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WOULD JESUS GIVE AN F?

BY JAMES A. TUCKER

When asked to speak to the monthly assembly of the Andrews University School of Education, I

was surprised by the interest generated by my topic, "Would Jesus Give an F?" When the announcement was posted across campus, there was suddenly a buzz of conversation among the students and faculty about what the answer might be. I overheard debates, some quite enthusiastic, about the topic: "No, Jesus would never give an F." "Yes, He would!" There were supporting arguments on both sides. Someone even placed a voting box under one of the announcement posters. The final tally was a 50-50 split. I have never had such a successful title for a talk. Even if I had not made the presentation, it would have been a success!

Jesus is called the Master Teacher. As Christian teachers, we see Him as our model. Nicodemus, one of the great theologians of his day, acknowledged this in his midnight visit to Jesus: "We know that thou art a teacher come from God"* (John 3:2). If Jesus were here today, and He agreed to teach in one of our schools, would He give an F?

Answering this question forces us to combine aspects of educational psychology, social psychology, and theology in a way that may make us uncomfortable. Why is it that we find it so easy to separate the principles of different disciplines? Space does not allow an expanded discussion of all of the issues involved, so this article will be little more than a discussion starter. It may raise more questions than it resolves, but such a discussion is long overdue.

Several texts are offered below to stimulate thought:

**Bible quotes are from the King James Version.*

I am glad that Jesus doesn't judge me on the basis of how long it takes someone else because I may take a lot longer—on a given day, or on a given issue.

"A good man obtaineth favour of the Lord: but a man of wicked devices will he condemn" (Proverbs 12:2). So God favors and condemns. Certainly, a condemnation is "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works" (Matthew 16:27). Thus, there are final marks given, based on how well we performed.

"And behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be" (Revelation 22:12). The final grade is conferred at the Second Coming.

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). There is no condemnation if we walk not after the flesh. So, maybe there is or will be an F (condemnation), but not for those who are in Christ Jesus.

"For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved, He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:17, 18).

Isn't Jesus our model? What is the basis for being condemned or not being condemned as a Christian? Does Jesus have a grading policy?

"And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, they say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act" (John 8:3, 4). In other words, "Jesus, here is a person who is an absolute failure. She has just failed her final exam, and now the rules require that she receive an F and be permanently expelled from school."

An official evaluation had been performed, and the outcome was clear. She was guilty. The rules specified that she be

stoned. At that point, Jesus conducted an evaluation of His own. He actually wrote some grades in the sand. And they weren't high marks. What did He write in the sand? The faults of the accusers. It is interesting that He chose to write in the sand, rather than on a wall or a scroll.

As far as we know, only twice did Jesus use His finger to actually write something. The first time was on Mt. Sinai, when He wrote the Ten Commandments.¹ It is significant that He wrote the decalogue in stone. This was the standard.

The second time was when He wrote in the sand the sins of the woman's accusers.² What does the wind do to sand? It blows it away. I think we see here a theological principle about our Lord's evaluation procedures. When He sets a standard, it is written in stone—a permanent record. Higher than any human thought can reach is God's ideal. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). There is no question; God has set His standard high and has placed it in a foundation of stone—the stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner (Luke 20:17).

But when we fall short, where does He write *that* report? He writes it in the sand, where the first breeze can erase the evidence.

Would Jesus give an F? What is an F, anyway? An F says, "You have failed." How does an F make you feel? Certainly not very good. The point here is to examine what we, who are God's representatives, teach students about God by our methods of evaluation. What are we modeling when we give a

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student an F?

God never compares us with others! He only compares us with Himself and says, "Believe on Me, and you will be saved." He sets the standard in stone, as high as can be, and then He says, "Believe on me, and I will get you there." For me, that is the theology of teaching: "I will get you there." It is the teacher's responsibility to help students succeed. I am glad that Jesus doesn't judge me on the basis of how long it takes someone else because I may take a lot longer—on a given day, or on a given issue. God works with me as an individual. I know of no instance where Jesus told us to find a good and righteous person and compare ourselves with him or her—

to follow that person until we measure up to his or her goodness. We sometimes confuse theology with pedagogy (teaching). And when we do that, we may try to make some of the natural ways of learning into sins. We also tend to embrace some of the world's philosophies, proclaiming them to be righteous, and incorporate them into our teaching. I believe that is what we have done when we seek to compare ourselves among ourselves.

