

## **Christian Education: Why not explore the behaviours of a Christian teacher?**

### **Abstract**

This article opens with a brief review of some of the literature on Christian education finding four streams of ideas and the struggles to define Christian education. Christian education need not reside in schools, perhaps it can be found in the behaviours of the Christian teacher. Specific behaviours are reviewed; thinking Christianly, right thinking and right doing, teaching from the inside out with integrity and through the medium of values education. The teacher's purpose is explored and how it translates to specific behaviours in the classroom. 'What if Learning' and Emanuel City Technical College UK, are considered as examples of specific Christian teacher's behaviours and the article concludes by acknowledging the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the teachers.

This article reflects on Christian education as it is conceived in a variety of ways in order to set a context for an exploration of the behaviour of the Christian teacher. This journey has begun from a personal perspective as a participant observer in Australia over two decades including three school principalships and now directing the Master of Teaching (Primary) program at Alphacrucis College, Sydney.

### **The Christian Education Context**

A brief survey of some of the literature surrounding Christian education from Australia, North America and the UK seems to highlight four streams. Firstly there is the emphasis on the transmission of content, sometimes packaged as faith, in the context of Christian churches or Christian schools run by Christians. This approach is often characterised by the imperative to instil in future generations, deeply conservative, family values, seen by many as at loggerheads with the western world's current pervasive emphasis on the principles of diversity and tolerance (Rose, 1988; Symes & Gulson, 2005, p. 19).

Secondly there is the extremely hard to define, *teaching Christianly*. In this context 200 Christian teachers in Iowa, USA, were surveyed on the question of what they thought it meant to teach Christianly. To the researchers it was distressing to discover that there was no consensus and some had no idea at all, confessing to be too busy teaching to have time to think about it (Van Dyke, 2013). To counter this confusion Van Dyke has set out six conceptions that together comprise the act of teaching Christianly:

1. *A sincere Christian teacher who is Bible believing will teach Christianly automatically;*
2. *Teaching Christianly is modelling Christ's love, virtue and morality;*
3. *Teaching Christianly is exemplified by devotional exercises such as prayer and Bible study;*
4. *Teaching Christianly means to impart truth into impressionable minds;*

5. *Teaching Christianly means to imitate the way Jesus taught;*
6. *Teaching Christianly imparts a Christian perspective on to subject matter (Van Dyke, 2013).*

Thirdly there are those who believe that Christian education is not at loggerheads with the principles of diversity and tolerance, rather Christian education is an extremely diverse concept that should be explored more widely (Etherington, 2008). An allied theme within this stream is those who highlight the difficulty to grasp or adequately define Christian education. Pike (2004) suggests this could relate to the way that the tenets of the liberal democracy have taken over the thinking of Christians and secular alike as they have seen the pedagogical advantages despite being secularised in the process (Hull, 2002, p. 211; Pike, 2004, p.149).

Bob Jones University, South Carolina, USA, seeks to define Christian education, conceding that there is still confusion as to its nature. Their position places Christ Himself at the core of Christianity therefore they say genuine Christian education can't begin before the learner is born again:

*His person (who He is) and His work (what He does). Christian education begins by introducing the student to Christ—by bringing him to realize that there is a God (Gen. 1:1) to Whom he owes allegiance and obedience (Hos. 13:4) and that this God has revealed Himself perfectly in His Son (Heb. 1:1-3). It does this for two reasons: that he may know Him (Phil. 3:10; John 17:3) and that he may be like Him (I Cor. 11:1; II Cor. 3:18). Once the student is regenerate, genuine Christian education can occur (Bob Jones University, n.d.).*

In Australia, Christian Education Nation has a perspective analogous with Bob Jones University; lauding that all knowledge has its definitive meaning and purpose only when framed by God's big picture for mankind and the universe when it is anchored in Jesus Christ. Their perspective on Christian education firmly rests on the *what* of Christian education, the subject matter and the lens rather than the *how* of the educational operation:

*Christian education invites young people to see and understand the world through the perspective of God's truth. The Bible becomes the lens in which students view what they are learning. The lens focusses their thinking on ultimate truth—a biblical vision for life where the world is created and sustained by God; where God has acted in history to deal with the distortions of creation caused by human rebellion; and where history is advancing towards a new creation in which all things are reconciled to God through Jesus who is not only the climax of the biblical story but is also the focal point of the lens (CEN, n. d.).*

