

# TEACHING THE BIBLE AS A REVOLUTIONARY CULTURAL FORCE

In the past 20 years or so, Bible courses taught in Adventist colleges and high schools have begun to add a new dimension. Rather than regarding the Scriptures only as a handbook for salvation, they have also begun to see it as great literature. This is true whether a literature teacher or a Bible teacher directs the discussion. Moreover, even Sabbath school teachers have begun to employ this approach, especially when the Sabbath school quarterly features one of the poetic books of the Hebrew Bible. Seeing the Bible from this perspective has helped students and adults appreciate God's Word as a document that touches the heart as well as the mind.

Yet I still sense that the core of bibli-

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By **ROBERT DUNN**

cal texts has not been sounded, even with the assistance of recent literary approaches. Readers still ask, "How can I make this ancient text my own?" This is an important question for those who still employ the approach

known as the New Criticism. This approach, the dominant one in mid-20th century America, concentrates on such elements of a text as meter, imagery, metaphor, and symbol and their effect on the tone and structure of a passage. Originally, New Criticism focused on the text to the exclusion of autobiographical or cultural influences from the age in which the text originated. At its best, it helped readers appreciate Bible texts more fully

and deeply, but personal applications had to occur on one's own time.

Years ago, while attending a regional conference of the American Academy of Religion, I overheard one participant say that it was not important for him to take a stand on the text about which he had just spoken. He merely needed to elucidate the text, not form an opinion about it.

For a person with an avid interest in religion, the New Criticism could lead to a “Real Absence” rather than a “Real Presence” in the text. For a person interested in literature, such an approach tended to leave the text a cold but well-analyzed anatomy on the dissecting table.

### **Reader Response—or Coercion?**

More recent critical approaches do

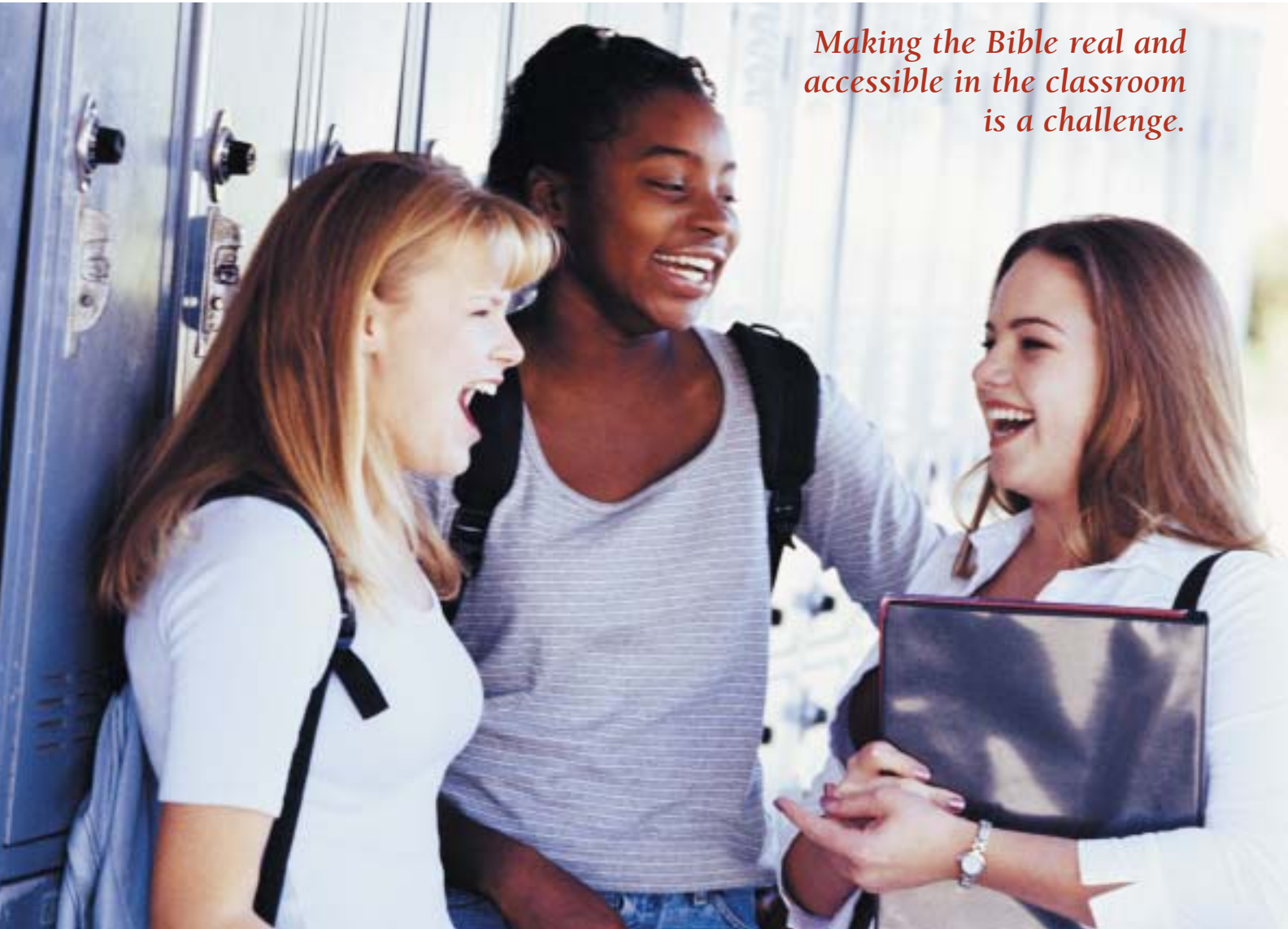
invite consideration of reader responses. But isn't the difficulty with all of our modern approaches that they usually take place in the formal classroom? The assumption, almost never stated, is that these texts are part of a canon that a student *ought* to accept; furthermore, that students should come to appreciate these carefully selected texts for whatever goal the teacher has in mind—for their aesthetic form and beauty (in New Criticism) or for their historical, linguistic, social, political, economic, or theological value (in more recent approaches). This makes their study a form of coercion. Teachers should aim, instead, to inspire a personal surrender to the Spirit that infuses the text.

