

When Love Dominates a Classroom

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Originally Written Jan. 2014
Edited March 2018, June 2024

Christian education must be a place where the Holy Spirit is free to act and move within the classroom. To be a highly effective Christian teacher, it is essential to teach in a manner that flows with what the Lord is doing in the lives of students. This article outlines essential godly characteristics for an effective Christian teacher's classroom love model, producing a thriving learning environment that grows students' understanding of who they are in God. Focusing on how a teacher interacts with their students will allow the teacher to improve the classroom environment and welcome the Holy Spirit into an educational partnership.

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Setting the Atmosphere

How does a Christian teacher establish a classroom environment that allows students to be instructed by God? This article overviews the many facets of a classroom atmosphere, enabling students to connect with the Holy Spirit. Christian education needs to be a place where the Holy Spirit is free to act and move within the classroom. To be a highly effective Christian teacher, it is essential to teach in a manner that flows with what the Lord is doing in the lives of the students. The Christian teacher is God’s representative in the classroom, the pastor, if you will, setting an atmosphere that carries God’s grace and love. As the pastor of the classroom, a Christian teacher does more than simply educate. They are modeling godly wisdom, character, and morality.

The foundation for a successful classroom is the teacher’s classroom management style. A classroom management plan based on how God relates to and interacts with students will reflect the love of God for the children. This invites students to connect with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A Christian classroom is a place where life is practiced, mistakes are made, and all is learned from. It is a place where no one is perfect, not even the teacher. In this classroom, successes are celebrated, no one is condemned over their shortcomings, and joy and peace are abundant.

A teacher’s classroom management success is measured by how well a class behaves and follows instructions. Unfortunately, for some teachers, behavior management is the only goal. Often, methods I refer to as command-and-control successfully get students to sit quietly and look like they are paying attention but fail to reach the heart of a child. Christian classroom management is setting a different atmosphere, a loving, Godly atmosphere. Command-and-control classroom management stifles the students’ ability to connect with the teacher and the Holy Spirit.

When teachers establish a classroom management style based on reaching the heart of a child, they partner with God because that is His goal for every child in the classroom. If the teacher has captured the heart of a student, then they have the respect of that student. Once a teacher has the heart of a child, behavior is maintained because of the relationship, not from fear of punishment. After all, isn't that what God wants from believers? Is it not God's desire that we are obedient because we love Him, not because we are afraid of going to hell?

A teacher welcomes the Holy Spirit into an educational partnership by focusing on God's relationship methods and bringing these methods into a classroom management system. In partnering with the Holy Spirit, the teacher will educate the whole child: body, mind, and spirit in a loving relationship. Additionally, the teacher's influence is enhanced through partnering with a student's parents, further strengthening the teacher's ability to reach the heart of their students.

Bethel Christian School has been developing a school atmosphere based on godly principles of relationship for the past twenty years. The following are brief descriptions of the philosophy and best practices of Bethel Christian School that have helped teachers establish classroom management plans based on godly relationships and instruction that welcomes the Holy Spirit into everyday classroom life.

Love and Connection

The success of the classroom experience is directly related to a student's desire to be in school. This may seem obvious, but if educators understood this simple concept, children would not feel tortured while sitting in their classrooms. School must be a place where children want to be. I have witnessed loving, supportive parents and a caring teacher change many students from resistant, struggling children who hate school into students who are anxious to be in the classroom and working hard to succeed. However, I have also witnessed teachers and parents, in an effort to motivate and spur on students, inadvertently destroy all hope of their success. Unfortunately, many well-meaning adults fail to recognize that the most critical aspect of a child's success is knowing they are loved and wanted! Many a failing child blames the adults in their life for their ill fate, feeling helpless to change it.

Have you ever had a grumpy or demanding boss? How did you react to that boss? When you were threatened or mocked, how did you feel? How many mornings did you wake up and wish it was your day off, or better yet, you could fake a sick day? Regrettably, that is how many students feel about school. As an employee, at least you were motivated by a paycheck. For a child, however, there is no reward. This begs the question, "What are children showing up to school for?" If school is so painful, then why even attend? Students trapped in the pain of school are usually motivated by the threat that their home life will be just as miserable as school if they do not go. They are trapped with no escape.

Well-meaning, loving adults think they are proving their love by forcing the child to go to school. If they were an uncaring parent they would just let them fail. However, the kids are not hearing the "I love you" message; they are hearing, "I do not care about you. I only care that you get this done," and "I am going to make your life miserable until you do." Unfortunately, these efforts to motivate a child through power or fear erode their confidence and self-esteem, destroying the most important thing the child needs to be successful: their connection to the adult.

Connection

Connection is a basic human need. Within every person is the need to belong. This need is founded in our Godlikeness, as described by Dr. Larry Crabb. Crabb states that man, being made in the image of God, was created to connect just as our Triune Creator is connected.

Dr. Crabb puts it this way:

We were fashioned by a God whose deepest joy is connection with himself, a God who created us to enjoy the pleasure he enjoys by connecting supremely with him but also with each other. To experience the joy of connection is life; to not experience it is death to our souls, death to our deepest desires, death to every thing that makes us human. However, just having connection is not enough. We need a connection with vision. Without a vision, without some sense of what God is up to in another person's life, there can be no true connection (Crabb, 2005, p.55).

Crabb's study of the correlation between physical health and intimate loving relationships concludes that love is essential to an individual's health and wellness. By meeting a student's need for connection and love, a teacher earns their student's trust and respect, setting up an environment for academic wellness. Creating a safe, loving learning environment where teachers are approachable is paramount to Christian education. After all, Jesus instructed His followers to love each other; by this love, the world would know they are God's (John 13:34-35).

