

# Classroom Devotions Make a Difference

by John Kalsbeek

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In order for us to consider what difference classroom devotions make, it's important that we are clear at the outset what our goals are in regard to Christian instruction. Once we have these goals clearly before our consciences, then, and only then, will it be possible to show how classroom devotions make a difference in achieving these goals.

As teachers we are fully aware of the importance of goals and objectives. Once these are established, we have something to aim at. In the education classes all of us took in college, and especially in our practice-teaching activities, the one thing that was persistently drummed into us was the need for objectives. In fact, on the daily lesson plan sheet, that was the first item that needed to be completed. When the supervising teacher visited the class, invariably that was his chief concern — What was your goal for teaching that material? What did you hope to achieve?

Objectives are important. I do not think anyone here will argue that point. All of us are governed by objectives. Sometimes they are objectives that we are consciously striving to attain — specific goals or specific concepts in a particular subject. Other times our objectives may be of a more general nature. They may be objectives we unwittingly strive for, like improving attitudes or implanting certain values. These objectives are real but dwell in the inner recesses of our subconscious.

Objectives, goals, aims, whatever we might like to call them, are helpful and in many cases needful. Without them we would indeed flounder about like a drowning person. We would become confused and lose our sense of direction like a lost hiker in a wilderness area. Our work would become an embarrassment.

But I'm not concerned tonight about the many secondary goals that

help us provide intelligent instruction in a specific subject area. My concern is the primary goal or objective of Christian instruction.

What is the chief goal of Christian education? What is the goal to which all other goals must be subordinate?

Some, no doubt, will at moment's notice declare that all education has to be God-glorifying. Who would dare to argue with that? They would insist that any instruction that does not meet this primary objective is wasted effort and not worthy of the name Christian education. Who of us would dare to deny this? To clinch their case they say that if our instruction is not God-centered then it must of necessity be man-centered and humanistic. There is no middle of the road. It's one or the other — God-glorifying or man-glorifying. Who of us is ready to dispute that?

Surely, though it may seem to be an old and trite saying, a shopworn cliché, it's important that God be glorified in all of our instruction. But the problem with this is that it is too general a goal to be of great value. Somehow we need to be more specific.

In order to achieve this goal of the glory of God we should carefully consider what Paul wrote to Timothy:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.  
II Timothy 3:16, 17

I'm afraid that our use of II Timothy 3:16, 17 to support the important doctrine of the inspiration of scripture sometimes causes us to overlook the real and maybe even more important message of these verses. Scripture is to be our guide in regard to doctrine. Scripture must be used to reprove a wayward sinner. Scripture is an important guide in the matter of correction. Scripture is the authority that must underlie all of our instruction. All of this is necessary that the man of God (the children we instruct) may be perfect and thoroughly furnished unto all good works. They have to be equipped to live godly lives. They have to be taught not only the rudiments of the three R's but also that their calling in life is a calling of service to God. It's of utmost importance that our students know who God is, who they are, and what their relationship is to God and to their neighbor. We as teachers have to supply a great deal of input in these areas.

Such instruction helps the man of God — our students — make correct choices, know the difference between right and wrong, and to walk in all righteousness. God-centered Christian education focuses its attention on the man of God that God may be glorified. That man of

God has been chosen by God from eternity “to be conformed to the image of His son” (Romans 8:29).

Rev. David Engelsma writes in *Reformed Education*:

Our goal is a mature man, or woman, of God who lives in this world, in every area of life, with all his powers, as God's friend servant, loving God and serving God in all his earthly life with all his abilities, and who lives in the world to come as a king under Christ ruling creation to the praise of God, His maker and Redeemer.

That's our goal. To achieve that goal I believe classroom devotions do make a difference.

What are we talking about when we use the term devotions?

Devotions are supplications and prayers designed for private worship. Oftentimes we conduct these devotions in the privacy of our homes but they can also be held in small groups.

Devotional activities are not limited to the Christian community. People of other religious faiths are also devotional. The apostle Paul speaks of this when he visited Mars Hill in Athens. At that time he said, “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription ‘To the Unknown God.’” About that God Paul then began to teach them. Their devotions, of course, were their acts of worship.

The ardor, the zeal, the fervor that many people show in their religions toward their false gods puts us to shame. Maybe it's our old staid, Dutch background that encourages solemn and almost joyless worship that's at the root of our lack of ardor, zeal, and fervor. The truth is, that we tend to look down our long noses on anyone who shows even a little outward piety and devotion. His or her motives are immediately brought into question. We are embarrassed and tend to shun such a one. The devil knows the power of true piety and devotion, and since the beginning of time has tried in every way possible to discourage it in the people of God.

