

Supporting Public Education: Resources for Worship



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Preface

Baptist Center for Ethics is pleased to offer this free resource for congregations wishing to show support for public education in their worship times. It includes prayers, readings, litanies, hymn suggestions and sermons contributed by a diverse group of church leaders. It also includes a poem written by a retired public educator that is appropriate for reprinting in worship bulletins for services recognizing teachers.

While some in the Christian community loudly and aggressively push an anti-public education agenda, BCE considers public schools a national treasure and public school teachers among our nation's most valuable resources.

We encourage church leaders to copy and use elements from this PDF to honor, affirm and encourage school teachers, administrators, students and parents. Both the beginning and the conclusion of the school year present excellent opportunities within congregational life. You might also want to incorporate some of these worship elements into the service in which you recognize high school and college graduates. National Teacher Appreciation Week, which is the first full week in May, offers yet another opportunity for your church to affirm the role and value of public education in your community.

We also invite you to visit our Web site, www.ethicsdaily.com and click on the Public Education Resources tab (www.ethicsdaily.com/static.cfm?mode=per). Here you will find valuable news articles, editorials and other features that can help you engage in positive discourse and thoughtful action in support of public education.

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A Prayer of Blessing

Lord,

We pause this day and give thanks for those who have taught us the words to share our thanks. Teaching us simple words like cat and dog, they helped us to name our world. They exposed us to the infinite with those finite words and with them we describe your hand in creation and struggle with the strangeness and mystery of grace. Teaching us arithmetic, they gave us the tools to count our blessings. And so today as we offer thanks for those who have educated us, we ask your blessings upon those who shape our minds and hearts through the schools.

Bless the bus drivers. Help them to be safe. Grant them concentration in the midst of the confusion of noise and clamor. Give the grace to deal with demanding parents, a tight schedule and inattentive drivers in a dangerous hurry.

Bless the teachers, all of them, those who believe and those who doubt. Help them to be sensitive to the needs of their students. Most importantly, lead them to care for those children who have no one else to care for them. Help them embody love and grace. Do not let them forget in the midst of meetings, curriculum and papers that they hold the future in their hands. Let them wipe noses and teach calculus with compassion.

Bless the school staff. Help them to view their days of toil not as jobs but as callings. Let their essential work help the schools to focus more clearly on each student. Give them a sense of the value and importance of each moment, no matter how mundane.

Bless the lunchroom workers. As they chop, cut, knead, bake and serve, let them do so in the light of your love. They meet the most basic needs of the body so minds can be educated and the language of the soul can be learned.

Bless the administrators. Give them the insight to handle the challenges of each day. Help them create safe and curious centers for learning. Let them judge with grace and wisdom.

Bless our children by blessing those who lead, educate and serve them.

Amen.

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky.

A Prayer of Blessing for Persons in Our Schools

Dear God, we offer prayer this day for those who are in our schools. We pray for teachers who care for students, who share with them the knowledge needed for a full, meaningful and productive life. Thank you that so many Christian persons have entered the teaching profession, sensing that the classroom is the venue whereby they can serve you in the vocation of teaching.

Forgive us, Lord, for the sin of speaking without wisdom about our schools. Christian voices across this land have too often criticized the public schools as secular institutions, rather than supporting the many Christian educators who work in our schools. We have been more concerned with politicizing opinion about our schools than we have been concerned with equipping our schools to meet the needs of our children. We have neglected to provide the resources needed for our children's education, particularly in our poor rural and urban areas. The loud voices of some speaking on behalf of the Christian community condemning our schools have caused too many of us to be timid about supporting our teachers and students and their schools. Again, forgive us, Lord.

Bring an atmosphere of safety to our schools. Create a spirit of excitement in our schools. Let us honor and respect the good profession of teaching. Call from our Christian young adults a new generation of persons you seek to serve you through the educating of our young. Renew the strength and passion of veteran teachers for their profession.

God, send a revival of concern for our schools. Let every Christian understand the need for strong support of local schools. Move parents to be partners in education, involved in their children's lives at school and supportive of their children's teachers, counselors, administrators and support staff. Send Christian volunteers to be readers, mentors, chaperones and supporters in our public schools. And, let frequent and fervent prayer for our schools be understood as far more meaningful than the political rhetoric that clamors for prayer in our schools.

