

VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL TEACHER COMMUNICATION
IN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST EDUCATION

By

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CONTENTS

I. A Brief Comprehensive Outline.....	2
II. Introduction.....	2
III. A Christian Education.....	3
IV. A Christian Teacher.....	4
V. The Christian Teacher's Role.....	6
VI. What Can Be Added and/or Changed.....	7
VII. The Only Existing Tools.....	8
VIII. Language - Its Divine Origin.....	9
IX. What Verbal Language Can Do.....	11
X. What The Silent Language Can Do.....	14
XI. Conclusion.....	18
XII. Footnotes.....	19
XIII. Bibliography.....	20

ABSTRACT

An SDA teacher is supposed to infuse SDA faith through every discipline, and he/she can do this through appropriate communication regardless of what discipline he/she teaches. And the opposite is also true, namely, that he/she through unappropriate communication, may deny the faith regardless of what subject is being taught.

A BRIEF COMPREHENSIVE OUTLINE

Our approach in this paper is to define Christian Education according to SDA concepts, the role of a Christian teacher, the transformation of students' character, what we believe can be changed in the students, character and the role of communication as an element which permeates every level of discipline in our schools in order to integrate Faith and Learning. In addition, we felt it appropriate to insert the section "The Divine Origin of Language" before mentioning verbal language, because verbal language is an evidence of our divine origin and a linking element to the integration of faith and learning.

Our purpose is to show that communication in a Christian fashion can improve the environment, and, consequently, transform lives.

INTRODUCTION

As participants of the seminar "Institute for Christian College Teacher" (ICCT), under the direction of Dr. Humberto M. Rasi, associate director of General Conference Department of Education, we can feel that the seminar reached its goal, that is to develop a conscience that academics and faith belong to each other and these are not separate realms. As Dr. George H. Akers, Director of General Conference Department of Education, explains, "We recognize that as teachers, our chief contribution to our students is to give them a Christian view of the world. Every class in every academic discipline should reinforce that view."¹

We can also feel that some disciplines are easier than others to be fused with faith, and some teachers feel really uneasy bringing SDA faith into their disciplines, such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and proba-

bly others. Therefore, we chose this topic -- Communication -- as an element without which integration is impossible, regardless of the subject that is being taught.

The idea for this paper was born in an environment where the authors spent about twenty years teaching elementary, high-school, and college levels, in a co-educational system, in Brazil. It is a half-developed country with a population of about 150 million people, and the Adventist member population is about 500 thousand, growing in a tremendous speed. (In U.S.A. and Canada together the Seventh Day Adventist members number about 650 thousand). Brazil is a country of tremendous needs in all aspects of life. (economical, educational, social, etc.). Of course, this situation affects all aspects of the Church life, especially its educational system. For this reason, and others, the content of this paper and the examples given may be inappropriate for generalization by all developed countries of the world.

Nevertheless, the authors strongly believe that many principles in this paper will be beneficial to every teacher who is interested in following the Master in the task of successfully teaching in Christian school.

The authors do not attempt to create a theoretical exposition of the issue but to give it a practical approach, since we feel the desire to share our convictions and experiences with our colleagues who are committed to Christian education.

A CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

What is Christian education, according to the Holy Scriptures and to the writings of E. G. White?

In Bible times, the schools of prophets played a crucial part in the

education of God's chosen people. When God's people were settled in Canaan in Samuel's day, there were two schools, one at Ramah and another at Kirijath-Jearin and later others were established.

"These schools were intended to serve as a barrier against the wide-spreading corruption, to provide for the mental and spiritual welfare of the youth and to promote the prosperity of the nation by furnishing it with men qualified to act in the fear of the Lord as leaders and counselors."²

The purpose for these schools is clear since when they were in prosperity all the nation also prospered, and when those schools were despised the nation ~~were~~^{was} despised. And so, at least four big issues were involved in that purpose: first, to serve as barrier against corruption; second, to provide for mental welfare; third, to provide for spiritual welfare; and fourth, to qualify men to lead the country in the fear of the Lord.