Regarding a child's education, their connection with their teacher is a close second to a child's bond with parents. If the teacher fails to form a loving connection, the teacher simply becomes the bad boss. In his book *Leave No Child Behind*, Dr. James P. Comer proved the importance of two fundamental forces behind a successful school. One is a parent's involvement in their child's education, and two is a positive connection with the teacher (Comer, 2004). During his long-term study on school improvement, Comer and his team transformed two of the lowest-performing, low-income inner-city schools into the third and fourth-highest-achieving schools in the district. Developing the connection between parents, teachers, and students was at the core of his success.

When the teacher inspires and makes a connection, it can become the inspiration movies are made of. A few examples are teacher Glenn Holland as portrayed in the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus* (Duncan, 1995), LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995), Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007), and Marva Collins in *The Marva Collins Story* (Jackson, 2010). All are examples of teachers who protected their connection and, in doing so, inspired students to achieve far more than traditional educational systems thought possible. If the teacher-student connection is so important, why does it fail so often? Seldom is it a teacher's lack of desire for connection with their students; instead, it usually breaks down in the teacher's understanding of how a child builds connection.

The classroom is not a generic mass of students but a collection of individuals. Each student must have a voice, feel connected, and be recognized. A loving, connected classroom requires a teacher to focus on the needs of the individual students more than the needs of the whole class or the teacher. Teachers who do not connect with their students have to change how they communicate their love and care to the students. Teachers often make the mistake of expecting a child to understand their adult reasoning and logic. Understanding child development is vital to building an age-appropriate connection. A helpful book on this subject is *Yardsticks* by Chip Wood (Wood, 2007).

Our school made great leaps forward in connecting with students by combining two philosophies: Danny Silk's *Loving Our Kids on Purpose* (Silk, 2008) and a classroom management program called *Capturing Kids' Hearts*™ (Flippen, 2007). Our teachers learned methods that draw positive, appropriate attention to individuals in the classroom and give them a voice. Students are applauded as individuals, yet the teacher is still setting the standard for behavior in the classroom. Classrooms at Bethel are no longer controlled by dominance; they are controlled through consistent and predictable relationships.

A Place of Hope

Along with the goodness of God, a Christian teacher must offer hope to their students. It is the balance between pushing their students to excellence and keeping them encouraged. Academic standards must be held high while still giving hope to the learners. The school must have methods to watch out for students who have fallen through the cracks. Children overwhelmed by school are like the lost sheep in the parable of Jesus (Luke 15:4-7). Jesus demonstrated the lengths He would go to help the hopeless; Christian schools must do the same. Two proverbs that emphasize the importance of bringing hope to students are "Without vision and hope, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18) and "When hope is deferred, it makes the heart sick, but when the desire is achieved, it is like a tree of life" (Proverbs 13:12). A Christian classroom needs to be a tree of life.

Christian teachers should be drawing out their students' dreams. After all, God has dreams for all His children, "For I know the thoughts and plans that I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts, and plans for welfare and peace and not for evil, to give you hope in your final outcome" (Jeremiah 29:11, *New King James Version*).

Everyone is uniquely made. God gave every child distinct abilities and the capability to be different and pursue their goals in life. To help the students of Bethel Christian School find out who they are we

established a dream class based on the book *Dream Culture* (Mason, 2011). Through this class, seventh and eighth-grade students learn that God is a dreamer and He wants to partner with their dreams.

“God is the greatest dreamer of all, and it is impossible to encounter Him without being reminded of who we are – children made in His image. One of the greatest things in life is to become increasingly creative by partnering with God’s creative nature and thereby experiencing the joy of His presence” (Mason, 2011, pp. 21-22).

By cultivating a dream culture, Christian teachers will better equip students to discover who they are in Christ, setting them on a path to find what builds their confidence, hope, and success.

Remove Shame

All too often, adults fail to recognize the destructive effects of fear, guilt, and shame. Fear, guilt, and shame are powerful tools of the deceiver and hater of humankind, Satan. These methods are used far too often by well-meaning teachers hoping to shape the lives of their students. Unfortunately, these techniques are used because they appear to be powerful motivators when, in truth, they are simply destructive. A Christian teacher must use methods of managing their students that avoid fear, guilt, or shame. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, it was not God who caused them to hide or feel shame (Genesis 3:8). These are the natural effects of sin. When God found them, He did not point out their guilt. He did the opposite; He made clothes for them to hide their nakedness, covering their shame (Genesis 3:21). God dealt with their failure by simply asking them questions (Genesis 3:13). Danny Silk has had a great deal of experience walking people through failure. He says, “Shame is removed through love. Shame tries to keep people trapped in their mistakes by convincing them they can do nothing, that they are powerless” (Silk, 2009, p. 40).

A discipline program with love and hope will draw students into a teacher’s sphere of influence and build connections. Failures must indeed be accounted for, but they must be done in a way that teaches students about God’s goodness.

God is Not Surprised by Sin

If God is not shocked by our failures, neither should the teacher. We all fail at some point. God made a way for us to recover from failure, and an influential teacher will also provide ways for their students to recover.