O God, you have taught us to love children. In the name of Jesus, who embraced and nurtured children in his time with us on earth, we offer this prayer for our schools, educators, students and their families.

Amen.

Written by Jack Glasgow, pastor, Zebulon Baptist Church, Zebulon, North Carolina.

A Prayer of Blessing for Teachers

As one who has nurtured all of us on the journey of being and as one who has brought loving, influential teachers into our lives, bless the teachers this day, O God.

Bless the teachers who love and teach as though their work was holy enough to be a calling from God. It is holy work they do because God has created every child, making them in God's image so they might grow to maturity and wholeness.

When the day seems long and the sounds of the classroom cause the mind to throb, give our teachers the stamina to "walk the second mile" so every child knows they are loved as persons of worth. Children are created as persons who express their deepest feelings, both in their noise and in their silence. God, help our teachers to listen to both the sounds and the silences and to respect both as the language children use in describing their inner world.

When the children appear as "sheep without a shepherd," help the teachers love each child as Jesus did. When a child lives in a home of chaos and neglect, help them understand they are loved at school because they are the focus of a teacher who recognizes in them a person of value.

When a child's parents are difficult to enlist as co-laborers in the shared task of education, bless the teacher with persistence. Bless the teacher who labors on in the work of education even when parents are too busy to pay attention to their child.

Even when some in the church seem to oppose the value of the teacher by questioning their skills and commitment, help each teacher understand that while others may not value what they do and question the merit of their work, it is work that is important in the eyes of God.

Bless and keep our teachers this day, O LORD. Bless them with awareness of your abiding presence because they partner with the Eternal God of all children.

Amen.

Written by Keith D. Herron, senior pastor, Holmeswood Baptist Church, Kansas City, Missouri.

A Prayer of Blessing for Teachers

O Lord, as we approach a time of year when many are thinking of graduation, help us in all of our “congratulations” not to forget those who have contributed immeasurably to this achievement—our teachers. With so much focus on future careers, the next job, or the next rung on the educational ladder, help us be mindful of those who enabled us to get to and beyond the first rung—our teachers.

In a profession that is often unrewarded financially and unrecognized in terms of its true significance, may those who teach find a measure of satisfaction in knowing how hopelessly lost all of us would be today if they had not shown us the way in the past. In ways that you alone can bless, we ask your blessings upon them.

Grant them strength for the sheer physical demands that teaching extracts.

Grant them patience when parents can be unreasonable.

Grant them clarity of mind when students’ needs press in upon them.

Grant them a sense of purpose when administrative demands seem to overshadow their real calling.

Grant them joy in realizing they do make a positive difference in the lives of so many.

In your holy name, we pray.

Amen.

Written by Tom Leland, pastor, University Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Virginia.

A Prayer of Blessing

Gracious God:

We ask your continued blessings on a special group of people, the public school teachers and staffs. Their challenge is compounded by the ever enlarging fire of societal ills. Their dedication is often dwarfed by the complexities of the challenge.

We pray for their sustained wisdom and personal stamina.

Bless the parents of the children they are presented. Help them to understand the partnership of learning. Please give the communities in which they teach the willingness to value and support the efforts they are making to develop worthy citizens.

Give to each of us the grace of loving hearts, the warmth of kind words, and the strength of supportive spirits.

In the name of the Master Teacher, Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

Written by Emmanuel L. McCall, adjunct professor, McAfee School of Theology; retired pastor, Christian Fellowship Baptist Church, College Park, Georgia.

A Litany for Education

LEADER: Faithful and ever-present God, we lift to you this morning our concern for education. We raise for your blessing and guidance all who work and learn in the schools and colleges of this state. We bring to you all our hopes and expectations.

PEOPLE: **Hear our prayer, O God.**

LEADER: We pray for public schools and colleges where generations have gathered for learning, where knowledge has been advanced and individuals have grown

PEOPLE: **May they be ever strengthened and ever faithful.**

LEADER: We pray for teachers, administrators, and all who work in education.

PEOPLE: **May they see each child as a special gift of your creation.**

LEADER: We pray for students of all ages who hope for the future, not knowing what the future will bring.

PEOPLE: **May they know courage, faith, and the joy of learning.**

LEADER: We pray for legislators and school board members who spend long hours determining curriculum and shaping policy.

PEOPLE: **May they seek your guidance and do your will.**

LEADER: We pray for those who advocate and volunteer their time to help make schools better.

