

Institute for Christian Teaching
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**Strategies for Integrating Christian Theory and Practice
In Adventist Secondary Bible Classes**

by

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INTRODUCTION:

Most educators who have had the opportunity of teaching Bible on a secondary level can identify with a very common problem - the students learn the material, but then seem unable or unwilling to apply that same knowledge to their actual life experience. Somehow there is a dichotomy between our classroom teaching of Christian principles and doctrines and the application of those concepts into the lives of our students.

This problem should be of particular concern to Adventist teachers in the light of statements from Mrs. White like the one in Messages to Young People (1930) which states, "a religion which is not practical is not genuine." (p. 72)

Could it be that we as Adventist educators have been so concerned with the transferring of our doctrines and beliefs on to the younger generation that in the process we have made our religion into a rather unappetizing plate full of seemingly irrelevant theological concepts? Roger Dudley in his classic Adventist text, Why Teenagers Reject Religion... (1978) seems to agree. In explaining why many Adventist young people are leaving the church, he says:

These youth share in common an alienation from religion, a sense of estrangement. They feel that while Christianity may serve some purpose for their elders or even some of their peers, it has nothing for them. They do not see its values as relevant to their present concerns and needs. They do not find in it any power to meet daily problems successfully. (p.8)

This presents a real challenge to all Adventist educators. How do we uphold and pass on the standards and values of our church in a way that will be relevant and practical to the youth of the 90's? How can we better challenge our young people to be "doers of the Word, and not hearers only"? (James 1:22 KJV)

It is time for us to revise and update our teaching strategies to meet this challenge! This paper will look at three major interrelated teaching strategies (adapted from Rasi, "Christian values in Adventist Education," p. 4) that must be strengthened in order to place a stronger emphasis on practical, experiential religion.

Preliminary Considerations:

Before we actually focus on specific strategies, it is important to have a general understanding of the adolescent developmental process. Dudley (1978) says that there are two very crucial components to the "maturing" process during the teenage years and these are 1) achieving independence (emotional and to a lesser degree economic), and 2) establishing an individual identity (facing and answering the question "Who am I?"). (p. 30) The adolescent is involved in the struggle of becoming a unique individual, and part of this process is examining and questioning the values and beliefs of parents and other authorities. This does not mean that the adolescent is necessarily rejecting the values of the authority figures, but only that these values must now be internalized and become their own. Unless this process takes place, the youth's values and

beliefs will probably not stand up against the pressures and stresses of later life. (p. 36)

If this development is correctly understood, the Adventist secondary school can help foster an environment where questioning is allowed and where the youth are encouraged and tenderly guided in the process of emancipation. In this type of environment, the Bible teacher acts more as a facilitator in the individual's search for truth. This concept is vital and basic to the integration of Christian theory and practice.

Before going further, it might also be well to make a couple points of clarification:

1. This paper is written specifically with the secondary Bible/Religion teacher in mind. The ideas and suggestions given are geared toward schools where the student body is largely Seventh-day Adventist. Bible teachers in a "mission school" where the majority of students are non-Adventist would need to modify the Bible program to meet their specific needs.

2. The term "values" will be used in this paper to refer to Christian beliefs, principles, and doctrines which the Adventist church holds to be important.

With these considerations firmly in mind, let us now look at recommended teaching strategies.

I. Attractive Modeling and Positive Relationships:

Although this method is more thoroughly developed in other ICT papers and literature, it is of such importance that it

cannot be overlooked here. Mrs. White, in Fundamentals of Christian Education (1923) states:

The habits and principles of a teacher should be considered of even greater importance than his literary qualifications. ...In order to exert the right influence, he should have perfect control over himself, and his own heart should be richly imbued with love for his pupils, which will be seen in his looks, words, and acts. (p. 19)

Modern research quoted by Wolterstorff (1980) backs up this statement. The significance of modeling was clarified by a series of experiments where it was found that "it made very little difference what the model preached. Overwhelmingly it was the model's practice that influenced the practice of the subject." (p. 57) It was also discovered that "people strongly tend to adopt the beliefs and attitudes of a community in which they find love and acceptance." (p. 60) So even if teachers are "practicing what they preach," but in a way that is not perceived as loving or accepting, their modeling will be of little positive effect.

