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The Office of Teacher in Times of School Reform



by John Van Dyk

School reform is in the air.¹ Parents, legislators, and business people, rumbling along on a school-bashing bandwagon, loudly decry the ineffectiveness of education in general and of the American public schools in particular. Business executives complain they cannot find competent graduates to hire. Economists warn that we are losing our ability to compete in the world market. Statistics show that U.S. elementary and high school students are far behind their Japanese and German counterparts in just about everything from math and science to peeling potatoes. What to do?

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Proposals to fix the problem are not hard to find: Scrap the bureaucracy, say some. Raise the standards, others contend. Technology is the key, still others maintain. Meanwhile, the belief that good education is simply a matter of money and resources continues to flourish as well. Above the din of proposed solutions, however, one uncontested theme has emerged: schools must change.

In our Christian educational communities, too, there are stirrings of change. Sometimes these changes are forced upon us by new government regulations, or by changing patterns in public school education, or simply by the current climate clamoring for school reform. At other times the changes originate in the realization that times change, that God continues to unfold his plan, and that, consequently, Christian schools cannot stand still. No change *is* change: no change means regress, to fall behind, to change our place in relation to a changing world.²

In the midst of the furor about change and reform, we do well to step back and ask some fundamental questions. Sometimes these questions are overlooked. For example, there is much talk about changing the school curriculum. But should we not ask, in view of conflicting opinions, what we mean by curriculum in the first place? Or, we urge higher standards without considering how such standards relate to the larger goals our schools should pursue. Or, we talk about school improvement and do not ask: What is a school anyway? What *ought* it to be? Ignoring these sorts of questions will leave us with mere bandaid approaches to school reform.

A Fundamental Question

In this article I focus on one such fundamental question: Just what is the place and role of the teacher in a school? It is interesting—and revealing—that educational “summits” often talk about funding and standards and technology while overlooking the central role of the teacher.³ But programs for school improvement cannot bypass the teacher. It has been rightly asserted that a school is only as good as its teachers. After all, it is the *teacher* who must implement the curriculum. It is the *teacher* who is primarily responsible for student learning. A school, in fact, is hardly a school unless there are teachers. Clearly, one cannot talk about school reform without talking about teachers.

But what, in reality, is the common view of a teacher, even today? It is no secret that, in general, teachers are not accorded the prestige they deserve. The term “school teacher” still conjures up visions of single ladies with scratchy voices and hair tied in a bun. To many uninformed observers, moreover, teaching seems like a soft job—hardly more demanding than baby-sitting—with attractive fringe benefits, such as long summer vacations, to boot. And teacher training? A waste of time! Why, anyone with a speck of common sense can just walk into a classroom and teach, right?

Another View

Any and all talk about teaching as glorified baby-sitting, or as a soft touch, or as a job for which anyone on the street is qualified, should be summarily dismissed from our conversations. The well-known warning of the Apostle James (3:1) that few should presume to be teachers ought to reverberate in our ears. The fact is, one can hardly think of a task more important than teaching. After all, over the years a teacher affects, one way or another, the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of youngsters. Teaching is also one of the most demanding, energy-sapping professions in the world. James Dobson says that parenting is the toughest job in the universe. This may well be so. But surely classroom teaching is a close second!

Is teaching just a “job,” and an easy one at that? Are school teachers merely employees who follow the orders of school boards and parents? Are they

just hirelings who need not play a central, even determining role in programs of school reform? Of course not! To see more clearly the absurdity of such claims, we must review the special calling, task, and office of the teacher. I have in mind specifically the office of the *Christian* teacher.

Calling and Task

Note, first of all, that a Christian teacher is *called* to the task of teaching. Teaching is a divine *assignment* and requires a carefully considered response.⁴ When we think of “assignment,” a vision of dull drudgery may come to mind. A teacher’s response to God’s assignment, however,

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should be one of enthusiasm and eagerness. If teachers do not feel enthusiasm and excitement about their task, they should reconsider their sense of calling. Of course, like everyone else, teachers will have their ups and downs, their good days and their bad days. Some days, in fact, will make them wonder whether becoming a teacher was really the right thing to do. Even veteran teachers regularly experience such low points. But when depression and disenchantment with teaching become patterns marking the life and work of a teacher, it surely is time to rethink the sense of calling.