We have many outstanding examples of people in Scripture who were devout in life and walk. They were not afraid to be seen in their devotional activities by others. One of the best examples is Daniel. He had made it a practice to pray three times a day toward Jerusalem. When this became a life-threatening situation, he refused to stop but continued the practice as before. Another saint that comes to my mind is Jephthah. In his devotions before an important battle, he promised to give to the Lord the first thing that came out of his house to meet him when the battle was over, and the Lord had given Israel the victory. Jephthah didn't expect a dog or a lamb or some other kind of animal

to come out to meet him. He fully expected his daughter would be the one to greet him. He was willing to give his daughter to the Lord for the rest of her life. In this connection we would be remiss if we failed to mention Hannah, the mother of Samuel. She, too, promised to give the fruit of her womb to the Lord and she faithfully kept her devotional promise. How zealous are *we* in our personal devotions?

Although our topic tonight is "classroom devotions," I'd like to take a moment of your time to encourage you in your own personal devotions. Take time to meet with the Lord at least once a day in the privacy of your own person. To do so twice a day is even more profitable. We are inclined to think that if one diet pill is good for losing weight, then two diet pills would help us reach the desired goal even faster. Or if the doctor prescribes five vitamin pills a day, then if we take ten a day we'd be twice as healthy. With medicine, such thinking is wrong; but with devotions properly conducted the result is that it is certainly even more profitable. We are so quick to cut ourselves short in this important activity. So easily we skip devotions because we are too busy or just don't have time. With urgency, I press upon you, "take time." It's of utmost importance that we give ourselves over to diligent study and prayer in order to seek out "the mind of the Spirit."

J. C. Ryle in his book *Holiness* writes:

The immense importance of "adorning the doctrine of God our Savior" and making it lovely and beautiful by our daily habits and tempers, has been far too much overlooked.

Devotions, then, are an act of worship. Our life of sanctification is the reason, the prime motivation, for our devotions. Rev. Herman Hoeksema writes, "Sanctification is the work of God upon the regenerated, justified sinner, whereby He delivers them from the pollution of sin and enables them to walk in holiness and all good works." Throughout Scripture God enjoins us: "Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." We are duly called upon to live a life of holiness. This perfection is granted to us in principle in this life. Although we sin, we hate those sins and earnestly seek the Lord's forgiveness. It's now our inmost desire to be pleasing to God. Thus sanctification is the motivation for all true piety and devotional activities. Devotional thoughts, activities, and prayers are the work of the spirit and arise out of a true faith. This faith constrains the man of God to live unto the Lord out of gratitude for all the Lord has done for him. Jesus tells His disciples in the upper room, "He that abideth in Me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit" (John 15:5).

These personal devotions which you are encouraged to consider on a

daily basis can be the springboard that helps to launch you out into the waters of classroom devotions.

When I speak about classroom devotions it's devotions that are conducted by the teacher with the students on a regular every-day basis. They include Bible reading, a short but pertinent message, prayer, and singing.

Since I'm not the most original person alive, and being original takes more time, I find it helpful to use the work of others for a guide. In the past, I've used *Standard Bearer* meditations written by our ministers; a book on *Proverbs: Studies in Proverbs* by William Arnot; two books, *Holiness* and *Practical Religion*, by J. C. Ryle, an Anglican divine near the turn of the century. Other materials that could be used are *Mysteries of the Kingdom* by Prof. H. Hanko; *The Promise and Deliverance*, a 4-volume set by S. G. DeGraff; and many others that are no doubt out there ready for use.

Once you decide the direction you wish to go, you may find you'll feel more comfortable if you write down your devotions in a notebook. I do, and find I'm not nearly as forgetful. I use the materials as a guide. Often I condense the materials in my own words and use my own applications. Much of the material is passed by.

The book, *Studies in Proverbs*, by William Arnot is an excellent aid when and if you use Proverbs. These proverbs are easy to understand and can be applied in so many ways to a student's life in school and at home. They are also an excellent guide for later life. I don't hesitate to talk about marriage, or vocations, or using money wisely when these subjects come up. They may not always seem pertinent to fourth or fifth graders but it's my firm conviction that already at this young age, their thoughts should be turned and molded in the proper directions.

The procedure I usually follow is to announce to the students the title of the morning's devotion. Then we read seven to ten verses together out loud and they try to decide which verse or verses we'll consider that morning. Most of them are eager to guess. Sometimes it's very obvious which verse will be used but at other times it's rather obscure. For example when we considered Proverbs 10:26, "As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him." The title was "The Greatness of Little Things." The message that morning, in a very condensed form, was that God is concerned not only with great sins — such a murder, robbery, adultery, etc., but also with the little sins like laziness, carelessness, messiness. After spending from eight to ten minutes talking about the verse we open with prayer and sing a couple of *Psalter* numbers.