Unfortunately, classroom discussions often fail to go beyond the theoretical. Too often, one senses that discussion participants hope to accumulate points for profound observations rather than to share deep experiences of God and neighbor. They approach the text from a distant, critical stance, never putting their hearts into it.

Fortunately, a few teachers and students have caught the spirit. I recently received this wonderful analysis of Jesus' response to His disciples who tried to prevent children from interrupting Him:

“When Jesus says [in Mark 10:15] ‘Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little

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child will never enter it,' for the first time in my life I hear the words of Jesus as a threat or a warning rather than a kind moral. Verse 14 indicates that the disciples' response to the children made Jesus indignant. . . . The verse suggests that Jesus may have possibly felt annoyed, resentful, angry, offended.

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“While reading the Bible, we usually tend to notice the very positive as-

pects of Jesus' behavior. But this time I have noticed the negative sides of his disposition, which, in fact, poses and in itself confirms the notion that Jesus was a human being with human feelings and sometimes even human reactions to different events. Or we could also attach these attributes to God, for Jesus simultaneously was of divine origin. Interestingly, that allows us to assume that healthy anger might be a natural response to human phenomena and there is nothing wrong for us as humans to feel angered or annoyed.”

This student allowed her attitudes and values to be tested against the ancient text. She pointed out that the tradition she received resists identifying negative emotions with Christ, but that when she reads the text again, she questions her first reading of it. She comes, as Marcus J. Borg suggests we should do, to read this passage again for the first time.<sup>2</sup> All of us can benefit from her reaction.

### **Embracing the Word**

Compare the traditionally bland response typically heard in a classroom to that of the first hearers of the Word. The disciples were so taken with the living Word, with Jesus, that they abandoned their jobs and homes to follow Him. Jesus interacted with them in their ordinary occupations, not in text or synagogue. Out of love for Christ they came, and out of their responses, the flock of believers grew.

One early saint listened carefully on a Sunday to the reading of the gospel: “If thou would be perfect, go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor; and come follow Me and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.” St. Athanasius tells us that St. Antony “went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers—they were three hundred acres, productive and very fair—that they should be no more a clog upon himself and his sister.”<sup>3</sup> St. Antony's response boosted the monastic movement, a movement that preserved Christian civilization in the Dark Ages and for the next thousand years.



Likewise, Martin Luther acted upon the words of St. Paul, which were brought to his mind as he devoutly ascended the steps in Rome, “The just shall live by faith.” John Wesley felt “strangely warmed” as he heard Luther’s comments on Romans read in a Moravian meeting on London’s Aldersgate Street. The American Quaker John Woolman remembers “while my Companions went to play by the Way, I went forward out of Sight, and, sitting down, I read the 22d Chapter of the Revelations: ‘He showed me a pure River of Water of Life, clear as Crystal, proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb, etc.’ and, in reading it, my Mind was drawn to seek after that pure Habitation, which, I then believed, God had prepared for his Servants.”<sup>4</sup>

Social gains were achieved through the work of all three. Luther overthrew the clerical abuses of the late Middle Ages and renewed Christianity on the basis of grace. Wesley invigorated a dormant religion and started a movement that established hospitals and schools. Woolman’s Quakerism was one of the first witnesses against slavery in the United States. Each of these people heard the Bible again for the first time.