"For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by

themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12).

Most of our grading concepts are based on competition and interpersonal comparisons. If you make an A, this often says more about the other students' performance than what you achieved. This practice has, for years, been called grading on the curve—for every A, there should be an F. But suppose you have a class of 20 very bright students. It doesn't matter how smart the lowest-scoring student is, he or she gets an F because comparisons are made with other students, rather than with a standard.

Establish Criteria

The alternative is to set a standard and then teach and test in terms of that standard. If students measure up to the standard, all of them make an A. If you must give grades, simply because everybody does it, or because the school policy requires it, then establish criteria based on a standard and allow each student to achieve the grade that he or she wants to work for. This way, students

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That explains why one of the first questions that I am asked in a graduate school class is “What do I have to do to get an A?” For them, that is the only really important question, not what they can expect to learn. So I begin every course by discussing what I expect of every student and how that translates into grades.

A more in-depth analysis of how grades affect motivation and achievement in school is provided by Charles Hargis of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in his book *Grades and Grading Practices*.⁴ Effective alternatives to traditional grading on the curve are provided by Hargis in Chapter 13 of his book, “Alternatives to Grades” and by Kohn in Chapter 11 of his book, “Hooked on Learning: The Roots of Motivation in the Classroom.”

Real learning is intrinsic and self-motivated. Jumping through hoops to get a degree is not learning. It is using what has been learned to accomplish a goal.

Grades in Process

In our life as Christians, we are to grow toward the standard of perfection that Jesus has set. We are in process, and Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is our teacher. The rich young ruler approached Jesus and asked for a grade. Essentially, what he wanted to know was, “Am I passing or failing right now?” And Jesus gave him an interim grade. Essentially, Jesus told him that he was failing—but then immediately clarified the assignment to let the young ruler know exactly what he needed to do to succeed. The evaluation was in terms of a standard—not in terms of other students in the school of Christ. Jesus did not say, “Rich Young Ruler, compared to my recently conducted assessment of young Jewish rulers, you rank in the 99th percentile. You can’t get much better than that. Please join my inner circle.” On any traditional

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are not compared in terms of scores—just in comparison to the standard. But if you adopt this approach, several other issues will have to be addressed, such as allowing varying amounts of time for different students to achieve the standard.

Children enjoy learning. I have never met a child who didn’t enjoy discovering new things. However, I have met a lot of children who didn’t want to learn what I wanted to teach them. How do we get them to want to learn? By giving grades? If grading really gets children to learn, why don’t we start giving grades immediately after the child is born? Because if we tried to get kids to walk and talk the way we try to get them to read and write, they would never walk or talk! And we wonder why kids don’t read and write with more enthusiasm! If you want to learn about the research findings in this area, I encourage you to read Alfie Kohn’s book *Punished by Rewards*.³ In the following paragraph, I have summarized Kohn’s conclusions from the research literature:

When your children were learning to walk, did you punish them when they fell down? Why not? Have you ever heard of a parent punishing a child because he or she didn’t say “Mama” exactly right? Of course not. If it sounded anything like “Mama,” you praised the child profusely. Children revel in that kind of enthusiastic response to their attempts to learn new things. The learning research literature strongly indicates that our attempts to encourage learning by external reward systems, such as money, gold stars, and grades, don’t work very well in the long run. Children learn in spite of rewards, not because of them. If we never used such rewards, children would learn faster and more permanently. Unfortunately, the research literature also indicates that because we have used these rewards for so long and in such great amounts, many students have lost contact with their inner drive to learn. They have been programmed to respond only to the rewards and to do only as little as possible to get the reward they want.

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measure of good behavior, the young man ranked at the top of his class, and he had been at that level as long as he could remember. But somehow, he knew that he didn't deserve an A in the school of righteousness. So Jesus gave him an interim evaluation. But that evaluation described in unmistakable terms what was needed to reach the next level.

You might argue that Jesus gave the rich young ruler an F; I would disagree. A grade is typically viewed as something final. An F is like the unpardonable sin—there's no way to make it up.

