

Jill Musick
August 2010
ACSI Philosophy Paper

A Christian philosophy of education is a decidedly Christ-centered framework from which a Christian teaches. Schools and academies may have Christian philosophies, but unless the teachers themselves hold to these beliefs, the school's educational aims will fall short. A Christian philosophy, then, does not reside in a mission statement or vision statement. It resides in the individual teachers. What then are the key elements of this individual philosophy?

In my personal philosophy, my framework is centered first and foremost on Christ. Out of this focus on and love for Christ flows a knowledge and love of the child. In order to best serve Christ and the student, I believe I should know the content I teach. I also believe I should also be committed to mastering all of the knowledge and skills needed to connect the student with the content.

I. Commitment to Christ in life and teaching

I believe that the central aspect of a Christian philosophy of education is a focus on Christ. From this focus come all the other areas. It is not complete in and of itself; someone who loves Christ yet cannot communicate with children could potentially do more harm than good by taking a teaching position. Yet without this key element, none of the other elements will serve the purpose of furthering Christ's kingdom.

How does a Christian practically have a Christ-centered focus in the classroom? It starts outside the classroom. The foundation rests in the Christian teacher's relationship with Christ. If the heart is not right, no amount of fixing the outward appearance can change anything. Tacking on good works like stapling fake fruit to a tree will not work. I think it is especially important for Christian teachers to spend time building up their own faith. For me, this means I need lots of quality time reading the Bible, praying alone and with other people, confessing sin, worshiping God through music, and memorizing Scripture. My relationship with God is my root; I cannot bear the weight of my students' needs unless I am grounded in Christ. Perhaps this is why James warns the dispersed believers that "not many of you should become teachers" (James 3:1, ESV). If we stumble, we not only bring ourselves down; we also bring our students down with us. We are accountable for more lives than our own. Therefore, we must be diligent in renewing our relationship with God.

As a result of our rooted and grounded faith, Christ will shine through in ways we may or may not recognize. The fruit of the Spirit will manifest itself in every aspect of our lives, including our interactions with other teachers and parents, relationships with students in and out of the classroom, and every other area of our personal lives that becomes public due to the nature of teaching. For instance, students need to see real-life examples of Christian confession and forgiveness. Often called the hidden curriculum, the students will pick up on these actions and words with which we do not intend to teach them, yet

from which they learn. If I am not putting Christ first in my life, my actions will teach my students that other things are more important than God, even if I claim with words that God is more important. Therefore, my goal is to be a teacher whose private life is centered on Christ and whose public life reflects that focus.

My commitment to Christ will not always spill over naturally. I must intentionally create situations that allow me to point my students to God. There will be “teachable moments” in which I explicitly share truth from God’s word in an unplanned moment, and there will be the ins and outs of daily life in which the students observe my actions and responses to situations, but on top of that, I must create my own scenarios that relate to both the content area and to the rest of life outside of school. In my case right now, that means I connect the various facets of musicianship that relate to the Christian walk, but it is not limited to that. When appropriate to the classroom setting, this intentional Christ-sharing may mean bringing up current events and discussing God’s attitude toward situations, addressing issues from dorm and home life as they relate to students’ relationships to God, or discussing the meaning and application of Bible passages.

Without intentionally bringing Christ into the classroom, the students will see Christ in my life, but I strongly feel that He needs to be woven into the very fabric of the content in order for the students to integrate the sacred into the secular. Too often, the “devotional” time is seen as something separate from the rest of the class. Kids sit and wait for the devotions to be finished so they can get to the real reason they’re here – to play music! I want my students to know that God is the God of their whole lives, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The real reason they can play music is through God’s creativity, and that knowledge should not be kept away from their actual playing times. The best way to help them understand that He is fully in their lives is to let Him be fully present within the classroom or rehearsal space.

II. Commitment to know and love the child

If Christ is our first love, our second love should be others. As Jesus commanded in John 13, “Love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (v. 34, ESV). As teachers, the “one another” that God has given us are our students. Therefore, as a Christian teacher, I have made a commitment to know and love my students. This manifests itself in several ways.