It is important to remember that the Lord does not call a teacher, or anyone else for that matter, to a task that he or she cannot perform. Think of Moses who objected strenuously to the Lord’s request that he return to Egypt land to set God’s people free. “Look, Lord,” Moses protested, “I’ve got marbles in my mouth...” But God sent him anyway, along with the promise to equip him to deal with the likes of Pharaoh.

But how do we recognize our calling? And how does the Lord equip us for our task, especially a teaching task, now that a burning bush, a voice from heaven, or transforming staffs into snakes appear to be things of the past? These are important questions, not only for undergraduate students beginning a teacher education program and who

are not sure whether teaching is really for them, but also for those who, after a year or two of frustrations in the classroom, wonder whether entering a teaching career was the right choice.

How the Lord Equips Us

The Lord equips us in at least four ways: First, he endows us with talents. He gives us gifts. So whether we are prospective teachers or seasoned veterans, we must ask: What are my talents? What gifts do I have? And do these gifts qualify me to be a teacher or to continue to be a teacher? Failing to ask these questions easily leads to wrong choices. Worse, failure to ask these questions means failing to recognize our talents and, consequently, the Lord's calling.

Secondly, the Lord also endows us with interests. Observe that talents and interests are not the same things. I may have talents to be, say, a concert pianist, but my interest lies in aviation. Or, conversely, I may be interested in becoming an airline pilot, but I cannot tell up from down. Both prospective and practicing teachers must ask: Am I *really* interested in children? Am I *really* interested in the subject matter I will have to teach? Do I *like* to be in schools, in classrooms?

Some think that asking about personal interests is inappropriate. To take my interests into consideration, they believe, is really an expression of selfishness. I remember a student who came to my office tearfully confessing that he had decided to become a preacher, even though his heart lay in the theater arts. "I would love to be an actor," he confided, "but I think I must set such selfish interests aside in order to serve the Lord. If I become an actor, I will be serving only myself; if I become a minister, I can serve God full-time." We talked for a while about the false distinction between sacred and secular, and between so-called "full-time" and "part-time" Kingdom service. *All* of our life, twenty-four hours a day, is to be lived in the presence and service of God, whether as actors, as ministers, or as hair stylists. Interests, I pointed out, are good gifts of the Lord. We have no right to dismiss them. To disregard our interests is tantamount to saying: "Look, Lord, I know you created me in this way, but I'm just going to ignore your workmanship and make my own decisions." Interests, then, are powerful indicators of the

direction in which the Lord is leading us. We must take them very seriously.

Of course, it *is* possible that interests turn into pure self-interest. In this case, interests are not taken seriously enough. If we see no other purpose for our interests than serving ourselves, we may well distort our calling beyond recognition. Interests, then, cannot be the only guide. They have to come together with everything else. Our interest has to be *informed* interest. Sometimes, too, it takes time to develop our interests. In short, we ought to take our interests seriously, but treat them carefully.

In the third place, the Lord equips us for our task by the sort of personality he gave us. Let's face it, we recognize that some people are just not cut out to be teachers. At other times we say: So and so is a born teacher: he's got the right personality. Note that our personality is distinguishable from both talents and interests. We know of people who surely have the talents to be a teacher, and may even be interested, yet will not make good teachers because, if the truth be told, they enjoy computers more than people.

Finally, the Lord provides us with opportunities and confronts us with challenges and needs. He opens some doors and closes others. We must cultivate sensitivity to the leading of the Lord. We must ask: Where can I serve the Lord best, given my talents, interests, and personality? Where in God's Kingdom do I see the need for the sorts of services I can perform? Consciously and persistently asking these questions gives evidence of the deep faith and trust in our Lord that must characterize our walk as Christians. Such faith and trust, in turn, suggest that we teachers have understood the *religious* nature of our calling and task.

Religion

To understand more fully the calling, task, and office of the teacher, we must review the nature and place of religion. Religion is usually defined as one component of human life, along with others, such as politics, economics, art, and the like. The traditional distinction between church and state, for example, assumes a distinction between religion and politics. As reformational Christians, however, we reject compartmentalizing religion. Instead, we affirm that *all* of life, indeed, *all*

human activity, is essentially religious in nature. But what actually does this mean?