We urge everybody to take a close look at the chapter "The School of the Prophets" in the book Education, to create a whole picture how these schools were established, operated and dedicated to Christian education, and let us try to imagine the results if the same principles were applied to our church's colleges, academies, and elementary schools today.

What about a nation or a denomination under the leadership of men and women, mentally, spiritually, and politically prepared by the Lord? For a better understanding of what SDA schools' goals are today, we quote from a brochure of the SDA Education Department the following definition: "The primary goal of Seventh Day Adventists schools is to promote a redemptive relationship between students and Jesus Christ and facilitate spiritual growth through the provision of an environment in which Christian nurture may take place."³

A CHRISTIAN TEACHER

Nobody can give you what he/she does not possess. It is only logical that you can give (or transmit) only that which you have.

It would be impossible to learn these Christian values or Seventh Day Adventist values without instructors, teachers, principals, and staff who would share these values, or principles in their lives. What kind of administrators and teachers are needed to operate our Christian schools? E. G. White relates many requirements for being a teacher, principal, and/or a member of the staff for a Christian school.

Since all of us are self-centered to some extent and since we, teachers, are all human beings, and therefore, sinful by nature, it is in no way possible to be perfect teachers without the grace of Christ; thus, as an example I chose this requirement from Mrs. White as the vital one, under which lie all others, and by which all others can be accomplished:

Teachers' safety lies in learning daily in the school of Christ. He who learns in this school hides self in Jesus, and will remember as he deals with students, he is dealing with a blood-bought heritage. In this school he will learn to be patient, humble generous, noble. The molding hand of God will bring out in the character the divine image. 4

Under the above guidance nobody needs to be afraid or discouraged to be a Christian teacher because Christ is available to teach and to equip everyone who feels the call for this type of ministry.

To become acquainted with other requirements for being a teacher, we would suggest the reading of the following: Education, Fundamentals of Christian Education, Counsels on Education, and Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students -- all four by E.G. White; and Dare to Discipline -- by James Dobson. We deeply believe these books should be required reading for every Christian teacher who wants to learn what Christian education is

all about.

THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER'S ROLE

Students come to Seventh Day Adventist schools because they feel they need to learn something, but many do not know actually what they need to learn. (In some cases, even some teachers are not quite sure about what they are expected to teach besides the academic matters). Students may have a small idea of what they need to learn about academic issues, but they have no idea what they need to learn about proper Christian behavior, habits, ethics, Christian life, marriage, etc., and in a co-educational system, especially in boarding schools, they depend very much on us, teachers, to teach all those Christians values, in addition to the academics.

I started teaching elementary school immediately after finishing college, and I became surprised once, when the principal told me that my classes represented about fifty per cent of what my job was supposed to be. Because I was teaching thirty classes a week that semester, (about forty students -- or forty-five -- in each class), I started wondering what the other fifty per cent of my job would be. I also wondered if I stayed up all nights and days, would I be able to catch up with everything? But hopefully it did not take me too long until I got his message. Since that school adopted the slogan "The School Which Educates for the Eternity", the other fifty per cent of my job was to teach the students by my actions, those values which could help them to prepare for eternity.

Since this is our goal and since they come to us, no one more than the teacher is in charge of passing on to them all of those values or just to say the same thing in a different way, to lead them to Christ so that they can learn to appreciate those values.

Are all teachers and those involved with students aware of the way we are communicating to them, or with them, in order to transmit these values? Are we all aware what we are passing on to them, based on our communication?

We all have only two unique tools to pass on to the students to help them to succeed in this life and in the life to come: "Verbal communication" and "Non-verbal communication".

On these two unique tools depend everything else. They are responsible to build character, to change lives, to degrade or improve any environment, to start a war or to make peace, to kill this planet Earth or to renew it like the Eden Paradise again.

