

# God's Advice Regarding Teacher Relationships

by John C. Jeske

[Essay read to Wisconsin Lutheran High School Teachers Conference, Nov. 7, 1974]

The older one grows, the more clearly he comes to realize that there are two beings with whom he must reckon, and with whom he must be at peace. The one is, of course, *God*. You can't ignore God in your long-range plans or in your day-to-day plans. You can't run away from Him. We have to live with God, but we have to live with Him in peace. Oh, I know people are trying to live without God—some carelessly, some rebelliously, some recklessly—but you can't live without God in peace. This applies also to Christian teachers. The Christian teacher must live with God, and live with Him in peace.

The older one grows, the more clearly he realizes also that he must live with *himself*, and that he must be able to live with himself in peace with his own conscience. Mental hospitals are filled with victims of guilty consciences; the homes and streets and campuses and churches of America are filled with people who are living worried and frustrated lives, lives perhaps of quiet despair because those people know they're not at peace with themselves; they know deep down that they're living on a lower plane than God designed them to live.

This essay will focus attention on *what God has to say about the teacher's relationships* to various people with whom he comes in contact in his teaching ministry. Considering what has just been said, it seems to your essayist that there are particularly three of the teacher's basic relationships that need to be examined in order even to begin to do justice to this theme. These three basic relationships are the teacher's relationship to God, to himself, and to people. It seems to your essayist that one can hardly discuss intelligently the third of these relationships (one's interpersonal relationships) without having touched on the other two first.

Obviously, you didn't decide by yourself to become a Christian. God called you as His child, and as His co-worker. We will want to look first at the teacher's relationship *with God*. Since you will be no more effective a teacher than you are a human being, we will want to look next at the teacher's relationship *to himself*. Finally, we dare not forget that God has called you to serve *His people*, some of them your peers, some of them younger than you; all of them, however, bearing the sign of the cross on forehead and breast. Here, then, are the three focal points of your teaching ministry—God, you, people—and because of our sinfulness each of them is a potential trouble spot. Accordingly, then, these will determine the three subdivisions of this essay.

God advises us:

- I. Cultivate your relationship with your God;
- II. Examine your attitude toward yourself;
- III. Strive with God's help to improve your relationships with fellow Christians.

## I

We're here today not so much because we decided to be here, but because the Lord has brought us together. At some time in your past, perhaps at your Baptism, He said: "I want you as My child." At another time in your past, He said: "I want you as My co-worker, laboring together with Me to rescue people from the meaninglessness of a life spent apart from Jesus Christ, and to rescue people from the nightmare of an eternity spent separated from God." God has not called us to be independent beings living alongside Him; He has called us to be children, living under Him in His family. He has called us to be branches on Him, the Vine, drawing on Him for life, for mercy, for strength, and for love. God has told us: "Without Me you can do nothing." It follows, then, that our success in our calling is going to depend—more than on anything else—on our relationship to God. This is why God's Word advises us: Christian teachers; *cultivate your relationship with God!*

The perceptive Christian teacher can never cease to marvel, e.g., at the unbelievable way God rescued us. Just imagine: there's no question as to our eligibility for God's grace and forgiveness. Compare that with the way we used to pick teams for a baseball game when we were children. We were careful to pick the best players available, right? God wasn't that finicky, though, was He? How could He have been? He chose us! C. S. Lewis calls God's grace unscrupulous; God just isn't very particular at all whom He chooses to call into His family. Here we've rebelled against Him and slapped His face and told Him in a thousand ways we want to be our own boss and won't He please get off our back. Like stubborn, spunky children we've run away from our Father's house, imagining we'd be happier making it on our own, and what did He do? Well, He didn't let us perish in our silly stubbornness. Since we weren't looking for Him, He took the initiative and came after us. Christ Jesus became our Brother, to fill our shoes, to tread our paths, to face our trials, to shoulder our burdens, and even more—to take our place, to obey God's Commandments for us, to assume our guilt, to bear our punishment. And all so that we might belong to Him, to live close to Him now and at His side forever. Talk about amazing grace!

As branches on a heavenly Vine, you and I are, however, not only *to receive* mercy and strength from God. Branches have another function besides to draw from the vine. Jesus made this quite clear when He said to His disciples: "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, that you should *bear much fruit*." In other words, as Christian teachers we must remember that Jesus Christ asks to occupy the place of honor not only in our heart, but in our life as well. In each of us He wants to see the fruit of a life dedicated to Him. Jesus Christ asks you to receive Him not only as the Savior of your soul, but as the Lord of your life as well. And if I have not acknowledged Jesus as the Lord of my life, then I have not accepted Him as my Savior, either. He will not take the one without the other. He will not take our faith without our life. He bought us soul and body. He wants and claims all that there is to us.