When we claim that all of life is religion, we mean to say that all of our activities are (1) driven by faith commitments, (2) headed in a certain direction, and (3) performed in worshipful service. The work of the teacher clearly illustrates these three elements.

First, our teaching is driven by what we believe, by what we consider to be important and valuable. This motivation is true for all teaching, whether Christian, atheistic, Muslim, or whatever. Now the faith that drives the Christian life is a faith in a living God who loves us and cares for us and is continuously present with us. In childlike faith, Christian teachers see themselves as utterly dependent on God. They do not first of all trust their own powers, their expertise, their creativity, their charisma, or their ability to get along with students. Instead, they trust the Lord. In fact, they see their teaching as a collaborative affair: They teach *with the Lord* at their side, arm in arm, as it were, in step with the Holy Spirit.⁵ Instead of thinking "I am going to teach today" they have learned to say: "We—the Lord and I—will teach today."

Secondly, all teaching moves in a certain direction. Teaching is purposeful activity. Perhaps the direction leads to good citizenship, or the acquisition of a set of morals, or the ability to be successful in the world, or whatever. *Christian* teachers direct their teaching towards the goal of preparing their students for knowledgeable and competent discipleship.⁶

Thirdly, human activity, including teaching activity, is service. Life is lived in worshipful service, either to the King of kings or to an idol. We order our lives according to the sort of god we worship and serve. If, for example, we adopt the god (really an idol) of amassing material wealth as the greatest good, we will order our life and priorities accordingly. Such an idol will control our life. The Lord, of course, wants us to accept, worship, and serve *Him* as the source of all meaning and value, and order our lives (including our teaching) accordingly.

To understand the teacher's task as a religious, faith-directed task is an indispensable prerequisite to understanding the teacher's office. Just as the task of the teacher is a religious task, so the teach-

er's office is a thoroughly religious office. But what do we mean by "office"?

Office

Picture a young man preparing to become a teacher. Sensing the Lord's call, he examines his talents, interests, and personality, and enrolls in a teacher education program. After four arduous years he is declared a candidate and subsequently sustains a number of interviews. And then it happens: He is offered a contract! The Lord opens a door. Prayerfully he considers whether or not to accept the offer. Then he makes his decision, and signs the contract.

Teaching is one of the most demanding, energy-sapping professions.

What is happening here? Does signing the contract mean that our young man has merely accepted a job offer? The signature does signify, of course, that he agrees to perform certain duties for a certain wage. In reality, however, signing the contract symbolizes that he assumes a specific, God-ordained office, a specific place in the Kingdom of God, a station, as it were, from which he can engage in redemptive educational activity.

Office, then, refers to a God-appointed place. It is a "locational" concept. It refers to an official position, to a place within the community of God's people. We might use a military metaphor here: Just as in the army there is a diversity of stations ranging from the infantry to the support troops, so in the army of God we are assigned our positions. Each one of these positions represents an office. Each position is occupied by an "office-bearer." In the same way, teachers are "office-bearers."

Sometimes we encounter very limited conceptions of office. For example, under the influence of medieval nature/grace, laity/clergy, secular/sacred distinctions, it is sometimes believed that only elders and deacons and ministers in the institutional churches are office-bearers. To reinforce this idea we often "ordain" such office-bearers by special acts of laying on hands and special, preformulated installation rites. The Reformation did much to undo this notion. Nevertheless, in Protestantism, too, the idea of office has often

remained limited to ecclesiastical contexts.

Such a restricted view of office is misplaced. The Lord calls each one of us to our various tasks. Each one of these tasks is associated with office. Most of us have multiple offices because we have multiple tasks: For example, I am a teacher, a husband, and a father. Each of these roles—offices, really—implies a different task, and each one of these tasks is assigned to me by the Lord. They all are religious tasks, driven by faith, headed in a certain direction, and performed in some sort of service.

One can be placed in office in various ways. A teacher assumes his office when he signs the contract. A politician is elected to office. A father becomes an office-bearer through biological processes. Sometimes, as was often the case in the ancient world, the drawing of lots determined who would occupy a particular office.