Dr. Crabb’s description of The Trinity’s desire to bring others into their deep bonded connection (Crabb, 2005) highlights the motivation behind the creation of man and the subsequent sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus’ death and sacrifice on the cross destroyed the sin barrier that separated humanity from God, giving every person the ability to have a personal relationship with God (Romans 5:10). Jesus’s death and resurrection paid the price for all, so whoever accepts God’s gift of new life is reborn into a royal priesthood and has access to the heart of God (1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 5:10). It is interesting that from the foundations of the world (Eph. 1:4), God knew the price He would be paying to have connection with those He would make in His image. God set humankind up for success. He only sees what we can become, so God no longer calls us sinners. Believers genuinely are God’s delight and most significant treasure. Teachers who understand and reflect the love God has for His children draw on a grace God has given them, modeling God’s love to their students.

Beloved Son/Daughter

The idea of becoming a son or daughter of God is common in modern Christian cultures. However, when Jesus walked the earth, religious leaders called Him a heretic, a crime punishable by death, for simply teaching that man could be a friend of God. What Jesus was teaching was a radical departure from the religious traditions of the day. Christians need to understand that it is an extraordinary and incredible thing that a believer is a son or daughter of the King of Kings. Grasping the reality of our closeness and connection to our Father in Heaven is at the core of understanding our relationship with Him. Knowing who we are as children of God allows us to act according to our destiny and purpose.

As a child of the King of Kings, we have unfettered access to the throne of God. Access to our heavenly Father, such as that famous picture of President John F. Kennedy’s little son, John-John, peeking

out from under his father's desk in the Oval Office. Believers must see themselves as God's little children, the joy of His life. Too often, we see ourselves before God as a teenager coming home to face Dad after wrecking the family car. Believers are God's most treasured possession. He calls them His bride (Revelation 21:9). Jesus died to set His bride free (Revelation 19:7). By recognizing who they are in Christ, the believer will begin to understand their God-given authority.

A Royal Mindset

Christian students need to understand who they are, Christ's children. Kris Vallotton's book, *The Supernatural Ways of Royalty*, lays out a renewed way of thinking about a believer's understanding of who they are (Vallotton, 2006). All believers in Christ are adopted into the family of God. Each becomes a joint heir with Christ (Romans 8:17), making them part of God's royal family. Vallotton encourages believers to walk in royal generous authority, not given to fear. Believers are to have the mind of Christ. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). When believers understand who they are, God's greatness is revealed through them. Ephesians teaches that God's multifaceted, diverse, and varied wisdom was hidden away until He used believers to make it known to demonic and heavenly powers (Ephesians 3:9-10). God intends that believers grow to be like Him, demonstrating His wisdom to both the seen and unseen worlds. Christians release and demonstrate the wisdom of God.

When a Christian's faith is firmly planted, and they understand who they are in Christ, it causes demonic principalities to flee them because all they see is Jesus in the believer. They see the image of God in us. As a child of the King of Kings, every believer is a royal descendant. As royalty, our circumstances do not shape us; we are shaped by our values and God's family history. We are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17), no longer molded by our past. The Christian teacher must instruct students in ways that reinforce this new nature. Every student needs to understand who he or she is: a new creation.

Two Sides of God?

What better example of love and relationship than how God relates to His creation? Through the teachings and stories of the Bible, humanity has a record of this relationship spanning thousands of years. It has, at times, been strained to the breaking point, then repaired and strengthened through forgiveness and sacrifice. Christian educators can adapt these qualities into teaching methods that build a positive, loving classroom atmosphere by studying and understanding godly qualities that build their loving relationship with God.

When examining the biblical record for godly qualities, it is essential to know that God's word is a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). This double-edged sword cuts in two directions so the word of God can encourage and convict simultaneously. The Word of God cuts in the direction it is swung. Take, for example, judgment. Does Mercy temper God's judgment in the light of God's forgiveness, or is it as unforgiving as the judgment of the condemned? It depends on the position of the person receiving the judgment. Someone who has given their life to Jesus is judged with mercy, whereas someone who has passed from this life rejecting God receives condemnation.

As a Christian educator, one must be aware of the direction God is swinging the sword by examining God's treatment of His creation through the filter of the New Testament. Everything changed when Christ died for ALL humanity's sins. God changed the direction His Word cuts on the cross. Because of Jesus's blood, everyone can receive God's mercy-judgment rather than His condemnation-judgment. Believers must approach non-believers with hope rather than condemnation, expecting to see God's desire for them to be saved and fulfilled.

By representing God's qualities from the standpoint of His love for ALL, the teacher will more accurately define the qualities that draw their students to be more like God. God shows Himself as Abba Father, or Daddy God (Galatians 4:6).

Dual Human Images

Two opposing forces shape human nature. In the beginning, God created man in His image. So, is humanity genuinely made in the image of God? If we are, why do we struggle to overcome our sinful nature? Sin is not in God's nature, but it is in man's because it is our inheritance as a son or daughter of Adam. All

humanity is trapped in the tension between their sinful nature and their godly character of being made in God's image. All must learn to overcome sinful nature by increasing their God nature through conformity to what is right and proper. A loving, caring learning environment is a demonstration of the image of God. A Christian school is to be an institution that nurtures its students' inborn Godly potential. It is a place that inspires hope and encourages students to pursue their dreams.

Christian teachers must understand the importance of a parent's role in mentoring their students to overcome their sinful nature. This is the primary reason for Christian schools: parents seek a safe place where children are taught high morals.

How do teachers become skilled at helping students overcome their sinful natures? Let us examine these opposing natures within each of us.

