

Teaching Religion Versus Teaching Theology

An Unbalanced Emphasis?

Adventists have traditionally taken an intellectual approach to Christianity. When we say someone “knows the truth,” for example, we nearly always mean a head knowledge of the church’s doctrines. Even Adventist evangelism tends to focus on the head rather than the heart or some combination of the two. It is only natural that the teaching of religion has generally followed that same path in Adventist schools.

To follow that route, however, is to nullify the very reasons that motivated the Adventist Church to establish a system of education. Adventist educators need to rethink the reasons why we require religious instruction in our schools and colleges. What do we hope to achieve? Have we consciously thought about our aims? If so, are our instructional programs structured to reach the desired destination? Such questions are crucial because they go to the heart of Adventist education’s reason to exist.

Theology Is Not Religion

Adventist education has all too often taught theology rather than religion. At the root of the problem is the false assumption that the two are the same. In this article, for purposes of discussion, *theology* will refer to academic and cognitive knowledge about God and religious ideas, while *religion* (a word with many definitions) will refer to the experiential-relational aspects of Christianity.

The following quotations may help us make the distinction more clearly. Perry LeFevre has written that “religion is the *commitment* to

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that which sustains, nourishes, and creates the good in human life. Theology is the intellectual interpretation of that to which man commits himself. . . . [r]eligion is the trust; theology is the intellectual interpretation of that upon which we rest our trust.”¹ William Temple made a similar point when he claimed that “the heart of Religion is not an opinion about God, such as Philosophy [or theology] might reach as the conclusion of its argument; it is a personal relationship with God. Its closest analogy

is not found in our study of astronomy or any other science, but in our relation to a person whom we trust and love.” Again, “Philosophy [or theology] seeks knowledge for the sake of understanding, while Religion seeks knowledge for the sake of worship.”² Elton Trueblood echoed this same concept when he wrote that “the essence of philosophy [and theology] is to *think*; the essence of religion is to *dedicate*.”³

While the two concepts are related, theology, or factual knowledge about God and the Bible, does not necessarily lead to religious experience. Blaise Pascal grasped that truth when he remarked that “the knowledge of God is very far from the love of Him.”⁴ *Theological knowledge that does not lead to practice and positive relationships with the God of that knowledge is meaningless and of little value.* After all, some of the world’s greatest infidels and atheists have known the content of their Bibles extremely well. Even Satan himself has an excellent knowledge of God—he is a cognitive believer (James 2:9).

Ellen White drove home the dangers inherent in mere knowledge (including religious knowledge) when she wrote that “[s]tudents must be impressed with the fact that knowledge alone may

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bluntly, a person can graduate from being a stupid sinner to an intelligent sinner.”⁶

Theological Knowledge Is Not an End In Itself

Thus far, we have emphasized the negative—the dangers of an unbalanced emphasis on theological knowledge in religion teaching. Adequate and accurate theological and biblical knowledge is important, but its acquisition must never be seen as an end in itself. One way to understand the positive balance needed in religious instruction is to review what we hope to achieve through such instruction. H. E. Carnack has summarized the threefold aim of religious instruction in three short phrases: (1) “Bring the pupil to Christ,” (2) “Build him up in Christ,” and (3) “Send him forth to work for Christ.”⁷ *Thus, the ultimate goal of religious instruction is the same as the ultimate aim of Christian education in general—to lead young people beyond understanding to relationship, and beyond relationship to service.*

Teaching facts about the Bible is not an end in itself. Rather, such instruction is a means to an end. The goal is for the encounter with biblical truth to affect the lives of both teacher and student. Trueblood observed that “[t]hose who promote religion are never satisfied with imparting information about religion; they are concerned, instead, that people *be* religious.” The heart of such religious experience, he

be, in the hands of the enemy of all good, a power to destroy them. It was a very intellectual being, one who occupied a high position among the angelic throng, that finally became a rebel; and many a mind of superior intellectual attainments is now being led captive by his power.”⁵ It is all too easy for even serious theological study to shut us away from God rather than opening doors to Him. This occurs when we allow the pursuit of theological and doctrinal knowledge to become our primary goal in religious study.