It is important to recognize the *significance* of an office. In the early church the office of elder, for example, was regarded as particularly significant. Sometimes the weight of responsibility that comes along with an office is not recognized. Think of young people who become parents when they are not yet ready or sufficiently mature to assume such an office. The office of teacher is especially important, since a teacher affects, for good or evil, the lives of many young people. I have already referred to the Apostle James, who reminds us of the heavy responsibility shouldered by the teacher. In order to recognize and affirm the importance of the teaching office, some Christian schools conduct special induction or installation ceremonies for incoming teachers.

Office Consciousness

It is vitally important that teachers recognize their office. Christian teachers need to develop a sense of *office consciousness*. Such office consciousness guarantees that teachers will not reduce teaching to a humdrum menial task, a routine for which they receive a monthly paycheck. Office consciousness will help them to connect their work to the calling of God, and, therefore, to the work of God himself. Office consciousness equips them see that every morning anew they enter the classroom as a place where the Kingdom of God must come to expression. Office consciousness

reminds the teachers that together with others they must strive to do his will. Office consciousness, in short, will remind teachers that life is religion in action. Ultimately, office consciousness empowers the teachers to participate fully in a school's program of improvement.

Not only the teachers, but everyone who is involved in the educational process—parents, board members, administrators, and legislators—must recognize the office of the teacher. Failure to do so will encourage school boards and administrators to make institutional decisions without adequate participation of the teaching staff. Not recognizing the teacher's office will marginalize teachers and reduce their status to mere employees, workers who are manipulated by administrative and board authorities, hirelings who have little meaningful voice in school reform.

The Implications of Office

That such a reduction is totally misplaced will be clear when we consider the implications the idea of office carries with it. We have already referred to some of these. Four of them are particularly significant.

1. **Authority** — What authorizes us to teach? What allows us to exercise authority in our classrooms? Is it because we are bigger and stronger than most of the students? Is it because we know more? Yes, these are factors. But they do not legitimate our teaching authority. Classroom authority is a direct consequence of office. Authority is inseparably attached to office. This is true for all offices. My authority as a father is to be attributed to my *office* as father. If we disconnect authority from office and attach it to ourselves as persons, we change it into raw power.

Of course, authority does imply power. All authority possesses power. In fact, authority *must* possess power. But such power may not be disconnected from office. In schools it is sometimes forgotten that the *authorization* to teach requires the *empowerment* to teach. When a school board hires a teacher and puts her in a classroom full of difficult children while at the same time withholding necessary resources, or prevents her from exercising her teaching task in freedom,⁷ the authority of her office is severely curtailed, perhaps even nullified.

At this point the issue of school reform returns once again. When programs of school improvement ignore the authority of the teacher, they in essence deny the office of the teacher. As suggested, they reduce the calling of the teacher to a subservient status of the “hireling.” But since teachers are central to the educational enterprise, they must be included in reform proposals. Indeed, they must have a significant, even determining voice in the design and implementation of such proposals, especially those proposals that touch directly on curriculum, learning goals, instructional strategies, and assessment procedures. Simply imposing “higher standards” or assessment procedures on classroom teachers ignores their office and prevents them from exercising their legitimate authority.

2. **Responsibility** — Authority comes with the office, and the office is a God-appointed place. Clearly, such authority, as well as all the other duties of the office, is to be exercised with responsibility. But to whom is the office-bearer responsible? Ultimately, of course, to the Lord, who has called and appointed the office-bearer in the first place. But the Lord has appointed other office-bearers as well, such as the principal of the school and the members of the board. Teachers as office-bearers are responsible to them as well. Furthermore, teachers are responsible to the parents of the children, and to the children themselves. There is, then, a complex responsibility structure encompassing the teaching task.

The question of sphere sovereignty emerges in this context. Sphere sovereignty suggests that the authority and responsibility of the various offices are directly delegated to the office-bearer by the Lord Himself. All authority is from God, Paul tells us in Romans 13:1. Sometimes conflicts between parents and teachers arise. Parents who support Christian schools sometimes seek to settle such conflicts on the basis of a supposed *in loco parentis* (“in the place of the parents”) principle. Presumably the teacher simply takes over from the parent, and, consequently, the teacher’s authority is subservient to parental authority.

