

christian
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★★★★★★ PRACTICAL WISDOM ON TEACHING WITH SPIRIT / FALL 2009

* INSIDE

Teacher: Christlike Servant

Teacher:
Christlike
Colleague

Teacher:
Revealing
Christ
to Students



CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS
INTERNATIONAL

editorial

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Every student will read this book!

In a recent staff development workshop, the speaker reminded us that we may have more clarity about our problems than creative solutions because we spend more time focusing on the problem than in creative reflection on possible solutions. He said: “We always get what we are clearest about.” Considering that perspective, what are you as a Christian teacher clearest about in regard to your work with students and your interactions with colleagues?

When schools have clear missions, they are more likely to reach them. When students have clear assignments, they are more likely to complete them successfully. When we are clear about our work as Christian teachers, we are more likely to be effective. Our passion for Jesus Christ, for kids, and for learning is demonstrated in how we work with students. We truly can be models of clarity and beauty that reflect Christ. As one wise person said, “We are the book that all of our students will read this year.”

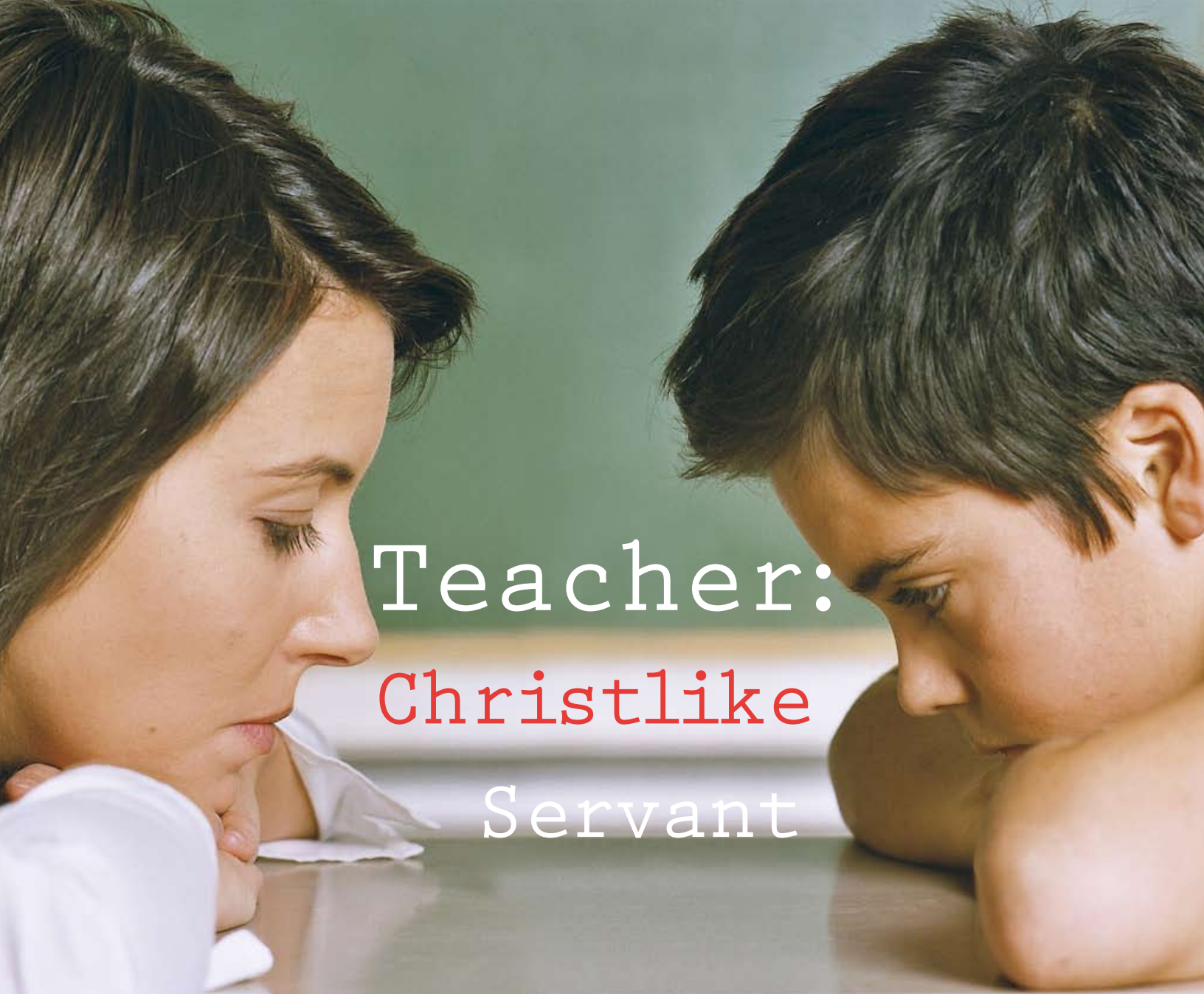
The more facets a diamond has, the more beauty that radiates when the light shines through. How many facets of being a beautiful teacher have you developed? Does the light of Christ shine through your integrity, passion, and clarity of purpose as you serve your students, their parents, your colleagues, your school, and your Lord?

