

Christian School Management

The Love Principle

“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”



Christian Teachers: The Love Principle

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a (NIV)

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

Zechariah 7:8-10

“And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’”

Christian teachers provide an environment for their students that is loving and just:

- Just – not arbitrary or capricious – fair: allows the students to meet each interaction with an adult with certainty because the response to behavior or performance (good or bad) can be predicted irrespective of time or place; it is “Always.”
- Loving – student-centered, not judgmental: goes to where the student is; assures the student that, whatever the circumstances, the adult has the student’s best interests at heart and will do whatever is needed for the student to be successful; it is Love incarnate.

It is good to remember the admonition of James that is, maybe, not spoken enough: “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check” (James 3: 1-2).

That is not to say that James (and Paul in many other passages using διδάσκω) is talking about teaching in a Christian school! This is not a statement of theology. It is to say that we must seek hints as to the appropriate relationship between a child and teacher. James provides a significant insight that we can all associate with – the task of teaching is carried out with words and actions, and the way in which we use words and interact with children has enormous significance.

Today we think of that truism not just as the overt use of criticism or praise with the power to motivate or demotivate, but in elements of incredible subtlety. Consider the use of vocabulary that includes or excludes; the way words are supported – or contradicted – by body language; the exercise of authority versus power; communication methods, including technology; the giving and taking of responsibility; rewards and sanctions. Placing the student at the center of the conversation, i.e., focusing on the way in which students can benefit from our words and actions, leads to asking how completely a child can trust us. Here, we are not talking about

truth and deceit (which are obviously important) but rather about the just and loving nature of our words and actions.

The Love Principle, at its heart, is about establishing a trust relationship. The writer of Titus says: “In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us ... but to show that they [the teachers] can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2:6-7).

It is important that we always recognize that the teacher in a Christian school not only wants the child to do well in an academic sense, thus securing a hopeful secular future, but also to be open to the Word of God and thus to have that secular future imbued with and infused with God’s love, giving it meaning and eternal significance. We will not think of this as a biblical worldview (although that can be a useful phrase) but rather as the presence of God personally in the child’s learning experience. The Love Principle brings the presence of God into the presence of the child. The teacher’s trustworthiness is a model of God’s trustworthiness.

God’s trustworthiness can be thought of in this context as providing two feedback loops:

- offering a true assessment of who we are – dead in our sins, and
- providing the way through – making us alive.

As Paul says in Colossians 2:13: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.” We trust God because we know in ourselves that His assessment of us is accurate (we are dead in our sins) AND that He did whatever needed to be done (died and rose again) and told us how we needed to respond (your faith in the working of God – v. 12). It is this essential trustworthiness of God that the teacher echoes as a faint shadow in every interaction with a child. The teacher speaks truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) so that the child can mature. The teacher provides a true assessment and a solution at the same time.

Too many schools are far too individualistic in creating this environment of trust, one that consistently reinforces for students that ALL teachers are just / fair and loving / committed to students’ success. The way individual teachers put these ideas into practice can vary so significantly that the environment is not empowering from the students’ point of view. Instead, it may seem contradictory, even capricious.

The Love Principle, therefore, also supports the Christian Professional Learning Community. Through this approach, being just and being loving becomes systemic through the best practices of communities of teachers. In such a community:

- The student’s development is the key measure of success, and the community’s commitment to that is primary.
- Each faculty member’s commitment to his or her own development is palpable.

- The willingness to engage in professional conversations as a norm of professional practice, unbounded by time or place, is endemic to the faculty culture.
- There is a common and unquestioned commitment to the mission of the school. There is generative conversation about the translation of that mission to every area of school life and to every developmental stage of the students.
- Study of the research and improvements in the practice of learning and teaching are valued. Best practice should imply a journey, not an ending!
- The faculty collaborate to ensure that their own improving practice is aligned (not identical) and that it is clear what is meant by curriculum, assessment, and standards.
- Faculty examine practice in their own classrooms and those of their colleagues, critique on the basis of student learning, and implement on the basis of continual improvement.

The Love Principle is both individual and corporate. It certainly is individual. Each faculty member is just (accurate and fair), while always supporting the student through thick and thin. As Jesus identified the failings of those around him, so he also drew people to himself so that they could be healed. While we are not so grandiose, nonetheless, we are an important echo of his ministry in the lives of our students. Through us, they will have a glimpse of the eternal. This principle is also corporate. We cannot do this on our own. Together with our colleagues (and assuredly with study and prayer), we must become a Christian Professional Learning Community where being just and loving is encoded in everyday practice, an environment in which learning becomes not just possible but profound for each student.

And that is the final point of this principle. It is not enough for us to do this for some, most, or even almost all students. As families are called to our mission and students enter our hallways, so our measure of success individually and corporately is 100%. Outside of circumstances where the student or family must be counseled out, our measure of success is absolute – all “100” students must be met, nurtured, and brought to a place of success. “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?” (Matthew 18:12).

The Love Principle looks easier than it actually is. To be just and loving every minute of every day of every week of every month of every year can only be accomplished through personal and corporate commitment to the task. “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Corinthians 13:11).