Often our teaching enables, but not for discipleship. Think of the many ways in which we inadvertently teach the serving of self, money, success, or other aspects of the American way of life. We may do this under the cloak of Christian virtue, through the use of unhealthy and often unmatched competition, mass teaching, standardized testing and grading practices, and individualistic classrooms.

Of course, in the final analysis we cannot enable anyone. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow (1 Corinthians 3). Only the Word and Spirit of God can truly enable for discipleship. We can lead a horse to water but we cannot make it drink. This reality does not take us off the hook, however. We can make the horse thirsty by running it around the well or feeding it salt! God calls us to create a teaching and learning environment in which the Holy Spirit can do his work. We are to design optimum opportunities for equipping for works of service.

The Context Of Teaching Christianly

Teaching does not occur in a vacuum, but takes place within the context of three domains. First, there is the classroom. The classroom is located within the second domain, the school. And the school exists within the larger ambient world. Various factors in each of these three domains

influence and affect our teaching task. Many forces impinge on classroom teachers: the social background of the students, the expectations of parents, the influence of the media and pop culture, the philosophical spirits ready to invade our classrooms, the school's educational mission, and the school's curriculum.

For purposes of this paper, I shall confine myself to a consideration of the immediate classroom context and atmosphere. The literature makes clear that we can structure our classrooms in at least three different ways (Johnson & Johnson 1986:3-4). One way is to design an individualistic classroom. In such a classroom, the students are responsible only for their own learning. They take no responsibility for each other. The learning of one student, in other words, does not affect the learning of any of the others. A second way is to structure a basically competitive classroom. In such a classroom, there are relationships, but they are negative relationships. In such a classroom the success of one student depends on the failure of another. Grading on the curve, for example, suggests such a negative relationship between the success and the failure of the students.

There is a third way, however, one that I take to be an essentially Christian way. It is the way of the collaborative classroom (Van Dyk 1990:4-5). Such classrooms exhibit the following characteristics:

- The learning of one student is related to the learning of all students. If Chris fails, all the other students feel the pain. If Chris succeeds, all share in the joy and celebration (1 Corinthians 12:26).
- Students are responsible not only for their own but also for each other's learning. No students are allowed to struggle by themselves. If Chris has difficulties with a learning task, the other students help her.
- Collaborative classrooms provide a secure, accepting, mutually supportive atmosphere, one where teacher and students can safely travel together. Unlike individualistic and competitive classrooms, they minimize fear: fear of failure, fear of the teacher, fear of one another: "love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).
- Gifts and talents, as well as differences, are recognized and mutually encouraged and celebrated. Diversity is considered a gift, not a problem. In individualistic and competitive

classrooms, gifts and talents are often seen as threats, or can foster jealousy.

Finally, collaborative classrooms provide a context for developing and practicing discipleship skills. I have in mind here not only social skills such as cooperation, acceptance and tolerance, but also specific servanthood skills such as love, respect, listening, patience, humility (esteeming the other higher than ourselves) and encouragement. Collaborative classrooms are places where the fruit of the Spirit is emphasized, displayed and practiced (Galatians 5:22-23).

To structure such a collaborative classroom must be the aim of every Christian teacher. Again, because of the myriad of constraints, we can not do so perfectly. But we ought to be working at it. Doing so will require us to recognize our limitations as teachers, and to develop the willingness to celebrate the worth, gifts and experience of every student in our classroom. We must be willing to lay aside our desire to be in complete control of our children's learning and to curtail our tendency to use merely transmission methods of teaching.

Within such a collaborative classroom we can consider a variety of teaching strategies. Cooperative learning is one method we certainly will want to use. We might also consider a "shared praxis" approach, in which the students relate the topic under consideration to their previous experiences and commit themselves to apply their learning to their lives (Groome 1980:135-250). Direct instruction has a place but must be used with caution. Its excessive use, especially of lecturing and note-taking, breeds passivity, and passivity is incompatible with active Christian discipleship.

Implications for Teacher Education Programs

What, then, are the implications of all these considerations for our teacher education programs? I will briefly touch on three areas: foundational perspectives, the structure of our post-secondary classrooms, and theory and practice.

1. Foundational perspectives: More than ever before, philosophy of education is the most critical component in our teacher education programs. We can teach our education students all the skills and techniques in the world. But if they cannot place them in the context of a Christian vision of education, we will have done them a disservice. Christian philosophy of education encompasses, of

course, much more than a perspective on teaching. Other themes play an equally important role. I think, for example, of a biblical view of the child as a unique, gifted image of God. I think of a larger vision of created reality as “the theater of God” (to use John Calvin’s phrase), his Kingdom which in its entirety is subject to his will. I think of the larger Christian task to function as agents of reconciliation, busy making all things new (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Colossians 1:19-20). Such themes must under gird and permeate our entire teacher education program if we have any hope at all of teaching our education students to teach Christianly.

We all know we live in a culture saturated by pragmatism, individualism and materialism. These “isms” are not mere labels. They are powerful spiritual forces that grip the hearts of women and men. They control and direct our Western civilization. Christian teachers must be keenly aware of these spirits, discern their impact on schooling and on classroom practices, know how to combat them, and pursue biblical alternatives (Van Dyk 1993:1-8).

2. The structure of our education classes: If teaching is guiding, unfolding and enabling within the context of a collaborative classroom, then every effort must be made to design our post-secondary teacher education classes as models. Too often the way we teach contradicts such a vision of Christian teaching. Take some of our large classes, for example. How can we adequately recognize and celebrate individual gifts and talents in a classroom of more than 100 students? How can we encourage students to take responsibility for each other’s learning in classrooms in which they hardly know one another? How can we foster active discipleship and servanthood in classrooms in which we are forced to rely too much on direct instruction?