WHAT CAN BE ADDED AND/OR CHANGED

One definition for education is "education is the changing of behavior." That is not too different from saying that "education is the knowledge or skill obtained or developed by the learning process", quoted from The American Heritage Dictionary. So it is assumed that the learning process is supposed to add or to change something.

Since the school is where this learning process is to take place, let us take a look at what can be changed or added to the students' knowledge and behavior through a school environment.

We are the product of two factors: heredity and environment. The first one we have no control over it. Wherever we go we are subject to the power of our genes and chromosomes. We have no control over our physical and psychological inherited traits. A very famous teacher and writer used to say that "we are like buses loaded with all our ancestors." The Bible also supports this truth, and Exodus 20:5 could be a good example. E.G. White also has the following to say on this:

It is usually the case, however, that children walk in the steps of their parents. By inheritance and example the sons become partakers of the fathers' sins. Wrong tendencies, perverted appetites, and debased morals, as well as physical disease and degeneracy are transmitted as legacy from father to son ...6

But there is still hope; God can cause change. In Jeremiah 13:23 God says He can change the inherited spots of leopards.

In addition, we can choose the environment in which to live and to study in our society if we are interested. That is the main reason why students come or are sent to our schools.

Although we could not find scientific evidence to support this, we believe that a child with a good heredity can be deteriorated through the environment in which he/she lives or the reverse; someone from a bad source, can be helped and improved through a healthy environment. We can find much support for this also in E.G. White writing. Talking about the choice made by Abraham and Lot, she says:

The atmosphere of lax morality, of unbelief, of indifference to religious things, has a tendency to counteract the influence of parents. Examples of rebellion against parental and divine authority are ever before the youth; Many form attachments for infidels and unbelievers, and cast their lot with enemies of God. 7

Therefore, we feel environment is as crucial as heredity in building one's character. In conclusion, "When we voluntarily place ourselves in an atmosphere of worldliness and unbelief, we displease God and drive holy angels from our homes."⁸

THE ONLY EXISTING TOOLS

Every person has at his disposal two powerful and unique instruments to influence, to convince, to persuade, to induce others with whom he

associates. And we do influence and are influenced by, regardless of whether it is intentional or unintentional. "By the atmosphere surrounding us, every person with whom we come in contact is consciously or unconsciously affected"⁹

These two instruments, Verbal Communication and Non-Verbal Communication, are two threads so interwoven that we can not tell which is more powerful or more efficient.

This first tool, verbal communication, means the faculty of speech -- what we say and how we say it, for example:

In seeking to correct others (that is the work of every teacher) we should be careful of our words. They will be a savor of life unto life or death unto death ... In giving reproof or counsel, many indulge in sharp, severe speech, words not adapted to heal the wounded soul ... Then our words will reform. 10

Of equal importance is the second, non-verbal language which exists and works differently in every country of the world; however, many people, including many teachers, are dimly aware of this silent language even though they use it constantly. And as an example of the importance of this matter we have this:

The teacher can gain the respect of his pupils in no other way than by revealing in his own character the principles which he seeks to teach them. Only as he does this in daily association with them can he have a permanent influence over them for good. 11

LANGUAGE - ITS DIVINE ORIGIN

As human beings endowed with the sublime gift of speech, we should do our best to use it in the most effective way in order to improve our relationship with our Creator and with our fellowman. "The word fitly spoken and in due season is like apples of gold in a setting of silver".

12

Prov. 25:11 KJV

A famous romance writer and poet, says this, concerning the God-given gift of speech: "The word, this heavenly gift that God gave to man and denied to all other creatures, is the most sublime expression of nature; it reveals the power of the Creator; it fully reflects the greatness of His divine work".