### Finding the Power of the Word

So how can teachers and students today experience such revolutionary readings of Scripture?

Making the Bible real and accessible in the classroom is a challenge. No two teachers will do it in the same way, and perhaps no teacher ever does it quite the same way twice. We easily miss the power of the living Word when we only read silently. Earlier generations opened themselves to the Word primarily by listening, always finding something immediate and vital in the hearing.

### Reading the Bible Aloud

Teachers would do well to read the Bible orally and to encourage students to do so, too. It is important to remember that people heard the original words of the Bible when a lector read

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it publicly. As the author of the Revelation says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (Revelation 1:3, NRSV). Public readings of Scripture are often hurried, sometimes barely understandable. Readers seem to want to finish their assignment quickly to allow more time for the sermon. But the earliest hearers of the Word were eager to hear about the deeds and words of their ascended Lord and each word by the beloved but absent apostle who penned it.

Generally, in Adventist worship, only small portions of Scripture are read, perhaps just a verse or two. Speakers often employ thematic approaches rather than expository ones. Consequently, contemporary Adventist students often have had less exposure to the Bible than earlier generations. They may regard the Bible as intended for private devotional reading or for study, and come to public worship to hear the sermon and music rather than the Word itself.

Because students have little prior experience in oral, public reading of the Bible, they do not know how to read biblical poetry and narrative aloud. Both religion and literature teachers should give instruction in how to read the Bible publicly: by speaking slowly, forcefully, and reverently, making certain all can hear. Biblical literature is generally composed of rather short clauses, so readers should allow time for each one to be received by hearers. The goal is to encourage a meditative response. Occasionally, readers can look up to see whether the audience is following, perhaps employing a ruler or marker to avoid losing their place in the passage.

Above all, they should enunciate distinctly and without excessive dramatics. Before the day when the reading is scheduled, they should practice reading the Scripture aloud, and do a little research to discover how unfamiliar names or words are pronounced. Simple technical competence is not enough. The reader should keep in mind that he or she stands in a long line of biblical interpreters whom the Spirit has used to bring hearers to greater intimacy with God.

### Comparing the Bible With Oral Tradition

To better comprehend the connection of the Bible with oral speech, an acquaintance with folkloristic analysis can be useful, for it helps us to see the differences between cultures that are largely oral and ones that depend more on texts. Speakers emphasize their points by drawing broad distinctions, while writers develop more subtle comparisons. The speaker paints quickly with large strokes, while the writer has time to create detailed pictures. Growing out of a culture that was largely oral, the biblical text was rooted in speech rather than writing. A seminal article on folklore by Axel Olrik<sup>5</sup> suggests a number of “laws” or broad characteristics of oral narrative. Among these are “The Law of Contrast (*das Gesetz des Gegensatzes*)” and “The Law of Twins (*das Gesetz der Zwillinge*).” These two laws can help us to understand why biblical literature is so different from modern literature. The story of David and Jonathan, for example, comes under “The Law of Twins.” The two are remarkably alike in age and character. Although unrelated, they seem to be brothers. On the other hand, David and Saul fall under “The Law of Contrast.”

Modern authors use more subtle ways of composing. They use metaphor or understatement, or observe subtle psychological traits. But when we understand the differences between oral and written expression, it becomes clear why biblical texts seem less sophisticated. It is simply that the speakers wanted their hearers to understand



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and remember the points they wished to make. This is part of the reason the Book of Revelation makes a black-and-white contrast between the rulers of the Roman empire and God's suffering people.

Furthermore, listening, as opposed to reading, brings the hearer into closer proximity with the speaker. One senses this intimacy in the opening lines of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John especially prizes the words of the Jesus he loved so much. Someone who has contact only with the written word can ultimately feel connected with the divine, but how much closer is the tie when one hears the word spoken by a living person!

### **Oral Culture in Later Times**

Oral culture did not end with the biblical period. For centuries afterward, people continued to listen more often than they read. In *Beowulf*, a scop or bard recited to audiences. During the Middle Ages, people learned about the Scriptures through pictures in stained-glass windows and mystery

plays. Indeed, such art existed not simply to teach, but to bring people close to the divine. Nearness to God was the goal of illuminated biblical manuscripts like the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels. People did not simply look at or even through this art. This art, like the eye of God (which truly it was), looked through them.