When you step into your classroom each new day, aren't you thankful that God has helped you get life's priorities straight? You have only one goal in that classroom, really, just as you have a single goal in all of life: "Everything to the glory of God!"

God has honored you by calling you to invest your life in the only thing that's going to matter the day after Judgment; do we recognize that as an honor and a privilege? And is that the goal we professional church workers carry before us constantly, in all of our activity? How easy it is for us to be so preoccupied with our day-to-day work that we lose sight of God's great plan for us! It's very possible for a pastor to be more interested in the congregation and its work than he is in the Lord and in His program. It's possible for a teacher to be so interested in the nuts and bolts of classroom management and daily schedules and the course of study that he forgets his classroom exists only to let God get His work done there. Every time you open the school door in the morning, ask yourself: "What's the most important thing that could happen in my room today?" And after asking yourself the question, answer it yourself: "The most important thing that could possibly happen in this room today is that God have His way with pupils and teacher. The greatest thing that could happen would be that some young Christians are helped to understand that a life spent close to Jesus Christ is the only kind that makes sense, that hangs together, that brings meaning to life."

This is, after all, the reason why God chose to put you, a mature Christian, in such close contact with a bunch of immature Christians—to let them observe how happy Jesus Christ can make a person. But what if my classroom behavior gives my pupils the impression that Christianity is sober, solemn business? What if my pained expression, or my disinterested or artificial tone of voice seem to tell pupils that my relationship to Christ has given me a headache, or that it leaves me cold? Then I ought to suspect that my relationship to God is sagging and needs attention.

There's an interesting passage in one of Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*: "I know a Jew fish crier down on Maxwell Street, with a voice like a north wind blowing over corn stubble in January. His face is that of a man happy to be selling fish, happy that God made fish, and customers to whom he may call his wares from a pushcart." How about that! "Happy to be selling fish." "Happy that God made fish, and customers..." Are we as happy to be teachers of Christ's lambs? Is our attitude toward God one of gratitude to Him for commissioning us to give children something to live for, something to work for, something to die for? The Christian teacher

simply cannot play it cool; he cannot approach his Christian task objectively. Only a zombie can be perfectly objective. God wants to see that we're thrilled with the task He has assigned to us. Through the perfect life and the innocent death of Christ God has placed you into a loving relationship with Himself, into a privileged relationship; into a relationship of joy. Cultivate your relationship with God!

## II

God has called you into the business of being a Christian teacher, first of all, for *His* sake. Each day will bring you opportunity to give credit to God, to put another jewel in His crown. But God has called you into this business also for *your* sake.

In His marvelous mercy God chose human beings to bring His love to human beings. He could've chosen angels to staff our schools, but He didn't. (I don't know why; maybe it's because angels don't know what it means to be saved, because they've never been lost.) But anyway, the mere fact that God chose to put representatives in your school classrooms who are made of sinful human clay makes for problems.

The problem arises from the sinful nature we brought with us into the world. You see, when you enter your school for another day, it's not only Joe or Jane Christian who enters that building; it's Joe, son of Adam, and Jane, daughter of Eve, who enter. The Bible tells me that there's a part of me that did not come to faith when I did; there's an evil nature in me which is never going to be converted, but which I'm going to have to battle down to my dying breath. That's the nature which the Bible calls my old Adam, which must be drowned every day, and that's not easy. Martin Luther once remarked that when you try to drown the old Adam you soon find out that that rascal can swim.

Christian teacher, consider these words carefully, and apply them to your ministry! God's advice to you is: *examine your attitude toward yourself!* When you've got a quick decision to make in some large study hall, when you're reacting to a disturbance in the classroom, when you're still correcting papers or preparing the next day's lesson plans at 11:30 in the evening, ask yourself: "Is this voice I'm hearing my old nature, or my new nature?"

Who of us hasn't had the thought flit through his mind: "You've got to think of yourself, because if you don't, nobody else will"? What a shabby philosophy of life that is for the person who has heard his Savior's promise: "Christian, you put Me first in your life, and I promise you that you will lack for nothing you need for body and soul!"

