

3D Christian teaching



Finding God in the classroom

Lecturers, teachers and teaching assistants are on the frontline of change in our society. Powerful forces are at work among children and young people. Media and marketing contend for their attention and seize every opportunity to shape their feelings and decisions. Parents, peers and communities buffet them in conflicting directions. And, in the midst, educators – who are, themselves, struggling to cope with clashing expectations of their role – are expected to help their students make sense of the differences, respond appropriately and prepare for the uncertainties of the future.

Who is equal to such a task? Is there a way that Christians working in colleges and schools can survive in such a situation, let alone thrive and make a positive contribution? What difference does being a Christian make?

Finding God in the classroom may be unexpected. We have not learned by instruction or example to find God there. In fact, it sometimes seems His presence is supposed to be prohibited there.

As I slowly moved from being a Christian who teaches towards being a Christian teacher, I found God in the classroom. My path has often been rough, with blind corners and detours, but I am convinced His presence there is our only basis for stability, hope and direction.

Stability

I found stability knowing that we have been strategically placed by the Lord of the universe to make an eternal difference in our classrooms. At the most spiritually significant time of their lives, God has given us a mandate to have input



After teaching for two years in a public school in Canada, Harold Klassen joined the staff of Black Forest Academy, a school for missionaries' children in Kandern, Germany. From 1977-1998 he taught various subjects including chemistry, physics, maths, Bible, and computer science. He was also the High School Principal for six years.

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Harold and his wife, Betty, have four children living on three continents.

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into more students for a longer period of time about more aspects of His world than any other Christian outside their home – and few have a Christian inside their home. We can't choose to be involved only on good days or with responsive students, but we are in an ideal position to demonstrate what God-in-a-person looks like at work. They can avoid other Christians in optional, extra-curricular church activities, but they have to be in our classroom. They may not agree with us, but none should be able to say 'I never met a competent, confident Christian.' They may be influenced more by other 'teachers' outside the classroom, but we may be their only opportunity to encounter a Christ-centered view of the world and everyone in it. Where else could God more strategically place us to make an eternal difference?

Hope

I also found hope, since no circumstance in our classroom can prevent the Lord of the universe from using us to make an eternal difference in our classroom. The kind and number of students, available resources and school ethos are important, but not decisive. We have Jesus' promise that 'everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher' (Luke 6:40). It is easy to list the things we cannot do, 'but with God all things are possible' (Matthew 19:26).

When we enter our classroom, the Lord of the universe is entering in us. He loves to use what is

weak and foolish so His strength and wisdom are obvious (1 Corinthians 1:26-31, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Because He can make a difference, we don't have to worry that we cannot. Of course, we don't enjoy being weak or feeling foolish, but He can still use us to create hope that He is really enough for the 'impossible' situations our students face.

If the only things of interest to God are activities customarily associated with a local church, then God won't be found in the classroom. However, if we are exploring God's world, His workshop, the place where He is actively and continually revealing Himself through what He has made for His purposes (Romans 1:20, 11:36, Colossians 1:15-17), we should always expect to find God there. Indoctrination and proselytisation are prohibited, but Jesus Himself spent 30 years involved in His Father's world before He began introducing others to His Father. If we understand that we can make an eternal difference by teaching, the opportunities are unlimited in the classroom.



Direction

Direction comes with the discovery that we can be intentionally involved in what the Lord of the universe is doing to draw people to Himself in our classroom. Prayer for every aspect of the classroom is more than a religious exercise when we are convinced that God is the one doing the work, but He has called us to be 'workers together with Him' (2 Corinthians 6:1). Bible study isn't just a devotional activity, but the logical place to cultivate the 'mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16) about His purposes for all the things we study, including the teaching/learning process.

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In the physical world, if something has two dimensions it can be seen, but it cannot be experienced. For this a third dimension is required. I believe teaching has three dimensions: who, what and how. It doesn't make sense to argue which dimension is most important, for all are needed. You can only see who a person is by observing what they do and how they do it. When our students look at us as Christian educators they need to experience us as a Christian person (who), who teaches truth that is consistent with God's truth (what) and does so Christianly (how).

