

# A Challenge for the New Teacher

If you are a new teacher, you have recently completed a vigorous and demanding program of study. You now *know* many things. You now can *do* many things. And you have developed *values* and *attitudes* that are important for your success as a Christian teacher.

You have chosen a noble path to follow. You have commitment and a vision of service. For this, you deserve honor, respect, appreciation, and support. Yet those who teach must deal with exceptional challenges. This is especially so for the beginning teacher.

In the classroom, you face a room full of students who have potential and promise. They look to you with anticipation and high expectation. What will you provide for them? Will you be able to fulfill their needs? Meet their expectations? Nurture their full potential and promise?

The educational process is complex and dynamic. Meeting the needs of each student and adapting to varying situations is a challenge. As a beginning teacher, you will need to apply all of the knowledge, skills, and values that you have acquired. This means you will need to give constant attention to professional and personal competence and reflection. Draw all the nourishment that you can from the bountiful table of your deep spiritual commitment. The potential to influence lives for eternity is awesome. And your rewards will be enormous.

You are to be commended for accepting this challenge and opportunity. As you dedicate yourself to this noble profession and ministry of teaching, I invite you to consider three specific challenges. They center around your perspective and attitude about your students, the curriculum, and vision. Your ability to meet these challenges will largely determine your success as a Christian teacher.

## The Primacy of Students

The first challenge concerns the primacy of your *students*. How will you perceive your students? The view you have of your pupils will have a profound impact on how you function as a teacher. The Bible reminds us that we are made in the image of God.<sup>1</sup> And the Incarnation, God's gift of Himself to us, reaffirms and validates the incredible worth of every human being. Abraham Heschel reinforces this important truth about human worth in a powerful way.

"How embarrassing for man to be the greatest miracle on earth and not to understand it! How embarrassing for man to live in the shadow of greatness and to ignore it, to be a contemporary of God and not to sense it."<sup>2</sup>

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By Ralph M. Coupland

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Will you view your students through the lens of this biblical perspective? Will you see each student as a very special child of God, created in His image and a candidate for redemption and restoration? Within this view, teaching becomes an awesome and sacred ministry in which students are nurtured in developing Christian characters that exhibit the virtues of love, obedience, worship, and service.

### What About the Curriculum?

A second challenge concerns your attitude toward the curriculum. Every subject is a great subject and should be taught in a way that helps students learn about the world, the universe, and the Creator. Here, the words of Scripture help to enlarge our vision and understanding.

“By the word of the Lord, were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. . . .Let all the earth fear the

Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spake, and it was done; commanded, and it stood fast.”<sup>33</sup>

Abraham Heschel echoes this biblical perspective and presents a compelling challenge to consider the Creator and His creation.

“We can never sneer at the stars, mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being. Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between earth and sky, we are silenced by the sight.”<sup>34</sup>

Everything you teach is related to God and His creation. Therefore, every subject is a great subject that can be viewed with awe, wonder, and reverence. Using a powerful metaphor, the poet Robert Frost expands on this perspective and also provides an implied response.

*“We dance around in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.”*<sup>35</sup>

While teachers and students dance around each subject, they can be in awe of its mystery, wonder, and greatness. As they diligently probe and study a subject, they recognize that no one will ever be able to completely reveal the ultimate depths of all its secrets. This perspective helps them see every subject as sacred and to hold each one in awe. Teachers and students explore together the ways that

each subject provides important windows on God and His creation. This attitude will have a profound impact on how teachers and students approach every aspect of the educational process.

### Vision

The third and final challenge has to do with *vision*. Effective education goes beyond great subject content, teaching, and learning. It addresses the need of every human being to fulfill a worthy vision of purpose and meaning. .

Solomon reminds us that . . . “*where there is no vision, the people perish.*”<sup>36</sup> Abraham Heschel remarks on the power and potential of vision and how teachers can nurture its development:

“Everything depends on the person who stands in the front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which

intellectual beverages may be obtained: He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? He must be able to answer in the affirmative.

“What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but textpeople. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.”<sup>7</sup>

A teacher with vision provides a compelling witness for living a meaningful life. And the greatest gift that you can give your students is to assist and nurture them as they discover and develop a powerful and meaningful vision for living their own lives.

So as you begin your teaching career, consider these three challenges:

1. Remember to view each *student* as a child of God, created in His image, and a worthy candidate for redemption and restoration.

2. Remember that every subject is a *great subject* that provides an exciting and challenging opportunity to understand God’s creation and the God of Creation. Therefore, every subject can be approached with a sense of mystery, wonder, reverence, and awe.

3. And finally, remember that each student is searching for a worthy *vision* to give meaning, direction, and purpose to his or her life. By assisting students in this important quest, you will be providing the most precious gift that you can give.

Congratulations on your commitment to this noble profession. If you are able to successfully address these three challenges—the eternal worth of each student, the greatness of each

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subject to be explored, and the importance of vision development—you will experience profound fulfillment in the ministry of Christian teaching! ✍

#### REFERENCES

1. Genesis 1:26, 27.
2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 112.
3. Psalm 33:6, 8, 9, KJV.
4. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), p. 25.
5. Robert Frost, “The Secret Sits” from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Edward Conney Lathem ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1979), p. 362.
6. Proverbs 28:18, KJV.
7. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 237.

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*Before his recent retirement, Ralph M. Coupland was the Dean of the School of Education and Psychology at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington. This article is based upon a challenge that he presented to senior teacher education majors at a teacher dedication service in the spring of 1999 at Walla Walla College.*