The Apostle Paul describes our sin nature in this way, "the works of the flesh are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like" (Galatians 5:19). Interestingly, this list contains some things that are acceptable on our playgrounds and in workplaces. For example, some would say selfish ambitions or contentions are signs of healthy self-esteem. Some teachers feel an occasional outburst is needed to keep kids in line, although they may not call it an outburst. Even envy is masked as striving to be the best when it is about winning by crushing your opponent. At times, believers may harbor hatred, contention, and jealousy in their hearts. Although they may not act on these feelings, they motivate their hearts.

In identifying sinful nature, teachers often make the mistake of judging their students simply by their actions. Misbehavior is evidence of a student's need for improvement, but it can also be misleading. Sin is a matter of heart direction. Jesus said that if you just look with lust, you have committed the sin (Matthew 5:28) and "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7 NKJV). It is essential to take the time to learn what is in the heart of a student. Some students know how to look and act right because they hide their motives well, but some students have a right heart and look or act as if they do not care.

Avoid Injustice

How a teacher suspects, corrects, and directs a student's sinful nature will do one of two things: improve behavior or cause kids only to appear to improve because they get better at hiding their sin. Remember that ignorance and personality are not sins. Students who act from ignorance or strong personality traits often have a right heart. If you treat them as if they have a wrong heart, they will not understand why you are being so unfair. These students only require training, not punishment.

Successful teachers do not read minds. They ask wise questions. Failing to understand what a child thinks tears at the fabric of the teacher's connection to their student. The child feels like the teacher does not care because he or she will not take the time to listen to them. Even if the child is wrong, they need an opportunity to be heard and lovingly corrected. Do not make the mistake of knowing a child is guilty. Get the facts first, then give the child a chance to confess and fix the problem. A teacher who fails to listen is unjust in the eyes of his or her students.

It is important to remember that when confronting a student's sinful nature, never fight fire with fire. In other words, do not use sin nature, condemnation, guilt, control, anger, or frustration to try to improve a student's sinful nature. Fight the fire of sin nature with Living water, the presence of the Holy Spirit, love, joy, and peace.

Reflecting the Image of God

Successful Christian teachers understand the qualities that reflect the image of God. In his description of *imago Dei* (Latin for the image of God) qualities, Dr. William Cox lists the following, "Imago Dei encompasses positive attributes like dominion, competence, excellence, sociability, justice, compassion, truth, impartiality, righteousness, perfection and love," (Cox, 2011, p. 20). The book of Galatians describes the fruit of having God's Spirit in us as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Additionally, the Apostle Paul taught that there are three qualities of God: faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13) that are so important that they will still exist in believers

when they meet God face to face. By turning one's attention to these God qualities, a believer will become more like God. A successful Christian walk is to set one's sights on goodness, "For as [a person] thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7, NKJV).

Love is central to who God is. He sacrificed His Son because of the love He has for us. He made a way for us to have a relationship with Him (John 3:16). Christians are instructed that the second greatest commandment is to love their neighbor as themselves (Mark 12:31). In addition, love never fails, love can be depended on, (1 Corinthians 13:8) and loving one's enemies is expected (Luke 6:35).

Faith is not wishing on something. Faith is an assurance of unseen things (Hebrews 11:1). "Without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (Hebrews 11:6, NKJV).

Hope should be a strong focus in any Christian's pursuit of their godly image. Hope is trust. Hope is what gets a believer through difficult situations. The psalmists often wrote of difficult and fearful circumstances that left only one place to turn: hope in the Lord (Psalms 43:5, 42:5, 71:14).

Genesis clearly describes God as Creator (Genesis 1:1). Creativity is built into us and part of our God-given nature. Simply observing the diversity and vastness of nature teaches us of God's creativity (Romans 1:20). God and humankind are both builders and developers. This aspect of humanity stirs us to dream about improving our future.

The Apostle Paul describes the following manifestations that come from being filled with the Holy Spirit: word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, healings, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Believers are given varied gifts to benefit all (1 Corinthians 12:7-11). These manifestations of God are supernatural aspects that flowed from Jesus when He walked the earth. God is supernatural; therefore, humanity being made in His image will naturally carry His supernatural qualities.

A passage in Romans sheds light on how to face this struggle we are born into. God's judgment awaits all, and there is no escaping it (Romans 2:2-3). However, we must trust God's richness of goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, "for it is the goodness of God that leads you to repentance" (Romans 2:4, NKJV). One must understand that because of the goodness of God, our hearts are turned, and we are able to repent. It is not God's judgment that leads to repentance. The passage goes on to say, "[God] 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality" (Romans 2:6-7, NKJV). Patient continuance in doing "good" is the key to overcoming our sinful nature. It is a life of repentance, not the repentance of continually suffering under the weight of guilt, but the repentance of turning around or re-making the choice to seek good. Christianity is a journey, and if one takes a wrong turn, he or she can simply make a right turn and get back on the journey, setting one's sights on good. As Apostle Paul put it, "I die daily" (1 Corinthians 15:3, NKJV), every day Paul chose to journey to good. It does not mean that he was successful all the time.

Shifting Understanding

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NKJV). Understanding who you are as a new creation transforms you into everything God has planned for you, His child. Kris Vallotton puts it this way: "The truth of the matter is that we are good because we have received a new heart and a new mind (see Ezekiel 36:26; 1 Cor. 2:16, p. 68). That is right – we received a brain transplant! We actually think like God (Vallotton, 2006)!" The verses that Vallotton paraphrased provide a powerful description of the transformation that takes place within every Christian. Since a believer is a new creation, he or she must daily choose to put the old thought patterns aside. As Vallotton puts it, "I can't afford to think differently about my life than God does" (Vallotton, 2006, p. 57). A believer has the ability to think like God.