PEOPLE: **May their efforts result in responsive, effective, and diverse education.**

LEADER: We pray for families who look for fruitful involvement in schools and have decisions to make about their children's education.

PEOPLE: **May they further the partnership of home and school, and find support to make wise decisions.**

ALL: **God of wisdom, we ask for all of us your blessing and presence as we strive to do your will in this community.**

Keep us faithful in our caring, ready to support and to challenge. Grant all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, that great student and teacher, who came that we might have abundant life. Amen.

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A Litany for Education and Schools

LEADER: *Will the teachers, school administrators, counselors, school volunteers, support staff, cafeteria workers, school bus drivers, and all others who work in our schools, who are able, please stand at this time.*

Today we remember the children and youth of this congregation and those involved in their education. The call to be involved in education is a high calling. Those who teach our children help shape the future. We give thanks to a gracious God for the teachers, school administrators, counselors, school volunteers, support staff, cafeteria workers, school bus drivers and all others in our congregation who work in our schools.

PEOPLE: **We celebrate your calling and pledge to support you and others in our communities who are involved in the education of children and youth.** (Educators may be seated)

LEADER: *As we recognize those who teach in schools, we recognize as well those who teach at home. Will parents or guardians of our children and youth in school, who are able, please stand.*

Education involves a partnership between school, home and community. The support of parents and guardians is essential to a child's success. This morning we recognize you for the support you give the students in your home. We hold in prayer all those in this congregation who have children and youth in school and pray that all homes will be a place where learning is valued and encouragement offered.

PEOPLE: **We pledge our support to parents and guardians. We pray that our ministries will encourage and strengthen those in our church families who provide care for children.** (Parents and guardians may be seated)

LEADER: *At this time I would like to invite our youth and children in preschool, kindergarten, elementary, junior high, or high school, if you are able, to stand.*

Your church family believes that each of you is a gift from God filled with potential and possibility. We pray that as you learn and grow you will develop caring hearts and minds that

think clearly. We believe in you and care about your education.

PEOPLE: **As your faith community, we pledge to be with you on your educational journey. We affirm that each of you is a precious gift from God. We will do all that we are able to ensure that your schools are positive places filled with hope and the resources necessary for learning.** (Children and youth may be seated)

LEADER: Let us pray—Gracious God, we lift up to you all those involved in education in this community and in all the communities in our nation and world. Guide us, great God, that we will know the best way to show our interest and support for our students, teachers and all those involved in education.

PEOPLE: **We pray for wisdom and strength to make a positive difference in the lives of those in school. We pray for courage to explore new ways of supporting the people and institutions that teach our children and youth. We pray in the name of the great teacher, Jesus. Amen.**

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(www.ncccusa.org/gifs/Litanyhandout.pdf).

A Responsive Reading

THE ONE	Eternal God, you give grace gifts to those among us who teach our children. Today we celebrate their preparation, wisdom, patience, persistence and hope.
THE MANY	Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.
THE ONE	You call from us those who teach our children. Today we encourage young people to consider careers as public school teachers.
THE MANY	Not only was the Teacher wise, but also . . . imparted knowledge to the people.
THE ONE	You sustain these who teach in our public schools as well as all who love and teach children. Today we acknowledge their sacrifices of time, energy and potential income.
THE MANY	Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge.
THE ONE	Loving God, we celebrate those who teach in the classrooms of public education and ask you to strengthen them in their efforts to prepare young minds and hearts for productive lives.
THE MANY	Concentrate on doing your best for God, work you won't be ashamed of, laying out the truth plain and simple.
ALL	Amen.

Proverbs 1:7, Ecclesiastes 12:9a, Proverbs 23:12 (NIV) and 2 Timothy 2:15 (*The Message*)

Written by Brenda Lynn Kneece, pastor, New Hope Christian Fellowship, West Columbia, SC; executive minister, South Carolina Christian Action Council.