Every Evaluation an Interim Report

But in this life, we always have options. We always have a chance to change, to get it right, with God's help. Every evaluation should be an interim report—written in pencil so it can be erased as soon as mastery has been achieved. I believe that our theology and our pedagogy should be consistent. Otherwise, what kind of message are we sending students? "You only have one chance." "If you don't do it right, you are out of luck—no more chances in this life."

It's not hard for students to conclude that "There's no hope for me; I'm just not good enough for heaven." Teaching can be and, I believe, should be a metaphor for salvation. The teacher stands in the place of Christ and says, "Yes, you can, and I will help you."

When is the final grade assessed? When there is no further opportunity to change, improve, or grow. In our spiritual life, that is at the judgment. As long as we have breath, we are still able to

change. How do we model that theological truth in our schools?

The rich young ruler already knew that he was failing. He didn't need to be told that. The assertion that another person (be he student or fellow traveler) has failed is a human tendency, a judgmental action akin to that of the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10). Jesus gently allowed His student to discover that he was failing, but did not indicate that he had failed. And He did not need to tell the young man directly that he was failing. It was another instance of "neither do I condemn thee, go and—[fill in the blank: For the woman taken in sin it was "sin no more"; for the rich young ruler, it was "sell what you have, and give it to the poor"]." Jesus simply set before His students the path that each must follow in order to achieve mastery. What a magnificent model that is for all teachers!

There is perhaps no grander statement about the objective and function of teaching than that written by Ellen White:

Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children. Godliness—godlikeness—is the goal to be reached. Before the student there is opened a path of continual progress. He has an object to achieve, a standard to attain, that includes everything good, and pure, and noble.

He who cooperates with the divine purpose in imparting to the youth a knowledge of God, and molding the character into harmony with His, does a high and noble work. As he awakens a desire to reach God's ideal, he presents an education that is as high as heaven and as broad as the universe; an education that cannot be completed in this life, but that will be continued in the life to come; an education that secures to the successful student his passport from the preparatory school of

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earth to the higher grade, the school above.⁵

When the objective is clear, every student knows how well he or she has achieved it. There is no need to provide a grade that says “you have failed.” And there is really no need to provide a grade that says “you have succeeded,” either. These secondary rewards do not motivate toward further achievement. Gradually, they become the only rewards for which the student strives, causing my graduate students to ask, “What do I have to do to get an A?” If I follow the model of my Master, I will say, “Go and get rid of those ideas that you have had from your youth up, and choose the better way.”

It was Jesus who created us. It was He who made our brains and designed us for lifelong learning. Ellen White says:

True education is not the forcing of instruction on an unready and unreceptive mind. The mental powers must be awakened, the interest aroused. For this, God's method of teaching provided. He who created the mind and ordained its laws, provided for its development in accordance with them.⁶

Each of us may fail in life or we may succeed, but Jesus, the Master Teacher, has set before us a path of continuous progress. He has given us His standard, and He accepts nothing short of mastery. We don't fail unless we choose to reject His teaching. Any failing grade that I receive will be in the judgment, and I will have chosen it. If Jesus gives it to me on that day, it will only be because I asked for it. In the meantime, He continues to knock on my heart's door, saying, “Neither do I condemn

you; lay down your cherished ideas, inspired by the accuser of the brethren, and follow Me.”

As a teacher, I believe that I should emulate Jesus Christ and His teaching methods. And Jesus says, “Follow me.” I know exactly what to do. And I know when I am not doing it—because I feel guilty. And I even know what to do when I fail. (Yes, I do fail, but that is different than receiving an F from someone else.) When I fail, Jesus says, “Confess it, and I will forget it.” See, He writes my faults in the sand, and the wind erases them. That is the model that I choose to emulate as a Christian teacher. ☞

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and Learning. Before joining the Andrews University faculty, Dr. Tucker was Director of the Bureau of Special Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education.

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2. *SDA Bible Commentary*, on John 8:6: “This is the only record of Jesus writing” (vol. 5, p. 986).
3. Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble With Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993), p. 204.
4. Charles H. Hargis, *Grades and Grading Practices* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1990).
5. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.