Prayer for students should be a priority. God is the One who knows each and every student intimately; coming to Him with our students’ burdens is the most logical thing to do. As we pray for them, we also learn to love them because we see them through God’s eyes. God has given us forgiveness and grace; praying for these kids helps us to also give grace for “as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13, ESV). I try to pray for my students on a regular basis. Each morning before school I take out my schedule and pray for the students I will be seeing that day. That sets me in the right frame of mind to face the day of school.

Part of knowing my students includes communicating with parents and dorm parents. By keeping the lines of communication open, I allow parents to inform me of any struggles the student may be facing at home that they may not want to tell me themselves. Parents know their kids better than anyone else; I like to tap into that resource as I seek to know their kids. I think it is important to involve the parents in the educational process because God placed kids into their lives to raise and nurture. They still have a responsibility, even if we as teachers are caretakers of certain aspects of the children's education.

In addition to praying for my students and communicating with their parents, I believe it is important to know what else is going on in their lives. Birthdays and major events should be acknowledged and celebrated. I look for little ways to show the students I care about them, and one of the most meaningful for them is just remembering the things that matter to them.

Knowing my students impacts my relationships with them outside of the teacher-student relationship, but it also can help me teach them better. When I know my students' interests, I can connect the content area to things that they care about and understand. This helps the learning process, since they instantly relate to the subject at hand.

Ultimately, knowing the student is not about making me a better teacher; it is about learning their strengths and weaknesses and helping them grow. I care about my students as people; I want them to learn and grow as individuals in their walk with Christ. Students are more important than content.

III. Commitment to know the content

Though students are more important than content, content cannot be ignored. I want my students to grow as people, but a big part of their growth involves the knowledge and skills learned in academic and co-curricular classes. As a teacher, this means I must do my best to be familiar with my subject area. In orchestra, I research composers and historical background of the pieces the students play; I want to be able to impart a full knowledge of the pieces, beyond simply knowing the notes. I think it is important to read music educator magazines and other literature put out by the music communities of the world in order to stay informed and fresh.

As a musician, I also aim to keep my own technical abilities up to a high standard. I am attempting to carve out a regular time to practice, and I plan on playing in some orchestral and solo performances to give myself an aim in practicing. My personal practice improves my teaching; I am intimately acquainted with the struggles my students face in finding time to practice, improving technique, and staying interested in a piece after playing it for a long time.

Not only is it important to know my content and be able to perform at a high level, it is also crucial that I believe it is worthwhile. There can be a temptation to feel less important than teachers of "core classes" (math, science, literature, etc.), but that feeling

of lowered efficacy can lead to poor teaching. I do strongly believe that music is essential to express and understand our deep-seated human emotions and thoughts. In order to remain convinced of my value as a teacher and the value of the subject I teach, I occasionally have to remind myself of the value of music as a means of communication, particularly the aspect of communication with God.

Music is indeed linked strongly with our faith. Both music and prayer often well up from somewhere deep inside us, a place too deep for conscious thought. We use music to bind our emotions to words in worship. My goal is to allow my kids to express their worship of God through the most emotive of instruments, the strings.

IV. Commitment to teach skillfully

A person could be the most devoted of Christians who loves and knows his or her students and who has the most complete technical and contextual knowledge of any particular subject area, but that would not make him or her an excellent teacher. A teacher must have certain skills and knowledge to really be effective in a school setting.

These skills are many and varied. A good teacher should know how to write good lesson plans and unit plans, integrate various subjects, expose students to different cultures, implement various modes of instruction, teach with methods appropriate for various learning styles. A teacher should be skilled in organization, management, planning, reflecting, and interpersonal communication.

A good teacher will be able to teach above and beyond his or her own content. Through the content, he or she will be able to teach the student HOW to learn. We cannot spoon-feed them the rest of our lives; they have to feed themselves when they are old enough. In my case, this means I do not always immediately tell my students exactly how to fix a problem with intonation or rhythm; I ask them step-by-step questions to help them figure it out. They will be able to repeat this on their own in their individual practice time. After studying with me, my aim is that my students will be able to analyze a new piece of music, determine difficult sections, and develop a plan to overcome the difficulties. Part of being a teacher is teaching them how to approach the daunting process of learning. With scaffolding and modeling, they can learn to learn.

A good teacher will also be able to guide the students into a love of learning. If a student learns all the content and gets straight A's in school yet departs and never wants to learn again, the "knowledge" is useless. An inquisitive mind is far superior to one that instantly grasps facts and concepts yet has no desire to reach a deeper understanding. How does a teacher teach that? Throughout my life, I hope to discover what it is that makes some people just want to learn, and tap into that part of every student that has that same desire.