A Responsive Reading and Prayer of Blessing

- LEADER:** What is the value of education?
- PEOPLE:** **For learning about wisdom and instruction.**
- LEADER:** Why do we send our children to school?
- PEOPLE:** **For understanding words of insight.**
- LEADER:** What is the purpose of learning?
- PEOPLE:** **For gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity.**
- LEADER:** Why do we persist in the face of obstacles?
- PEOPLE:** **To teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young.**
- ALL:** **Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill.**
- LEADER:** We learn from everyone and everything, oh God. Our parents, the neighbors, the clerk at the grocery store, the big dog down the street who scares us, the hot stove. We learn useful things. We learn frivolous things. We learn bad words. We learn goofy songs. All of life is a learning adventure. But our teachers help us make sense of the clutter in our brains. Oh God, bless the teachers whom you have called that they may see the wondrous nature of our minds and approach students with a sense of the holy ground upon which they stand.
- LEADER:** To the two-year-old who asks: Why? We answer:
- PEOPLE:** **Because God made it that way.**
- LEADER:** To the 11-year-old who asks: Why? We answer:
- PEOPLE:** **Because the molecules come together in just this pattern so that physically it works that way.**
- LEADER:** To the teenager who asks: Why? We answer:

PEOPLE: **What do you think?**

LEADER: To the adult who asks: Why? We answer:

PEOPLE: **I don't know. Maybe because God made it that way.**

LEADER: And to the teacher who asks: Why? We answer:

PEOPLE: **Without you we would be diminished.**

Written by Carol Franklin Sutton, national coordinator, NEW LIFE 2010, national ministries ABCUSA, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

Hymn Suggestions

"All Creatures of Our God and King"

"All Things Bright and Beautiful"

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

"He Leadeth Me! O Blessed Thought"

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"

"O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee"

"Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart"

"Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"

"Take My Life, Lead Me Lord"

"This Is My Father's World"

Sermon: Why Christians Should Support Public Schools

Text: Jeremiah 29:4-9 NRSV

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

Without a doubt one of the most contentious debates within Christian circles is the proper relationship between the church and the community/state in which we live. Apart from the voices of Christian Reconstructionists—those who would reshape our form of government from a Federal Republic to a Theocracy—most Christians recognize with the writer of Hebrews, “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for a city that is to come” (Heb 13:14 NRSV).

Like the children of Israel, we know the present must and will give way to the Kingdom of God. Because of John’s great vision in Revelation, we look forward to the day when we will see “the new Jerusalem coming down out of the heavens from God;” when the home of God will be in our midst. (Rev 21:2, 3)

In the meantime, we struggle with what to do with the city we do have. Do we withdraw into Christian enclaves so we can at least shield ourselves from as much unwarranted influence as possible? Do we attack and defeat those forces in culture that we perceive to be a threat to our way of life? Do we, through boycotts and other actions, seek to make people conform to our expectations, even if they don’t accept our beliefs? Do we simply throw up our hands and surrender the field? Do we accommodate our lifestyle to the community around us in order to get along—when in Rome? Christians argue and act in each of these arenas.

And perhaps this struggle becomes most obvious and intense when we begin talking about the education of our children in general and the public schools in specific.

At one time most Protestant Christians, including Baptists in the South, were great advocates of the uniquely American vision of universal education for all citizens. Over time this vision evolved from Thomas Jefferson’s proposal for a publicly funded and accountable system that would extend through college, to Horace Mann’s dream of the “common school” where children of all social

classes would come together to learn not only the 3 Rs but how to live and work together, to Margaret Haley's picture of an educational environment where citizens would be taught "to think and to express thought in free and intelligent action."

For Baptists, in particular, this picture of a democratically administered and accountable system of education whose goal was to produce citizens who could think and act freely fit well within the framework of our basic beliefs, e.g. to be responsible the soul must be free, and the necessity of a free church in a free state.

However, over the past several decades support for our public schools has been eroding, even among Baptists. And unfortunately some of that erosion can be connected with the uglier side of our history. The integration of the public schools created a crisis for many white Christians and opened an hemorrhage of support for public education, that in recent days has only intensified—though the rationale has shifted.

Today Baptists in the South are much more likely to look at public schools with suspicion, if not outright hostility. If resolutions passed by a number of state Baptist conventions and introduced at several SBC meetings are to be believed, public schools—often called 'government schools'—are instruments of forces determined to destroy our children, our country and our churches. A significant movement is growing which advocates a complete exodus of Christians from the public school system. To protect them and educate them in the way of the Lord, they argue, we need to disengage from those who do not share our values.

