

# PASSING ON WHAT REALLY COUNTS:

TRANSMITTING ADVENTIST VALUES AND BELIEFS AND A SPIRIT OF SERVICE AND MISSION

How can religion teachers foster the transmission of Adventist beliefs and values to . . . a diverse audience?

**A**dventist religion teachers face a variety of students. Some are entrenched in postmodern convictions and conditioned to seek something more extraordinary in their religious experience than the mere recitation of facts. Others wrestle with a tendency to disbelief or are inclined to question fundamental biblical doctrines. A few come with an atheistic or animistic background. Others have had very tangible conversion experiences, even though the emotional and psychological baggage from their former life may hang on for years. Still others are deeply rooted in an Adventist subculture where they feel at home, yet they feel deeply dissatisfied with the way things are going—or not going—in the church.

How can religion teachers foster the transmission of Adventist beliefs and values to such a diverse audience? In a culture saturated with the idea of self-fulfillment, how can they instill in students a desire to reach out and serve others? How can they help students focus on mission rather than narrowly on academic success to ensure getting a well-paid job?

## What Is Education?

The answer is to focus on what really counts in Adventism. For Adventists, all of Scripture is important to our faith. While God's infallible revelation cannot be reduced to just a few basic doctrines, Seventh-day Adventists are recognized in holding no less than certain basic biblical beliefs.<sup>1</sup> We now have 28 Fundamental Beliefs that identify the church's understanding of certain biblical teachings.

Transmitting what is uniquely Adventist, however, involves more than memorizing a lot of Fundamental Beliefs. Adventist

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teachers must also pass on the values and principles embedded in those beliefs. Understanding those values and principles will enable students to translate their cognitive beliefs into a biblical-Adventist lifestyle.

This leads to the question of what education really is. It has been said that “Christian education, simply defined, is the ministry of bringing the believer to maturity in Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the purpose of educational ministry is to help students develop a Christlike character.<sup>3</sup> This is what we want to pass on.

### Education for Faith

Education for spiritual maturity means educating for faith. This can best be done in the context of mutual trust in a faith community as well as in an academic environment that is conducive to biblical faith. However, Scripture speaks of biblical faith in three different but interactive ways. A proper theological understanding of spiritual maturity includes the cognitive, the affective, and the volitional.<sup>4</sup>

### The Cognitive Aspect of Faith

“Faith has an intellectual or cognitive aspect. There is an element of knowledge or content to faith. Scripture affirms that faith means believing certain things are true. There is a content to be believed, and that content has specifics.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is not enough to have faith. *What* a person believes is every bit as critical as the fact *that* he or she believes. If we want to help our students grow in faith, we must communicate the *biblical content* of faith. This will include our understanding of basic biblical truths. “It is impossible to be spiritually mature and yet be ignorant of the truths of God’s Word. Spiritual maturity is contingent upon knowing what God has said. . . .” and this means “teaching the content of the faith accurately.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Relational Aspect of Faith

Faith also has a relational aspect. It is not enough to know the right content.<sup>7</sup> Religious beliefs must also capture the heart and will.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a living faith goes beyond



Photos in this article depict students at the author’s school, Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria, engaging in a variety of religious life and outreach activities.

the intellectual; it is relational and alive toward God. It requires an emotional commitment to the object of one’s faith so that the heart delights in the truth. It is not possible to speak of spiritual maturity apart from these qualities. Therefore, the religion teacher’s goal must be to help students turn their hearts toward God. Then they will not only understand the truth but also be attracted and captured by the truth<sup>9</sup> and have a desire to be in communion with Jesus Christ, who is *the* Truth.

### The Volitional Aspect of Faith

Faith also has a volitional dimension. True faith empowers people to put their beliefs into practice to achieve a Christlike lifestyle. We cannot truthfully say that we believe in Jesus unless our commitment translates

into active obedience and a loving desire to do God’s will.

Taking these aspects of faith seriously will help teachers choose the right approach for transmitting their beliefs. To educate for spiritual maturity means to be faithful to all of Scripture. It also means respecting the dignity of the other person and seeing him or her through the eyes of Jesus—with love and compassion. Furthermore, it includes a belief that students are free moral agents who may need help making wise decisions. An authentic education for faith will avoid manipulative or coercive methods that produce a forced compliance to the will of God. Instead, it will seek to win the students’ trust and encourage them to commit their lives to God. It will help them throughout their lives to develop a spirit of dependence upon God and a healthy independence from other people in obeying His will.