How can one be made new on the inside? As Dr. Larry Crabb suggests, there is a need within each person to connect with God and, when they do, understand who they are (Crabb, 2005, p. 43). Relationship and love bring life to people, and a "connected community is the defining center of God" (Crabb, 2005, p. 40). Christians can overcome many emotional pitfalls that hinder their spiritual development through connection. Crabb has discovered that a person is changed from the inside out because they learn to believe in themselves. The Apostle Paul puts connection this way. Speak the truth in love as you grow up under Christ's leadership because everyone is joined and knit together. Through this connection of love and

edification, believers are supplied for the effective working of the whole church (Ephesians 4:15-16). Students who are connected to the community and God can be taught to overcome their sinful nature.

“Battling the flesh” is a phrase commonly used to describe overcoming sin, but is it really a battle? Sin and death were defeated through the death of Christ on the cross. Every believer is now blameless before God (Colossians 1:21). Yet, Christians still choose to operate from their flesh. Fleshly motivations lead one to act out of fear, anger, lying, deception, etc. When a person feels vulnerable and unprotected, these fleshly motivations are a natural gut reaction.

Nevertheless, when connection becomes one’s priority, coupled with the infilling of the Holy Spirit, a teacher will learn to react out of love. I appreciate Dr. Crabb’s perspective of seeing the flesh for what it truly is: a roadblock to love and connection. Flesh reactions are not a friend, nor do they help protect oneself from hurt and pain. “The disguise [of fleshly motivation] must be ripped away. The horror of the enemy’s ugliness and the pain he creates must be seen” (Crabb, 2005, p. 91). Acting out of selfishness, fear, or other works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21) only removes us from the life we receive through connection with God and other believers (Ephesians 4:16). Once a person has experienced a love connection with God, through His Holy Spirit, they are awakened to the benefits of intimacy with God. They become motivated to protect their God connection by having a pure heart, leading them to a deeper connection with God.

Breaking the fleshly reaction cycle is essential to a Christ-centered love model for education. Operating from fleshly or selfish motivations can feel like a person is taking control, but in reality, it does just the opposite; it leads to bondage and restricts one from finding freedom. School leaders need to learn to recognize when their students, parents, or themselves are using fleshly methods in hopes of achieving a godly outcome. We cannot fix something we do not see, and if we fail to pull the mask off this lie of the enemy, we will likely end up partnering with him. Understanding the motives and methods of behavior management is a critical aspect of a God-centered classroom in developing a successful love model for the students.

Shifting students’ understanding of who they are will lead them to operate from their God nature. Focusing on the qualities of God’s nature turns one away from sinful nature and will transform a believer into the image of God. If there is a battle, it is simply turning one’s back on sinful nature and walking toward God’s image of who He created us to be. Coupling repentance (the rejection of sin) with the power of forgiveness renews one’s mind to have a God perspective (Matthew 6:14, Luke 17:3). By setting one’s mind on the attributes of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23), the teacher will be leading their students in focusing on their God-image. Dr. Crabb sums up how to pursue the image of God very simply, “To discover what God is up to and join Him in nourishing the life He has already given. It may be necessary to face what’s wrong, not to make the wrong better, but to cut through to find what is right” (Crabb, 2005, p. 49). A believer is to focus on what is right.

Spiritual Warfare

There is an often-unseen spiritual battle that takes place around every believer. A disciple needs to understand how to fight this battle. It is not a battle fought in the physical. It is spiritual warfare against principalities, powers, and the rulers of the darkness (Ephesians 6:12).

“The devil gives us names that disempower us . . . Because people act according to who they are, these lies are ultimately acted out in their behavior” (Vallotton, 2006, p. 62). A spiritual war rages around us, seldom visible but certainly felt. It is a war of identity and ideas. Satan, the accuser of believers (Revelation 12:10), not only stands before God accusing believers, but he and his demons assault humanity with lies of unworthiness. Satan is known as the father of lies, and there is no truth in him (John 8:44), yet believers often accept Satan’s description of who they are because they have failed to spend time knowing God and hearing who He says they are. This war is not fought physically. It is spiritual (Ephesians 6:12) and is felt in one’s emotions, surfacing in ways that cause fear, anger, mistrust, low self-image, and many other negative emotions. The battle of thought and imagination is won with truth through the Word of God (Ephesians 5:26, John 17:17) and connection with God and other believers (Ephesians 4:15).

God's Gifts

Supernatural Gifts of the Spirit: The Apostle Paul told the church at Corinth, “Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1, NKJV). Jesus said His disciples would do greater things than He did (John 14:12). If someone is a disciple of Christ who carries the Holy Spirit, they will walk in signs and wonders as a natural outpouring of their Christian life.

Supernatural occurrences are common in the Bible. Every Bible story involves aspects of God's intervention. However, many believers do not expect God to perform supernatural acts. I used to believe that miracles were rare, mysterious events dependent on God's impossible-to-find grace. I was astonished when I witnessed how easily children hear from God, pray, witness miracles, see angels, and exhibit faith surpassing that of the adults guiding them.

Jennifer Toledo learned this firsthand at an orphanage in Kenya, Africa (Toledo, 2012). The Lord asked her if she would teach the children the “undiluted Gospel,” meaning would she teach them about Jesus without limits or explaining away the supernatural. She discovered how often, when teaching the Bible, she would interject her personal experience, or more precisely, her lack of experience in the supernatural things of God. By simply reading the Bible to the children, they began to receive instructions from the Lord on how to pray, which so profoundly transformed their village; leaders of a nearby village asked if the children could come and pray in their village as well.