No doubt, the Jews in Babylon had many of the same concerns. Stuck in an alien culture, overwhelmed by the values and practices of the dominate culture, they were tempted to withdraw into safe enclaves to wait out their exile. Perhaps others, buttressed by the false prophets, had come to believe that by maintaining a certain purity of action and belief, their exile would be shortened.

Into that context Jeremiah writes to encourage the exiles toward a creative engagement with the city where they found themselves. Not only does he encourage them to get on with the everyday business of life—have children and grandchildren, provide materially for their families—but he advocates taking a more dramatic step.

They are to seek and pray for the welfare the city, "for in its welfare, you will find your welfare." Three times in verse seven the word "welfare " appears, and each time it translates the Hebrew *shalom*—the complete and total well-being of the community and each and every individual in it. Shalom is one of those comprehensive words that speaks of God's desire for peace, wholeness and blessing in every part of life. And here God encourages the people of God in exile to work and pray for shalom to be a reality in Babylon.

In this word through Jeremiah, we get an idea of what to do with the city where we live. We are to pray and work for its well-being. That cannot be done by withdrawal. That cannot be done by standing back and throwing the stones of condemnation. That can only be achieved through active, creative, engagement with the city, its people and its institutions.

Fortunately, we are far better off than the people to whom Jeremiah wrote. We are citizens, with full rights and privileges in our city. We are not helpless, voiceless exiles from another land. We have been given the gift of being in a place where we are free to be actively, creatively engaged with the city, its people and its institutions.

Now, more than ever, our public schools need the active, creative engagement of Christian citizens, and not just those with children.

Rather than attacking our schools and their teachers for their shortcomings (real or imagined), we need to engage ourselves in helping to provide ways to strengthen our schools. This might mean being willing:

- To vote for increased revenue sources for our schools—most folks would be surprised at how much of their own money teachers invest to provide for their students. For too long we have expected our schools to provide high-quality education to every student, and yet we have tied their hands with inadequate resources.
- To vote for increased revenue sources for programs that support children. It is amazing how many children come to schools without adequate nutrition, family support, medical attention, etc. We could relieve some of the pressures on our schools if we addressed the needs of children where they live most of their lives.
- To volunteer to help enhance the educational experience of our children through in-school tutoring/mentoring programs, after-school clubs and activities, being available to chaperone field trips, etc.
- To challenge those who take isolated incidents and generalize them as being pervasive throughout every public school. Most schools are not hotbeds of violence. Most school teachers are not just collecting a comfortable paycheck while waiting to retire; they are dedicated people who love children and want to see them succeed. Most school administrators are not corrupt people gorging themselves at public expense, but creative, dedicated people working to balance all the expectations we place on them and their institutions.

- To educate ourselves concerning the truth about court decisions regarding church and state issues in our public schools, so that we can prevent distorted actions on both sides. We need to hold ourselves to a high standard of truth-telling rather than demagoguery.
- To get involved, as churches, in supporting parents as they seek to raise their children—and not just the parents in our churches.

The phrase that can get heads nodding, tongues wagging and legislators legislating is “the crisis in public education.” No doubt some schools are better than others, some districts face bigger challenges than others—people make mistakes. But the bigger crisis in education may not be in the schools themselves, but in the community. Ignorance and apathy among us leave our schools vulnerable to those whose agendas are detrimental to the democratic ideal.

Now is not the time for Christians to back away from a commitment to or involvement with our public schools. Now more than ever, our children and their teachers need Christians who are willing work in creative ways, to strengthen this uniquely American system of universal public education where the rich diversity of people come together to, as Jefferson envisioned it, learn to think for themselves and appropriate the benefits of freedom.

As Baptists let us renew our historic commitment to our public schools, their teachers and administrators. Let us say to them: We will not abandon you, but are willing to join with you in seeking the educational welfare of all our city’s children. And in so doing, we contribute to the welfare of the city.

Written by Jim Holladay, pastor, Lyndon Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky.

Sermon: If I Were a Teacher

Text: Mathew 7:12 NRSV

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

Introduction

Jesus changed the imaginative landscape of his followers when he laid down a firm guideline on how we are to treat others: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This simple directive pushed Christians to develop an ethic in which empathy and action are combined. At the risk of oversimplification, Jesus' directive fueled the impulses which ultimately enabled some Christians to imagine the horror of slavery, envision a world in which slavery had been abolished and take steps to make it so. Similar dynamics led Christian reformers to undertake to improve the lot of children, workers and women. Christians changed the world by asking: "If I were such a person, what would I want Christians to do for me?"

