



Belief and Practice

Spiritual Imperatives for the Adventist Teacher

Being a teacher involves more than the hours I spend in the classroom with my students. Besides the degree qualification, I am proud to be a Seventh-day Adventist Christian who is committed to preparing myself and others to meet Christ, our Savior and King. I believe that my role as a teacher cannot be separated from my responsibility to lead others to Christ. In order for this to occur, I must first have my own relationship with Christ. It is impossible for anyone to see Christ in a human being in whom He does not reside.

Christian teaching is a spiritual endeavor with redemption as its core. This aim is distinctively characteristic of Adventist education. Ellen White said: "To restore in men and women the image of their

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Maker, to bring them back to the perfection in which they were created—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life.”¹ She added: “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one.”² The Adventist teacher’s role, therefore, is to not only train the youth in worldly matters, but also to educate and lead by example in matters of the spirit. Teachers are leaders, and their students look to them for guidance in the academic as well as personal spheres. The purpose of teaching is to guide students toward improving themselves. Teachers therefore are in a position to improve the spiritual lives of their students.

Continually focusing on the relevance of having teachers in our educational institutions who are dedicated to nurturing their own spirituality is a necessary condition to achieving the goal of true education. *Spirituality* here refers to a constant, personal, and deep relationship with Christ. Teachers who cultivate such a relationship with Christ are important, both for the salvation of the teachers themselves and for the salvation of their students and others who are associated with them.

The works of salvation and redemption are available to all who would avail themselves of the opportunity through Christ, whose love for us was the driving force behind His gift of salvation. For that reason, teachers need to take their spiritual lives seriously because God loves them and sent His only Son to die for their sins. Jesus gave His life without reservations or conditions so that all may have eternal life. In return, He calls us to turn to Him and be saved (Isaiah 45:22). From this perspective, the “redemptive aim of true education” is to save the teacher. It may mean that God has called people into education because He loves them and it is one of many plans that God has designed to save them. Their salvation has already been provided, but it is up to them to accept and embrace it.

Teachers need to cultivate spiritual lives because they represent Christ as a role model for their students. Teaching is a high calling, and Adventist teachers “labor in Christ’s lines for the salvation of souls.”³ Students have high expectations for teachers to live up to their faith because they learn better with what they see than what is told to them.⁴ They can know who Christ is by observing. This principle was revealed in Valuegenesis³ 2010 research, which discovered that “82% of the participants said that attending a Seventh-day Adventist school had helped them develop their religious faith.”⁵

The apostle Paul’s advice to Timothy also provides a clear message for teachers in relation to living a spiritual life: “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16, NASB).⁶ For that purpose, I want to present two ways teachers can strengthen their walk with God so they can have confidence about their salvation and represent God effectively and efficiently to their students. This model is based on a principle found in spiritual-leadership literature.⁷ In order to maintain a healthy spiritual life, one has to combine two imperatives: spiritual beliefs and spiritual practices. True education requires the convergence of these imperatives.

Spiritual Beliefs

Spiritual beliefs include the individual’s understanding of, experience with, connection to, and confidence in God. They are crucial for Christian teachers because they shape identity and determine the quality of life and spiritual experience with God. These beliefs include having faith and hope in a personal and loving God, desiring to be close to God, and having a higher calling to serve God.⁸

Having Faith in a Personal and Loving God

Having faith in God is imperative for teachers because faith demonstrates our confidence in the limitless power of God to replace our limited power. It propels us to act, knowing that God is in control, in spite of the uncertainties of life. We need to have confidence in God to carry us through the challenging circumstances of our teaching responsibilities and daily life. Faith makes even the impossible possible, for the Bible says that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37, NASB).

For this purpose, Ellen White advises that teachers “have a living faith or they will be separate from Christ. The Savior does not ask how much favor you have with the world, how much praise you are receiving from human lips; but He does ask you to live so that He can put His seal upon you.”⁹ Having faith in a personal and loving God is vital to our success and survival.

Having Hope in a Personal and Loving God

Teaching is a “discipline of hope”¹⁰—continuous hope for our students and their families, and a better world as a result of our teaching. In education, “hope is necessary not simply to endure the present situation but to envision and work toward an improved alternative.”¹¹ Our hope sustains us, helping us believe that change is always a possibility.

Therefore, we need to stay with the main Source of hope to carry us through. We can find this hope in God. “He is the One in whom our hopes of eternal life are centered; and the teacher who learns from Him finds a safe anchorage.”¹² He gave us His Son as our Model. He is the great Teacher whose goal is “to restore the image of God in the soul” and to invite “every teacher in our schools [to] work in harmony with this purpose.”¹³

Desiring to Be Close to God

“Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands,

you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world” (James 4:8, NLT).¹⁴ Resisting Satan requires an intentional decision. He who would oppose our relationship with and access to God must be repelled, and we must acknowledge the omnipresence of God in our lives. We are called to live according to God’s way in what we value and cherish (“purify your hearts”) and what we do (“wash your hands”).