With the development of printing in the 15th century, people could afford to own and read books, which changed culture significantly. Then the printed word became an affordable witness of God. However, Martin Luther continued to think of the Word of God (and especially the New Testament) as essentially oral.<sup>6</sup>

Today, with the advent of electronic technologies like radio, television, and computers, we are witnessing another revolution, which involves new ways of experiencing the Word. In some ways, this technology is similar to the earlier oral culture. We can hear and see speakers on radio or television, even when they are only recorded. But for many, the personal dimension may still be absent if one regards, for exam-

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ple, a movie on the life of Christ as simply entertainment.<sup>7</sup>

### **Assignments for Students**

Religion and literature teachers should be aware of these large cultural movements as they seek to help students understand the place of our printed Bible in history. They can assign students to research ways that various artists—poets, novelists, musicians, and painters—have adapted the biblical text. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* is a treasure trove for anyone wishing to see how characters such as Abraham and David in the Hebrew Bible have been presented over the centuries. The articles also note examples of their development in subsequent Jewish literature and in medieval or modern literature, art, and music. Other helpful resources include the two-volume *Chapters Into Verse*,<sup>8</sup> edited by Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, and David Curzon's *The Gospels in Our Image: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Poetry Based on Biblical Texts*.<sup>9</sup> There are many volumes similar to these. One can also find relevant poems by simply doing an Internet search. When students discover these artistic appropriations of biblical texts and characters, they begin to understand that the Bible still impacts our culture.

Teachers can also respond creatively to the texts. Asking students to write analytical papers is one way, but perhaps not the one that current students find most helpful in inserting themselves into biblical stories. Memorizing scriptural passages and then reciting them can also help them get inside various texts. Writing poems, stories, and dramatic scenes using bib-

lical characters or plots are other ways. Too many students know the Bible only as a source of moral admonitions. Creative assignments such as those listed above allow them to see God's Word as an imaginative construction, and to understand that when we respond imaginatively, we are imitating God the Creator. Some may then be inspired to change their lives or culture in revolutionary ways.

These methods of reading the Bible have been practiced for centuries. Consider, for example, St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>10</sup> which shows how people were encouraged to meditate using colloquies with their Lord or other characters in the Bible. Louis L. Martz<sup>11</sup> suggests that Ignatius' devotional methods were used by such English poets as John Donne, George Herbert, Robert Southwell, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughn. He even suggested that the Puritan preacher Richard Baxter recommended some Ignatian techniques in his *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650). Martin L. Short provides an up-to-date explanation of how to do this.<sup>12</sup>

### Spiritual Reading and Contemplation

Another traditional practice of reading Scripture is known as *lectio divina* (or spiritual reading). *Lectio divina* involves four phases—hearing (or reading) the Word, meditating upon it, praying the Scripture considered, and contemplation (or resting in God). It led to the seven monastic hours of the day, when monks and nuns ceased their labors to spend time with God in prayer. At the time of the English Reformation, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer shortened the hours of prayer to two, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. In this way, he hoped to make the life of prayer a reality for busy people in the world as once it had been for nuns and monks.

Today, all that is left for Adventists of the medieval canonical hours are the "Morning (or Evening) Watch." In this, we have been influenced by Archbishop Cranmer's prayer book. Daily devotional books can be very helpful,

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but one wonders how many people use them—or any other meditative system. In biblical literature classes, students can be encouraged to read a daily devotional book or follow one of the daily lectionaries posted on the Internet. To ensure that this is done, the teacher can ask students to keep a journal of their responses to the texts they have read. In this way, students can discover and participate in the contemplative tradition in Christianity that formed our practices of Bible reading.

### Practical Results

In every assignment, the teacher must seek to help students find the rich spirituality that is such an important part of the Bible. That spirituality is rooted in love. By immersing themselves in the Bible text, they will come to understand why Adventist readings of Scripture have led not simply to doctrinal speculation, but to deeds of charity. We establish hospitals and universities. We go to the ends of the earth to minister to men, women, and children. The practical results of reading the scripture are at least as important as the doctrines we have developed. We are led to wonder at what God can do through us.

As students immerse themselves in the written Word, they will respond to God's love and be inspired to reach out in concern for others. But the source of this inspiration is not the written text but the divine Source to which the text introduces them. From that great Source, teachers and students can climb in wonder the ladder of faith with Moses and Isaiah, sit gratefully with Matthew and John at the table with our Lord, experience with the Marys and the other disciples the awesome power of the risen Christ, and drink of the fountain from which the text and all of humanity originated. ✍



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