Asking such a simple question might reform the current debates over public schools and teachers among American Christians. For too long we've been mired down in matters of policy, structure, taxation, values and the like. Along the way we've lost sight of the human dimension of public education: the teachers. We would serve God better if we focused on teachers and asked ourselves a question: "If I were a teacher, what would I want the church to do for me?"

Recognize and affirm my calling.

For various reasons, I've recently spent time reading through the works of the great Protestant Reformers, and one thing struck me: their strong affirmation of the worth of each Christian's calling. Though they divided on many matters, the great reformers agreed the calling of a baker, a candle maker, or a merchant—the "everyday vocations" so to speak—were of equal worth with that of the clergy. Such an insight energized Christians. They now thought of their life's work as a calling from God. The Protestant insight accorded a kind of holy dignity to each person's work.

If I were a teacher, I would want the church to recognize and affirm my calling. I would want the church to celebrate my calling and treat it with care. My calling drew me into teaching and keeps me there. My calling inspires me to invest my intellect, skills, time and creativity in children. I would want my church to recognize I am not a hireling or a cog in some machine designed to mass produce children who can pass various exams. Instead, I am a unique human being, created by God and called by God to take up the task of inspiring children

to become life-long learners. If I were a teacher, I would ask the church to bless me in my calling.

Pray for me.

If I were a teacher, I would want the church to pray for me. In our church we pray often for those who serve in the military, especially those who are on front line duty. We also pray for men and women who serve our city as law enforcement and fire department personnel. In short, we have a long-standing tradition of praying for persons who have committed their lives to vital service to the community.

When I recently began to think about how we pray for such persons, three insights popped into my mind. First, a large percentage of our church members serve in public education. How is it that we have failed to pray for them as they go about living out their vocation? Second, I realized we should pray for them in the same manner in which we pray for other community servants: that they might be granted wisdom, safety, effectiveness, fulfillment and the resources they need to do their work.

Such prayer, of course, is not only good for teachers and an act of obedience to God—it is a tool through which God changes us! What do I mean? Our prayers for other community servants have led us to take steps to get to know them and assist them in their work in ways they request. Much the same kind of thing will happen as we pray repeatedly for teachers. If I were teacher I would want the church to take up one of its God-assigned ministries on my behalf: prayer.

Help me teach your child by doing your “homework.”

If I were a teacher, I would want church members to take seriously the task of preparing children for each school day. Church members have the strangest priorities at times. I think of the amount of energy, time and money we pour into children’s competitive sports. Some of my best friends have spent money they did not have to provide their children with coaches, practice facilities and equipment. One family traveled all over the southeastern United States in support of their son’s passion for baseball! I’ve known very few fathers, for instance, who would even think of saying: “I just don’t have the time to work with my daughter’s tennis game.” No, we sacrifice whatever is required to give our children the chance to succeed in sports.

I’ve known many teachers well. Nearly all of them could use, and would be grateful for, better facilities and equipment, reduced paperwork, increased pay and the like. Most, though, in my experience would say their greatest, daily need is for parents who will partner with teachers in the education of their own children.

What do I mean? At the very least, Christian parents should ensure all homework is completed well. I have more in mind, though. As we work with our children, Christian parents should seek to convey a vital idea: learning is not drudgery but instead a joy. Why do I make such a point? Allow me to illustrate my meaning by asking a question: How many of you have on occasion told your child, in essence, “If you will finish your homework, then you can do something that is fun.” What kind of message are we, admittedly unconsciously, sending about learning? We can do better!

If I were a teacher, I would want Christians to help me by bringing a passion for learning to the time they spend assisting their children with homework. No one has more opportunity to nurture a love of learning than a parent.

Call out the called.

Not too long ago I took part in an informal discussion with some fellow clergy. We grappled with the issue of calling out the called, that is of how best to encourage men and women to be open to God’s call to undertake the life of a clergyperson. In a short while we identified several factors which contribute to a looming shortage of clergy. Then one member of the group raised a good question: “Do we put the question of such a calling on the table often enough?”

If I were a teacher, I would hope the church would put some energy into calling out the called, that is into helping men and women explore what God would like them to do with their lives. Some, of course, would find they are called to become pastors, worship leaders, missionaries and the like. Others, in fact the overwhelming majority, would discover God is calling them to serve him by serving others in various careers, including teaching in public schools.