The desire to be close to God empowers us to excel in what we do. Having a close connection with Him allows teachers to have “an intelligent knowledge of practical religion.” By “keeping their own souls in the love of God, they will know how to exercise the grace of patience and Christlike forbearance.”¹⁵

Having a Higher Calling to Serve God

Not everyone is called to teach, and not all who were called accept the invitation. However, Adventist teachers have accepted the “high and holy calling”¹⁶ to teach students “to be fitted to serve God, not only in this life, but in the future life”¹⁷ and to “love and serve God . . . to be the light of the world, shining amid moral darkness.”¹⁸

For that reason, there can be no compromise in the teacher’s lifestyle. We are expected to “flee” from the dangers of sin and pursue a righteous life (2 Timothy 2:22) and “to live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1, 2, NIV).¹⁹ We can trust God to help us in this endeavor and equip us for His ministry. Moreover, we “need to come to [Him] with faith in all that is promised in the word, and then *walk in all the light and power that God gives*.”²⁰ In other words, belief alone is not enough, we must also put our belief into practice.

Spiritual Practices

Spiritual practice is what we intentionally do on a regular basis to

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deepen our relationship with God. It includes dealing with our busyness, prayer, meditation, and study of the Word of God.

Dealing With Our Busyness

Teachers face the challenge of being 24/7 professionals and thus, other aspects of our lives directly impact our role and influence. The forces of “busyness,” which occur on a daily basis and can detract from deeper communion with God, can be placed into four categories: personal, family, professional, and social life. These four priorities dictate our responsibilities to our jobs, families, workplaces, and ministries, and also include personal desires and goals. The problem is not found in these, but in our lack of prioritizing God above all. The solution: being intentional about making God our priority, so that “the worries of this life” and

“the desires for other things” (Mark 4:19) will no longer be barriers to deep, meaningful communion with God.

Prayer

The importance of prayer in the teacher’s life cannot be overstated. Prayer is communication with God. It is the source of our strength and power. It is the breath of the soul and is central to our spiritual life (Ephesians 6:18) as we share with Him the burdens of our hearts. Prayer can be individual (Matthew 6:6) or collective (Acts 1:13-15; 2:42). Each type of prayer has its place and utility in spiritual practice. “Through sincere prayer we are brought into connection with the mind of the Infinite.”²¹ In return, God will pour out His blessings in our walk with Him. “Prayer is the key in the hand of faith to unlock heaven’s storehouse where are treasured the boundless resources of omnipotence.”²²

“Every teacher should daily receive instruction from Christ and should labor constantly under His guidance. It is impossible for him rightly to understand or to perform his work unless he is much with God in prayer. Only by divine aid, combined with earnest, self-denying effort, can he hope to do his work wisely and well.

“Unless the teacher realizes the need of prayer and humbles his heart before God, he will lose the very essence of education. He should know how to pray and what language to use in prayer. ‘I am the vine,’ Jesus said, ‘ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing,’ John 15:5 [KJV]. The teacher should let the fruit of faith be manifest in his prayers. He should learn how to come to the Lord and plead with Him until he receives the assurance that his petitions are heard.”²³

Meditation and Study of the Word of God

Meditation is the practice of filling our minds with the wonder, works, and Word of God. It is the art of having a personal experience with God, especially by studying His Word. We seek union with a personal God when we meditate on His Word, on Him, His creation, and the ways He has led our lives. We make ourselves available to Him by allowing Him to speak to us and to guide our lives.

The uninterrupted connection with God through the undivided heart in studying His Word will equip us to think about “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable . . . excellent or praiseworthy” (Philippians 4:8). In addition, the practice of meditation will shape our character to conform to God’s. Meditation on the Word of God will enrich teachers’ lives “with that wisdom and piety” that will make them “beloved of God and angels.”²⁴

Considering the importance of the work of teachers, Ellen White advised them to make the Word of God their meditation. She indicates that by relying on the Word of God, we become vessels wherewith the Holy Spirit inspires us and then in turn touches the mind of the student through us. “The beauty and virtue of the word of God have a transforming influence upon mind and character; the sparks of heavenly love will fall upon the hearts of the children as an inspiration. We may bring hundreds and thousands of children to Christ if we will work for them.”²⁵

Ellen White expanded on the same concept and stated that teachers should daily seek to learn from Christ: “The true teacher will educate himself [herself] in moral excellence, that by precept and example he [she] may lead souls to understand the lessons of the Great Teacher. No one should be encouraged to do the work of teaching who will be satisfied with a low standard. No one is fitted to teach the grand mysteries of godliness till Christ is formed within, the hope of glory.”²⁶

Conclusion

The teacher’s spiritual growth is sustained by the interaction between two imperatives—religious beliefs and religious practices. This synergistic blending—when teachers faithfully believe in God and practice what they believe—has a transformative effect on their life and work. It is essential for teachers to embrace these imperatives as well as consider the salvation of their students (Philippians 2:12). Teachers become the first beneficiaries of their spirituality by being known and loved by God (2 Timothy 2:19). Furthermore, students also become partakers of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23) as they interact with and learn from their godly teachers. ✍

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