This issue of *Christian School Teacher* explores three key facets of Christian teaching:

- **Teacher: Christlike Servant** (Sybesma)
- **Teacher: Christlike Colleague** (Heinemann)
- **Teacher: Revealing Christ to Students** (Sutherland)

Wishing you a blessed school year,

A handwritten signature in brown ink that reads "Dan". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping loop under the "D" and a long, horizontal stroke extending to the right.



Teacher: Christlike Servant

BY LILA SYBESMA

One of my favorite movies, *Forrest Gump*, has a memorable line: “Stupid is as stupid does.” This quote got me thinking about a biblical principle: Love is what love does. Simply put, we show our love for God by serving others. “Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep’” (John 21:16 NIV).

This verse implies that love is not just an emotion; love is also an action. Loving others is a natural outgrowth of loving Jesus, not merely a requirement. Teachers can ask students to show love to others by being intentional about being a servant. Then servanthood will eventually become a natural part of who they are. If we teachers model servanthood, our students will learn how to serve.

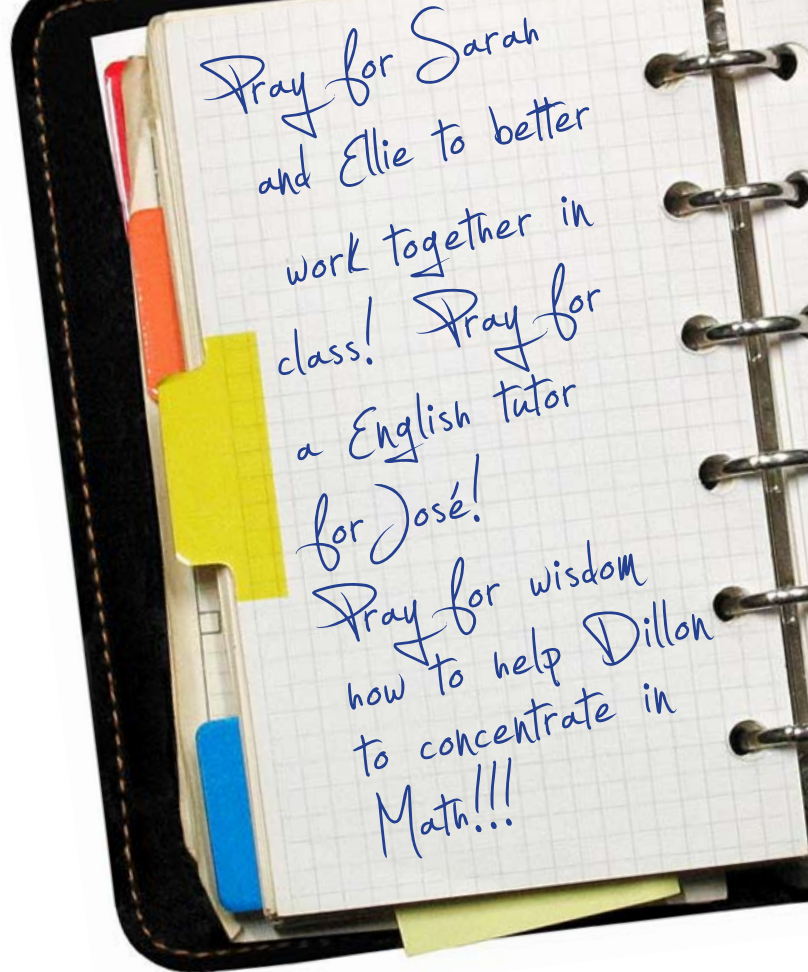
WHAT IS DISTINCTLY CHRISTIAN ABOUT A SERVANT TEACHER?