As I moved from being a Christian who teaches to a Christian teacher I realised I should not neglect any of these three dimensions to my role. As I began thinking about what distinctively Christian teaching might involve, I immediately thought about the importance of who I was. If I am not being transformed by the renewing of my mind (Romans 12:2) so that all things are being made new (2 Corinthians 5:17), I cannot expect my teaching to be transformed. Of course, we always have the problem that we are not yet Christ-like in every area of our lives. There are still significant parts of our lives where God's transforming work is not yet complete. Because we are not Christ-like in all areas, it should be no surprise when some of what we do and how we do it, is not Christ-like.

When I encountered problems in a state school in Canada, I was convinced that the system was the major hindrance. I looked forward to moving overseas as a missionary teacher to a place where I had complete freedom to make everything as Christian as possible. Unfortunately, the flight overseas didn't change me, so I was unprepared to take advantage of the opportunities I had. I had never experienced a Christian teacher in a school classroom and my theological training hadn't prepared me to find God there either. I was in a supportive environment where Christian teaching was expected, but what I did was little different than what I'd done – and what other non-Christian teachers did – in the 'restrictive' state system. What I did and how I did it were largely unchanged.

As a Christian, I thought excellence, ethics and evangelism (the three Es) were the only value-added extras that I could contribute to the classroom. I had never considered the possibility that

what I taught – the curriculum – and how I taught – the pedagogy – could also be expressions of who I was in Christ. He did not just want to be found in caring relationships and moral decisions, but in the specific issues of the classroom. I needed to be more than ‘nice’ and ‘fair’ to be a distinctively Christian teacher.

How

It was in reflecting about how I should teach that I first began to realise that generic Christian principles weren’t sufficient. I had thought a little about the teaching methods of Christ, but had not really considered that my conscious and unconscious pedagogical choices might reveal who I really was. Did my natural tendency to do what I found most comfortable reveal that I hadn’t learned very much about being concerned for others, or was it an exercise of God-given gifts? Did I really value the uniqueness of every student? Was my tendency to use words rather than images a reflection of God’s concern for language from the Garden, to the Word made flesh, to the Bible, or a personal preference resulting from growing up pre-Internet? Did my classroom management practices reflect a biblical understanding of the infinite worth but fallen nature of everyone in the classroom, including myself? Did working in small groups make me uncomfortable because my pride made me unwilling to recognise my dependence? How I taught certainly had the ability to make visible who I was becoming in Christ.

What

The most undeveloped area in my thinking was a consideration of what I taught. I was used to having what I taught prescribed by state curriculum guides, external examinations, administrative directives and university expectations. I couldn’t do anything about those things so I



assumed I could do nothing about what I taught. Actually, I wondered if anything really needed to be changed. The only way I could conceive of connecting God to chemistry and physics was to sprinkle Bible verses in the lesson plan. In fact, I had some textbooks written by Christians that did that regularly. Unfortunately, the extra verses were rarely a comfortable fit for my students or me. The process seemed too artificial to be meaningful, and totally unusable in a pluralistic state system where God-words were proscribed. I experimented with various ways of adding something Christian to what I taught, but the results were very unsatisfactory.

After over 20 years, God began to help me see that I needed to fit what I was teaching into what He was doing, rather than try to add Him to someone else’s curriculum plan. If He wasn’t central to what I thought about what I taught, no system could be blamed. I could do something about my own thinking and then go into the classroom confident that what filled my mind and heart would ‘leak out’ in the classroom even if I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone my ‘secret.’

God is involved in whatever I am teaching because He created it (past) and sustains it (present) for His own purposes (future). If I don’t see Him in, or know His purposes for, my subjects, I need to start looking. He said we would find Him if we looked for Him (Jeremiah 29:13, Acts 17:27), but I was so much like my non-godly teachers that I rarely looked for Him in what I taught. If Christ was functionally irrelevant in what I taught, it was my fault, not someone else’s. My mind needed to be renewed: I needed to be transformed before I was prepared to be an agent of transformation in anyone else’s life.

The real goal

I realised that I needed to grasp the ‘big picture’ of what God was doing, if I was to relate what I

Janz Team

Janz Team is an association of national mission organisations in Brazil, Canada, USA, Belarus, France, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland and the UK. Creative evangelism, Christian education and compassionate empowerment are common themes with a strong emphasis on music. A new ministry group, TeachBeyond, is being created to mobilise, equip and send teachers to be involved in missional Christian education – intentional involvement in what God is doing in education to draw people to Himself.