Similarly Etherington applies a definition of Christian education from Tye (2000) thus, that it is instruction of children about faith, teaching Christian doctrines and conducting religious practices. A closer examination of Tye's thesis reveals an extremely broad and deep definition (p. 11-12):

1. *Christian education is religious instruction. Deliberate intentional attempts to transmit the knowledge and practices of the Christian faith.*

2. *Christian education is a socialising process or the faith community approach. Some call it the community of faith enculturation. This emphasises ways to belong to a particular group, taking on the identity, habits and behaviours.*
3. *Christian education is personal development or spiritual formation, moral development and character formation. This highlights the need for an environment that nurtures all persons in whatever stage of their spiritual faith journey they are on.*
4. *Christian education is a process of liberation, critical thinking and transformation. The development of a new Christian consciousness that leads to constructing new faithful lifestyles. Developing critical reflection and enabling social action. Direct involvement in mission trips for example rather than remaining in the traditional church context of church school.*

It is interesting to note that Tye does not anchor her focus on the institution where Christian education might occur but rather in the object of Christian education, namely the students who might be thus socialised, developed or even transformed. It is this perspective that has inspired this study and perhaps finds its home in the last of my identified streams of Christian education.

Fourthly, the stream that recognises the possibility that Christian Education might not reside in a specifically Christian context at all. The Association of Christian Teachers, UK, has been established to serve and inspire any Christians in education. Their website claims that the *ACT seeks to inspire all Christians in education confidently to live out their faith day by day, positively influencing the culture, values and spiritual environment of their place of work and, ultimately, transforming the nation for the Kingdom of God* (ACT, n.d.).

Here in Australia the Christian Educator's Professional Association (CEPA, n.d.), has been established by and for Christian educators, leaving open support for Christian education within the public (state) system. Their *vision is to help, serve, challenge and equip the teacher and through helping they seek to enhance the quality of Christian education being offered by Christian educators and Christian school communities* (CEPA, n.d.).

Though opening a small door to the possibility of Christian educators in places other than Christian schools there is an implicit implication that their main concern is with Christian school communities. Again, like the CEN, it most certainly carries a focus on the *what* of Christian education as opposed to the *how* of the ACT in the UK.

It is from within this stream, the *how* of Christian education, that this article sets out to explore the behaviours of the Christian teacher and perhaps to suggest that this stream would be a rich one to develop, crafting a dynamic philosophy that the Christian teacher might apply throughout their vocation in teaching wherever they find themselves.

### **Why not explore the behaviours of a Christian teacher?**

I contend that *how* the Christian educator lives out their faith day by day, positively influencing their culture, values and the spiritual environment of their workplace can

determine how they mature and flourish as a teacher and ultimately, how they may play a part in the transformation of nations for good.

Whilst describing the principle of teaching Christianly and responding to the apparent lack of understanding by his students regarding the concept, Van Dyke (2013) proposed an *alternative model*. It is this that I propose to use as a springboard for my exploration of the behaviours of a Christian teacher. He uses a metaphor in order to identify the essential constituent that captures the whole style of a Christian teacher. Van Dyke's metaphor is *the journey that the teacher and the student travel together towards a pre-determined destination*.

He describes the teacher as *the guide*, the one who knows the landscape to be traversed together; that landscape being the curriculum. He describes the teacher's activity as *unfolding*; systematically revealing new ideas, concepts and perspectives as the journey is travelled. Finally he talks about *the enabling*; speaking of the student being now enabled to do things that previously he or she could not, they grow in confidence and skill as they watch their guide in action, learning new techniques and abilities previously out of reach.

### **What do the Christian teachers' behaviours look like?**

All of our behaviours are the result of the way we think; so a consideration of *Thinking Christianly, revisited* (Walsh, 2007), seems an apposite place to start this review of the Christian teacher's behaviours, especially in the light of Van Dyke's (2013) model for *teaching Christianly*. This seems to take the concept one step back and asks, is the Christian teacher thinking right?