If God truly is the same yesterday and today (Hebrews 13:8), we cannot limit God to our personal experiences. A great example of this is when God spoke audibly to Samuel. The child heard the voice of God before he knew the Lord! Eli, the priest, Samuel's teacher did not hear God like Samuel did. The word of the Lord was rare in those days (1 Samuel 2:18-3:21). Eli only had to believe in the remote possibility that Samuel might be hearing God's voice. The early life of Samuel reveals another aspect of how to train children in spiritual gifts. Let children do what the adults are doing. As a child, Samuel ministered before the Lord (1 Samuel 2:18). It is not enough to just teach children about spiritual gifts; they need to be given the opportunity to practice these gifts. They need what I term real ministry opportunities.

As I mentioned above, Paul told believers to desire spiritual gifts! An effective Christian school expects students to hear from God and receive the gifts of His Spirit.

For example, when we started teaching about prophecy, we focused on what the gift was used for. The reason for the gift of prophecy was to encourage and build up others in the church. We based our teaching on 1 Corinthians 14: “Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy” (Corinthians 14:1, NKJV). “But he who prophesies speaks edification, exhortation, [encourage and build up] and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification” (Corinthians 14:2-5, NKJV). Teaching students about the gift of prophecy in this way has changed our students' understanding of their relationship with God. They know the gift is not about them; it is to draw people's hearts near to God. They are simply messengers. They see the love of God poured out on others; they see the goodness of God firsthand. If you ask most Christian children if God loves them, they will say yes. However, if you ask them if He likes them, many will likely say, “Only when I am good.” By releasing our students to hear God, they come to know that God likes them all the time and that He has good plans for them.

If you want more information on this topic, I highly recommend reading more about leading children to pursue a supernatural lifestyle from the resources below.

Supernatural Children's Teaching Series (Seth)

Here Comes Heaven! A Kid's Guide to God's Supernatural Power (Johnson & Seth, 2007)

Time with Jesus an Interactive Journal (McCandless, 2013)

Eyes That See & Ears That Hear (Toledo, 2007)

Visions Beyond The Veil: God's Revelation to Children of Heaven and Hell (Baker, 2000)

God's Loving Nature

Most non-believers have a distorted view of God, believing God is angry and desiring to pour out His wrath on sinful humanity. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is God's nature to love. John points out, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16, NKJV).

Additionally, God loved humanity before they loved Him (1 John 4:7-11). It is God's nature to give humanity every opportunity to choose life in Christ. His will is that no person ever be condemned to hell and that everyone would have everlasting life (2 Peter 3:9, 1 Tim 2:4).

God is in a Good Mood

Sparing the rod and spoiling the child (Proverbs 13:24) has justified many children's discipline. Regretfully, that discipline is often delivered with anger or contempt, which are sin motivations. The Old Testament is indeed filled with the judgment of God. His wrath is poured out against those who fail to obey Him. It is the angry face of God. Is that the face He is showing humanity now? Christ's shed blood has turned God's face into one of love for humanity.

Christian educators must show God in the light of His love for all. The environment within a Christian school must be a place where God's goodness is evident and where forgiveness is given to those who fail. It must be a safe learning environment where students are given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes.

Children raised under a cloud of judgment live in fear that someone will see their faults, which causes them to work hard to conceal all their failures. This process leads them down a path to their destruction because no one can be perfect. First John gives self-explanatory instructions on overcoming our failures: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8).

A school that operates with the love of God is a safe place for students and teachers alike to make mistakes. Perfection is not required. It is an environment where every mistake is an opportunity to come face to face with God's goodness, which leads to repentance (Romans 2:4). Students need to know that God is in a good mood. All can live confidently, knowing God receives great joy when His children are open and honest with Him.

I must point out that God's good mood is not an excuse for us to live in sin. Yes, we all sin and come short of the glory of God, but that does not give us permission to ignore our need for repentance. God's glory also reveals our failures. His glory also brings our repentance and our renewed life. The love of God will bring us to repentance.

Adoring God

Worshiping and adoring God is not a requirement but a necessity. Worship is spending time in God's presence and being formed into the image of God. "When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now, the Lord is the Spirit; where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:16-18, NKJV). Worship is as necessary for one's spirit as oxygen is for our body. There is so much that could be mentioned here, but in an effort to keep things brief, I must clarify I am not talking about a kids' songs service. Adoration is teaching our children what it is like to step into the presence of the Living God. To be in His glory, to give God the reverence and honor that is due Him.

Instructed by the Holy Spirit

All believers are given the Holy Spirit to comfort and teach them. Teachers in a Christian school must be aware that they are co-teaching with God. His Spirit is alive within the hearts of each of them (Luke 11:13, John 20:22, Acts 2:38-29). The same Spirit that hovered over the waters at the creation of life resides in each student (Gen. 1:1). Understanding there is no less presence of the Holy Spirit in a child than in an adult believer is a fact often misunderstood by those who instruct children. Every gift and manifestation of the Holy Spirit is available to all believers, regardless of age.

In partnering with the Holy Spirit, a Christian teacher must be aware that God may use their students to instruct them. Children are often better able to hear from the Holy Spirit because they already possess what most adults seek: "childlike faith" (Luke 7:35, Matt. 18:2).