Reuben Hilde put his finger on the

problem when he wrote that “one of the stark realities we face in Seventh-day Adventist education is that in too many cases the education provided in our schools has not appreciably changed young people.” He noted that although many of them stay in the church, that “this is not particularly satisfying. . . . *When a Christian school doesn’t bring about transformation of lives, the purpose of that school comes close to being absurd.*” The central problem, he asserts, is that much learning enters “the mind that has never gone through the heart. To put it

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noted, is a commitment that includes courageous involvement.⁸

Arthur Holmes reinforced this point. Faith, he suggested, is a person's response to God. It is more than assent to intellectual truth, even though that is involved to a certain extent. "Creedal assent is not enough. . . . Religious faith includes trust, openness, consent, and commitment, as well as assent. It is the response of the whole person to the revelation of God's grace that transforms his life."⁹ Faith, in part, is the application of what we know to our daily existence. The Christian ideal is not scholarly detachment, but energetic involvement in the issues of life.

Ellen White addressed the above ideas repeatedly in her writings. One of her major educational themes was that higher learning is not mere intellectual knowing, but "*experimental* [i.e., *experiential*] knowledge of the plan of salvation." Individuals experience such knowledge in their characters rather than merely in their minds.¹⁰ "An intellectual religion will not satisfy the soul. *Intellectual training must not be neglected, but it is not sufficient.* Students must be taught that they are in this world to do service for God. They must be taught to place the will on the side of God's will."¹¹ Again, she wrote that "[a]ccepting new theories does not bring new life to the soul. Even an acquaintance with facts and theories important in themselves is of little value unless put to a practical use."¹²

In Christianity, there is a major gulf

between *knowing about the truth* and *knowing the truth*, just as there is a difference between *knowing about Christ* and *knowing Christ* as one's personal Saviour. The Bible is not concerned with abstract truth. We must not confuse theological knowledge with saving knowledge. The first is a mere intellectual understanding of truth, which we can achieve through the teaching of theology. The latter involves the application of God's truth to our lives and is inherent in what I have called "religion."

So What?

The initial reaction to the above argument may be "So what? We have known this all along." That is undoubtedly true for many teachers at all levels. But it is equally true that for most teachers, it is all too easy to succumb to the temptation of living on two levels—one of theory, where verbal understanding cannot be separated from practice, and another in the everyday world of the classroom, where the separation does occur.

Here teachers face a persistent problem, since it is infinitely easier to develop religious instruction that passes on information than to prepare a curriculum that brings the student into a personal confrontation and/or relationship with the living God. The latter, however, is the ideal that we must seek despite its difficulties. The very least we can do is to develop curricula and instructional techniques that try to get at the vital realm beyond the transmission of knowledge. Lois E. LeBar spoke to the issue: "Because evangelicals have such a high view of Scripture, we sometimes get our pupils related to the written Word without getting them through to the Living Lord. We strive to get them to understand doctrines, memorize, complete their workbooks without dealing personally with the Living Word. Words, doctrines, ideas are stepping-stones to the Person of the Lord—essential means to spiritual reality."¹³ We must not allow the means to become the end.

In summary, the essence of Christianity is not a body of knowledge to digest or a book to study, but a life to live. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14). Thus, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the teacher's life is crucial, since teachers who themselves have not moved beyond the cognitive level in religion can hardly hope to lead their pupils beyond theory into the realm of experience.