I cannot say that I have in any way reached all of these ideals. These are my aims; I strive to be a better teacher and I learn from my mistakes. The important thing is that I am committed to improving my teaching skills through personal reflection, colleague collaboration, administrator review, and various other forms of professional development.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, my aim in teaching is to make Christ's name great. I always try to keep the main thing central in my life. Christ comes first, then my students, then music. I never want music to become a god in my life. My outward mission is to teach music to my students, but my real call is to disciple them and model Christ to them. I serve Christ by caring for my students and teaching them to make music for His name.

Further questions and considerations

Will my philosophy of education change in a different school setting?

The basic principles will stay the same, though their expression will change. If I teach in a public school in America, I will not be able to bring my faith expressly into the classroom setting. I will not hide that I am a Christian, though. I do not think it would be possible for me to conceal something that is so integral to my being. Christ will shine through my actions and words; I will be open to sharing with students if they approach me. I might bring up moral and ethical discussions that could potentially lead to discussions of faith; in this case, my philosophy of intentionality remains the same while what it looks like changes.

Most of my students right now are already Christians, so my role is more along the lines of discipleship with regards to their faith. In a public school, I would have more of an evangelistic approach, beginning with sowing seeds wherever God places me.

My desire is to remain close to God and share that faith with others through the work God has called me to do.

Should all parents send their kids to Christian schools if possible?

The argument has been made that a child's education deeply impacts his or her worldview; wise parents would send their kids to a place where their worldview will be shaped according to the Truth. This is a valid point, yet two questions arise: Does the Christian school always influence the child's worldview positively? Does the educational setting truly have the largest impact on the child's worldview?

I do not believe that students are always better off in a Christian school with regards to worldview formation. Often, yes, but not always. Kids in Christian schools can form cynical viewpoints toward the Gospel because it is seen as just another part of school, homework, and other "unpleasant" parts of life. Some kids can also "float along" in the comfortable Christian environment. When they leave, they often face struggles with defending their faith because previously it was just assumed to be the Truth. I think both of these problems are not necessarily true in every Christian school or with every student.

Some students grow strong in faith through their Christian school experiences, especially through classes where they are required to wrestle with issues of faith and worldview.

I would agree that a school does play a large role in influencing a student's worldview, but experiencing a secular worldview in public school is not always going to cause a student to buy into that worldview. I personally went to public school in high school, and for several reasons I believe that going to public school made my faith actually stronger than if I had gone to private school. The biggest reason is my home education experience. No, I was not homeschooled; my parents did devotions every single night, so we discussed many of the problems in high school before the issues actually came up in school. They prepared us with our discussions. As questions arose when we experienced differing worldviews of students and teachers, my brothers and I had a safe platform at home to discuss these worldviews and hear a thoughtful Christian response to what otherwise could have been faith-toppling.

A Christian school education may be necessary for parents who do not have the time or knowledge to train their kids in Biblical understanding. For those who can, however, the public school provides an interesting curriculum of alternative worldviews with which the students can wrestle with the guidance of their parents. When fighting to defend one's faith, it is difficult to become cynical or stagnant. That support structure from home *must* be in place, though.

A Christian school does not guarantee a Christian education. Likewise, a truly Christian education is possible without a Christian school. Parents should not assume they should send their students to private school if possible; nor should they assume that public school is the best option. They should be discerning, considering their own ability to teach their children and the best environment for their kids' individual personalities.

As a Christian teacher in a Christian school, I am committed to the value of the education we are providing the students. I firmly believe we are doing our best to develop the students' faith. Yet knowing that some may be cynical reminds me to open up a platform for these students' doubts and questions of the Christian faith. I do not assume that all the students are Christian; nor do I assume they believe everything we tell them. It is in their best interest to face the questions now, in the safe environment of a Christian school, rather than later when they are without this support. Just as my parents helped me sort through many difficult issues of faith and morality, I can help my students in their similar struggles. If I were teaching in a public school, I would not have that freedom to share Christ in every situation. At this point in my life, I am grateful that God has called me to teach in a Christian school, and I trust that He will continue to guide me in my own growth and development as I learn to guide my students.