How might the church do so? The hallowed tool of testimony comes to mind. Let’s create situations in which our boys and girls hear the personal stories of teachers who feel called by God to their vocation. In the tradition of Baptists in America, we can and should create Bible study literature which explores the matter of calling. Perhaps most importantly, we should school ourselves to speak carefully, wisely and respectfully of the teaching vocation. Our evident positive appraisal of teaching as a vocation may go a long way toward encouraging others to take up the teaching task.

Conclusion

What might the church do for teachers? The answer is to take seriously the words of Jesus: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The moment we begin to think and act in this way toward teachers, we will start to be the church to teachers.

Written by Michael Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Sermon: In the World, But Not of the World

Texts: Matthew 5:13-16; John 17:15-19; Colossians 1:15-17; Matthew 22:21

This sermon is an attempt at defining the Christian's responsibility to public schools. Who knows where the debate will be a century from now, or even a decade. My interest is in discovering our response to public schools today.

First, a word of warning: Discussing this issue will bring about strong opinions and stronger emotions. Realize that this issue is inherently a trap. But there is a way to navigate these stormy waters. Jesus is our example. The Pharisees tried to trap Jesus on the issue of taxes. They asked his opinion on the matter. They thought that they had woven the perfect web. If he avoided the issue, he would be seen as weak or indecisive. If he spoke in favor of the tax, he could lose some of his 'populist' appeal. If he spoke against the tax, he was guilty of treason. He asked for the coin and made a simple statement: Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. What could they say? What could anyone say?

The public school issue is a trap. If we say we are for public schools, we will be labeled as anti-home school or anti-private schools. I recently wrote an article in support of public education. I was branded a liberal and a friend of the Moabites [public school officials?].

If you say that you are against public schools, you will be seen as impractical or an isolationist. The response we should have is Jesus' response. We give Caesar what belongs to him and God what belongs to God. My take is this: We have responsibilities to God. We also have a responsibility to the state. Supporting government, more specifically public schools, is our duty as Christians—our inescapable duty.

1. We must realize that public schools belong to 'Caesar', but they are ultimately controlled by Christ (Col 1:15-17).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

One of Paul's biggest struggles was telling Christians, who were enslaved and occupied by evil governments, that they should still be loyal to the secular leaders and secular institutions. In Romans 13 we are instructed to pray for those in secular leadership. In Ephesians 5 slaves are told to serve their masters as if they are serving the Lord. In Colossians 1 we are told that all entities, all thrones and dominions are under the control of Christ. Not only does Paul not see these institutions as entities to be opposed, he sees that they are ultimately controlled

by Christ. I am confident that God is at work today in the lives of students, even students in public schools. Though public schools are secular institutions, they are still controlled by and held together by Christ himself.

2. Isolation from the world is not God's will for believers (Jn 17:15-19).

"I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."

I would never claim that it is God's will for every child to go to public schools. I know many students in my church who have flourished in private schools or home schools. What I am concerned about is the isolationist view that is being espoused by politicians and religious leaders. If we Christians leave the schools, we are harming public schools and our own children. One of the great lessons learned in public schools is learned outside the classroom. We learn how to interact with people from all races, religions and backgrounds. In short, we learn how to live in a complex, diverse and changing world. If Christians resort to a "bunker" mentality, all they have assured is that their children will be ill-prepared for the challenges of a demanding world.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples is found in John 17. It was prayed hours before his crucifixion. He prayed that his disciples would be in, but not of, the world. In, but not of the world is our calling as Christians. It is God who keeps us strong in the world. The will of Christ for his believers is abundantly clear in John 17 and his plan is not isolationism but intentional engagement.

3. We are called to be "salt and light" in public schools (Matt 5:13-16).

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

In the Sermon on the Mount, we are called to be salt and light. These images are dramatic. We are to shine God's light in the darkness. Our 'saltiness' provides flavor, preservation and curative power to a world that is desperately ill. How do you shine a light in the darkness if you never go to dark places? Can salt do any good if it never comes into contact with food? We are called to make a difference. What can we do? There are so many needs. There are so many schools with so many problems. Let me suggest one idea that has worked well for our church.

Did you know that there are 95,615 public schools? Would it shock you to know that there are 305,000 Christian churches in America? That does not include any other faiths, just Christian.