In partnering with the Holy Spirit, it is important to know His role. “The Comforter (Counselor, Helper, Intercessor, Advocate, Strengtheners, Standby), the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name [in My place, to represent Me and act on My behalf], He will teach you all things. Moreover, He will cause you to recall (will remind you of, bring to your remembrance) everything I have told you” (John 14:26, Amplified Version). The Holy Spirit is freely given to all believers (John 14:26). He brings each believer a supernatural ability to learn from God (Hebrews 8:10). Jesus taught that His followers would not need teachers because God will write His laws in their hearts and minds.

Teachers in a Christian environment must learn to listen to the Holy Spirit, follow His lead, and partner with God in instructing students. Proverbs 22:6 makes it clear: “Train up our children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not depart from it.” Teachers must train students in the ways of the Holy Spirit.

What a Teacher Needs to Understand

Teaching is a partnership that includes colleagues, parents, students, and the Holy Spirit. A Christian teacher fulfills the Great Commission through their work. They make disciples (Matthew 28:19). Correction and guidance must occur in a positive atmosphere that edifies the student (Silk, 2009).

All believers walk in the tension of the internal struggle over good and evil. Humanity’s dual natures compete within the hearts of all. By focusing on a student’s godly qualities, the teacher sets the student’s mind on what is right and encourages them to turn aside from sinful traits. Remember, “it is the goodness of God that leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4, NKJV). Students will grow in Godly character when they understand they do not have to be perfect. Becoming like God is a lifelong direction, not a landing place. The classroom is a place of hope where students are free from condemnation for failure, allowing them to take the risks required to find success.

Finally, a teacher’s most important role is to be a model for their students. Jesus made this abundantly clear when He emphasized the effect a teacher will have on his students. “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40, New King James Version). This verse has had an immense impact on me. This is why I say, “Who teaches your child is more important than what they are taught.” Are Christian schools choosing merely qualified teachers, or are they choosing qualified teachers that they want their students to emulate?

Students Need to Understand

By knowing who they are in Christ, believers can better navigate humanity’s tension between righteousness and sin—knowing how God views him or her releases the student to achieve their God-given potential and increases the nature of God within them. When believers truly surrender their lives, they become a disciple of Christ and are set free from their old nature. Every disciple of Christ was purchased with a great price through Jesus’s death and resurrection. The act of surrendering one’s life to the will of God is a rebirth. The believer is reborn as a child of the Living God, a royal priest with access to the heart of God (1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 5:10).

Disciples are motivated by love and service to others. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Developing a Love Model for Twenty Years

I have been the principal of Bethel Christian School in Redding, CA, for over twenty years. Kris Vallotton (Vallotton, 2006) and Danny Silk (Silk, 2009, 2010, & 2013) have trained my staff and myself in the principles I have just described. The staff of Bethel Christian School also incorporates an atmosphere of connection as described in the books *Leave No Child Behind* (Comer, 2004) and *Connecting Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Crabb, 2005). Our love model of Christian education has been successful in disciplining students and releasing many of our students to be faithful adults committed to Christ.

The following are interviews exemplifying how the Love Dominated Classroom model has influenced classroom methods and contributed to the growth of both teachers and students at Bethel Christian.

Developing a Connected Loving Teaching Style

Mr. Smith (Not his real name) came to Bethel Christian School as an enthusiastic first-year teacher, fresh from teacher training, excited to have students sit at his feet and learn from the master. He knew that once he found a connection with his students, he would be able to open their minds to all he had for them. He was overwhelmed when found a room full of disrespectful, antagonistic junior high students more interested in their social agenda than his well-planned lessons. The more Mr. Smith worked to control the classroom, the less he worked on relationships. His classroom control slipped away, and trust was lost. When students failed to meet his expectations, his frustration would rise, leading to moments of raising his voice to regain control. During one of these tense moments, a student snapped a picture of Mr. Smith with a yearbook camera. Once the boy's parents saw the unflattering photo, it was immediately brought to me. Mr. Smith had lost the battle. How could this young, motivated, brilliant, and knowledgeable teacher not connect with his students effectively? He could articulate all the principles of managing a classroom through connection, but when he tried to put these principles into practice, the students rejected him.

This is a common problem for new teachers and is regularly mishandled. Seasoned teachers often tell the fresh teachers they can only smile after Christmas vacation. That is, fear and control will force the kids to behave. You must keep the pressure on the kids, keeping them busy so they do not have time to misbehave. This philosophy of control by dominance does little to build relationships but does bring the appearance of control to the classroom. Unfortunately, a teacher who uses dominance is planting a social virus called disrespect because dominance feels like disrespect to the students they are trying to control.

Mr. Smith's desire to connect with the students was counterproductive to a classroom management style of dominance and control. His students concluded he was only pretending to be nice because he was trying to catch them being bad. They had lost respect for him. Mr. Smith had run into why most teachers fear junior high students and think one must be crazy to teach students of that age.

Today, Mr. Smith is a highly respected and influential teacher with a well-managed classroom. What changed?

Mr. Smith put it this way,

I have always been about relationships, but relationships without order lead to chaos and contempt. I had to create a predictable world. I learned I had to change the way I used my power. I learned that incorrect consequences affect attitude as well as behavior and that a father does not provoke children to anger (Ephesians 6:4). If I cannot identify the cause of a bad attitude, the cause is probably me, and it "being me" is optimal because then the solution rests in me. I do not try to limit what I teach to what I think kids can handle. I teach kids adult-sized ideas using kid-sized methods. If it is boring to me, it is probably boring to them. It is hard to teach when you stop learning, and the best learning comes when you can relate to your students' learning experience. Smith, December 2, 2013

Mr. Smith has achieved what he set out to do in his first years of teaching. Often, Mr. Smith's students list him as their favorite teacher. In a recent interview with two former students, they spoke highly of how well Mr. Smith prepared them spiritually and academically. Once he learned how to connect with his students in a productive and life-giving manner, Mr. Smith became that Luke 6:40 teacher; I wanted my students to become like him!