13

When Adam received the power to speak from the Creator, he also received the assignment to name all other living creatures that inhabited the earth. Certainly it was a pleasant task, and in the happiest moment of his life -- when he received Eve from the Creator's hand -- he created the first poem of history when he said "woman". "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man!" Gen. 2:23 KJV

Although linguistic evolucionists claim that chimpanzees are able to construct new words and phrases and also to utilize certain grammatical rules and syntaxes, we must realize that these are not the only characteristics of humans. We are endowed with the sense of uniqueness and transience, so that one day we know we will cease to be. In this, we are confronted by an awareness of death, a concern with things beyond those of this present life -- a philosophy that makes sense of the profundity of daily existence, the pursuits and concern for moral values innate in the human race. And also:

In turn reminds us that the dimensions of humanity are not only biological. Humans are aware of non-biological obligations, rooted as these are in relationship to, and awareness of, God. Humanities' religious dimensions appear integral to our biological makeup, our yearning for which is beyond us reflecting a deeply felt biological and human need. 14

For these and other reasons we affirm that language is closely connected with the horizons of our existence. We confidently quote L.R.

Holmes:

"One of the greatest miracles and mysteries of human existence is language...Whatever else Satan has been permitted to do to degrade, to debase and dehumanize mankind, he has not been able to destroy that exclusively human faculty of speech." 15

We feel that this truth supports the hypothesis that man is of divine origin. No other species on earth is able to communicate through speech. and another observation about language that deeply impressed L.R. Holmes is its universality. He states:

Just as we have not been able to find one monkey which could talk a little bit, so we have not been able to find one fragment of society that could not talk a whole lot. Edward Sapir, in his book, Language, has this to say, 'One may argue as to whether a particular tribe engages in activities that are worthy of name religion or of art, but we know no people that is not possessed of a fully developed language. The lowest South African bushmen speaks the forms of a rich symbolic system that is in essence perfectly comparable to the speech of the most cultivated Frenchman.'...It is regrettable that weak-kneed Christians cowered before the pseudo-scientific babbling of Darwinism and began to disbelieve the divine origin of language. In doing so they relinquished one of the greatest arguments for special creation. 15

In conclusion, notice the following by Jones, D.G.: "Until it can be shown that linguistic capabilities of chimpanzees also serve as harbingers of transience, the distinction between human and nonhuman primates will not have obliterated." ¹⁶ For us language still serves as an evidence of the divine origin of mankind.

WHAT VERBAL LANGUAGE CAN DO

This section is not a theoretical study of language as communication but something to lead the Christian educator to think about the responsibility that each person has of knowing and making use of clear, meaningful

speech. The apostle Paul states in I Cor. 14:8-11, "If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words...? You will just be speaking into the air." ¹⁷

E.G.White also writing about the importance of learning language says:

More important than the acquirement of foreign language, living or dead, is the ability to write and speak one's mother tongue with ease and accuracy; but no training gained through a knowledge of grammatical rules can compare in importance with the study of language from the higher point of view. With this study, to a great degree, is bound up life's weal or woe." ¹⁸

From E.G. White's quotation we can infer that the study of language should closely follow the study of the Bible, which is also a study of language. We suggest that this is a never-ending task. Some people (teacher) sometime appear to be very fluent but are too rhetorical or too complicated and lack the preciseness or the necessary simplicity to reach the level of the audience or the students. They speak as those who "speak to the air."

Our concern is for those teachers who may fall into the above extreme or on the other hand into the carelessness of vulgarism. Both positions would harm the work of a Christian teacher. What we advocate is the balance so that what is useful can be matched with what is pleasant.

The quality of the language we use labels us socially and spiritually in society. There is a close relationship between what one person's character is and the kind of language he/she uses. The apostle Peter was not able to hide his identity, namely that he was a Galilean and one of the Master's followers because of the language he was accustomed to using. The Scriptures state of Jesus, "No man has spoken like Him." ¹⁷ The soldiers were so impressed with the way Jesus spoke that they did not arrest Him.