Sphere sovereignty suggests that the *in loco parentis* principle is problematic, perhaps mistaken. While it is true that parents have the responsibility to see to it that their children are nurtured in

the Lord, they do not delegate the authority of teaching to the teacher, anymore than they delegate authority to the medical profession when their children require surgery. A parent has no more authority over a teacher’s lesson plan than over a surgeon’s decision of which scalpel to use. Competent teachers and competent surgeons are office-bearers in the educational and medical arenas, and their offices come with their own peculiar authority and responsibility. Of course, a parent can withdraw a child from the authority of a teacher or a surgeon. Doing so, however, does not essentially impair or reduce the sphere of authority of the teacher or the surgeon. Ironically, to see

To see the teachers as in loco parentis provides an argument for the claim that schools should take over all duties from the parents.

the teachers or the school as *in loco parentis* provides an argument for the claim that schools *should* take over *all* duties from the parents. I think we will agree that while schools do in fact increasingly take over parenting duties—due to the continuing breakdown of the family—they ought not to do so.

3. **Servanthood** — The teacher as office-bearer, endowed with authority and responsibility, is to carry out the teaching task in self-effacing (and self-affirming) servanthood. Here again, office consciousness is vitally important. Without such consciousness a teacher might believe that it is sufficient if her task provides personal satisfaction. Or he might see his work as an opportunity to express to be a leader or to be in charge. Such thoughts are essentially self-serving. Rather, the great commandment “Love God and your neighbor”—which, according to Paul in Galatians 5 translates into “Serve God and your neighbor”—must guide the Christian teacher. Consequently, all classroom teaching decisions must be made in response to the question: How will this serve the Lord? And how will this serve the young people in my care?

This is not an easy matter. Yes, it is easy to say “I teach to serve the Lord,” but in actuality we often teach in a self-serving way. Think, for exam-

ple, of how defensive we teachers tend to be, how difficult it is for us sometimes to accept and make use of legitimate critique, and how quickly we blame our students for their failures rather than our poor teaching technique. Self-effacing servanthood is a difficult goal to achieve. In a sense we never achieve it. But we need to work at it all the time. As teachers we must take time periodically to reflect on the extent to which we successfully exercise servanthood.

For the teacher, servanthood displays the special character of ministry. What does ministry mean? Usually we think of it as helping those who are hurting. Thinking this way means that we commonly reduce ministry to a healing ministry. Now obviously this is a very important sort of ministry. Teaching, however, may better be defined as a "ministry to equip." Such ministry includes the healing ministry. Teachers must meet needs and heal hurts. They must forgive and encourage. But they must also celebrate gifts and equip others for service. In so doing they are ministering, attending to the needs and gifts of others.

Concluding Remarks

Office consciousness is vital to the educational process and to programs of school reform. Of course, in a world in which power, competition, and selfish ambition rule, office consciousness will be difficult to cultivate, even more difficult to acknowledge. But surely in a Christian educational community the idea of office must and can play a central role. A Christian school community is, after all, a body tightly knit together, in which every part is important to the welfare of the

whole.⁸ Within this body there is a diversity of calling, a diversity of tasks, a diversity of office. Arbitrary power, disconnected from calling and office, can have no place in the Kingdom of God. Only when the diversity of office, authority, and responsibility is celebrated and promoted can the Kingdom of God be made manifest in the troubled world of education. A communal sense of office may well offer an unparalleled opportunity to show the world how genuine school reform is to take place.

Notes

1. This article is an adaptation of a chapter in my book *The Craft of Christian Teaching*, currently in preparation. My thanks to Dr. Stuart Fowler for reading and commenting on this chapter.
2. For a discussion of the potential for change in Christian schools, see my editorial "Can Christian Schools Change?" in the February, 1994, issue of *Christian Educators Journal*.
3. If teachers are discussed at all at these so-called educational summits, it's usually their classroom competence that receives all the attention. Presumably, as long as they can read and write and spell reasonably correctly and know something of the subject matter they teach, teachers can continue to teach. Questions about their role in school reform programs are ignored as irrelevant.
4. 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11-13.
5. Galatians 5:25.
6. Ephesians 4:11-12. For discussion of the purpose of Christian schooling, see my article "Goals and Objectives: Pathways to Educational Myopia?" in the June, 1995, issue of *Pro Rege*.
7. Some schools require that all their teachers use a specific pedagogical strategy, such as, for example, the Madeline Hunter direct teaching method.
8. A major theme in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12.