Walsh dissects what it is to think Christianly or in a Christian way. He claims that to think Christianly, we need to think from *a place or specific location in the world*. This is not a geographic place with which we are familiar but rather a metaphysical setting we almost certainly don't know and a place with which we are certainly not familiar that he describes as *marginalised, a place of suffering and powerlessness* (2007, p. 3), a place where the *least* (Matthew 25: 40) are forced to live. Unless this is really the Christian teacher's starting point, their motives will tend to be that which prevails in their own culture and time; even if they do find the *least* in their local setting; they will adopt or assimilate such an environment, and in time their Christian distinctive may be lost.

Walsh recognises that maintaining this stance in isolation is extremely problematic, so he advocates that the best way to ensure the strength of the foundation is *to hear, celebrate and retell the stories of the foundations of the faith; they need to capture the individual's imagination*. He goes on to propose that *true imagination has the audacity to imagine the world can be different* (2007, p. 4). What a beautiful premise for Christian education, a regular celebration of the birth of faith by an engagement in their local church community, and an acknowledgement that there are many aspects of life on earth that need change and perhaps the Christian educator can be part of the answer,

rather than adding to the problems. This is still at the thinking Christianly stage but what a wonderful way to prepare the teacher for action than to begin to imagine the future can be better for the least in their place of suffering and powerlessness.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians in the New Testament is then used to illustrate the effect of thinking Christianly on the life of the thinker whose life will be marked out with a distinct *character of virtue, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and forgiveness*. From this standpoint the thinker may enjoy the world from a *deep sense of gratitude*, which in turn translates into acts of worship, in the broadest sense, thinking of the needs of others rather than ourselves. From this premise, Christian educators see themselves, their students and their world through a distinct narrative, and it establishes a set of caveats that contain each outcome within the bounds of their act of worship (Walsh, 2007, p. 4-8).

Paulo Freire (1998) also challenges the Christian teacher to wrestle with the ambiguity of poverty and opulence. He challenges us with the concept that right thinking and its associated words if not given body (made flesh) have little value. In his terms *right thinking is right doing* (p. 39). Freire asserts that integral with right thinking is a generous heart that cannot avoid the clear task of becoming a clear witness to decency and purity (p. 38). He also has a great deal to say about the nature of effective pedagogy that challenges the position of Symes & Gulson (2005, p. 19) that Christian schools are focussed on the transfer of deeply conservative, family values that are at loggerheads with the principles of diversity and tolerance. In contrast, Freire asserts, without any distinction between Christian or secular, that the teacher must realise that they are not primarily transferees of knowledge but rather they are to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge in a collaborative environment (p. 30). This is the right action, or behaviour, that he sees should emanate from the teacher's right thinking.

Both Walsh and Freire challenge the Christian educator working in any context or setting, Christian or public (state). They are at pains to stress the importance of the foundations for the Christian's teaching. They question whether the Christian teachers are thinking Christianly despite the pressures of conformity and the exhaustion which comes with the huge demands of the work. It is my contention that unless these foundations are firmly established the pressures to conform and the discouragement of exhaustion may anaesthetise the Christian teacher's vocation.

Parker Palmer's (2007) *The Courage to Teach – Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* seeks to unpack the inner motives, drives and sustainability of the teacher's heart. He argues that the teacher's vocation must be established on their true identity as a person of God, called for His will and purpose in this world. This eternal perspective can act as a fixed reference point for those times when we might lose our way. Palmer acknowledges that it takes courage to teach and as a part of the building process he coined the term *teaching from the inside out* as he proposes a praxis that nourishes not just the mind but the spirit and the soul of the teacher and the student. It is

so refreshing to give focus to the person of the teacher as opposed to the continual stream of measurement and the expectation of the tangible external evidence. From the outset, teachers should embark on an inward journey towards living and learning from a place of self-knowledge and authenticity, *he commands teachers to know themselves* (p. 3).

Palmer describes Christian education not as the dissemination and communication of Christian ideas (Symes & Gulson, 2005, p. 19), but rather the formation, in the students, of *a peculiar people* (p. 13). He challenges Christian educators with a call for resistance based upon the gifts and graces He has bestowed, and asserts that identity and integrity are essential to good teaching (p. 13). This resistance, while providing an external focus for the teacher's work, also adds to their purpose to push against the tide and to keep alert to the changes in the tide of change and the pressures to conform to others worldviews and desires.