Dudley's research (1978) hits very close to home for Adventist educators. In a study of four hundred randomly selected students in North American Adventist academies, he discovered that:

No other factor was as strongly related to teen-age rejection of religion as was the religious sincerity of their academy teachers. Students who perceive their teachers as insincere and hypocritical in their relationship with God are much more likely to be alienated from religion than those who view their teachers as genuine and sincere. (p. 80)

These findings give weight to what has really been known for a long time - "Actions speak louder than words!" The implications

for Adventist teachers are vast. Are we teaching one thing and living another? If we are expecting teenagers to adopt our Adventist values, we must be more consistent in the application of these values in our own lives! They will only be drawn to a religion that is attractive and practical in the way that we live it.

The educational administrators in our church must find better ways to select personnel (especially Bible teachers) for Adventist schools. No one can judge the "religiousness" of another, but school administrators have the duty to prayerfully engage in a little "fruit inspection." (Matt. 7:16)

One suggestion would be to have a much more rigorous recommendation process. Teachers are almost always hired on the recommendations of fellow colleagues or other adults. But these people may not really know what kind of teacher they are recommending. Why not get students involved in the recommendation process? If carefully and prayerfully gathered, input from former students could be very helpful in determining the effectiveness of a person's teaching and modeling.

It must be remembered that a teacher who does not model his/her religion can do immeasurably more harm than good!

II. Open Dialogue and Other Internalizing Activities:

Too often religion has been taught as a series of facts handed down by the teacher, who expects the students to accept them without any questioning or personal adjusting. But, at this point, it is of utmost importance to remember the

preliminary considerations. "The process of emancipation seems to demand questioning the values of parents and other authorities....Values not questioned and examined are not really values at all." (Dudley, 1978, p. 36) We as Adventist educators, ~~must~~ allow adolescents the freedom to question and examine the church's values in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. We must encourage them to become "thinkers" and not mere "reflectors" of the teacher's thoughts. (White, Education, 1930, p. 17)

In Fundamentals of Christian Education, Mrs. White strongly differentiates between "training" and "educating" youth. She says:

The severe training of youth, without properly directing them to think and act for themselves as their own capacity and turn of mind will allow, that by this means they may have growth of thought, feelings of self-respect, and confidence in their own ability to perform, will ever produce a class who are weak in mental and moral power. And when they stand in the world to act for themselves, they will reveal the fact that they are trained, like the animals, and not educated. (p. 17)

With these thoughts in mind, we can turn to specific teaching methods that will help students in the process of internalizing values.

A. Open Dialogue. This is a rather general, but very important strategy for Christian teachers. Is the classroom atmosphere conducive to a free and open interchange of ideas, questions, and differing views? The teacher who is always "right," and allows for no individual freedom of thought, is only encouraging his/her students to reject the values he/she

espouses. The Christian classroom should be a place where doubts and differing opinions can be vented, and where, under the attentive eye of a caring teacher, the students can be "guided" in the process of internalizing their values.

B. Giving Reasons. Wolterstorff (1980) once again cites research which concludes that a very effective strategy for internalizing a given tendency is to offer a good reason for that particular tendency. It is also important when giving reasons to make sure that the reasons are accepted and understood. (p. 72) Add appropriate discipline or modeling (preferably the later) to the reason, and you have "the most effective strategy known for inducing internalized tendencies to act in certain ways." (p. 73)

Do we as teachers give acceptable reasons for our Adventist values and lifestyle? We have a reasonable faith and we should be able to back up all our beliefs with good, solid, Bible-based reasons. The tendency to feel uncomfortable when students begin to ask "why" should challenge us to re-examine our values.

C. Challenging Accepted Views. This strategy should be approached cautiously and prayerfully, but can be very effective. The idea is to challenge the students' values, and cause them to grapple with and verbalize what they really do believe. More often than not, this leaves the students scrambling in their Bibles to find support for their hand-me-down beliefs that they have inherited from parents and other religious authorities. Mock trials where students are "in the stand" for their beliefs

are very effective. F.D. Nichol's book, Answers to Objections, is a good resource for this approach.

D. Moral Dilemmas. This teaching strategy grew out of Kohlberg's research on moral development. The idea is to look at a conflict situation where what's right or wrong is not clear-cut or obvious. For a more in-depth look at this and the next two strategies, I refer you to Roger Dudley's, Passing On The Torch. Briefly though, according to Peter Sharf and associates (Growing Up Moral), an effective dilemma:

1. Presents conflicting claims, both or all of which on the surface appear to be reasonable.
2. Involves some life experience that's real to the participants' own situations.
3. Focuses primarily on the ethical issues in the case.
4. Opens the way for discussion questions that force youth to think more deeply about the moral issues. (p. 32)

In the classroom setting, a moral dilemma can make the group and the individual examine their values in a "real-life" situation, but with the guidance and support of their teacher.

