

The Reformed Teacher's Devotional Diligence

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Devotional time is a vital part of the day for the child of God. By “devotional time” I am referring to those parts of the day, usually at set points, when we set aside the earthly labors which occupy our time and pay especially close attention to giving glory to God in the careful reading, singing, and praying of His Word. It is an act of worship, so that we, as the covenant friend-servants of our God, might know and bless and thank Him for His efficacious saving work in Christ Jesus, as well as for His continual presence with us and with His church through the ages.

Understanding that the purpose and elements of devotions (worshiping God by careful reading, singing, and praying of His Word) are similar for all situations, whether as an individual in his “closet” (Matt. 6:6), or as the head of the household leading his family (Job 1:5), we would do well to consider the place of devotions in our schools. As we call to mind the Reformed conceptions of a father as the spiritual leader of his home,¹ and of the school as an extension of the home where the teacher stands in the place of the parents,² we will see that the thoughts and suggestions outlined below regarding devotions in the school can easily apply to devotional life in the home. It is my prayer that the schools are actually mirroring the home in these areas, as God gives parents the command to teach their children about His Word in family worship (i.e., devotions) in several passages of Scripture, most notably in Deuteronomy 6:7, 11:19, and Psalm 78:5.³

1 See Rev. Kenneth Kooles article, “The Reformation and Family Worship” in the *Standard Bearer*, 71 (Dec. 15, 1994 and Jan. 15, 1995 issues).

2 See Prof. David Engelsma’s book, *Reformed Education*, pp. 62ff.

3 See Chapter 13 of *The Family: Foundations are Shaking* concerning “Family Worship” by Rev. Barry Gritters.

Teachers who understand these Reformed ideals will ever so carefully prepare for devotions with two great concerns, namely, that they are prepared to *teach* in devotions and that the class is prepared to *hear* the devotions. These concerns are really nothing new to teachers, but we do need to be reminded of them from time to time. Considering first the work of *teaching* through devotions, a teacher must take the responsibility to lead in the worship of God in the classroom as seriously as a father takes that responsibility in family worship. Just as it is unacceptable for a father to merely open the Bible, read a few verses, pray a quick prayer, and be done, so also is this unacceptable for the teachers who stand in the place of these fathers when the children are at school. Therefore teachers themselves must be diligent students of God’s Word, earnest in prayer, living with a song in their hearts, knowing their covenant-Friend intimately. Only in such preparation can one be equipped to lead others, whether the members of a family or a classroom full of students.

In addition to this personal preparation, the teacher also must prepare to explain (teach!) the Word. This means that the teacher should be ready to explain difficult words, concepts, or points of grammar from the Bible passage that is read. Also, the teacher should both ask questions to and encourage questions from the students, and, as much as possible, foresee where questions might arise so that a “ready answer” (1 Pet. 3:15) is available. Proper application of the scripture should be made in the children’s lives, especially if the class has a particular sin or trial that is evident in its life or in the life of one of its members. Through all of this, the children need to see, wherever they turn, whether in church, the home, or the school, that reading God’s Word takes real effort, but yields very profitable results in that we come to know and enjoy God more perfectly and are thus able to live a life furnished with good works (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

Prayer is also an area in which the teacher must be prepared to teach. While some feel that this is an area of concern for the home (and most certainly it is!), the fact is, as a perceptive pastor once told us at a teachers’ meeting, students will learn how to pray from their teachers too, whether the teachers are trying to teach this or not. They will learn of the reverence one must have for God in the way in which the teacher addresses God in the prayer. They will learn of the confident yet humble attitude with which the petitions ought to be uttered as they listen to the voice of the teacher. And they will learn what the contents of their prayers should consist of by hearing the petitions which the teacher asks of the Lord, modeled on the way in which our Lord taught us to pray (Matt. 6).

Additionally, students at school learn through prayer that the hands of the school and home are joined together in the great work of instructing them to walk in Christ, for in each place we can pray for the mutual strengthening of the other. Also, they learn that they ought to pray to our heavenly Father for specific needs, such as for the aforementioned sins or trials that are peculiar to a class. And one other benefit of prayer at school for students is that they are taught in a very real way that there is diversity of members in the body of Christ, even within their own age group, and that they should all have the same care one for another (1 Cor. 12).

Lastly, there is a work of the teacher in teaching the children to sing. Psalm 47:7 calls us to sing praises "with understanding." Because of the enthusiasm with which young children sing, it is easy to assume that they are comprehending the words they are singing, but this is not always the case, even with very familiar songs. Therefore teaching students to sing praises to our God involves not only training in the tune itself, but also in the text. The teacher should be prepared with age-appropriate comments about the vocabulary, grammar (phrasing), and concepts expressed in the songs. Also songs that are appropriate for various subjects being taught are a great reinforcement as eminently practical applications.

The other great concern of the teacher is that the class *hears* the devotions. To be sure, it is all of God's good pleasure and in His good time that He sovereignly softens hard hearts and graciously gives His elect people the "ears to hear" as Jesus puts it in his parable of the sower (Luke 8:8). A mere man, eloquent teacher though he may be, cannot alter that fact. However, with good reason our Lord commanded in that same parable, "Take heed therefore how you hear" (Luke 8:18), and that certainly implies there must be instruction to learn *how* to listen. The Christian teacher ought to understand how the "art of hearing" must be emphasized to the students, especially in our technological age where he is tempted to embrace the visual and eschew the aural. Vitality important is hearing to our very souls, as it is written, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17)!

The reading of God's Word obviously gives many opportunities for teaching students to listen. Carefully selected passages which have a special emphasis on the knowledge of God and on the life and needs of the students are a great tool to furthering their hearing. The students, being viewed as those who have a "small beginning of the new obedience," will be interested when the scriptures are brought to bear on their lives as the passage is explained to them in a manner

appropriate for their age level. Comprehension and application questions asked by the teacher are especially effective at getting students involved in listening attentively. For this purpose, it may even be helpful to solicit topics for devotions from the suggestions of the students, if they would want a particular doctrine or passage explained to them.

A great concern of the teacher is that the students listen to the prayer, as this is a time of especially close communion with God. Again, the teacher cannot ensure that the prayer is actually being heard and prayed by the student, but there are steps that can be taken to assist the students in their listening. One is that the students know that a reverent attitude is best for listening. Even a statement about that fact made at the opening of the prayer is a powerful reminder to the students that their act of listening to the prayer makes the prayer their own. Reverence is also indicated outwardly by posture, as inward attitudes of the heart always have an outward expression (Prov. 4:23, Matt. 7:17).

There is a tendency to forget that we listen to one another as we sing (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16), but this is also a time for teaching the children to listen. What a wonderful lifelong skill the children develop when they learn to listen to their mutual building up of each other through the godly songs of Zion! Thus it is necessary that the teacher ensures that the children sing reverently, that is, under control, with the appropriate volume, and with the correct words to best glorify God. This was humorously brought out to me as the father of three little girls who loved to sing the "condescend song" (see stanza 3 of Psalter #306), as they referred to it in our family devotions. Another opportunity for teaching was afforded when I later figured out that their young ears understood it to be the "candy-send" song.

The few moments of time spent in devotions in the school day almost seem disproportionate to the special care and effort that is required from the teachers who lead them so that they are prepared to teach and see to it that their students are listening. Teachers will do well to remember that devotions are an act of worship in which the students come to know and praise our great and glorious God. May God bless our efforts of teaching children to worship Him, whether in the home or in the school.