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God Loveth Adverbs: Teaching (and Living) Christianly

Abstract

"In my current role as a teacher educator, I strive to help my students (pre-service teachers) understand what it means to 'teach Christianly.' If I'm honest about it, I am still striving to fully understand what this means in my own teaching practice."

Posting about being a Christ-like teacher from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/god-loveth-adverbs-teaching-and-living-christianly/>

Keywords

In All Things, God, teaching, perspective, Nicholas Wolterstorff

Disciplines

Christianity | Education

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

God Loveth Adverbs: Teaching (and Living) “Christianly”

 [all in allthings.org /god-loveth-adverbs-teaching-and-living-christianly/](http://allthings.org/god-loveth-adverbs-teaching-and-living-christianly/)

Dave Mulder

One morning in May of 2015, I had the opportunity to sit in on a conversation with a hero-of-sorts for me: [Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff](#). He was in the area for some other speaking engagements, and arrangements were made to have him on campus to share some of his thoughts on Christian higher education in an informal session. It was fascinating for me to hear from Dr. Wolterstorff firsthand; I’ve been reading things he has written since I was an undergraduate Elementary Education major 20 years ago.

There were so many things that came up in this short session that I cannot recall all of them, but one stood out for me.

Almost in passing, Dr. Wolterstorff mentioned an old Puritan adage (thus within the Reformed tradition...):

“God loveth adverbs.”

I was struck by this quote because I have heard it said before that “Christian” is great as a noun, but pretty lousy as an adjective. The idea that there is one singular “Christian” perspective on... pick your topic... is challenging. All too often, I think there are multiple “Christian” ways of looking at things, because the umbrella of Christendom is wide, to say the least!

I love the idea of describing our approach to thinking about our work as “Christianly.” Using the adverb instead of the adjective here may be helpful. The idea of a Christian college preparing young adults to conduct their work in this world “Christianly”—in harmony with biblical truths, in consonance with faith, following the example of Christ—rings true for me.

In my current role as a teacher educator, I strive to help my students (pre-service teachers) understand what it means to “teach Christianly.”¹ If I’m honest about it, I am still striving to fully understand what this means in my own teaching practice.

In one of the very first college courses I taught, we were talking about how our perspective matters for *how* we teach, and our classroom conversation turned to whether or not there is such a thing as “Christian teaching.” I brought up this topic and hoped we would have some real discussion about it, but my students were slow to get started. Many of them seemed to assume—as I had, when I was in their shoes, I am sure—“I am a Christian and going to be a teacher... I suppose that means I will be a ‘Christian teacher.’” I was intrigued, however, by one student who was affronted by the idea—as if there was such a thing as a “Christian” way to teach!

I clearly remember him asking, “Is there a ‘Christian’ way to do anything? Is there a ‘Christian’ way to smoke a cigarette?”

(Hmmm... good question, there.)

That got the rest of the class thinking pretty critically about what we really mean by “Christian teaching” or “Christian education.” Our class consensus was that there *is* such a thing as “teaching Christianly,” but no one could really articulate exactly what that meant.

We clearly said what it **isn’t**:

- It’s not *just* having devotions, chapel, Bible class, and the like.
- It’s not *just* quoting scripture every few minutes.

- It’s not *just* taking prayer breaks throughout the school day.
- It’s not *just* using a sprinkling of “God talk” in the lessons you present.

Not that there is anything inherently *wrong* or *un-Christian* about these things; in fact, we agreed that we would expect that these things should happen in Christian schools!

But then, my insightful student who had stirred the pot so perfectly asked the *magic question*: “Can you ‘teach Christianly’ in a public school?” So, of course, I turned the question back to the class. And again, there was strong consensus that you *can*, in fact, “teach Christianly” in a public school setting, but no one was entirely clear how that might happen.

After quite a lot of debate and discussion, I suggested we might think of it as a matter of *perspective*: perhaps “teaching Christianly” has more to do with our intent, our approach, our heart. If we are striving to be Christ-like in our approach to classroom management, to unit plans and lesson plans, to instructional strategies, to assessment and evaluation instruments, to our interactions with students/parents/colleagues/administrators, and *to our entire teaching practice*, perhaps this is what “teaching Christianly” might look like. ²

I am the first to admit that I don’t have all the answers, and I certainly do not do this perfectly in my own teaching practice. But I strive to help my students think through big questions: What does it really look like to teach Christianly? Will my classroom look different or feel different from the classroom next door if that teacher is not also striving to teach Christianly? How does my identity in Christ affect how I approach my task as an educator? How can I submit my will to the will of Christ in *all parts* of my teaching practice? And, more broadly than just teaching... How can I *live* Christianly in the fullest, most authentic sense of discipleship?

I welcome you to wrestle with these questions along with us!

Footnotes

1. In full disclosure, this is not an idea I have developed myself; I had the joy of learning from Dr. John Van Dyk in both my undergraduate and graduate studies, and his work has had a profound influence on my own thinking about teaching Christianly in an authentic way. See his books, *Letters to Lisa* and *The Craft of Christian Teaching: A Classroom Journey* for his thoughts on what this might look like. ↩
2. Again, I am indebted to John Van Dyk for this conception of teaching Christianly, which he discusses at length in *The Craft of Christian Teaching: A Classroom Journey*. If you are a Christian educator, you owe it to yourself—and your students—to read this book. ↩