Jesus spoke with simplicity, yet He spoke powerfully. What is important about His speech is that He reached every level of people in society. E.G. White writing to teachers, recommends:

The chief requisite of language is that it be pure and kind and true -- The outward expression of an inward grace...Because there is so much cheapness of character, so much of the counterfeit all around the youth, there is more need that the teachers' words, attitude, and deportment should represent the elevated and the true"
19

We are responsible before God for every thought and word whether spoken or written. In short, we are responsible for the means we use to communicate. "No one who is committed to the gospel of Christ can ignore the question of language."
20 Both the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy emphasize and expand this last statement: "The tongue has the power of life and death". Prov. 18:21
21 NIV. "And if such are the thoughts, such will be the expressions." Therefore, language may be a wall that separates lives, or a golden key that opens hearts closed by bitterness and grief. It may be the push into the chasm, or a strong hand to help put somebody back on the road of life.

Dr. Rasi, in his article "El Prodigioso Poder de Las Palabras" (The Wonderful Power of the Words), goes on to say that the words we speak not only exert tremendous effects upon the listeners but also affect our own way of thinking. If we keep saying that we are able to do something, it is possible that we will end up doing that; but if we keep saying that we are not able, we will probably leave undone something that we could have done under a more positive influence.

The apostle Paul urges us that our conversation should be full of grace and seasoned with salt, so that we might know how to answer everyone. Col. 4: 6. And Jesus says that we will be charged by every word that would come out of our mouth. "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Math. 12:36-37 KJV.

Somebody once said, "Language is a loaded weapon." Language reveals the state of the soul. It carries emotions and hidden feelings. The vocabulary, the tone of voice, and even the syntax tell us much about the speaker.

The experience of Jesus' disciples is a powerful example of how language can be refined. Most of them were crude fisherman, barely knowing how to communicate, and also irreverent. After some years of exposure to Jesus and close association with Him, their ability to communicate and speak became powerful tools which shook the world and brought many men and women to the Creator, which in the last analysis from a Christian viewpoint is the real purpose of language learning.

WHAT THE SILENT LANGUAGE CAN DO

Communication, nevertheless, is not always through words; sometimes the silent language of behavior is more powerful than the most elaborated speech. Then E.G.White again states, "In dress, in deportment, in all their ways, they should exemplify the Christian character, revealing the fact that they (teachers) are under wise disciplinary rules of the Great Teacher."²²

One can observe that all behavior is a communicative situation. Since it is also impossible not to behave, it is also impossible not to communicate. Regardless of what somebody does or does not do he/she is communicating something if there is someone else nearby.

This fact is to be considered crucial in a school setting, where the purpose of Christian teachers is to help to change, to improve the students' behavior.

In the article "Towards a Classification of Non-Verbal Teacher Behaviour", by Kaye, M.E., we read that "there is now growing support for the claim that their non-verbal behavior is as important as, if not more important than, their verbal behavior."²³

The Bible also supports this idea when we read that "beholding as in

mirror the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory." 2 Cor.3:18 KJV. So we raise the question: What may happen to the students placed in an environment where the teachers behave like really converted teachers, and what may happen to the students' character living together and observing their teachers acting like some examples we are going to mention?

I was inspired to be a Christian teacher in Christian schools from many of my former teachers from elementary school all the way through College, and there are scenes still very clear in my mind. I can still see the principal of one of our academies opening the front gate before seven o'clock a.m. every day and standing there greeting every student; in the rain or sunshine, every day, there he was. Then many years later I saw somewhere the proverb, "Nothing beats reliability in products or people," and I remembered that principal's image standing at the door greeting every student every day all year around. I can not remember his preaching a sermon about dependability but he did show us what being dependable is all about.

I can recall another teacher whom I do not remember listening to preaching a sermon about justice, but once I could not turn in my assignment due the next day and a zero was promised for those who would not turn it in. But I couldn't because I had spent all night long working for the the school on a special assignment for one of the departments. I privately talked to the teacher before the class had started and he did not tell me anything, but he also didn't ask the students for the assignment he had requested so seriously the day before. I got his message. In order not to harm me under that circumstance, he forgave all others possible cases of carelessness.

