

FEATURE

The Spiritual Climate in the Schools

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Teachers are concerned about the spiritual climate of the schools in which they teach. This is a laudable concern. The heart of the Christian school teacher yearns not only for healthy individual students, but a healthy atmosphere in which to nurture healthy students.

Spirituality can be defined simply, I believe, as the effect of the Spirit of Christ in the lives and hearts of the students to make them holy students. A spiritually-minded student shows himself or herself to be such by behaving in a holy way. Spirituality of the school, therefore, is nothing more than the collective spirituality of the individual students.

Spirituality in the school shows itself, mainly, in four different ways. (I am not talking now about personal holiness as such, but about personal holiness that comes to expression in the public setting of the school. There are many other things that could be added to this list, such as sorrow for sin, etc. But we are concerned here with those aspects of holiness that bear on the general atmosphere and, therefore, on the public life of the school, that is, those things that can be seen by almost any visitor.)

First, a spiritual atmosphere is shown by *reverence and respect for the teachers*.

A holy student shows himself to be holy and spiritually minded in that he shows reverence and respect for those who are in authority: the teachers and the principal. He does that because he or she reverences God Whose authority the teachers bear in the place of parents. This includes not only the words that are spoken by the student to the teacher, but even the expressions of the face and the gestures of the body, the attitudes expressed in a thousand subtle ways.

This is what the Heidelberg Catechism explains to be obedience to the fifth commandment. Holiness of children is this: "That I show all honor, love and fidelity, to my father and mother, and all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand."

Second, holiness in the school is *respect and love for fellow students*.

A holy student reveals himself as spiritual and holy in that he shows respect and love for the other students in the school, because he sees the fellow student as a fellow believer, as compatriots in the kingdom of God. This includes his attitude towards the fellow students, the words he speaks to them, as well as all aspects of the behavior that is expressed in his relationship with them.

This is the Catechism's explanation of the communion of saints, is it not? By definition, saints are those who are holy. What is the communion of holy ones? This: "... that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members." So holy living, a spiritual behavior, will show itself in the careful treatment of fellow students.

Third, spirituality is seen in the *carefulness in and zeal for the studies* the student has been given.

A holy student shows himself spiritual and holy in that he has a zeal for and a carefulness in the work that he has to do, because he sees himself called by God to do the best he can do, and because he has the call by God to be a good steward of the time and abilities that he has been given. This will show itself in that he pays attention to what is being taught during classes, that he uses his time carefully in school, and that he does his homework well.

I believe this falls under the Catechism's explanation of the eighth commandment's call to holiness when it forbids, along with all thefts and robberies that are punishable by the magistrate, "all covetousness and all abuse and waste of his gifts." This is the biblical injunction to redeem the time, the call of Scripture to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us.

Fourth, (and this you may question, but I firmly believe it) a holy student shows himself holy and spiritually minded by his *appearance in school*, by the way he presents himself physically.

By the way a student dresses and the way he grooms himself, a student shows himself spiritually minded because he is called in Scripture to flee from all appearance of evil, and called to distinguish himself from everything that is unbelieving and unholy.

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Is this holiness shown by the student population in the school in which you teach? I, too, share the same concerns that you as teachers have. If it is lacking, why is it? If they do not, why do our students not show more respect? Why do they not put their heart into their studies as much as they do their television, vidoes, or sports? Why is there not that desire to be separate from the ungodly world?

I believe there are a number of factors that teachers and pastors (as well as every parent) must keep in mind, lest they become discouraged and fainthearted in their work.

First, (certainly not more importantly) there *may be unbelieving members* in the classes. This is simply a fact that you must reckon with. One cannot escape the fact that in every Christian fellowship, whether that is a church, a school, or some other Christian society, there will be carnal members, there will be hypocrites, those who are not truly sons and daughters of Zion. This is a fact that those who abandon the Christian school because they see some carnal students and wicked members and are fearful of their bad influence on their own children, fail to reckon with.

Practically, that works out in this way. We must be aware of this and accept the fact "they are not all Israel that are of Israel." But I would caution all teachers, just as preachers need to be cautioned, that they not attempt to judge the election and salvation of individual students. I believe that it is mandatory for teachers as well as preachers (without being blind and naive) to treat the students as covenant children, to make them the objects of their love. But this does not take away from the fact that there may be purely carnal students in the schools, some because they are not God's children, others, possibly, because they have not yet been brought to faith and conversion by the Lord of the covenant.

Second, there is *the sin of believing students*. This, too, is a fact. Every believing student is holy only in principle, is spiritually minded only in beginning. This is a given in the Reformed faith. Every believing, Christian student, therefore, is going to fail (to some extent) in his calling to respect you as his teacher; will fail in his responsibility to promote the welfare of his neighbor, speaking the truth in love to the fellow students; will fail in his responsibility to do his work well and zealously to the glory of God; and will fail in his responsibility to appear as a Christian in his general appearance. This, too, contributes to the lack of spirituality in the schools.

Third, (closely connected) there is the complete or partial *lack of holiness in the homes* of the students.