Motivation

Certainly a “non-Christian” teacher could serve his or her students in a similar manner to a Christian teacher. The difference between the two is motivation. A Christian teacher keeps in mind that Christ was the ultimate teacher and therefore tries to imitate him in the classroom. Jesus did his best work with the marginalized, (known in today’s classrooms as the “at-risk students”).

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus modeled the importance of caring and compassion. He is the servant leader we should emulate in the classroom. His ministry included service to those he encountered. He walked beside people, listened to their questions, put his followers’ needs before his own, and healed people’s wounds. Like the Teacher, a Christian teacher also devotes his or her life to service and imitates Jesus’ example in order to serve the students. But how does Christian service differ from other forms of service?

Although it can be argued that motivation for serving is different for a Christian teacher than for a teacher who is not Christian, it is actually complicated to distinguish the source of motivation for Christian and secular service. A non-Christian teacher might be motivated by approval or affirmation from other people, monetary compensation, a strong evaluation, promotion, the common good, recognition, a potential legacy, or even concern for the well-being of students. A Christian teacher’s motivation to serve may be the same as a non-Christian’s in many ways. But even though a Christian teacher may have some of those same motivations, he or she should also be motivated to serve God and follow his commands by committing to being obedient, to being an image bearer, and to being a witness. A Christian’s motivation for service should develop out of a deep and abiding love for our Savior and



a desire to bring him glory as a response to the love shown to us in Jesus Christ.

Vertical Dimension

The motivation may be different for a Christian teacher than for a non-Christian teacher, but is the service itself different? I would argue that there is a vertical dimension to both motivation and service for a Christian teacher that is not found in other teachers. This vertical dimension is attributed to the power of prayers offered by the Christian teacher and the Spirit of Christ that’s within that teacher. Prayer affects both our hearts and our circumstances, and it directly correlates with the spiritual life of a Christian teacher. A teacher once suggested that I sit in the desk of each of my students and pray for them individually. Another teacher suggested that I pray for students while they are taking tests. This vertical dimension of prayer is powerful for both my students and for me.



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Christian teachers rely not only on their own abilities but also on divine intervention. Those teachers' ability to serve is magnified by the fact that Christ lives in them, breathes in them, provides for them, and cares for those they serve. He desires that his will is done, and they are conduits of service through their love.

Perceived Difference

Do students perceive service from a Christian and a non-Christian teacher as the same thing? Students may not be able to attribute the positive classroom environment and attitude of the teacher to Christian love. However, there seems to be a connection people feel when encountering those who love and serve in Jesus's name. My third grade teacher often worked shoulder to shoulder with me, looked me in the eyes, and called me by my name. I genuinely felt God's presence in her, and although I can't attribute that feeling to any particular words she said, her actions spoke to my heart.

Jesus Christ's love was and still is a magnet for flocks of people. Christian service is not an internal feature that goes unnoticed. It bubbles

to the surface and becomes visible in action. Students notice the effervescent nature of Christian service, and everyone in the classroom proceeds to manifest those attitudes and behaviors.

One of my teachers seemed to radiate God's love in almost everything she did. Decidedly human, with jiggling arms and coffee breath, she smiled easily, listened readily, and spoke gently. One of her favorite lines was, "I will give you grace on that." This became my favorite line as well because I needed grace (and still do). Whereas I hope to avoid her infamous jiggling arms and coffee breath, I do hope that I reveal Christ through my words and actions as she did.

Defining Christian Service

It is difficult to define a difference between Christian and secular service, because both Christian and non-Christian people do good, caring things. As much as Christians would like to believe that we've cornered the market on stewardship, reconciliation, reform, and healing, others also make those contributions.

Herein lies the difference: With the purpose of eternity in mind while teaching in the classroom, Christian teachers are modeling a way of being that reflects the Kingdom and prepares students for a lifetime of service to others. The Christian servant teacher helps students develop their gifts so that they too can serve in a secular or Christian environment. The secular teacher prepares students for a worldly life and fails to address eternal life.