### Educating for Spiritual Maturity

In many ways, Adventist education has been oriented more toward equipping its students with professional skills rather than developing their character.<sup>10</sup> A study known as *Readiness for Ministry*<sup>11</sup> showed that what was considered valuable for the pastor’s effectiveness was not, in fact, ministry *skills*, but *character values*. For example, more than

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half of the top 12 most-valued ministry descriptions—out of 444—were character-based, such as “keeps his/her word and fulfills promises,” “acknowledges his/her own need for continued growth in faith,” “serves others willingly with or without public acclaim,” and “maintains personal integrity despite pressures to compromise.” Although professional skills and other factors are important in ministry, this study compellingly highlighted what really is important for a pastor—the solidity of his or her Christian character in the sight of God and His people. This commitment is just as important for other careers.



ical training. It **strengthens the character**, so that truth and uprightness are not sacrificed to selfish desire or worldly ambition. . . . What education can be higher than this? What can equal it in value?”<sup>16</sup>

### Character Development, the Curriculum, and the Teacher

But how do we institutionalize character education? It will not be achieved by adding yet another course entitled “Everything You Need to Know About Character Development.” Christian maturity requires a willingness to have one’s character formed and transformed—and perhaps even more upon the positive example of the teacher. For

“no educational system is above the people working in it. If the teachers do not fear the Lord and delight in him, the best educational system will fail.”<sup>17</sup>

The teacher needs a supportive environment that allows time to mentor students, one on one. Downs notes that “people can be taught best to know doctrine and think in biblical categories when they are in-



While Seventh-day Adventists have emphasized the importance of character development and spirituality, in theory we tend to give less time and attention to those areas than to intellectual skills. We must educate for character as well as intellect, decency as well as literacy, virtue as well as knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Ellen White insisted that “the Bible must be made the groundwork and subject matter of education,”<sup>13</sup> unfolding “a simple and complete system of theology and philosophy,” and warned against humanistic trends: “When education in human lines is pushed to such an extent

that the love of God wanes in the heart, that prayer is neglected, and that there is a failure to cultivate spiritual attributes, it is wholly disastrous.”<sup>15</sup>

Christian education is first and foremost *character* education. “Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men strong to think **and to act**, men who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions. Such an education provides more than mental discipline; it provides more than phys-



structed individually or in small groups.”<sup>18</sup> When the class sizes increase to such proportions that teachers have a hard time remembering students’ names, let alone interacting with them on a one-to-one basis, it becomes very difficult to transmit spiritual values.

Although Jesus occasionally *preached* to an audience of several thousand, He taught a rather small circle of close disciples. Here, smaller schools seem to have an advantage because their more personal atmosphere is more conducive to the transmission of spiritual values than a large and anonymous setting.<sup>19</sup>

It is important for students to learn central biblical facts, appreciate the beauty of Adventist beliefs, develop an understanding of worldviews and philosophies, and acquire professional skills. However, all this is worth very little if not accompanied by integrity.

Moral qualities are not so much transmitted intellectually as by observation—from what students see and experience in the lives of teachers—in the classroom, in church, and in their homes and families. Observational learning effectively communicates values, behavior, and attitudes.<sup>20</sup>

However, there is no spiritual growth apart from truth. “Christian education must *approach and treat Scripture as truth* if it is to produce spiritual growth.”<sup>21</sup> The combination of sound Christian witness and the truth of Scripture is the key to a teacher’s influence and effectiveness. “Character alone, apart from the Word of God, will not produce righteousness. Conversely, the Word of God, if it is not communicated by a righteous teacher, will be less likely to have a powerful influence on the student.”<sup>22</sup>

In other words, if teachers want to transmit to students the importance of (1) involvement in the church and its missionary activities, (2) an active devotional life, and (3) selfless service, they must value and model these activities themselves. This will inspire their students to do the same.

### Essential Values and Beliefs

Having said all this, I would



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like to pinpoint some essential values and specific beliefs that we must transmit in our schools. These suggestions are not exhaustive, but rather may serve to stimulate further reflection.

### Understanding Salvation

Christians want to follow the divine plan for character development because they have experienced God’s forgiveness in Christ. The Bible says that God offers His unmerited salvation to all, but to receive this free gift, humans must make a conscious decision. This means that decision-making



skills, such as being able to choose independently and in an informed manner, are basics of Christian education.