Not only do the students have only a small beginning of holiness; this is true of their parents as well. And we have to remember that not all the homes of the children are going to be the kind of good influence on the children that we would like bearing on them. Specifically, there are parents who do not respect (or are very weak in the respecting of) authority — the authority of the government, the authority of the

elders, the authority of the employer. Perhaps they assume a critical attitude towards those in authority. This inevitably will rub off on the behavior and attitudes of the children in your school. (This, probably, is the student who is the most difficult for you to love, is it not?)

There may be parents who have little or no concern for the welfare of others in the church or in their circle of acquaintances – very little consideration “cheerfully to employ his gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members.” Some parents are very concerned for their own family, seriously so, and the lives and the spiritual welfare of their children; but are not “mixers,” are not visitors. This, too, will rub off on the children in your classrooms. There are parents who fail to encourage the students to be zealous in their work and studies because the parents themselves are not enthusiastic for their work and good stewardship of their resources. There are parents who are not themselves eager to show themselves even in general dress and appearance, as holy and separate from the world.

Fourth, there is the *lack of holiness and spirituality on the part of the teachers themselves* that influences the behavior of the children. I will leave the development of that idea for the positive part of my presentation this morning.

The Broad Picture Teachers Need to See

Teachers may not despair for the unholiness in the children! Oh, it is easy to despair for these circumstances. God has given us a difficult path to tread. It is not an easy job teaching sinners. It is so tempting for teachers as well as pastors to say, “I am ready to give up; it’s no use; my work has failed; my children are unholy children; it’s enough.” Does that sound familiar to you?

The life and ministry of Elijah the prophet fit here well as an encouragement for teachers when these thoughts plague them. I wish that every teacher would be as familiar with the history of Elijah the prophet as with any other part of sacred history, because there are lessons in that history that apply to public servants, teachers as well as pastors, that every one of us needs to learn. And you ought, in your spare time (!), to obtain and read the books by Arthur Pink or Friedrich Krummacher on Elijah’s ministry.

Let me give you just a couple of the pertinent lessons. This greatest (minus one) of all the Old Testament prophets made the mistake of thinking that the revelation of God would always bring conversion. This was a contributing cause of his depression under the Juniper tree. He was utterly frustrated because the mighty revelation of God on Carmel brought an outward show of repentance and service of God,

but did not result in the true conversion of the people. We sometimes make the same mistake. Just because God shows Himself, or uses us to show Himself, to the children, does not mean that there will be positive fruit on that showing.

Second, Elijah made the error of thinking that the efficacy of the Word brought depended on the man who brought it. You remember when he was under the Juniper tree, and he cried out, "Lord, it is enough; I am not better than my fathers. . . ." There he was, stuck in self-pity, because he was thinking, "the people are not coming to repentance because of me. I am not good enough." And he forgot that the efficacy of the Word does not depend on the person who brings it, but on the God Whose Word it is!

He forgot that it was the still small voice of God that effected salvation and repentance. It was not the thunder of God from heaven, not the great wind, or the fire. Nor today is it the earthquake that two days ago devastated the bay area of North-Central California. It is not hurricane "Hugo" that brings conversion and holiness to the children in your classes. It is the still, small (but omnipotent!) voice of the Word of God.

And, Elijah forgot that there were 7,000 who had not yet bowed the knee to Baal.

Teachers, do not become discouraged in your work. Do not be surprised at unholiness in your children! That is, we ought not think that an unholy attitude by the students in the school is something we should be surprised with, as though this is unusual. We know, because we know Reformed theology, that this will be the case! We know, because we know the Word of God concerning our children, that the children are not perfectly holy (except in principle), and therefore the atmosphere of the school cannot be an atmosphere of perfection.

Are we surprised at the lack of respect of the students for us as teachers, as though this is some strange thing, unique to *our* school? We should not be. We may not be! We may be disappointed, saddened; but we should not be surprised! Are we surprised at the lack of respect and concern shown by the students for each other? We should not be. Are we surprised at the failure to work as they ought to work, zealously? I ask you, are you surprised at the lack of holiness in your own life? Of course not! Because you know that there remains in you until the day you die an old man against whom you must wage a bitter battle. So you know that the same applies to the children of the school in which you teach.

The Means to Promote Holiness

Nevertheless, God gives means to give holiness to children, to promote spirituality in the schools.

He does! This is not something about which we simply wring our hands in despair. God gives us minds and means to promote holiness and a spiritual atmosphere in the school. Just as God gives means to promote personal holiness, and just as God gives means for giving holiness to the church, God also gives means for the holiness and spirituality of the schools where His children are studying. And I would like to make some suggestions as to what kinds of means God gives you as teachers for that.

First, God gives this by means of the prayers of the teachers.

Do you teachers have personal prayers before you begin your work every day? Do you pray, personally, for the holiness of your students, for the respect from them that God demands of them? Do you pray, personally, that the students will be considerate one of the other, helping instead of hurting one another? Do you pray, personally, that the students will take their work seriously, and with zeal for God's glory? You who are parents know the vital character of prayer regarding the labors with your children. I, as pastor, understand the urgent necessity of prayer for my work. You must personally pray each day, that God give holiness to those children under you.