As a teacher, I want to equip students for today as well as beyond tomorrow. One of the most numbing experiences in my teaching career was the death of one of my students. Matt was a rambunctious, full-of-life, carefree child. He was known for zipping down the hallways, making faces behind the teacher's back and instigating pranks. At his funeral, the pastor stated that his schooling prepared him for life . . . and prepared him for death.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

Luke 22:27 NIV

If we are to prepare children for a life of service, if we are to prepare children for eternity, and if we are to be agents of shalom, we must do more than show students how to understand the world. We must facilitate students in their efforts to change the world. Touching students' hearts for service is as important as molding their intellect. Nicholas Wolterstorff indicates that "the goal is not just to impart to students a Christian world- and life-view but to equip and motivate them for a Christian way of being and acting in the world" (*Educating for Shalom*, 2004). Being equipped and being motivated complement each other as two

sides of the same coin. Students will not desire to serve unless they are motivated, and they will not know how to serve unless they are equipped. Wolterstorff continues, "There is not a shred of evidence that simply putting abstract theory in front of students will alter their actions." John Van Dyk echoes that sentiment: "If we train only for marketable skills, academic excellence, and good moral behavior, but neglect the higher purpose of Christian discipleship, we lose our distinctiveness as Christian educators" (*The Craft of Christian Teaching*, 2000). We need to encourage students to think deeply and to act meaningfully. Service should develop from learning about God's world and then responding to that knowledge.

When I think of unconditional love and service, a story from my childhood comes to mind. When I was a little girl, my mom often asked me to clean my room. I would argue, "But why?" and she would patiently say, "Just because." She never finished the sentence, but it was understood. I did it "just because" I loved her and "just because" she loved me. I did it "just because" I was part of the family. When I was serving in this capacity, I didn't have to choose between serving her and serving God; I was serving both. A parallel can be drawn with our lives of service. A life of service isn't a choice between serving God and serving people. All that we do is for God. Scripture says, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40 NASB). A love for God is shown through our love for others. Servanthood is a matter of the heart. We do it "just because."

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¡Déle a Su
Hijo el Mundo!
(Give Your Child the World!)



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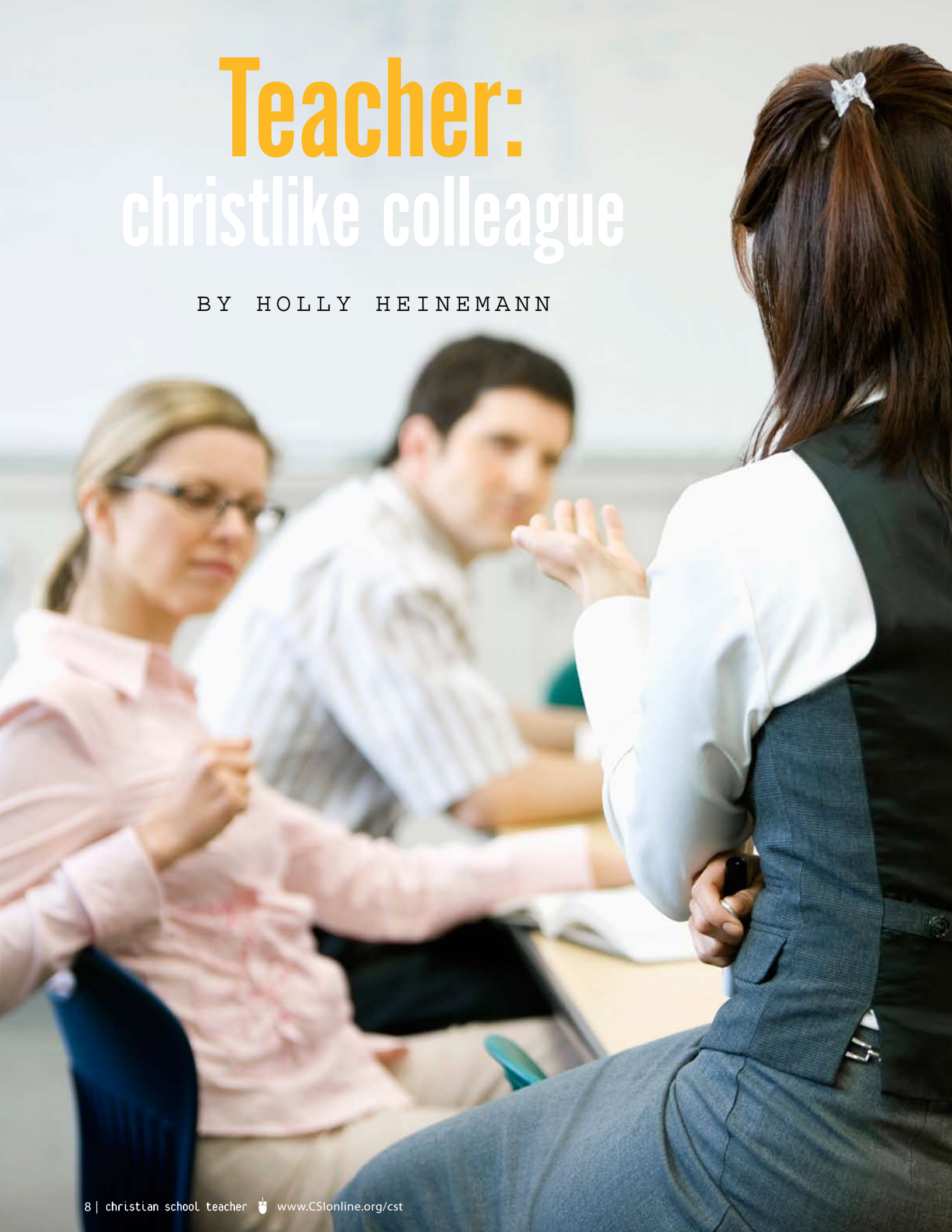