Created beings are held responsible for their choices. Therefore, Christian education needs to help students accept responsibility for their behavior and their decisions. Understanding the nature of forgiveness, accepting the redemption offered through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and experiencing the joy and fulfillment that comes from following Jesus and His written

Word are essential elements of religious education. No student should leave our schools without an experiential knowledge of salvation.

### Understanding God's Commandments

Postmoderns are plagued by a deep-seated uncertainty about truth. Truth for many has become a matter of taste or personal preference. Familiarity with the Ten Commandments can provide reliable orientation and guidance in moral education. However, it is helpful to apply God's law in different contexts so that students comprehend the principles embedded therein and can apply them to their own lives.

For example,<sup>23</sup> the first commandment (Exodus 20:2, 3) includes the principle of setting the right priorities because God deserves first place in our lives, rather than material things, possessions, other people, or fame.

Not misusing God's name means more than refraining from swearing and cursing. It also means living as a child of the God whose name we bear and not falsely portraying His character through our words and deeds. This calls for integrity and honesty, as well as self-control, patience, justice, and steadfast love.

The fourth commandment calls us to be good stewards of our time and physical energies (Exodus 20:9, 10). Other commandments highlight the worth of the family, teach us to respect other people's possessions, to be truthful, to value the beauty of sex within the safe boundaries of marriage, and to guard the dignity of life.

### Biblical Virtues

The Bible teaches many virtues that provide a basis for decision-making.<sup>24</sup> These principles can be found in a condensed version in passages such as Galatians 5:22-23, 2 Peter 1:5-7, 1 Corinthians 13, Matthew 5:3-11, and Romans 12, to name but a few. We should teach our students to be



self-controlled and moderate (Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 10:31), content (1 Timothy 6:6; Hebrews 13:5; Philippians 4:11), grateful (1 Thessalonians 5:18; Philippians 4:4-6; Psalm 95:2; 107:1), honest (2 Corinthians 13:7; Philippians 4:8), loyal and committed (1 Corinthians 15:58), kind and compassionate (Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 3:8, 9), patient and persevering (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Revelation 2:25), and respectful of all people and of divine authority (1 Peter 2:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Romans 12:10).<sup>25</sup>

### Promoting Peace and Practicing Forgiveness

Today, it seems particularly fitting to promote peace and forgiveness. Christians should be peacemakers (James 3:18), reflecting God's shalom in their lives. In a world increasingly torn and divided by violence, war, and aggression,<sup>26</sup> it is our privilege and responsibility as teachers to imitate God's indiscriminate love and to reflect His forgiveness in the way we deal with ourselves, our students, other people and races, as well as with other denominations and nations. I believe this requires a serious re-evaluation of our individual and collective attitude toward all wars and violence as a method of conflict resolution and a serious look at the rise of nationalism even within our own ranks.

### Understanding Sacred Time and Prophetic Time

Other aspects of our faith should be fostered and faithfully transmitted to students. Our name, Seventh-day

Adventist, already suggests an understanding of *sacred* and *prophetic time* (i.e., the Sabbath and the Advent hope).

To know the Sabbath and keep it in the right spirit means knowing the difference between what is holy and what is profane, between the sacred and the common. Students can develop an awareness for this

important distinction when they experience it in how their teachers live, dress, talk about God, conduct worship services, choose what kinds of music to listen to, and use Holy Scripture, to name but some areas.

The Sabbath also points us to the supernatural origin of all life, as revealed in God's seven-day creation<sup>27</sup> and points us to the Creator of time, the Sovereign of time, and the Redeemer in His time.<sup>28</sup> Character education has declined under Darwinism, which depicts morality as evolving rather than fixed and certain. All this makes the teaching of the biblical doctrine of the Sabbath even more urgent today. The Sabbath is a sign that human beings belong to God. Our worth and dignity are not derived from what we do but come as a result of being created by God and spending time with Him.

Seventh-day Adventists are a prophetic movement that draws its identity as God's remnant people out of a particular interpretation of Bible prophecy. Understanding apocalyptic prophecy, especially the books of Daniel and Revelation, is essential to comprehending the church's role in this last phase of world history. To understand the times in which we live gives a sense of urgency for our mission to the world.

Connected with this prophetic understanding of history are other aspects of our Adventist belief such as our understanding of salvation and Christ's high-priestly role in the heavenly sanctuary, the judgment, our unique mission and responsibility as God's end-time people, and much

more. Biblical prophecy gives us a sense of realism. While we see this world as it really is—in all its dark and sinful condition, we never despair because of the wonderful Advent hope.