Are your prayers fervent prayers? Are they cries from the depths of your soul that God will give holiness, that God will bless your children and your school and your teaching? Remember, this is the kind of prayer God promises to answer. Commenting on the history of Elijah, James says in his epistle, "The fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Do you pray for that student that is giving you the most trouble, that manifests himself more than any as an unbeliever? Is your prayer for him or her the fervent desire of your heart?

Sometimes I think that we pastors, as well as you teachers, can talk and complain and worry and even come close to despair about the lack of holiness in the church or the school, the failure of the children in their behavior, but fail so miserably ourselves in our prayer life seeking God's grace for holiness in the students.

Do you teachers pray before school as a group? Do you have devotions once in a while with the teachers as a whole? Do you discuss the needs and concerns that you have in your souls, and then bring those needs to God in prayer? We are not individualists! You are a company of teachers. Some of you are with a dozen teachers. Some are with one or two others. In any case, you are not an individualist.

You are teachers who have banded together to teach the covenant youth. You have the same concerns, the same goals, the same hopes. You ought, therefore, regularly to pray for the holiness and the spirituality of the members — because God gives holiness in answer to prayer.

Second, God gives holiness through the *serious work of the teachers* and administrators.

Part of that serious work is the work of making and enforcing good rules for the behavior and appearance of the students. The rules ought to be clear and understood by everyone. I realize that there is a fine line between, on the one hand, giving the children the impression of legalism, the impression that you run a military barracks, and, on the other, the careful application of good rules. I do not believe that we ought to have law upon law and precept upon precept. I believe that we ought to have as few laws as absolutely necessary. But every school needs to make clear to the students beforehand what kind of behavior is expected of them, and what kind of behavior will not be tolerated.

Concerning dress, I am not in favor of uniforms; but I am in favor of strict dress codes. Let me give you an example to make clear why I say this. When I was in the Christian High School in Ontario, California in 1970, there was a fairly strict code of dress both for the boys and the girls. For the boys the rule was: no jeans, period. (The main reason was that they didn't want the dairymen's sons coming to school right out of the barn with manure on their pants. But it was a rule, nevertheless, and a good one.) Everyone wore corduroys or other dress slacks. For the girls, the rule, if I remember correctly, was dresses or dress outfits of pants with matching tops. I believe that that dress code made a difference in the attitude and atmosphere of the school. A neat, careful dress, fosters an attitude of carefulness and respect. Let me give another example. When I was in Junior High school in Redlands Christian, there was no dress code that I remember. And we boys, when we got into Junior High, wore our blue jeans, white tee shirt, white socks, and *surachi* Mexican sandals; topped that off with sunglasses, and then went out and stood like cool cats in front of school. And we *felt* like giving some lip to the teachers! Rebellious dress will make a rebellious spirit come to expression.

However that is done, I believe that every Christian school ought to have some good regulations, so that the dress of the students is appropriate, and different from the world. I do not know what kind of dress codes all of our schools have, but I do know that if the children wear to school what they sometimes try to wear to catechism, it is

astounding the rebellion and irreverence that shouts from their clothing.*

The hard work of the teachers and administrators includes having a firm, strict discipline with the students. Teachers ought to have a no-nonsense, firm-handed approach to discipline in the schools. Again, we need not train like the army. It is important to be friends with the students and have fun with them. But they must know their limits and be treated firmly when they cross over. If there is one thing that I have learned from my 8 or 9 years of catechism teaching it is that a firm hand is necessary at the outset.

Why is firm discipline necessary? First, because we understand that there are unbelieving students in the school. And the biblical principle that applies to the church also applies to the school: "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." That leaven needs to be removed from the lump, lest the whole body is affected and infected. I hope no one of our schools adopts the notion that any child may remain in the school just because the parents pay the tuition and probably scream pretty loudly when the student is threatened with expulsion. The school may not allow those to remain whose unbelieving confession or walk ruins the other students.

Primarily, discipline is necessary because the believing, but sinful, children need correction that will "drive the foolishness far from them." This is the main reason for discipline. As parents are called to discipline their children for their correction and salvation, so teachers are called to discipline the children of the school. And remember, the purpose of discipline, according to Hebrews 12, is the holiness of the children, "for without holiness, no man shall see the Lord."

Third, holiness can be promoted in the schools *by showing holiness in your own life*. You cannot be perfect, but you can be a teacher with integrity, with a reputation for holiness and sincerity. Be that kind of a teacher!

Specifically, express your love for the students. Let them know that you love them! Tell them sometimes that you love them. I do, as a pastor! And if you do not love your students, if you do not have a deep desire for the holiness of these covenant children, then you ought to do some serious soul-searching as to what's wrong. How does God

* I was told by a teacher after this speech was given that these remarks ought to have been addressed to the school boards, not the teachers and principals.