What if every church decided they would adopt a school? What if they decided that they would pray for that school by name every week at Wednesday night services? What if the pastor got to know the administrators at the school by name? Would it make a difference if the church gave the teachers goodie bags on teacher appreciation days? Could churches identify needs in the schools and help meet those needs? If every church would adopt a school, theoretically, every school would have three churches. You and I know that there are discrepancies based on demographics, but you get the point.

Here is the genius of the plan: every community has schools and every community has churches. The church must decide whether to be an enemy to public schools or a friend.

WWJD: What would Jesus do?

Written by Ed Hogan, pastor, Jersey Village Baptist Church, Houston, Texas

A Prayer of Benediction

Father, we are thankful for those who have dedicated themselves to teaching our children. Only you know, O God, how many countless hours these committed servants have given to make sure that our children learn not only history and mathematics, but also wisdom for living. Help those who work with our public schools to see their daily tasks as ministry. Setting aside the goals of greed, our teachers have sacrificed to give our children the opportunity to shape their own futures. Forgive us, O Father, when we fail to encourage and uphold those who spend every day making a real difference in the life of a student. Every one of us, O God, can remember a teacher who made a profound difference in our lives. For all of these we give thanks.

Amen.

Written by Howie Batson pastor, First Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas.

A Prayer of Benediction

For this time of worship, O God, we give you thanks.
Now we ask that you give us the strength to live lives of worship as we go about our daily tasks.

For this time of challenge, O God, we give you praise.
Now we ask that you give us the courage and strength to live lives that have been transformed by renewed commitment to you.

For this time of confession, O God, we give you tribute.
Now we ask that you allow us to live each day in full awareness of your grace and forgiveness.

For this time of learning, O God, we give you adoration.
Now we ask that you give us the wisdom to share your truth with those who are searching for understanding.

Even as Jesus sent the first disciples into the world, we accept his call to us to go into the world to learn of him, and to teach others that they may learn of him.

Amen.

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, North Carolina.

A Prayer of Benediction

Gracious God,

We are blessed that you reveal yourself not only as the God of our salvation, but you are the God of complete knowledge and infinite wisdom. As we have worshiped you on this day, we have also recognized and affirmed those whose calling in life is to enlighten and equip us for our calling in life. We are grateful that our teachers enrich our understanding of you by enhancing our knowledge of your world. Send us now from this experience of worship to be true disciples, students eager to learn from the greatest of all teachers. And as we go, continue to grow us in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Written by Barry Howard, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Pensacola, Florida.

A Prayer of Benediction

May we go from this place with renewed conviction to follow Jesus' example and call all children unto us,

May we go out with renewed commitment to support those who've given their lives to the ministry of public school education,

May we go with renewed creativity to discover ways for our community to join with public educators in their mission to provide excellent learning opportunities for every child in every corner of our nation.

Amen.

Written by Robin Norsworthy, pastor, University Baptist Church, Montevallo, Alabama.

A Prayer of Benediction

Now may the God who publicly blessed all children of the world, who through your Son, Jesus Christ, blessed the meek, the mourners, the pure in heart, who welcomed the least of these and called us to express hospitality to strangers, send us from this place to be your salt and light among all people. Equip us to work beside Christian educators who serve the public so faithfully. Empower us to be your missionaries, serving with the towel of Christ, as members of this community. Cause us to care so deeply about education that we will mentor, love and share your resources with the children for whom you care, and in so caring, we will be ministering to the least of these, by the power of Christ who first blessed us and called us as his children,

Amen.

Written by William D. Shiell, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee.

You Can Call Me Teacher

You can call me teacher.
I will gladly bear the name,
If there is no other glory
On this earth that I may claim.

I might have studied medicine,
Else been an engineer,
Or worked in a factory
As some great overseer.

But the young ones I see
And daily try to teach,
Would have been worlds away
And completely out of reach.

Had I been somewhere else
Or sat in other places,
I might never have seen
Pretty smiles on children's faces.

I have chosen this profession
And will do all I can
To make of every girl a lady
And each boy a gentleman.

At the end of my pathway
And a slab marks the same,
Please, let them call me Teacher,
I will answer to the name.

Written by Charles F. Kneece II, retired public school administrator and former teacher and coach; active layperson, Bethel Baptist Church. Monetta, South Carolina.