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Teacher: christlike colleague

BY HOLLY HEINEMANN



As Linda stepped into the faculty lounge, her sense of isolation increased. A few of the other teachers glanced up and then returned to their private conversations. She longed to say, "My daughter is flunking out of college. My husband stares at the TV all evening. Do any of you care?" Instead Linda poured herself a cup of coffee as Brenda, who taught next door to her, walked in. "How are you?" Brenda asked, obviously preoccupied with finding a tea bag. "Fine," replied Linda. "I'm fine."

While it's often easy to be friendly on the surface, real relationships can be messy, often bringing with them obligation and disappointment. Relationships with colleagues are even more risky because even if the friendship

result in resolution, we fume silently. Even without conflict, teaching tends to be a solo activity. I spend my days in a room full of young people, I am somewhat isolated from meaningful adult conversation.

How, then, can Christian teachers bond? Despite our mutual love for Jesus Christ, we often have vastly different perspectives on what Christian education should look like. Some of us believe that as educators, our primary responsibility is academic teaching, while others believe that curriculum is secondary to imparting Christian values to our students. While we may agree that Christlikeness needs to be taught in the context of academics, what is easily said in a staff meeting becomes more difficult to balance in the classroom.

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becomes strained, a necessary contact, such as at curriculum meetings still remains.

To further complicate matters if you teach at a Christian school, as I do, all the educators are brothers and sisters in Christ and as such should love one another. Instead we often maintain superficiality in our relationships with other believers, at school and elsewhere. Afraid of being "unloving," we avoid healthy conflict in favor of platitudes, trading authentic friendships for more shallow (but safer) connections. That's right, authentic friendships bring the risk of conflict. But some conflict is actually healthy, and an honest look shows that the teaching profession is filled with potential conflict. After all, if Mrs. Norman's choir class is gone all afternoon on a field trip, the quiz in Mr. Simon's seventh period math class will probably be affected. Instead of respectfully expressing our frustrations, which would likely

In order for unity to exist among teachers, we of different paradigms need to be able to openly discuss these viewpoints without assuming that those who disagree with us are wrong. When we feel safe expressing ideas and insights, knowing that others will respect our opinions, then even if we do not reach full agreement, we have made a step toward bonding.

Teachers who feel safe sharing ideas on a professional level will eventually begin to discuss more personal hurts and struggles. Colleagues will become friends as they encourage one another, cry with one another, and offer to assist each other in practical ways. This level of openness also means that when we are offended, we must approach the person who has offended us and seek reconciliation (Matthew 5:23–24; 18:15–16) instead of complaining to an administrator or an uninvolved person. James 5:9 reminds us: "Don't

grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged" (NIV).

Also, because teachers tend to be isolated from one another in their classrooms, we need to make an effort to spend time together—for example by attending students' extracurricular activities. Working on projects together and finding common interests with other teachers are also instrumental to building friendships.