Janz Team UK has a special emphasis on Eastern Europe. Their staff in Romania are working with

English camps and a sanctuary ministry for mothers and children. They have regular involvement with the College of Theology and Education in Moldova and support micro-economic development there. They also participate in LinGO English camps for 18-30 year olds in Moldova, Belarus and Latvia. In addition, they have staff at Black Forest Academy (www.bfacademy.com), Janz Team’s school for missionary children in Germany.

More information can be found at www.janzteamuk.org or you can contact them at jtuk@janzteam.com

taught to it. But my real goal became to help children and young people relate all of life and learning to God and His word for themselves. I wanted them to have a Christian framework of thinking that they could develop as they grew like Jesus 'in wisdom' (Luke 2:52).

If they grasped that God made everything to reveal Himself, they could look for Him on their own – inside and outside the classroom. Having minds less cluttered than my own, they would probably see Him before me if I taught them to ask 'Where is God in this picture?' If they realised that sin had affected everything, they could become discerning learners who weren't prepared to mindlessly accept the 'flavour of the moment' being peddled in the marketplace of ideas. God's redemptive activity is revealed in Christ, the Living Word, and the Bible, the written word, so they could learn from them to distinguish reflections and distortions of God in what they were studying. Instead of memorising disconnected facts about incoherent subjects, they could learn to seek God's purposes for everything and responsibly choose to use what they were learning for His glory.

If I was cultivating my thinking about the things I knew best, I could foster careful evaluation of the

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answers other 'teachers' were giving them about the big questions of purpose, the true, the good and the beautiful, choices and consequences. Even if they resist any universal answers, I could encourage them by example to become more thoughtful learners who were more particular about those they accept as 'teachers.' If I'm prepared to give an answer when they ask, 'Why do we have to learn this anyway?' I can seize the moment to go beyond glib economic and academic answers. When they ask, 'What do you think?' I may be able to reveal a small part of what I think. Then the Holy Spirit can use that to create a challenging 3D picture of Christ that will draw them into a living relationship with Him.

Only when I have found God in the classroom can I be sure I am pointing my students in the right direction by what and how I teach. And perhaps God will give me the joy of seeing some of them find Him in the classroom also.

■ Harold Klassen

Springs for Children

Springs Dance Company specialises in offering curriculum-linked performances, assemblies and workshops to enable pupils to learn from and about Christianity. Please contact us for further details about booking the Company to come to your primary or secondary school in 2008:

01634 817 523, 07775 628 442
SpringsDC@aol.com
www.springsdancecompany.org.uk

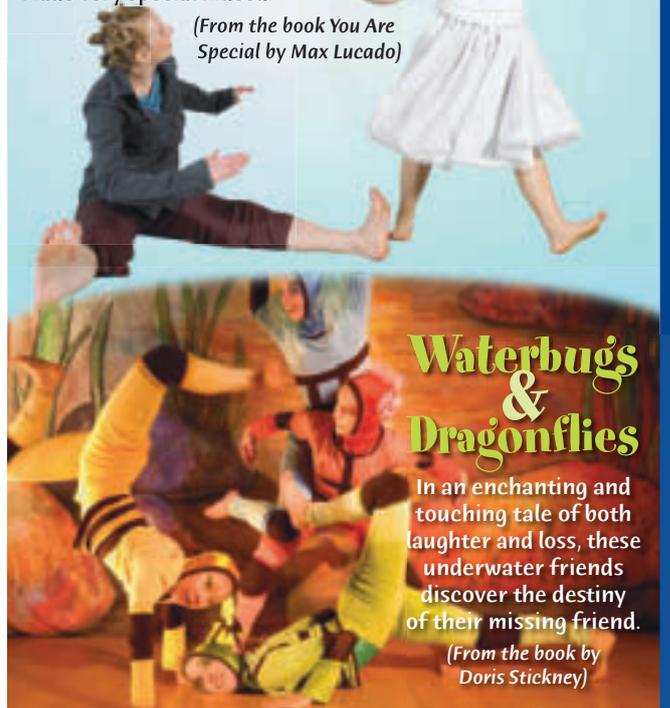
Assemblies and workshops are available throughout the year and in the summer term, we will be offering schools a double-bill for children aged 3-9 based on these two well-loved stories.

Springs dance company

The Wemmick Story

Follow the journey of this little wooden wemmick as he discovers his true worth as a unique creation - made very special indeed.

(From the book *You Are Special* by Max Lucado)



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(From the book by Doris Stickney)