*Courage to Teach* (2007) reminds teachers that Christ is in them and in their students (John 17: 3, 26). Again this eternal spiritual perspective changes the thinking from the concrete present to the eternal. If the teacher knows themselves they can know their students and help them take a similar inward journey to true selfhood and integrity. Palmer's thesis calls for the integration of faith and learning to the end that it requires the wisdom of God instead of the accumulation of the wisdom of man.

What is the integrity of the teacher that Palmer emphasises? The Oxford Dictionary (Oxford, n.d.) has four definitions:

- i. *The quality of being honest and having strong moral principles;*
- ii. *The state of being whole and undivided: upholding territorial integrity and national sovereignty;*
- iii. *The condition of being unified or sound in construction: the structural integrity of the novel;*
- iv. *Internal consistency or lack of corruption in electronic data.*

All these are wonderful descriptors of the Christian teacher that have natural outworking in distinctive behaviours. From the first one, if teachers compromise on their honesty, the younger children, in particular, will know it; to say nothing of the internal strain on the teacher. Further, how can they effectively model right thinking and right doing to their students without strong moral principles? And, the concept of being undivided, a sound person and what-you-see-is-what-you-get again supports the efficacy of the teacher's modelling and at the same time supports the teacher internally. Any entity with internal divisions will be bound to fail, when the weakest links are exposed.

Values education research has pointed to the influence of the personal values of the teacher as being crucial in cultivating the intellectual and effective ambiance of the classroom for cooperative learning and its effective scaffolding (Toomey, 2007, p. 147). Toomey argues for values education to be specific and explicit in every curriculum area (Hill, 2008, p. 110) as this will improve student outcomes (p. 141-2). This was certainly the perspective in Emanuel City Technology College, Gateshead, North West England, where the school came in the top 30 in the UK for academic achievement. This was a

public school run by Christians with an unapologetic emphasis on character formation (Twelves, 2009, p. 29).

However, this discussion is focusing on the individual Christian teacher who may not be serving in a school with an overarching Christian philosophy. I would contend that even though such a teacher may not have any say in the development and shaping of the school curriculum, they can still shape everything they teach from a values education perspective. In fact I would argue that the exercise to cross check the curriculum against the values perspective is much more profitable than to do the exercise that some Christian schools have done in seeking to weave the Biblical perspective into every lesson.

Toomey goes on to argue that values education can be the seed-bed for positive interpersonal relationships in the classroom, creating calm and contemplative learning environments, giving people, teachers and students alike, their emotional and spiritual space with the objective that everyone should become lovers of learning (p. 144). Here the Christian teacher clearly has the rationale for their classroom management strategies, which in turn if applied, will ease the strain upon the teacher at the same time as gaining greater success in prescribed outcomes as well as student fulfilment.

This should not be seen as a strain on the developing Christian teacher, as their own gospel should take the lead and find a natural outlet in values education, either in their overt or hidden curriculum, depending on their context and this approach will naturally integrate the teacher's talk and their walk (Hill, 2008, p. 110). In turn, this perspective can quite naturally be transformative rather than transmissive with this in their personal philosophy (Toomey, 2007, p. 143).

Having explored the Christian teacher's inner world, their thinking, their integrity and their values; this next section seeks to examine the Christian teacher's purpose through the lens of Brian Fikkert's (2007) *Education for Shalom*.

Fikkert starts by acknowledging that all communities are by nature exclusive, and by implication so is the Christian community. But at the heart of the Christian faith is the call for inclusivity, so that we might acknowledge *the poor that they might nullify the things that are* (1 Corinthians 1: 28). This perspective parallels Walsh's foundation statement (2007), the call for engagement with the despised is a Biblical imperative that Christian education should recognise. Fikkert asserts that one reason Israel was sent into exile was for not caring for the poor (Ezekiel 16: 49). As an aside, he goes on to claim that the natural corollary of this is that Christian schools should be populated by those *least able to afford them* but instead they seem to have become *enclaves of the relatively privileged* (2007, p. 363–366).

