Review of Graham's "Making a Difference: Christian Educators in Public Schools"

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Donovan L. Graham

*Making a Difference: Christian Educators in Public Schools*

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Donovan Graham has provided a thoughtful and practical guide for Christian teachers in public schools to help them understand and embrace a grace-filled approach to their calling. Graham challenges teachers to contemplate key theological truths and the implications that follow. He insists, “We must examine our personal relationships with the students, attitudes towards the students, classroom management practices, grading and measurement practices, the structure of our curriculum and daily learning activities—every part of our learning atmosphere—to see whether our students are breathing the fresh air of the gospel that leads to life or the toxic fumes of legalism that lead to death” (pp. 29–30).

The proper role of the Christian teacher is “not being an evangelist or even a missionary,” Graham clarifies. “After all, you are primarily there to teach. It is, however, being ‘missional,’ in that you live out the truth of the gospel where you are and reveal both the kingdom and the heart of Jesus” (p. 59). This is accomplished through the quality of the relationships teachers establish with students. The goal is a connection with each student based on the assumption that every child bears the image of God. As image bearers, students are to be accepted and valued as they walk through the door each day with all their faults, and are to be provided a safe space to learn.

Through the first three sections, Graham builds a foundation of theological teachings concerning creation, the fall, the nature of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit. The image of God, though marred, is still recognizable in both students and teachers. Teaching should reflect the truth that students are purposeful, rational, creative, moral, responsible,
relational beings because they bear the image of God. Graham promotes considerable student freedom, even in sorting out moral issues. Genuine teaching goes far beyond passing on information, dictating beliefs, and issuing behavioral directives. Students must make their own choices, live with the consequences, and learn through the process. Graham is not timid about promoting classroom practices that logically flow from a belief that teachers are sinful, finite creatures. He suggests that we who teach are just as broken as our students and should be “cautious about our interpretations, humble in our approach to students and parents, and unwilling to take ourselves too seriously” (p. 46). Grace is the appropriate response to brokenness and demands classrooms where students are creative risk-takers who are expected to make mistakes. The challenge of applying these theological truths in the day-to-day world of classroom teaching is the subject of the fourth section.

The fifth section includes chapters that emphasize the importance of relationships Christian teachers need with God and with others. Sandwiched between those two chapters is a delightful reflection on establishing “rhythm” in life. I found this chapter to be a hidden gem, addressing a topic worthy of much more attention. Graham draws heavily and fruitfully from Parker Palmer and Richard Foster, along with the Benedictine monastic tradition. The use of Quaker and Catholic sources enhances the book, but the intended audience is clearly Protestant Christians, particularly those from evangelical churches.

The emphasis on teacher-student relationships will make this book attractive to many Christian classroom teachers. Readers are immediately introduced to fifteen students, each with their own unique challenges. The postscript contains illustrations of how these students were served by teachers modeling practices the book promotes. At the end of the first chapter, readers are asked to identify needy students of their own, providing a focus for personal reflection throughout the book.

What’s missing is consideration of the challenges of professional collaboration and teacher leadership that are common today. Teachers are viewed as individualists with considerably more autonomy than most teachers who read this book enjoy. The book references the systemic challenges teachers face, but offers nothing to guide those who seek to make changes at that level.

In spite of those overlooked topics, the book is a helpful resource for
Christian teachers in public schools seeking to integrate faith and work. It is especially appropriate for groups who meet regularly to support and encourage one another and want a book to guide their conversation. The last three chapters provide an extensive set of suggestions and strategies for moving forward, one step at a time and with support.

Gary Sehorn