

Friday Focus

From Emory

The 'Bite' of Christian Cynicism

As educators, and as a Christian school, we have a very difficult job. In fact, barely a week goes by that, as discussion begins to go down the path of details pertaining to a particularly tough set of circumstances or a sticky situation in the school, someone privy to some of that information doesn't say to me, "I wouldn't want your job."

You get that too sometimes, I am sure. The tough decisions over circumstances involving students (and parents) that require great patience and much prayer aren't the envy of any outsider. And if we were to compare the difficulty and struggle-level with the income produced by these positions, well..... let's not go there. It goes without saying that no one in the classroom is in it for the money, and the financial 'benefits' of teaching certainly don't justify the potential obstacles of ridicule and being second-guessed. Teaching is a calling.

One of the greatest joys about Providence Christian School is also potentially one of the most difficult things: parental involvement. When done in right measure it is a wonderful and supportive union that makes our teaching stick. When it is over-cooked and misappropriated, it can make teaching stink.

In conducting incoming family parent interviews, I usually try to un-wrap the school's expectations of parents as well as squash the 'there is no sin here' belief that some families naively bring on the front-end. Because we are a "Christian school," one of the initial goals is to debunk the myth that PCS is Nirvana personified and that staff here make perfect decisions. The perfection standard is not only an impossible measurement, but obviously a sure-to-fail approach that is untrue and unfair.

We certainly do have sin and we all make mistakes... every day. But because we have "Christian" in our name, some feel that we are ordained with perfection. (Our perfection is coming but that won't be on this current earth.)

Now, obviously, not all of the parent responses we receive are negative, nor do most of our students get into trouble. In fact, sometimes when I tell my secular-school administrator friends some of the issues that we are working through, they chuckle at the comparative innocence of ours to their own. But that doesn't diminish the reality of the situation with which each person is dealing. It is very real and often creates a sense of urgency that makes time stand still for them. Many veteran teachers have certainly experienced parent 'conferences' held with a parent in the aisles of Wal-Mart or over a booth at Olive Garden, or have experienced answering one's home phone in the evening to a call that begins with the caller saying: "Sorry to call you at home, but...."

Sometimes the most stressful situations, from a parent's perspective, involve the tyranny of the urgent where the solution is often as simple as giving a hearing ear to receive their concern. But, what should be done in those ongoing, perpetually tough circumstances with an especially difficult class or with a specific parent who seems to be 'after you' about a multitude of circumstances or situations on a persistent basis?

As I have considered and dealt with parental disappointment and school staff discouragement over the years, it occurred to me recently that the most difficult attitude to deal with in either case is the same. It is **cynicism**. The dictionary defines cynicism as: *contemptuously distrustful of human nature; implies having a sneering disbelief in sincerity or integrity*. It is distrustful, skeptical, suspicious; derisive, mocking, sardonic, scornful; defeatist, fatalistic, negative, and sarcastic.

It is a dangerous and destructive force in any organization and I believe it is as prevalent in today's Christian churches and Christian schools as it is in secular culture. It is what occurs when someone has placed a perfectionist expectation and trust in humanity and is let down. If someone places complete and absolute trust in another individual or organization they will surely be disappointed. No person, church, or school (even Christian) can ever live up to that standard. Likewise, we as a school are guilty if we hold parents to the

perfection standard, if we expect them to have reasonable and objective viewpoints of their own children at all times.

Recently, someone gave me the notes from a series of lessons on the subject of cynicism that came from an outline on the subject from the teaching of First Presbyterian Dothan’s Henry Morris.

The information comes from a series Henry taught recently titled: Understanding Cynicism. The notes include several Paul Miller quotes, one of which says:

Our personal struggles with cynicism and defeated weariness are reinforced by an increasing tendency toward perfectionism in American culture (i.e.: the ‘perfect’ relationship, ‘perfect’ children, and the perfect body). These set us up for a critical spirit- the breeding ground for cynicism. In the absence of perfection, we resort to ‘spin’-trying to make ourselves look good, unwittingly dividing ourselves into a ‘public’ and a ‘private’ self. We cease to be real and become the subject of cynicism.

In order to overcome cynicism, we must put our faith in the true Faith-giver and not in the naïve optimism that creates the critical spirit that surfaces when someone or something lets us down. To place the burden of the expectation of human perfection on a child, a teacher, or coach of the school is unfair--likely one of the most cruel and unfair expectations one could espouse.

Henry’s notes tell us: “Naïve optimism is the root of cynicism and it appears identical to genuine faith. However, genuine faith comes from knowing our Heavenly Father loves, enjoys and cares for us. In naïve optimism we don’t need to pray because everything is under control...everything is possible. In cynicism we can’t pray because everything is out of control...little is possible.”

Cynicism erupts when the pseudo-faith of naïve optimism crashes head-on with disappointment. Miller says: “At some point each of us come face-to-face with the valley of the shadow of death. We can’t ignore it. We can’t remain neutral with evil. We give up and distance ourselves, or we learn to walk with the Shepherd. There is no middle ground.”

True faith in God produces a ‘can-do’ spirit that allows one to navigate even the most troublesome issues and circumstances. It is what allows one to survive in the face of difficulty and heartache. How do we recognize Satan’s attack of perfection expectation that leads to the pit called cynicism? Generally, it produces a sense of hopeless despair. Satan’s attack is not of hatred, but the loss of hope.

Jesus’ ministry is one of hope. We are at our best when we are hope-givers. Again Miller asserts: “Many of us believe in the Christian hope of ultimate redemption, but we breathe the cynical spirit of our age and miss the heart of God...When you pray, you are touching the hopeful heart of God. When you know that, prayer becomes an adventure.”

Cynicism	A Praying Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creates a numbness toward life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages Evil
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always observing and critiquing, but never engaged, loving, & hoping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn’t take “No” for an answer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hopes, dreams, and asks with bold confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destroys intimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoys intimacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leads to a bitterness that can deaden and even destroy the spirit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leads to a fellowship that can build up the spirit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without hope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives hope

My prayer is that each one of us (beginning with myself) will place our faith in the author and perfecter of faith and not in ourselves, in institutions or other people. Only then will we survive the onslaught of circumstance and heartache that are guaranteed in this earthly life.