

Teaching: A Blessed Calling

It was a grade-school science teacher's enthusiasm and demonstrations that first hooked me on science. And then God gave me a pair of chemistry and physics teachers who showed me some of the most fascinating aspects of God's creation and helped me understand "why" things in creation do what they do. These experiences solidified in my mind that I wanted to work in the physical sciences. In addition, a Bible teacher once took me aside and told me that I might have the ability to be a minister and strongly encouraged me to pursue the ministry. Although not convinced that I should enter the ministry, I did see in myself an interest in working with the young people and a desire to teach.

Consequently, before my high school years were completed, I knew clearly that I was called to be a teacher in a Christian high school chemistry/physics classroom. Where else could I get to "do" science every day? And what could be more satisfying than to share my love for this aspect of God's creation with the covenant young people? High school was the right age group – they could tie their own shoes, were past the "she-has-cooties" stage, and could begin to think abstractly and appreciate deeper learning. Therefore, I felt called to be a high school chemistry/physics teacher.

I believe that this is how God shows each of us what our calling is regarding a profession. He does so by showing us what gifts and interests he gives us through encouragements from family and friends, as well as through the situations in our life. Young people have to learn, with the guidance of their parents, to examine their lives and see God leading them towards particular vocations.

Necessary Qualities

I believe that there are two *essential* qualities that anyone desiring to be a teacher must have. Those qualities are a love for the student (and working with the student) and a passion for the content.

First, anyone desiring to be a teacher must love children and working with them. An elementary teacher, for example, must love the children and their hundreds of questions, as well as their need for help on the simplest of tasks. This love for the children is ultimately grounded in the covenant. It is imperative for prospective teachers to have a proper understanding of the covenant that God establishes with His people and the place of children in the covenant. When a teacher understands the love of God for his covenant children – including the lambs of the church – then the teacher cannot but love these children.

Although all the members of the body of Christ love the children of the covenant, not everyone is called to be a teacher. In addition to loving the children of the covenant, one called

to be a teacher must genuinely love **working** with these children. The teacher must have the gift of patience to work with the young people, as well as the ability to interact and instruct the children at their level.

This love for the children manifests itself in several ways. First, a teacher who loves his students has a **genuine interest** in their lives. “What do you have for lunch today?” “Boy, I sure enjoyed your piano playing at the program the other day!” “Did I see your grandma in church yesterday? Is she in town visiting you for a while?” This love for the children also manifests itself in **an ability to interact** with students. Those interactions may include playing with them. “Hey kids, let’s play hockey at recess today!” It may also involve simple conversation, which sometimes may simply be related to their learning. “Are you ready for that test next hour? No? What are you concerned about from this past chapter?” Finally, a love for the children manifests itself in a **willingness to discipline** the children. No parent loves their children whom they will not discipline. This is one of the deepest manifestations of love a teacher can show his students. Unfortunately, a great temptation for teachers is to try to manifest love in other areas at the expense of discipline. As grievous as discipline is for both parties (Heb. 12), it is necessary and will bring forth good fruit in the lives of the covenant children (Prov. 22:6). Teachers must be encouraged to discipline the young people faithfully, confident that God blesses the faithful discipline with good fruit.

The second essential quality that a teacher must have is a passion for the content that he must teach. Can a teacher be effective if he greatly loves the children but has no subject-specific knowledge or has no interest in the material he must present? Such a teacher will not be of much service to the parents who called him to teach their children these things. That passion for the content manifests itself in a number of ways. First, a teacher must have a general love for learning. There is a familiar saying that says, “Teachers who love teaching teach children to love learning”. Teachers must love to read and study – particularly to read God’s word, but also a variety of other good books to broaden their perspective and knowledge base. A love for learning is a key characteristic a successful teacher must have. Second, the teacher must not only love learning, but must also delight to share God’s wondrous works with others. The teacher must have a passion to bring the content to the students in light of God’s word so that the students ultimately see God in all their work. Finally, a teacher must be able to bring the content that he loves down to the level of the student whom he must teach.

Besides having these two essential qualities, it would be helpful for a teacher to have a few other skills. A teacher should be aware of the pedagogical techniques available to him in order to help teach the students the necessary content. A teacher must be very careful in this area, however, for many of the techniques and ideas about education are based on a wrong

view of the child, of the teacher, or of the content. Therefore, a teacher must have a keen sense of discernment – to use only those things that are truly profitable to the student.

In addition to a knowledge of pedagogy, a prospective teacher would profit greatly from a truly Reformed “developmental psychology” course. So much of Christian education (from instruction to discipline) is based on a proper view of the child. A great place to start would be to read Prof. Hanko’s *Biblical Psychology* syllabus and listen to his speeches on *Biblical Psychology* that were recorded a few years ago by the Federation of Protestant Reformed School Societies (for access to these contact Alex Kalsbeek—Executive Director).

Finally, a teacher ought to have a working understanding of the history of the Christian school movement and the principles and practices of Reformed education, including a thorough grasp of the concept “in loco parentis”. This will help guide the teacher towards the correct goal in his work. School boards would do well to encourage future teachers to take the “Principles and Practices of Reformed Education” course that is currently taught every other year by Prof. Dykstra. And no teacher ought to step into a classroom without having read Prof. Engelsma’s excellent work, *Reformed Education* (at least 3 or 4 times; and then yearly thereafter).