## Conclusion

While the content of our beliefs is important for spiritual maturity, it is personal character that will manifest itself in service to other people and communities and in courage in public life. This is what we want to pass on. Therefore, religion teachers should believe what they teach about God and the Bible, trust the Scripture, promote faith, and consistently model what it means to live in relationship with God and with those He has placed in their care.<sup>29</sup> ✍



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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The preface to the *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* states: "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain Fundamental Beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word" (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, p. 9).

2. Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), p. 16.

# The religion teacher's goal must be to help students turn their hearts toward God.

This definition suggests that Christian education is to be oriented toward believers and thus begins where evangelism ends, helping believers grow in their faith.

3. Even though the word *character* appears relatively rarely in the Bible, God has plenty to say about developing a Christlike character. For Ellen G. White, the concept of character includes the "preparation of the physical, mental, and moral powers for the performance of every duty; it is the training of body, mind, and soul for divine service" (*Christ's Object Lessons* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1941], p. 330). Thus, "an upright character is of greater worth than the gold of Ophir. Without it none can rise to an honorable eminence. But character is not inherited. It cannot be bought. Moral excellence and fine mental qualities are not the result of accident. . . . The formation of a noble character is the work of a lifetime and must be the result of diligent and persevering effort" (*Patriarchs and Prophets* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958], p. 223).

4. I am here following closely Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, pages 18 and 19.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

6. *Ibid.*

7. The Epistle of James warns against the dangers of having a faith that is only cognitive and tells us that orthodoxy alone is not sufficient (1:25-27; 2:14ff; 4:17).

8. Downs, p. 18.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.

10. Ron E. M. Clouzet, "The Spiritual Objective of Theological Education," presentation at the European Theology Teachers Convention, Bogenhofen Seminary, April 11-14, 2003, 3. Cf. the unpublished doctoral dissertation by Clouzet, *A Biblical Paradigm for Ministerial Training* (Pasadena, Calif.: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997).

11. David S. Schuller, Merton P. Strommen, and Lilo L. Brekke, eds., *Ministry in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 16-22, as quoted in Clouzet, "The Spiritual Objective of Theological Education," p. 10.

12. Cf. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 6.

13. Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1923), p. 474.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

16. \_\_\_\_\_, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 18, emphasis supplied.

17. Downs, p. 26.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

19. In saying this, the positive spiritual di-

mension and atmosphere that exists on many larger Adventist schools and institutions around the world is not denied. However, the larger the setting, the more difficult it becomes to implement spiritual formation. One way to create a setting that fosters spiritual and character development at large schools is to create numerous smaller circles and study groups where spiritual mentoring on a personal basis is much easier than in a large, more anonymous, classroom setting. This of course involves an additional effort and investment of energy, time, and personal involvement beyond the normal teaching assignment, which normally is not recognized and paid for.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 132. It has been pointed out that "the systematic truth of Scripture is not clearly communicated in a purely socialization mode. . . . A pure social learning approach to Christian nurture could lead to heresy being taught and believed, without anyone realizing it. It is the propositional truth of God's revelation that provides the safeguards and norms for our faith. If the propositional truth is lost, the foundation is lost" (p. 163).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 160. This means that when choosing a teacher, Adventist schools must look for more than knowledge and academic qualifications. "God has called us, not to model perfection, but to model redemption. We are to be living demonstrations, not of how good we are, but of how good God is. We are to be models of the Gospel, of God's redemptive acts in sinful humanity" (p. 164).

23. There is not enough space here to give an example of an application for every commandment. This, however, is something that needs to be done to help students understand the relevance of God's perfect law that gives freedom (cf. James 1:25, 2:12).

24. See the discussion in Donna J. Habenicht, *Ten Christian Values Every Kid Should Know* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000), which I follow closely in this section.

25. Habenicht has correctly pointed out that "all of these values are rooted in love—God's love and the love He gives to us. Without love in the center of your being, these values cannot be expressed" (*ibid.*, p. 25).

26. In light of this biblical fact, I wonder whether an active participation in and support of military engagements and bearing of arms reflects such a peaceful attitude.

27. Belief in God's special creation is foundational for many other biblical doctrines and for biblical faith. There are at least 12 theologically relevant connections between Creation and other biblical beliefs, cf. Frank M. Hasel, "Living With Confidence Despite Some Open Questions: Upholding the Biblical Truth of Creation Amidst Theological Pluralism," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14:1 (2003), p. 231.

28. I am indebted to my cousin Michael G. Hasel for these ideas.

29. Cf. Roger L. Dudley with V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992), p. 271.