

# Building Faith in the College Religion Class

By George W. Reid

**T**ravis arrived as a freshman at an Adventist college, coming from a small town with an Adventist church of 40 members. He and his mother were the only believers in an otherwise secular household and extended family whose males prided themselves in materialistic goals and preoccupation with weekend sports. From the moment of his conversion Travis became a partial outcast to the men to whom he had always looked for personal identity.

Compounding the problem, as a lone Adventist Travis passed through a secondary school environment that can only be described as socially hostile. He attended few social events, missing the frequent dances and parties as well as the sporting events scheduled for Friday nights or Saturdays. As a result, Travis had a well-developed commitment to his faith, constructed under stress. However, his worldview focused on multiple absolutes and fixed positions.

Travis arrived at college with unrealistic expectations and a fierce hunger for spiritual support. Outwardly confident as a Christian, Travis was vulnerable on several counts. He was, in fact, a ready candidate for a fracture of faith or for outright disillusionment. Fortunately, his personality and outlook included stabilizing features, which provided some needed balance.

His case illustrates, however, the fragility of many who enroll in college Bible classes. As the teacher introduces new data and insights, old ways of thinking—worked out at considerable personal cost—are challenged and made to appear inadequate, even foolish.

This is particularly devastating to students like Travis and others whose background has been restrictive or who have been required by circumstances to endure opposition or ridicule for taking

an unpopular stand for their faith.

The Bible teacher's challenge, then, is to enhance spiritual growth while introducing new data and insights that may displace previous views. If properly introduced, the new concepts should provide a better grasp of what it means to serve Christ, a more satisfying integration of Bible truth with a coherent world view, and a more effective witness.

## Getting Beyond Indoctrination

How should teachers approach this task? A traditional avenue has been simple indoctrination. Biblical truth is

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treated as an established commodity to be directly transmitted. In the past many Bible classes were little more than indoctrination. In such courses, students saw their task as purely academic—absorbing and memorizing data and predigested interpretations so that they could survive examinations.

However, indoctrination seldom enhances one's relationship with God. It inhibits personal initiative and ignores the spiritual and intellectual dignity of the person. It suggests that spiritual growth consists mostly in the acquisition of biblical knowledge for its own sake.

In fact, religious development is less taught than caught. Each person must achieve a living relationship with God by combining intellect and experience with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the teacher's first assignment to foster that

development in each student.

Recent reaction against the indoctrination approach has led to Bible classes that are open, free-wheeling, and exploratory. Some even border on the disorganized, providing little more than an occasion to ventilate uninformed opinions. Textbooks are discarded and the Bible itself is treated as auxiliary. This denudes the course of content, suggesting that neither absolutes nor norms are indispensable. It conforms to the spirit of contemporary Western culture, which values individualism and whose sole moral value is nonjudgmentalism.

Fortunately most Bible teachers avoid both extremes. But in doing so, they often sacrifice student interest. This is tragic, for the effective Bible class probes the deepest levels of human perception and wrestles with the most fundamental questions humans can ask.

Acquisition of biblical knowledge is important, but it does not fully answer the problems of life. The teacher needs to help the student distinguish between the important and the trivial. This provides a vision of what "ought to be."

## Academics

Bible study in the college setting is both academic and experiential. Academically, the effective Bible class incorporates several features:

1. In graduated steps it leads to inquiry about God and His Word. Its point of ultimate reference is God, not human thought.

2. It bravely tackles every fundamental question. Further, it courageously admits that human beings are hampered by partial understanding; hence conclusions based on human logic are always tentative. However, with divinely inspired absolutes the situation is different. The authority of the Word must not be compromised in any way that makes

core elements of Christian belief seem less than credible.

3. While reinforcing the central beliefs of Christian faith, the effective Bible class shows the student how to order ideas, placing troublesome subordinate items in intellectual suspension until sufficient knowledge becomes available to make conclusive statements. This stabilizes faith while allowing students to explore the parameters of their beliefs.

For the Bible teacher, this is a most sensitive task. Some students arrive in the classroom with the flippancy characteristic of contemporary teen life. Boldly antiestablishment, they lack the traditional reverence once accorded the Bible, and they may even scoff openly at belief in a personal God. They may challenge the teacher and play games with content material. Such students are usually heavily secularized and disdainful of any form of public piety in the classroom. They reflect the values of Western society, which privatize piety to such a degree that any public manifestation challenges an accepted taboo.