This perspective argues that Christian education needs to be geared towards *equipping and motivating students to be ministers of reconciliation*, and should progress from merely *training minds* based on the academic perspective to *equipping hands* based on the principle of service. Fikkert acknowledges that what he seeks is beyond the natural, it requires a miracle, and as such it is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit (2007, p. 367). That is, there is a perspective of being totally reliant on the work of the

Holy Spirit to transform the lives of the students to the extent that they will be equipped to engage with the despised to bring hope and reconciliation as they change their world. This perspective is a most unnatural expectation to level at a teacher, however the Christian teacher has a higher calling, and has available to them the necessary supernatural equipment to be an agent of change and in turn, the prospect of bringing *shalom*.

Many Christian schools have embraced, local, national and international missions (Twelves, 2013, p. 343) but their service model tends to fall under the umbrella of the *Service-Learning Model of, Santa Clause is Coming to Town* (Fikkert, 2007, p. 370). Fikkert is very concerned about this model as while the students learn the dynamic of sacrificial service, the divide is merely perpetuated by the perceived paternalism of the rich, which further degrades the poor. In contrast, he advocates the *Learning from the Poor as Service to the Poor* or *Participatory Learning and Action* (PLA). Here the outsider is the learner and the poor are the teachers, and when the Holy Spirit turns up transformation can happen to both. He has applied this model to his students in the tertiary sector, where his students go to live in poor communities for between three and six months during their studies, and the majority graduate to work full-time amongst the despised (2007, p. 371- 373).

This particular illustration is not appropriate for school children, Kindergarten to Year 12; however, I am citing this example as illustrative of the *purpose* and motivation for the Christian teacher that can inspire specific evidentiary behaviours. This way of thinking and behaving, would certainly impact the purpose and drive of the Christian teacher for ever. It would quite naturally write itself into their philosophy of education.

Examples can be quoted of specific Christian schools sending students on short-term mission trips with their participants returning transformed; however, I would argue this is merely an example of the outworking of Christian education, rather than being a requisite element of Christian education *per se*. I propose that Christian education is a condition of the heart of the teacher, which may, given the right environment, send students on short-term mission trips to poor communities. But conversely can also motivate Christian teaching in any setting, faith-based or secular. Surely, using Fikkert's principle, the test should be whether the privileged and the despised are both transformed or whether it is only one-sided, namely a big wake-up call to the rich but only a fleeting respite to the poor, their marginalisation remaining unchanged. Surely from the Christian gospel's standpoint Christian teaching should be for *shalom*, which roundly echoes back to the Christian teacher's heart that has the audacity to imagine they can change the world, motivation indeed.

So far in this discussion, most of the ideas have been internal within the heart and motivation of the Christian teacher; with the expectation that there should and will be an external expression to these internal constructs. In closing I would like to address the most common fear expressed to me by Christian teachers considering service within the

public (state) system, namely that because of the secular philosophies that govern such educational settings, the Christian teacher will find themselves gagged, unable to express their faith to their students and certainly not encouraged to share their journey with their teaching colleagues while at work.

To open this discussion I would like to draw on the work of Trevor Cooling (2010, 2015, May 4) from the UK. Cooling takes as his spring-board, the current British government's push for character development to trump competency. They have built this philosophy on the foundations of the drive for neutrality, diversity and tolerance to accommodate the growth in multiculturalism in the UK. They suggest that if future generations can all exhibit great character, this will harmonise the nation and improve productivity. They argue that character is neutral and not linked to any religious or faith based perspective.

Cooling argues that Christian teachers can leapfrog off this to advocate for the students' vocation as opposed to their career. By this he is suggesting, just as the Christian teacher is responding to their own calling into teaching as their vocation; they should look out for the calling on their students to serve others in preference to their ideal career choice that more often than not has been measured against the best pay packet (2015, May 4). He also highlighted the principle of hospitality and Christian ethics as key drivers for measuring the effectiveness of a school's curriculum. It is good to ask, does the curriculum unintentionally foster more division, isolation and parochialism while pursuing the god of materialism? Or does it encourage greater unity, inclusion and harmony while pursuing *the common good*, a further British government mantra for their future policy development? In response to this thinking Cooling's team in the UK developed the 'What if Learning Project' for those who want to be intentional about the impact of their faith in the classroom:

*This site is for teachers who want their classrooms to be places with a Christian ethos or atmosphere, whatever the subject or age group they teach. It explores what teaching and learning might look like when rooted in Christian faith, hope, and love (What if Learning, n.d.).*

Operating with these principles will certainly earn favour with the accreditation authorities while at the same time laying a great foundation for the Christian gospel to be demonstrated in very significant behaviours on the part of the teachers and the students in their care. 'What if Learning' is relevant to all students not just Christians, so the Christian teacher contemplating a move to the public (state) sector should be encouraged (Cooling, 2015, May 4).