D. Values Clarification. In values clarification, the emphasis is again on helping the student to examine their own values in a non-threatening way. This method goes through seven criteria developed by Louis Rath and associates in Values and Teaching. The criteria are as follows:

1. Encourage the student to make choices and make them freely.
2. Help them discover and examine alternatives when faced with choices.
3. Help them weigh alternatives, reflecting on the consequences of each choice.
4. Encourage them to consider what they cherish.
5. Give them opportunities to make public affirmations of their choices.

6. Encourage them to act in accordance with their choices.
7. Help them to examine repeated behavior patterns in their lives. (pp. 38,39)

These criteria lead the student to deeper reflection on his/her values, and hopefully on to value-based action.

F. The Value Sheet. This method consists of a provocative statement or story and a series of questions to go with it. The questions are first answered individually in writing, and then discussed as a group.

All of the above methods have been found to be effective in helping bridge the gap between Christian theory and practice. It must be remembered though, that it is essential for the teacher to move beyond the "what if" stage to a call (and maybe an assignment) for concrete action, because it is at the action stage that true internalization takes place.

III. Practical and Experiential Applications:

I have put this strategy last, but it is here that I would like to place the greatest emphasis - because I feel that it is here where the church has its greatest need. Ideally, the other two approaches will be incorporated into, and be an integral part of this last strategy.

A. Biblical Background. The religion of the Bible is a religion of service to our fellow men. Christ - our example and leader - "did not come to be served, but to serve," (Matt. 20:28 NIV) and He clearly points out that to truly be great in the kingdom of heaven, one must be a servant. (vs. 26) The apostle John exhorts us to not just love "with words or tongue" but

instead "with actions and in truth." (1 John 3:18) James restates this theme in his own words by saying we need to focus on doing what Christ says and not just listening to it. (1:22) He pounds home the point that faith ~~must~~ be accompanied by actions (2:17), and even goes so far as to define "pure and faultless" religion in such practical terms as looking after orphans and widows (1:27). No portion of scripture presents this idea more emphatically than Christ's own words in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt.25). Here the entrance requirements for heaven are measured in terms of unselfish service, not Theological beliefs! He summarizes by saying "whatever you did (or did not do) for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did (or did not do) for me." (vs. 40, 45)

B. Ellen White Comments. Mrs. White has much to say on this topic of Christianity inaction. When it comes to integrating Christian theory and action in our schools she says, "It is not enough to fill the minds of the youth with lessons of deep importance; they must learn to impart what they have received." (Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, p. 545) She adds that "By faithfully putting to a practical use that which they [the students] have learned they will increase in ability to use their knowledge." (p. 545) For those who have questions on how this concept of practical religion fits into the educational goals of the school she says, "In unselfish service for the blessing of others he [the student] is meeting the high ideal of Christian education." (p. 545)

Too often Seventh-day Adventists have relegated the idea of "Christian service" to some sub-compartment of the religious organization. In our educational institutions, if this issue is addressed at all, it is often tacked on as an added "bonus" or "option" that can be gained from attending a Christian school. I would like to suggest that Christian service is not a bonus or an option, but rather an integral and inseparable part of our religion. Christian education without service is neither Christian nor true education!

The question then for Adventist educators is not "should we," but rather "how can we" integrate this practical dimension of Christianity into our schools, and more specifically, into our Bible curriculum?

Mrs. White once again gives much guidance and practical instruction on this subject. "It is necessary to their complete education that students be given time to do missionary work."

(p. 545) "If a missionary spirit is encouraged, even if it takes some hours from the program of regular study, much of heaven's blessing will be given, provided there is more faith and spiritual zeal, more of a realization of what God will do."

(p. 545)

To be more specific, she gives a suggestion of forming groups to assess the spiritual needs of families in the community around the school. (p. 545) Then the students can be formed into teams to work "as nurses, gospel visitors, and Bible readers, as canvassers, ministers, and medical missionary evangelists." (p. 546) Others should be involved in "city

mission work," and ministering through song (p. 547). Then there is much Christian service that can be undertaken on the school campus itself. Suggestions include student Bible studies (p. 550), student-led tutoring, and student prayer groups who pray for the principal and teachers (p. 550). Most of these ideas, with a little adaptation or modification, could be undertaken at any SDA secondary schools.

C. Practical Considerations. The possibilities and potential of involving Adventist youth in practical, experiential religion are so vast and varied that there is no way to fully explore them in this paper! I am not talking here about service being another extra-curricular activity. Instead, it would be an integral part of the Bible curriculum. I firmly believe that this would not detract from the Bible program, but would rather strengthen the class by giving added incentive for learning.