Preparation

Typically, a prospective teacher will need to earn a 4-year college degree. That degree will include education courses (i.e., theory and practice) and content-specific courses (i.e., chemistry). The teacher must be especially discerning with regard to what is taught in many of the education courses. Whether at a Christian college or public university, you will not likely agree with the college’s “world view” regarding education. Nevertheless, you will be faced with important opportunities to express and articulate your “world view” (especially at a Christian college). It will be critical at those times to grow in your understanding of Reformed principles that apply to education by your own study of the word and the reading of good books (as well as discussions with teachers at PRTI conventions).

A prospective teacher will get into the classroom setting early in the teacher preparation program. Make good use of these opportunities to get a feel for what it is like to be on the “other side” of the desk. Experience some of the joys, as well as the frustrations, of trying to get kids to understand something. This will help to solidify whether or not you are called to be a teacher. Enjoy your student teaching experiences and try to grow from them, but always understand as you practice teach that things will be different when you have your “own” students (because then you will have the opportunity to set the classroom climate as you desire *from day one*).

Teachers must also be on top of the news and trends/fads in education. I was surprised in my own experience how many faculty meetings and other settings involved a discussion of educational philosophies and trends in education. Often it is necessary to critique these trends to protect our schools from the danger of adopting practices that will be to their detriment. In this is required much wisdom. Prospective teachers would do well to prepare now for attacks that our schools may face in the future by studying and understanding the trends of the day (and the past).

As part of the preparations to teach, prospective teachers would do well to learn to acknowledge their own mistakes. You will make many mistakes—some which are worthy of a good laugh and others that are more serious. Students will be quick to let you know of your mistakes and foibles. Always acknowledge your mistakes, because nothing is more damaging to the classroom atmosphere than a teacher who is “never wrong.”

The last thing a prospective teacher ought to do in preparation for teaching is to buy good shoes.

Day-to-Day Experiences:

Once hired, a teacher will have much opportunity for a variety of experiences. Each classroom has its own “chemistry,” providing a variety of experiences from hour to hour and year to year. Almost everyone is quite familiar with the activities and duties of teachers from their own observations from their school-days. But the “behind the scenes” responsibilities of teachers are myriad, and perhaps less known. Teachers need to make lesson plans for each class of the day (**what** will be taught, **how** to teach it, what activities or technology to use, what assignment to give, etc). The teacher must learn how to make good lesson plans efficiently and to evaluate them each day for their effectiveness. With those lesson plans will come plenty of grading (tests and quizzes; daily homework; lab reports; papers). This grading, though difficult and time-consuming, can be done at flexible times and locations—during pre-dawn hours when no one is at school; by staying late after school and getting it done; or by taking a break and enjoying the company of your wife and children and grading later when the kids are in bed—and sometimes at all three of these times. But our teaching does not focus only on the academic; it primarily aims at the spiritual heart of the child. Covenant children must be taught how to use their gifts as obedient servants of God in whatever calling he gives them. They also must be taught to see the sovereign hand of God in all things. Therefore a pressing and demanding part of teaching is applying biblical principles to the various content topics. This takes a working knowledge of the content material as well as of the Scriptures and the confessions. Weaving biblical truths into the content is one of the great joys of teaching.

Other “outside the classroom” duties may include coaching, parent-teacher conferences, giving chapel speeches or teacher convention sectionals/speeches, preparing for field trips, and committee work. Other miscellaneous tasks also crop up from time to time. For example, in addition to writing this article, I spent a couple of hours this week writing college recommendations for students.

The Blessings

Today I busy myself in my 18th year of teaching. It has been a rich blessing for to me to teach in our schools. Because of the covenantal basis of our schools, the labor is an important and high calling. Although laboring with others in the sphere of the covenant to help nurture and instruct the children of the church is a heavy responsibility, it is also a very rich privilege. It is a labor that is filled with blessings and that bears much fruit.

The blessings of teaching can be found in the day-to-day duties of the teacher. Showing students “how” and “why” things in the creation work as they do and how this shows God’s greatness and wisdom is a rich blessing. For in doing this, I personally grow in my own appreciation of God’s handiwork. One of the greatest joys in teaching is to watch students respond when they recognize that something I taught them several weeks ago was a necessary step in order for them to learn what they did today (i.e., when they see the whole forest, not just the trees). When this happens I have had the great opportunity to show the young people the intricacy and inter-relatedness of God’s creation. What a blessing it is to be a part of this! There are also rich blessings in opening and studying God’s word, either in devotions, in the classroom instruction, or during lesson plan preparation. Having the opportunity to discuss spiritual matters in class, chapel, or on an individual basis with students is another way in which the work of teaching has its rich rewards. Even the challenging parts of education (i.e., discipline or grading) are rich in blessings. In order to discipline properly, I find myself in prayer at the throne of grace looking to God for the wisdom and strength to properly lead the lambs of the church in the right and proper way. And when overwhelmed with the load and weight or busyness of the work, I am sustained by the grace of God and by the encouraging words of colleagues and the cooperative and caring parents in whose place I stand. In all of this, the central blessing of teaching is knowing that God graciously uses me and my colleagues ***to help parents train and equip the covenant seed to obey and fear God*** in whatever calling/station he gives them in this ever-increasingly sinful world.

The labors of the teacher are rich and abundant in blessings. One who has been given the gifts and qualities to teach and uses those gifts faithfully in the instruction of the seed of the covenant will find a great reward and a satisfying “career” (calling). May God richly bless our schools with faithful, qualified teachers!