Beware, though, of several "bond-busters" that will undermine the growth of any relationship. The first of these is gossip, which unfortunately has been rampant in every faculty lounge I've entered. Most of us have probably experienced the indignation that comes from the rest of the staff discussing our personal business. Gossip destroys any feeling of safety among faculty members and keeps individuals from speaking honestly, giving

Simple busyness is probably the most common obstacle to building relationships. Teaching well means that you spend time preparing and grading, which, when added to family and church responsibilities, may leave little time for cultivating friendships. One solution is for you to do some tasks together with other teachers, such as helping each other put up bulletin boards, that would allow you to chat while you work. You may even finish early and have time to continue talking over a cup of coffee. Or consider team-teaching a unit or even an entire subject. You'll be able to complement each other's teaching styles, and the many hours collaborating may lead to a deeper friendship (in addition to better lessons for your students). Busy teachers often find creative ways to maintain their work friendships: Nan and Lucy carpool to work; Steve and Roger cosponsor a

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feedback, or asking for prayer. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29 NIV).

Another prominent, though admittedly less malicious, way that bonding is inhibited is avoiding those with whom we feel uncomfortable. Colleagues may intimidate us, annoy us, or be in a situation that makes us uneasy. Richard, a high school math teacher, told me of his deep sense of loneliness after his wife had a miscarriage. Though the entire staff knew about it, no one spoke to him about his grief or even sent him a card. While his wife received condolences from friends and coworkers, he did not. Apparently the other teachers in Richard's school didn't know how to respond to his loss.

science club after school; Mary, Gail, and Heather meet before school to pray for their students.

Praying with and for our colleagues is probably the single greatest way to increase the bonds among us. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he keeps asking God to give them wisdom and revelation through the Holy Spirit (vv. 1:16–17). When we bring each other's fears, hurts, and disappointments before the Father, asking him to give our brothers and sisters both wisdom and revelation, and when we share our own struggles, knowing that our fellow teachers will be lifting us up in prayer, we begin to experience the unity that he designed for us.

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Teacher: Revealing Christ to Students

BY MARJORIE SUTHERLAND



It seems to me that one can explore Christian teaching on several levels. First, there are the personal aspects of who one is as a teacher. Being a Christian teacher means being a good example in one's life and conduct; displaying the willingness to grow the fruit of the Spirit in your life; bringing these characteristics to bear when dealing with students, parents, and colleagues; and seeking to establish and uphold routines and structures that balance the concepts of fairness and forgiveness, justice and mercy, and accountability and grace.

Second, I would argue that it is not enough to do all of the above while neglecting the gold mine of the curriculum. Being a Christian teacher also involves cracking open one's subject area and laying a foundation for a course that begins solidly with a view of the world in which Christ is the King who boldly proclaims over every inch of His creation, "This is mine!" Looking for and emphasizing foundational concepts in a course or unit not only provides an excellent framework for planning, but it also allows students to view the material in terms of overarching themes. Individual concepts can then reinforce these themes as you teach. I have seen students who were complacent about their faith and bored with Scripture come alive with excitement about the order and predictability we see in the periodicity of matter, the dual nature and mystery involved in light energy, or the "chicken and egg" argument regarding which came first—proteins or their DNA code that proteins themselves unlock. Concepts such as these act as natural springboards into fantastic discussions with wonderful spiritual ramifications. I could go on, but that subject is broad enough to provide content for another article.

Third, I hope that being a Christian teacher involves leading students to more meaningful

relationships with Christ through our relationships with them. Many students come to us having been baptized or dedicated to God as infants, maturing in their faith, and supported by home and church as well as school. But this is not the case across the board. Although evangelism is not the school's primary role, we have an obligation not only to nurture the faith development of students but also to introduce those for whom belief and trust are difficult concepts or for whom the Christian worldview is brand new to the hope we have in Christ.

Finally, being a Christian teacher involves the willingness not only to mentor others but also to learn from our colleagues *and* our students. Our own humility can speak volumes! I cannot count the number of times I have been ministered to by the young people who have been entrusted to my care. To the degree that we are willing to learn, we become better teachers ourselves, and this openness unfolds itself in a willingness to share. I once had a discussion with a colleague who complained about no longer getting anything out of the local Christian school teachers' convention since he had been in the job so long. "Then perhaps," I offered, "it's now your time to give."

Over the last 15 years I have discovered what an enormous blessing teaching in Christian schools has been. As my journey continues, I welcome the many conversations, opportunities, and insights that provide encouragement and food for thought along the way.

This article is an excerpt from "On Christian Teaching," an article published in OCSTA News (the Ontario Christian School Teacher's Association newsletter) vol.31, issue 5, February 2009

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