For those who wonder how the students would accept this practical emphasis, I quote Anthony Campolo: "Young people are not attracted so much by a church that tries to entertain them as they are attracted to a church that challenges them to do things for others." (1983, p. 9)

What is the teacher's role in this practical application of the Bible curriculum? He/She becomes a creative resource person who encourages the students to take the initiative and run with it. The teacher might need to be a liaison between the students and community contacts, or may need to give guidance and direction to student ideas, but it must be remembered that the more ownership the students can have of a project, the better the

chances of success. Let the students brainstorm about service projects; let them divide into groups and work on concrete plans; let them lead out in the actual projects. From my experience, the greatest challenge for the teacher is to keep the students motivated and "on task."

In the last part of this section, I would like to briefly look at some concrete ideas and suggestions for implementing a more practical and experiential Bible curriculum. These can barely scratch the surface of possibilities, but are intended to stimulate thought and act as a launching pad for further thought and action.

1. From a practical standpoint, it is very hard to undertake any real kind of service project during a forty minute class period. Therefore the teacher has to think of alternatives to this time period such as: (a) Making the practical aspect an out-of-class assignment, or (b) Meeting outside of school hours to undertake projects (it is very hard to make this kind of project mandatory), or (c) Juggling the school schedule to give a longer period for Bible activities.

Although there is a time and place for all three of the above approaches, my feeling is that the third one merits the most attention. Much can be learned from Weimar Academy and College (and others) in this regard. There, one full school-day a week is devoted to practical methods of outreach.

In order to give each teacher the time he/she needs in their individual disciplines, the schedule could be re-worked so that Bible meets just once a week (for approximately four hours)

while the rest of the classes have an extra class period on another day. There are obviously many complications to this kind of schedule-changing, but with a commitment to make it work, it would be possible! There are many other possibilities for re-working the schedule.

2. As far as textbooks and curriculum for this practically-based Bible program are concerned, it might be well (at least at first) to stick closely to the same general outline as is followed by the SDA Bible curriculum. Make the practical application fit right in with the theoretical learning. For example, let's look briefly at the Junior and Senior year program along with some suggested activities:

Juniors:

- Study Romans, SDA doctrines, and Revelation in class.
- conduct "Steps to Christ" seminar to fellow students, students become involved in administering Bible correspondence courses to interests*, and help with a Revelation Seminar.

(* I have found the Bible correspondence course to be a very effective teaching tool. Students are not intimidated by any face-to-face contact, and it gives them a chance to research answers to questions, etc. My students have become very excited about reaching out to non-Adventists through correspondence.)

Seniors:

- Study Proverbs, Careers, Marriage and Family, and witnessing in class.
- Conduct Week of Prayer or worship series on the wisdom of Proverbs, do volunteer work in prospective career areas, conduct dating and sex education workshops for schools, lead out in underclass witnessing projects.

3. There are many other activities and projects that could be adapted to fit most any school situation. Student-led

surveys could be given in the community to assess needs, short-term mission projects could be tied into the Bible program, branch Sabbath Schools organized, cooking schools and health seminars conducted, and the list goes on and on. The important point is that we Teachers must start with something, and we must start now!

As I mentioned earlier, modeling and internalizing techniques should be an integral part of this service orientation. Students who see that we, as educators, are personally taking Christ's call to service seriously, will be much more likely to want a part of this vital Christianity we live. And, as they reach out to a world in need, their values will be called into question. They may find their priorities being re-shuffled, and in this process, they will be internalizing the values that we so strongly hold.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I would like to draw an analogy between Christianity and the human body. The Theological beliefs of the church can be likened to a skeleton. Without the backbone of its unique, Adventist values, the church would crumble. But, when viewed and overemphasized on their own, they appear no more attractive to the youth than a "bag of bones." It is the practical application of these values; the personalized, loving way in which these values are integrated into life, that makes religion attractive. This is the muscle and skin of religion. You can't have one without the other, but as I have suggested in

this paper, I feel it is time that more emphasis be placed on where values meet "real life."

I once heard a story about a boy who was duly instructed in the Christian teachings of how much God loved him as a unique individual. After hearing this same concept repeated day after day, the boy became more and more restless, until one day he piped up, "But I want to see love with skin on it!"

My prayer is that by emphasizing the three suggested strategies of attractive modeling, open dialogue and other internalizing activities, and practical, experiential application, Adventist Educators can indeed present a religion to our youth that has "skin on it."

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