As a demonstration of the types of behaviours that can be expected of a Christian teacher in a public (state) sector school context, Cooling develops the story of Daniel in Babylon, as told in the Old Testament account. In this instance Daniel is taken, against his will, into a counter culture but he excels in all he does and never compromises his faith. Above all he did not treat the normative thinking and behaviours around him as having the highest authority as his captors did, there was always God's authority that he remained loyal toward (Cooling, 2010, p. 24-25). In Daniel chapter 5 he does not

question whether to challenge the Babylonian worldview, knowing that such a challenge could have dire consequences. God sees his faith and looks after him. For me the main message from this example is the season of quiet resistance where he did not take on the local customs of eating like the locals. I am sure the food customs are not going to be the crunch point for today's Christian teachers but the parallel challenge will be to see if the Christian teacher can be lauded with the highest praise for their craft while they maintain their Christian thinking and eternal perspective, despite the prevailing counter culture.

Returning to Emmanuel City Technical College I would like to consider, in a little more detail, some of the factors pertinent to their resounding success for a public (state) school run by Christians but with an open, non selective intake. Was their success the fact that they were operating as a Christian school and individual Christian teachers would never have had the same impact? I think not. From my perspective, every Christian teacher can have an impact either individually or collectively, in fact the grouping of Christian teachers into a Christian school does not guarantee any better outcomes, there are many other factors at play there (Twelves, 2013). The principal of Emmanuel, told me their success was attributable to their schools *attitude and application* (Twelves, 2009, p. 30):

***Positive attitudes towards study:** They have seven core values and lay far greater stress on character formation than upon academic prowess. Their core values – honourable purpose, humility, compassion, integrity, accountability, courage, and determination are all natural foundations for good character development but we can see how they will naturally generate the best academic outcomes for their students.*

***High levels of application/effort.** This is consistent with the college's Christian worldview which helps them understand:*

- 1. That children are made in the image of God and are therefore capable of more than they can dream possible...*
- 2. The children are fallen, and therefore require direction, discipline and to be held to account...*
- 3. That children have been entrusted by their maker to their parents and that the primary responsibility for education and upbringing belongs to them...(Winch, 2009, personal email, cited in Twelves, 2009, p. 30).*

Perhaps the most important behavioural principle for the Christian teacher was explained by the principal of Emmanuel. Unequivocally, the teachers were the authority figure in their classrooms, while intentionally setting out to create rich, productive communities of teachers and learners (Winch, 2009, personal email, cited in Twelves, 2009, p. 30).

This college, without doubt, is a true Christian teacher's success story; however this community has been subject, not surprisingly, to a great number of researches, some of

which have been reported by Cooling (2015, May 8). He confirmed that the results have been brilliant but some of the results from a student survey were concerning. It was said that the school has *turned off* many to the gospel and some found the gospel messages *really weird*. It seems that the teaching staff are required to spread the gospel and that they are given patterns to follow. It seems a great shame that a culture of great depth and character should be marred by the Christian school mantras, typified in to my *stream one* at the opening of this article with their emphasis on the transmission of content, sometimes packaged as faith, in the context of Christian churches or Christian schools run by Christians.

### **Conclusion**

Why not explore the behaviours of a Christian teacher? It seems to me and it is also borne out by a brief review of some of the literature, that the behaviours of the Christian teacher identify them as unique and that their outcomes with the students can be superior in terms of character development and academic achievement. A further consideration is that the Christian teacher's health and stamina, their ability to persevere and fulfil their own vocation over the long term can be attributed to the Christian teacher's behaviours and the educational philosophy they have developed.

Nevertheless, I don't think such an exploration would be complete without reference to one of the Christian teachers I interviewed for my thesis (Twelves, 2013). They laid claim to the view that the single most important factor influencing their success was the *presence of the Holy Spirit* in their classroom.

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