Moving Beyond the "Grocery-List" Approach

Accurate theological knowledge is both necessary and important, since religious experience does not occur in a cognitive vacuum. Theological knowledge does give direction to religious experience and provides a framework for testing its validity. But, as Wheaton College's Robert Webber points out, "few things are more devastating to the Christian student's spiritual growth than an irrelevant 'grocery list' course in the mere facts of the Bible."¹⁴

There are at least two ways to avoid the grocery-list mentality. The first is to help students begin to see the Bible as something more than a collection of facts. They need to see it as a dynamic book that deals with real people in real situations—their personal situations, which are meaningful for them in the here and now. Thus, such seemingly abstract biblical themes as the nature of God, the nature of humanity, God's revelation in Scripture, and the issues of sin and redemption are more than formulas to memorize. To the contrary, they are vital issues for everyday living. The reality of sin, for example, can be described as a broken relationship between people and God that affects every part of human existence, rather than as a doctrine to understand. After all, when we place our selves rather than God at the center of our universe, we rupture our relationship with God, our fellow beings, our environment, and our own selves. It is, in fact, the cause of humanity's individual and collective problems. We see those problems featured daily in the newspaper, on the television, and in the stresses of family living and classroom existence.

The books of the Bible were not

written as abstract theses but as messages addressed to people just like us with the same kinds of problems that we face today. Thus, the Bible is a vital and meaningful book that speaks to our lives and calls for the same kind of commitment and action today that it did 2,000 years ago. We need to focus on enabling our students to see the Bible as a living book that deals with the issues in *their* lives.

Webber has argued that we remove theology from life when we teach it exclusively on an intellectual plane. "Because man is more than mere intellect, truth will have no meaning for him if it is unrelated to human experience. . . . I believe . . . we must begin to rethink our approach to theological education and seek out those ways through which we can discover and demonstrate the relation of biblical truth to life. We can begin only after we have recognized the poverty of rational systematic and analytical formulae. The positive dimension of reshaping evangelical theological education will begin when we have learned to read Scripture as the activity of God in history, moving us to respond in faith to the Lord of history who in the historical form of Jesus of Nazareth accomplished our reconciliation with God and set us free to live."¹⁵

A second avenue for moving beyond the grocery-list mentality in the teaching of religion is to provide a classroom climate that shows Christian knowledge to be active and dynamic rather than passive and theoretical. Nicholas P. Wolterstorff helps us here when he outlines three types of learning:

- cognitive learning (acquiring knowledge about something),
- ability learning (acquiring skills and competencies), and
- tendency learning.¹⁶

Speaking of his third category, Wolterstorff argues forcefully that Christian education "must aim at producing alterations in what students tend (are disposed, are inclined) to do." He points out that Christian schools must move beyond merely teaching the knowledge and abilities required in acting responsibly, since students can assimilate or learn these without developing a "tendency to engage in such

action." Thus, "a program of Christian education will take that further step of cultivating the appropriate *tendencies* in the child. It will have tendency learning as one of its fundamental goals."¹⁷

Donald Oppewal of Calvin College has set forth a teaching methodology based upon the dynamic nature of religious knowledge. While noting that actual practice is the ideal, he suggests a three-stage instructional methodology to facilitate tendency learning. In the *consider* stage, the learner is presented with the new material. During the second phase—the *choose* stage—"the options for response are clarified and their implications better understood. . . . If the first phase dramatizes what it is that the learner faces, the second phase highlights whatever *oughts* are involved." In the third stage—the *commit* phase—students move "beyond intellectual understanding, beyond exposure of the moral and other considerations, and toward commitment to act on both the *is* and the *ought*." Commitment to a form of action, claims Oppewal, constitutes the very minimum goal for biblical knowing and teaching.¹⁸ Of course, teachers need to also give students the opportunity to act on those commitments, whenever possible, as part of their approach to instruction.

In summary, Christian education falls short if it focuses exclusively on theology. While the head-knowledge of theology is important, it should be seen as only one aspect of the complex task of teaching religion. Gloria Stronks, Doug Blomberg, and their colleagues help us glimpse the larger picture when they assert that a major task of Christian schools is to "help students unwrap their God-given gifts" so that they can find their place in service to others.¹⁹ ☞

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