We live in an age when much stress is placed on human rights. We've heard a lot about women's rights, and the rights of minority groups, and states' rights. Christian teachers will regularly examine their attitudes to see whether they have been infected by this unholy and unwholesome emphasis on my rights. We don't like to be put down, because we've got certain rights around here, haven't we? It's interesting, and most instructive, to see how the Scripture de-emphasizes our rights. "By love serve one another," God asks of us. My satisfactions, my feelings are not the goal of my life; God's glory and my fellow man's welfare are.

As we examine our attitude toward ourselves, do we see evidence of a martyr complex? Does my speech reflect a feeling of self-pity? Can our friends, perhaps even the members of our congregation detect a note of regret over the long hours our calling requires of us, or over the exhausting and sometimes disappointing nature of our work? Might be a good idea to check our attitude over against the attitude of John the Baptist, the man of whom Jesus said: "Among men born of women not a greater than John the Baptist has risen." From John's lips came what must surely be some of the most beautiful words ever spoke by human lips. Pointing to Christ, John said: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Please don't misunderstand. This does not mean that it is sinful for the Christian teacher to want to be great, to excel. Remember the time Jesus' disciples were having an argument about which of them was the greatest? Do you also remember what Jesus said? Did He say "Oh, so you disciples want to be great! Well, shame on you"? He said nothing of the kind. It's no sin to want to be great. God did not design you to be a little, second-rate creature, a doormat. You were made for greatness, not for mediocrity. Jesus told His disciples on that occasion: "If anyone of you wishes to be great, let him seek greatness, but let him seek it in the right way.

You know that the rulers of the heathen lord it over their subjects. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become the willing servant of all—like the Son of Man; He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Examine your attitude toward yourself. Am I the one who calls the shots in the faculty meeting or in that classroom, or am I the one who takes the lead in loving? Are the pupils in that classroom for *my* sake, or am I in that classroom for *theirs*? Have I perhaps forgotten how wholesome it is for me to say no to myself, to practice self-discipline? Am I ashamed to confess in front of my students: “I was wrong” or “I’m sorry”? Am I too proud to admit: “I don’t know”?

Psychologist Carl Rogers claims that only self-discovered, self-appropriated learning significantly influences behavior. One of the best primary sources for the student to use in self-appropriation and self-discovery is the teacher. Because we are primary sources for our students to study, what we *are* is far more important than what we *say*. Our love for God, for the student, for the world in which God has placed us, and for our subject is a spark that, under God, may very well ignite similar love in our students.

Each of us must live in the presence of God, but each of us must also live with himself, in peace with his own conscience. How important, then, that each of us regularly examine his attitude toward himself.

### III

But each of us lives not only in the presence of God, and not only with himself. Our relationships are also interpersonal, and it’s these interpersonal relationships that we now want to look at briefly. There would seem to be three areas of interpersonal relationships which call for special attention: the teacher’s relationships with his principal, with his fellow teachers, and with his pupils. What is God’s will for us here? God advises us: *strive to improve your relationships with your fellow Christians!*

When any two human beings are called to work together closely, there is going to be difference of opinion. This is only natural, since God didn’t make any two people identical. (And we can be thankful that He didn’t, because if two of us were identical, one of us would be superfluous!) When God made people, He didn’t, as it were, cut them out with a giant cookie cutter.

Apply this to your relationship with the principal of your high school. There will be times when you two will disagree, but did God ever say there had to be unanimity in His church? That’s impossible as long as we’re human beings dealing with human beings—little, frail, limited people that we are. There doesn’t have to be unanimity of opinion, as long as there’s unity of purpose.

When there is discord between principal and teacher (or, for that matter, between teacher and teacher), it’s evidence that God’s will is being sidestepped. Then it’s important for us to remember what God has commanded regarding our interpersonal relationships: “Love one another; in honor prefer one another. “ If I truly love my fellow Christian, I will have the confidence in him to discuss a problem with him, or some area of misunderstanding, instead of holding a grudge deep down inside and letting it eat away at the lining of my stomach. Good interpersonal relationships require that the lines of communication be kept open between teacher and principal.

A loving attitude toward one’s principal will not put the worst construction on his actions. If he visits your classroom or your study hall, he does it not necessarily to snoop; give him credit for being concerned about the calibre of the high school’s training program, so he can speak first-hand when he speaks as the school’s ambassador in homes and in congregational voters’ assemblies and high school association meetings and pastoral conferences. If he fails to visit your classroom, don’t chalk it up to lack of interest in your work and to lack of sympathy with your problems. Maybe he just doesn’t want to risk offending you by appearing to invade your privacy. Maybe he just hasn’t got enough time to make meaningful visits in all classrooms.