The skillful teacher must avoid being reactionary, accepting verbal challenge

at face value and treating such students seriously, while recognizing and avoiding game playing.

New insights must be presented as enlarging the older absolutes rather than discrediting them. This will open the way for the Holy Spirit to win the secularized student to a living experience with Christ, while preserving and strengthening the faith of those for whom new discoveries threaten cherished positions.

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The wise teacher does not allow classroom discussion to deteriorate into quibbling over the technical or the trivial. Instead, he or she shows how each item relates to God's grand plan. The Bible's final message deals with ultimates, not with details.

If encouraged to do so, often the class as a whole will set a stabilizing pace for the discussion, but those with a steady,

balanced growth are often somewhat reluctant to speak up. The instructor should encourage them to do so.

4. The teacher needs to encourage exploration and help students develop their analytical skills within the bounds of absolutes. Students need to see that intellectual exploration cannot function without borders. A developing intellectual synthesis inevitably includes givens—some presuppositional, others discovered, yet others revealed.

The teacher can help students identify the givens, explaining why they must be such, while showing how secondary concepts contribute to them.

For example, consider how one would present a difficult passage such as Daniel 11. The first several verses of this prophecy are clear, but later portions are at best uncertain because of limited reference points and the lack of clear parallels with other prophetic sweeps. Teaching about this prophecy can be damaging if it suggests that prophecy in general is uncertain. This could devastate the faith of fragile students and dislodge their confidence in prophetic studies.

### Developing the Spiritual

Although Bible teaching usually is seen as religious development, it actually deals with both the intellect and the heart. Religious growth flourishes in the presence of an active witness by other believers. The act of sharing Christ—even by one person—encourages others to place self under the command of the Holy Spirit.

This all-important new-birth experience goes beyond simple assent to doctrines or social conformity. These shallow concepts of religion are especially prevalent among youth reared in an Adventist environment. The Bible teacher must lead such students beyond empty ritual into a deep experience with Christ.

The gospel meets human needs. It assures us of God's enduring concern, reinforces personal self-worth, consoles in discouragement, and relieves stress. But to present the good news of redemption largely for its utility and its benefits to humanity, shortchanges its greater meaning and encourages self-centeredness.

The central message of the gospel is the plan of redemption, rather than religion's usefulness as a balm for human needs, real or imagined. Insight into the

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cosmic backdrop of God's outreach to humankind carries Adventism beyond the standard theology of other churches. This insight springs from our special attention to prophecy and last-day events and is the key organizing truth in *The Great Controversy*.

Biblical classes must give this insight its proper place. Teachers can do so, not through continuous repetition, but by allowing the concept to infuse other biblical themes.

Ultimately it is not really the hope of "pie in the sky, by and by" that fires Christian belief. What motivates Chris-

tian action is a profound desire to reflect the nature of Christ, to bring honor to Him. This has implications for our students' lives, both present and future. This concept forms the basis of successful Bible teaching.

Spiritual development brings with it a renewed interest in Bible study, an interest that reaches beyond assigned readings, acquisition of information, or study to defend a point. Only continuing exposure to the Word can provide the daily encouragement and persistence necessary for successful Christian living.

### Making Bible Study Relevant

Student life is crowded with activities. Most youth see Bible reading as an anachronism. We must demonstrate how God's Book addresses what is really important. Even in a materialistic age such as ours youth sense the need for a moral element in life. This opens the way for the teacher to introduce Christ as the true center of meaning.

A final practical goal demands our attention. We must enable our students to be both tactful and persistent in sharing their faith. Rather than a matter of proper technique, this outreach requires the infusion of vibrant joy, which leads

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naturally to spiritual sharing.

As we have noted, Western cultures privatize religion. Our youth need to recognize this cultural prohibition. Through skillful teaching and the infusion of the Spirit, they will overcome this prohibition to witnessing.

Not until the goal of outreach becomes paramount in Bible classes will our students achieve God's ultimate purpose for their lives. We fall short if our Bible classes become mired in urbane theoretical discussions of theological and ethical questions. We must inspire our students to translate inner commitment into a shared faith that commends itself to unbelievers and nominal Christians.

As we seek to accomplish this goal, our Bible classes will become what God really intends them to be—centers where faith is deepened and from which students depart with a sense of urgency to share their joy in Christ. □

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