I used to see and hear the boys' dean preaching about prayer and praying with us, but I can not remember any of his prayer or words. Neverthe-

less, I learned from him how to pray when every night at bed-time (sometimes the lights were already off), he entered our bedroom with his flashlight in hand and invited us to pray. He showed us how to approach to Jesus every day.

There are other sermons I have seen in my teachers' lives which inspired me so much and are still helping me today. But because it is true that we also learn looking at the opposite side of things, I am going to ask some questions about negative behavior I have also seen in my former teachers' lives which I am sure, did not help me in any way.

Time speaks, and sometimes very loudly especially if we move from one culture into another. What about a teacher who frequently comes late for his classes? What could this kind of behavior be telling the students? Once I read a book called How to Be a Bad Teacher, and one of the illustrations was to stay in class and continue the lesson after the bell has rung. Students hate this kind of behavior. Once I had a teacher who gave us examinations that caused 90% of the students miss going to the school cafeteria.

What about the teacher acting as group adviser, who collected money from the group to pay for the bus fare to make a tour. He collected twice as much as the price of the fare would cost. The students knew how much the cost would be, yet he never gave back to the students the rest of the money.

What about the teacher (and I had this kind, too, in one of our academies), that uses to schedule quizzes and tests and frequently forget to prepare them. It was a real hassle for everybody.

Once we students and one hot-tempered teacher were playing in the gymnasium. By the end of the game a hot argument was started between one of the students and this mentioned teacher. To make the story short, they did not start a real fight because the teacher was much stronger and the student

became afraid.

Here is a list of what I have seen and felt in our schools regarding behavior: Much irony and disrespect; teachers who borrowed books from the school library and did not check them in, and students got to know the story somehow; teachers coming to the class smelling sweaty; others shouting and being rude; constant delays in grading the students' assignments; foul jokes; flirting between married teachers and students; those who tell the class their feelings and bitterness against the administration. This list could go on, but we do not wish to belabor the point.

If it is true that even the less obvious and less easily observed behavior communicates (and we believe that it is true), let us imagine the immeasurable effects these have on the students!

We quote from The Interpersonal Communication Book the following:

"These small movements are extremely important in interpersonal relationships. We can often tell, for example, when people genuinely like each other and when they are merely being polite. If we had to state how we know this, we would probably have considerable difficulty. These inferences, many of which are correct, are based primary on these small non-verbal behaviors of the participants -- the muscles around the eyes, the degree of eye contact, the way which the individuals face each other, and so on. All non-verbal behavior, however small or transitory, is significant, all of it communicates." 24

Michael E. Kay in his article, quoting Galloway, says that "overlooked by many of us in our classroom teaching is that pupils may learn more meanings from non-verbal messages than they do from our verbalizations."²⁵

Then if this is true (and nobody can deny the fact), let us consider the heavy weight that exists on this issue, namely, the influence that teachers, maybe unconsciously, exert over the students' characters, and how all these may determine the pupils' future for this life and for life eternal.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have merely scratched the surface of this important subject. This is just an attempt to stimulate and challenge someone to tackle the subject of communication committed with the Truth and to show to Christian students how relevant this God-given gift is to tell the world about Jesus. The theme is too broad, and it can be looked at from many angles. This was only a start.

As already stated in this paper, learning in Christian schools should be always integrated with faith, and we can not think of no greater means rather than communication in uniting faith with learning in any discipline, whether biology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, or whatever.

The words the instructors use and the way they behave are telling the students that they are followers of Christ, inviting them to do the same or hindering them in discovering Jesus.

While marching toward this goal we are fulfilling the command of the Master about education that is:

To restore in man the image of his maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which we were created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose of this creation might be realized. This was the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life." 26

FOOTNOTES

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