It’s obvious that a paper this brief on a topic this broad can only hint at some general considerations for the teacher interested in improving his interpersonal relationships. For those who might like to pursue the matter further I’d recommend an essay which Pastor Robert Voss read at a District Pastor-Teacher Conference half a

dozen years ago. It's entitled "Pastor-Teacher Harmony," and was printed in the January, 1968, issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

How about the relationships between teacher and teacher? Obviously, some of these same principles govern. Remember that your relationship is not that of employee vs. employee; in Christ your relationship is that of brothers and sisters. You share membership in the family of God.

Remember the doctrine of the call, too. God has not only established the teaching office; He also provides those who fill the office. Instead of concentrating on another teacher's shortcomings, the Christian teacher will honor a fellow teacher's call from God. It is God who gave us to each other. Surely when we consider our relationships with other called servants of the Word, with those people with whom we share a ministry, we will want to pray: "Forgive us, Lord, for taking people for granted, for demanding more and more of them, for treating our friends and associates as though they counted for little or nothing, for thinking of them largely in terms of how much they can help us. Instead of growing impatient with the people with whom we live and work, help us to see the love they're trying to express. Help us to listen to one another with mutual respect and to help one another in any way we can."

Someone has described a factory as a place not so much for producing machines as for producing people. That's what schools are for, too—to produce people, to help immature babes in Christ to grow up into young men and women in Christ. In this growing and maturing process lies what is probably the biggest problem area for the Christian teacher's interpersonal relationships: the relationship *between teacher and student*.

The only reason you have some students in your classroom is that Christ's love has reached out for them. Now through you Christ still wants to extend His love to those young people. Here the question may be in place for each of us: "When I deal with my students, am I letting Christ's love shine through? Does my classroom behavior announce to each of my students: 'God considers you important, and so do I'?"

Our love for those lambs so dearly loved by the Savior does not grow less when they rebel against the leading of the Good Shepherd. The Christian teacher cannot afford to be disgusted or discouraged or shocked when his students are disobedient or dishonest or act indifferent to what he says. It was mentioned before that there is in each of them, as there is in each of us, a portion of our physical and mental equipment which is not under the direction of the Spirit of God but of self. Surely we will use the Law of God to crucify our flesh, and to help our students crucify their flesh with its self-centeredness and lovelessness, but it's only the message of God's merciful love which can kindle an answering love in the hearts of our pupils. If they aren't responding with the love we think they ought to, then we as teachers ought first of all to suspect ourselves. It's difficult to build a fire with icicles. Young people have a sure sense, or instinct, for love.

We can use the Law to point out the student's sinfulness; we can use the Law to point out to him the way he should act; but we cannot use the Law to make him do it. You don't tell a person: "You should be grateful; now get grateful." To be a good teacher you don't necessarily have to be a great educator, or a first-rate administrator, or an effective disciplinarian. But to be a great teacher you do have to know how to love.

Remember: the students in our classrooms and study halls are priests of God. Just imagine: in his own right the student is a person with right of direct access to God through Christ! The teacher needs to consider the student in his uniqueness and to treat him with the kind of consideration he needs in order to grow into what God has designed him to be.

One final thing. When you experience difficulty in any of your interpersonal relationships, remember that as a Christian teacher you serve a powerful Savior, one Who can move mountains and make roses bloom in the desert. The message of Christ's powerful love for sinners has the power to draw people to God, to melt their stubbornness and selfishness, to remold and remodel their personalities. It's the fact that we serve a powerful Savior, Who has promised to bless our work, which gives a note of steady optimism to Christian teachers as they strive to move forward in doing their Father's business. Ethel Waters stated this rather eloquently, I think, when she remarked: "Jesus don't sponsor no flops." Now if you're a literary purist and you're inclined to criticize her inelegant English, you force me to ask you: "What do you want—good grammar, or good

theology?" There's just a whole lot of practical, Christian common sense in that homely statement. Jesus *don't* sponsor no flops. He has not called you and your students to make a botch of your Christian profession. He has set a goal for our lives, to be sure, but He also assures us of His help in attaining that goal.

After all, Jesus don't sponsor no flops.

John C. Jeske