

#780 The teacher's calling, especially in a parochial school

Colleagues,

We apologize. You looked for this on Thursday or Friday. Saturday came, and it still wasn't there. Now it's Monday, and we're only now getting ready to shoot it off to you.

We: Carol Braun, overburdened teacher at a girls' academy in the Hudson Valley, currently caught in the crush of extra responsibilities that attend the end of a school year; and yours truly, madly prepping for some forthcoming duties in South Africa while juggling a couple of other major projects as well, one of which is the job that pays. Ah, well. We will bank on your godly patience this week, if not on your indulgence.

I trolled files again and found something from 1996 that hard-pressed teachers might find of interest. It will apply by extension to anyone else who works in a church-based version of an activity or enterprise that is common to secular settings too. Teacher Carol found a sliver of time to give it a glance yesterday and thought it apropos "especially at this time of year when teachers everywhere are sitting through commencement ceremonies and meditating on the ultimate purposes of our jobs, and on how we can do better next year at fulfilling those ultimate purposes."

With that endorsement, here it is, a set of thoughts I threw together for the faculty retreat that launched the 1996/97 work year for Messiah Lutheran School, the Pre-K through Grade 8 institution that my congregation operates in Fairview Park,

Ohio, on the western border of the city of Cleveland. As I look at it again seventeen years later, I wonder if it didn't cause a few pairs of eyes to glaze over at the time. It's not light reading, by any means, nor does it make for easy listening. Then again, I can't imagine that Thursday Theology readers are looking for the light and easy. With that in mind, have at it.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

Taking the God's-Eye View

Theses on our vocation as servants of the Word of God at Messiah School.

1. Let us not think of ourselves too highly. To be a servant of the Word of God is a universal condition of being alive and human. To draw so much as a single breath is to serve the life-giving command of the Giver of breath.
2. The servants of the Word of God come in all sizes, shapes, and conditions. Among the latter are the conditions of good and bad, or more precisely, obedient and rebellious.
3. The servants of the Word of God may also be categorized as witting and unwitting. St. Louis of France is an example of the former. Cyrus of Persia illustrates the latter. The ordering and governing Word of God is nonetheless served by both.
4. There is surely a measure of coincidence and correspondence between wit and obedience; though to be sure, some unwitting servants do a better job of obeying the Word of God than those who know better. Even so, the rule holds that the better one knows, the better one serves. Hence St. Paul's emphasis on the renewal of one's

mind.

5. The key difference between a baptized, confessing parochial school teacher and an agnostic public school teacher is not that one is a servant of the Word of God while the other is not, but rather that the one acknowledges what he or she is while the other does not. In so acknowledging, the former is better equipped to serve well than is the latter.
6. Baptized, confessing public school teachers—among them are some of our brothers and sisters at Messiah—presumably share with their parochial school colleagues the advantage of knowing who they are. Presumably they also labor under the disadvantage of not being free to own up to it.
7. I take it for granted that some parochial school teachers are cannier about the Word of God and what service to it entails than are others. Once again the former are in a better position than the latter to serve well, with greater confidence, deeper joy, and less confusion of priorities.
8. To be a canny servant of the Word is to recognize that one's identity and calling are defined and shaped in two quite different ways, on the one hand by the Law of God and on the other hand by the Holy Gospel.
9. The Law of God, simply put, is the means by which God sustains his present creation. As such it is the necessary and wonderful source of life. Paradoxically it also and necessarily has a deadly effect on those who are bound and determined to flout it. That includes us all.
10. The Gospel of God, simply put, is the promise that because of Jesus Christ God is bound and determined not to let the Law's deadly effect on us be the final period at the end of our several biographies. So it is that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
11. Messiah teachers are servants of the Law. I submit

(provisionally) that this is their first and most pressing responsibility, to serve the Law well. Another way of putting this is to say that unless Messiah School does an excellent job of equipping its students to serve God well in this world, it ought to go out of business and let God's public school servants do the job for us.

12. The other side of this coin is that the existence of Messiah School is predicated on the assumption that Messiah's teachers can teach reading, writing, arithmetic—and, let us add, computing—as well as their public counterparts, with the added fillip that they are free to convey the deepest and truest reason for the skills of reading, writing, and computing, i.e. that God might be glorified and the neighbor loved well.
13. Those who serve the Law do well to remember St. Paul's dictum that the Law breeds wrath. This happens both directly and indirectly. Witness reactions to report cards—or professional evaluations—both good and bad. Wrathful outbreaks will provoke neither surprise nor aggrieved distress in canny servants of the Law
14. A corollary observation is that the more pressing the Law, the more flagrant the wrath. This is one reason for keeping rules to a necessary minimum.
15. Messiah's teachers are likewise servants of the Gospel, this by virtue of their baptism into the death of Christ and the provoking of faith in that same Christ which the Spirit has worked within them.
16. To serve the Gospel is to speak and to act on the assumption that its incredible promise is trustworthy with respect not only to oneself but also to one's students, one's colleagues, one's set of parents or parishioners, one's neighbors.
17. The Gospel does not abrogate or supersede the Law. Rather it transcends it. It is not, for example, an excuse to do

away with grades and expectations. It is rather an invitation to love and honor each other (to say nothing of God) without reference to those grades and expectations, and exclusively for Christ's sake.

18. Canny servants of the Gospel recognize that this invitation is unthinkably difficult to accept. It therefore bears endless repeating, in both word and deed. Where and when the repetition takes root, one is obliged to give thanks and praise to God for a miracle.
19. In their capacity as servants of the Gospel, it is not the responsibility of Messiah's teachers to convert their students—or anyone else, for that matter. Rather, one's responsibility begins and ends with the speaking and conveying of that which one trusts, in Christ, to be true.
20. Tangentially: whereas the drive in secular education is to inculcate self-esteem, the wiser and vastly truer move in parochial education is to inculcate the conviction, unthinkable apart from Christ, that one is esteemed by God.
21. Such inculcation begins with believing the unbelievable about oneself. It is therefore necessary that servants of the Gospel should constantly hear the Gospel addressed to them.
22. It is true in general that the Church's only unique gift and contribution to the world is the Gospel. It is likewise true that the Gospel is the sole excuse for parochial education.

Jerome Burce

August, 1996