True, even in large classes we can still use a variety of good cooperative learning strategies. But I remind you of the distinction between cooperative learning as a strategy and the larger collaborative classroom as context. I fear that often our education classes are fundamentally individualistic classrooms into which we inject occasional cooperative activities. We may be lulled into believing that we have established a collaborative classroom when we periodically require some group work. Large classes often force us to send mixed messages: compete

(for good grades) and cooperate. On Monday and Wednesday we are individualists, on Friday we engage in some collaboration.

In spite of these serious handicaps, there are some things we can do to have our education students experience a Christian collaborative classroom in their teacher education program. Here are some suggestions:

- Encourage students to become fellow travelers, joining you on a journey towards equipping for service. At the beginning of the term, ask the students to share with you, and with one another, something of their life, their experiences, their dreams, hopes and fears. Have them identify specific goals and suggest ways in which they can reach them in the course you teach. Invite frequent discussions about your class, your teaching, and student learning.
- Invite the students to take ownership of their learning. Give them options about how they might want to learn the course material and to demonstrate their learning. Involve them in the design and construction of tests and examinations. Have them suggest evaluation procedures. Provide them with opportunities for self-evaluation. Use collaborative teaching strategies liberally. Design them with the explicit purpose of encouraging the students to practice discipleship skills. Remember, it’s one thing to tell students how to be servants, but it’s quite another to ask them to practice it. I would specifically recommend “shared praxis” approaches. As suggested, “shared praxis” encourages students to compare their experiences with a topic and to discuss and compare their experiences and understandings and to articulate how the new learning will be incorporated into their future lives, how it will make a difference and to commit themselves to actions resulting from their learning (Van Dyk, in preparation).

These suggestions are not warmed-over Deweyan democratism! After all, the teacher remains the guide, divinely appointed to the task of equipping for service. I am not at all talking about a free-for-all open-classroom type approach to learning. But neither do I think it right to treat students as if they were objects to be manipulated or passive containers to be stuffed with our brilliant insights! After all, every one of our students is a special, gifted image of God.

3. Theory and practice: A problem we face in our teacher education programs is the tendency of students to maintain a huge gap between theory and practice. Presumably theory is what you do in college classrooms; practice is what you get in the “real world” classrooms of elementary and secondary schools. Theory is boring and irrelevant; practice involves action and excitement. Sometimes cooperating teachers confirm and reinforce this view. Sometimes they tell student teachers: “Forget all this college stuff—you’re in the real world now!”

As college professors, too, we can easily foster this dichotomy by how we treat and talk about theory and practice. Too often we see theory and practice as distinct domains, only externally related. We may say, for example, that theory affects practice and practice reflects theory. This sort of formulation continues the dichotomy.

Nor are theory and practice parallel to knowing and doing. The ancient Greeks postulated such a view. They distinguished sharply between theoretic knowing and doing, between knowledge and action, between theory and practice. But such narrow intellectualism contradicts the biblical concept of knowledge. According to the Scriptures, knowledge divorced from and unrelated to actions is not knowledge at all. Theory and practice are two ways of doing. All knowing, including theoretical knowing, is a form of doing, in response to hearing (Van Dyk 1982:2-7).

To overcome the theory/practice dichotomy, we need a better grasp of the concept praxis. Praxis refers to the close intertwining of theory and practice. This is especially important in education. No part of educational theory should be removed from practice. And at no point in our educational practice can we leave theory out or set it aside. The idea of praxis, incidentally, is currently much discussed under the rubrics “reflective practice” and “action research.”

In our teacher education programs we need to teach our students “praxis.” To do so, we must bring practical situations into theoretical settings, and into the student practicum experience we need to bring the theoretical considerations.

This can only happen through active, participatory learning and teaching. The reader will be familiar with such teaching and learning: case studies, discovery learning, inquiry methods, journals, role

play and simulations, and the like. This does not mean we cannot lecture; but when we do, we should make sure to present many illustrations, stories, examples, and opportunities for students to respond.

In all of this we constantly ask, “Why?” We don’t just teach effective methods, learning theories and management skills. Ultimately, we teach our students to ask and answer “Why?” There is nothing in our teacher education program to which this question does not apply. How we help students answer this question makes all the difference. In particular, we need to wean our students and teachers away from the answer, “Because it works!”

Conclusion

I have sketched a broad, general approach to teaching our education students to teach Christianly. There are no universal prescriptions for teaching students to teach Christianly, any more than that there are universal prescriptions for teaching in general. This does not mean that nothing universal can be described. If our only recourse was personal preference, ultimately we would sink in a morass of pragmatism and relativism, with each one of us doing what is right in his or her own eyes. Let me conclude, then, with two biblical parameters.

First, all creation and all human activity within the creation are subject to the will and intent of God. This includes teaching students to teach Christianly. Teaching Christianly can never be regarded as merely a set of techniques or methods. The entire concept represents a response to what the Lord intends our teaching to be. Consciousness of this reality is indispensable to our work in our teacher education programs. But because of long-term historical distortions, it has become very difficult to discern the will of God. The biblical command to test the spirits (1 John 4:1) is a daunting task.

Second, in today’s fad-ridden, hoopla-promoting jungle of education, we need to work and pray together to develop and press a Christian alternative to the innumerable opinions and options around us. The individualism so characteristic of our age can be overcome among us only if we deliberately and intentionally reach out to one another and structure opportunities for meaningful collaboration. The conference that led to this book is an example of the efforts that need to continue.

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