Success Stories

I interviewed two former students, Martha and Mary (not their real names). Their story illustrates how a love-centered learning experience contrasts with a traditional learning environment. I chose to interview them based on the faith and self-assurance they demonstrated in public high school. These sisters had experienced a traditional Christian school before attending Bethel Christian School and then moved on to public high school.

Martha, the oldest of the two girls, said she was taught about God in her traditional Christian school but was not introduced to God. It was a religious experience where reverence and obedience were emphasized. By the time Martha left that school after fifth grade, she was questioning the existence of God. Both girls shared that they knew their teachers loved them, but they did not think the teachers cared about

who they were. It was more a matter of outward appearance. If one conformed, it was assumed that they were doing well. Mary said it was just like the uniforms they had to wear. Everyone needed to look the same. The teachers were effective, but God was treated like a subject rather than someone they should get to know. Bible lessons were just that, a lesson about a Bible story. The girls said it was a safe, caring, and loving environment, but there was no depth of connection with the teachers or God as they had experienced at Bethel.

Bethel was an encouraging environment where they were inspired to pursue their individual dreams. Their teachers believed in them, so it was a safe place to take risks, knowing failure was okay. Due to this positive atmosphere, they believed in themselves and grew in their relationship with God and others.

As I have outlined, God's attributes were embedded into daily classroom interactions. Worship was no longer a song service. It was a time to connect with God. Bible study became a time to hear God's voice rather than just read about Him. The girls also learned of their God-given gifts.

Mary now understands that she feels people's emotions more than most. This awareness of others' emotional needs is a gift that helps her minister to broken people. However, this gift of discernment comes with a price, as some days she comes home from high school emotionally spent. On such days, she retreats into the presence of God through worship and reading her Bible. Her alone time with God revives her so she can reach out again with joy and encouragement the next day.

Martha did not understand why everyone called her a leader until she entered public school. At Bethel, it was difficult to recognize her leadership qualities when so many confident students surrounded her. Upon entering public school, she felt the leadership void and naturally rose to the occasion.

Because Bethel was a safe place and they were accepted when they made mistakes, the girls set goals that felt like a difficult stretch, only to find they were far more capable than they thought. During my interview, I was impressed by the girls' self-assurance. They had learned who they were, children of the King of Kings, and they carried a royal mindset. Martha and Mary graduated from our junior high with seventy students and are now in a public school with nearly 1,500 students. One would expect them to shrink back due to the large numbers of people, but they have not. They are stepping up and facing the challenge. The girls credit their success to the teachers of Bethel, like Mr. Smith, and they are not the only Bethel students who are rising to the top outside of the Bethel environment. Another older Bethel classmate is her school's current student body president, and another student is a star lineman, chaplain, and co-captain of the football team who was also elected Homecoming King.

This leads me to another story about this football player. He wore his Bethel Christian School PE tee shirt to high school one day, and several Christian classmates tried to mock him because of Bethel's belief in supernatural gifts. This young man faced this attempt to mock and shame him by prophesying over these Christian classmates. He declared the goodness and love of God to these other students. The Christian students did not know how to handle being loved in the face of their trying to shame the football player. The non-Christian kids heard the prophetic words gathered around the football player and asked him to prophesy over them. He ended up sharing the gospel with a large group of non-believers.

Are all of Bethel's students this successful? No, but many are faithful to the Lord into adulthood. One former student, now a young man, recently stopped by the school office just to say hello. As we talked, he shared that his classmate had recently re-committed his life to Jesus. I was surprised and thrilled to hear this, mainly because I had known that the student had taken a turn for the worse when his parents divorced. This former student was not surprised. He simply said, "Bethel students always come back!" I do not want to give you the impression that we developed a perfect educational model. I could also share stories of students who turned their back on Jesus as young adults. After all, each of our children is caught in a battle for their soul, and they can lose sight of eternity when faced with the temptations of this world. Our place is to build the strongest foundation possible in the hearts of our students and trust that the Lord is watching and pursuing them their whole lives.

Conclusion

Transitioning a school or classroom to a God-centered place of hope takes dedication, time, and persistence. The teacher must learn to focus on and support the Godly characteristics of their students and their own lives. As with Mr. Smith, teachers will default to what they know best, which is usually how their

teachers taught them. Traditional classroom management methods incorporate a great deal of humankind's sinful traits, such as fear, anger, and condemnation, to force students to comply with the teacher's will. Christian educators need to recognize that these methods are counterproductive to the overall success of the student, destroying self-esteem and reinforcing the lies of the accuser of the brethren. Teachers must understand which spiritual realm they are partnering with. In choosing the Holy Spirit, the teacher gains a teaching partner who truly understands the heart of each student. The Holy Spirit is a co-worker who wants the best for each child. God makes this declaration, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11, New International Version). The teacher, too, must find ways to "keep their love on," as Danny Silk would say (Silk, 2013, book title), just as God does. They must find a way to stay focused on the prize of seeing students reach their full potential when they partner with the Holy Spirit and let love dominate the classroom.

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