I believe successful devotions could also be achieved by using a question and answer format. This has certain drawbacks, however. Some students willingly participate and others say nothing at all. Some students who are willing to express themselves speak so quietly that the others cannot hear them. There is little opportunity for a student to prepare himself. At times I've told them what we were going to cover a day ahead of time but few of them took the time to consider the material.

Some areas you could profitably spend time on in your morning devotions would include the following: prayer, Bible reading and study, holiness, need for devotions, holy men of God, the attributes of God, the ten commandments, parables, work or study habits, loving one another, friends and friendship, or a particular book of the Bible. The list is endless. Problems that arise in the classroom in the course of a week or month could be handled in a group situation in your devotions. I've had opportunity to do this on occasion and believe that it does help the situation.

It does take time and effort on your part to prepare for these devotions. They do not come about without effort. It takes me about thirty minutes for each devotion. I hope this doesn't discourage you. It's a worthwhile endeavor. Anything worth doing is bound to demand a little effort.

I'm firmly convinced that classroom devotions make a difference. If I wasn't, I guess I wouldn't have agreed to address you on this subject.

Sometimes it's a difference that is so nebulous that we do not even see and recognize it. It's a difference that we never even become aware of. Occasionally a concrete case arises that shows us that they really do make a difference. I had the following experience which is a case to the point.

In one of our devotions we talked about the importance and blessedness of having God-fearing parents. It was brought out what a difficult work it is to be a parent, and that that work included the disagreeable task of disciplining their children. No parent enjoys that part of his responsibility. But our students have parents who love them enough to spank them or to discipline them when they needed it. I mentioned that they should be thankful for parents who disciplined them.

Some months later, at a Parent/Teacher conference, one of the mothers told me about an incident that happened at home. Her fourth grade daughter had misbehaved and the mother had to discipline the child. The nature of the misbehavior and the discipline escapes me but the discipline must have fit the situation. Later in the evening the

daughter came to the mother and told her that she wanted to thank her for punishing her because she really had it coming, and Mr. Kalsbeek said they should be thankful for parents who loved them enough to discipline them.

Another example or case in point happened after we spent a number of mornings talking about the importance of Bible reading. I pointed out that it was true that they, even though they were young, could profit from daily reading God's Word and that they should make it a habit to do so. A couple of months later, two sets of parents told me that their children were setting aside a certain amount of time to read the Bible privately to themselves each day. I don't know if they have continued the practice but I hope they have.

In Ecclesiastes 11:1 Solomon tells us, "Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days." Such is also true of any work you put into daily devotions in the classroom for the students. God will use them to furnish thoroughly the man of God (the child in this case) to all good works.

We must not doubt that the Spirit can and does work through our feeble efforts to conduct daily devotions with our students. Even younger children, I suspect, will benefit. Younger children are more easily molded, more ready to listen than are older children, and certainly as apt to remember.

I'm convinced these devotions make a difference in my own life as a teacher. They speak to me as well as to the students. They help me face the many different problems that arise each day in a more patient and understanding way. I feel more confident that my work is an important work. I'm more concerned that it's a God-glorifying work. Even if none of the students benefit — and I don't believe *that* happens — it's still good for me.

I'm convinced that it helps build up in the students reverence for God and respect for their teacher. They know that the teacher is concerned not only about their everyday subjects but also their spiritual welfare. Many important matters can be brought to light in these periods of devotions that cannot be brought up in any other subject area. I believe these devotions help to build up a godly rapport between students and their teacher.

Finally, I believe devotions make a difference in the classroom situation. They set the tone for the day. They can impress the students with the seriousness of their calling as students, with their worth as individuals, with the importance of serving God responsibly.

God uses these devotions to further His Kingdom and cause. They

should not be neglected. They should be an important aspect of our instruction. Let them be the frosting on the cake.

Before I finish I'd like to encourage you to consider the possibility of teachers' devotions. Perhaps you do have teachers' devotions at Hope and Covenant. If you do, let me encourage you to continue. If you don't, I wish to encourage you to begin. We have them every morning at Adams and I cannot think of a better way to start each day or time being spent in a better way. It has drawn us together as a staff. We pray for each other's needs. We show our concern regarding our calling as teachers. It helps us to work together as a team. We know that we are not in this business alone. Here again, it takes some work, some individual effort, but the payoff more than compensates for the effort.

Since our aim, our goal, is that the students entrusted to our care be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works, consider using classroom devotions. They add a new and significant dimension to our instruction. Such classroom devotions do and will make a difference.

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## **Why Can't Johnny Spell or Read?**

by Doug Boone

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The term "learning disability" seems to be rather popular in the field of education lately as resource rooms and other special helps are set up to combat this new educational enemy. The problem is not new, but the names have been changed over the years to protect anyone from sounding old-fashioned by calling it dyslexia, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, developmental aphasia, dyssymbolia, or perceptual handicaps. Seriously, the term "learning disability" (LD) is used to try