

# The Religion Classroom: Life-Giving or Lethargic?

**Y**ou folk don't need heaven." We had been discussing

Jesus' second coming and had concluded that there wasn't the same sense of urgency in North America as in some other parts of the world. When I asked "why," a sweet voice with a South American accent responded with the statement above. She went on to explain how much we had materially but how much we lacked spiritually. She was not condemning and had spoken in a very matter-of-fact tone. Most of her peers had been raised with spiritual information and opportunities perhaps too readily available. In fact, several could have given some quite sophisticated, sociological interpretations of North American church members' spiritual lethargy.

But in plain words, she was right. We were comfortable, feeling little sense of spiritual jeopardy or deep spiritual need. Emotionally and physically, there seemed no current threat. But this was religion class, and a discerning person must acknowledge the danger of such a complacent condi-

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tion. Spiritual information must transform the student's life or it may contribute to deadly lethargy.

For Adventists, integration of faith and learning has come to mean that our belief system colors the education process and alters the product of education. In many disciplines the goal is to master the subject, but in the case of religion classes the student must be mastered *by* the subject. This means that at whatever level one studies theology, it must be-

come much more than a mere topic for analysis. It must be integral to life. This concept is better caught from the teacher than taught as part of a list of things to memorize. To accomplish this, Bible teachers are well advised to apply Christopher Adsit's advice:

*No matter what kind of ministry you want to get involved in, it should be the result not of overwork, but of overflow—the overflowing life, vigor and power of Christ dwelling within us.<sup>1</sup>*

There is a very real danger in class presentations of Christian precepts that "cold facts" will replace "words of life." A related danger is that the teacher

will become so enthralled with the intricacies of theology that he or she loses touch with the realities of adolescence.

I have talked with several seminarians who seemed enthralled with the idea of academy Bible teaching. They envisioned an opportunity to delve into abstract theological issues that had little relevance to the teen minds with which I was familiar. I have known experienced Bible teachers who were amazed that their students weren't as captivated by their abstract ruminations about the nature of God as they were. In each of these examples the teacher views the subject as "real hot stuff," while many of the students are more likely to see it as cold facts unrelated to the questions and struggles of their daily lives.

The ministry of Bible teaching often means life or death for someone in the classroom, and the teacher has no way of discerning the import of today's lesson. This does not mean class should always (or perhaps ever) be ponderous and interminably serious, but it does mean that the hope and power of scriptural messages should be reinforced constantly, daily.

In *The Church Education Handbook*, Kenneth O. Gangel reminds us that

*A teacher's attitude toward the Scriptures is shown by the way he handles his Bible in class, how he talks about it, and how he encourages his students to use their own Bibles. A teacher's attitude toward the Holy Spirit should be shown through prayer and the way he talks about the Holy Spirit's role in the classroom.*<sup>2</sup>

There are no higher themes presented throughout the secondary curriculum than those of the religion classroom. However, there are probably no topics more in jeopardy of being lost to apathy due to lifelong repetition of the obvious. Many students reach the ninth grade thinking that they know all about the Bible, while in fact they are profoundly ignorant of its real issues. This

is not the fault of their instruction. It is more a matter of student readiness.

One of the privileges of Bible teachers is seeing "the light come on" when students discover the relevance of something they have been exposed to many times before. Sabbath observance and other life-style issues are often grasped in this manner. When a student's essay indicates an awareness not just of the mechanics of salvation but

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also a personal ownership of full life here and for eternity, this is a real breakthrough. But it requires far more than simply acquiring the right information. It is the meshing of the facts with maturation, spiritual conviction, and teacher modeling.

The secondary religion teacher must help his or her students to acquire a set of values based on personal integrity and study. It is no longer enough at this age for the young person to do the

right things to keep peace with parents or other authority figures. John H. Westerhoff in *Tomorrow's Church* makes this point: "Christian education needs to help persons move from faith given through faith questioned to faith owned."<sup>3</sup>

This important process is not greatly enhanced by a facts-and-figures approach to instruction and testing. It is time to provide the tools for analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the biblical material. To be sure, students will still need to memorize important facts, but this requirement must be validated by questions relating the importance of these facts to belief and life. "Expression deepens impression" may sound like a cliché, but I haven't been able to improve on it. Helpful approaches may be found in *Teacher's Guide for Special Methods Course: Teaching Religion in the Secondary School*.<sup>4</sup>

The chapter titled "Teaching as Interaction and Decision Making" devotes many pages to small-group methods and lauds the value of discussion and questioning. Pertinent examples and appropriate learning activities are highlighted in Appendices III through IV. Role playing, agree-disagree, and problem solving are among my personal favorites. The agree-disagree statement I have gotten the most mileage out of is this: "The sincere Sabbathkeeper enjoys a greater blessing than the sincere Sundaykeeper." The concepts of truth and sincerity are not at odds in this statement, but they are usually roundly discussed. The word *blessing* usually ends up being pivotal. The conclusion is often as follows: If there is no added blessing to keeping the Sabbath, why trouble other Christians with it? If there is an added blessing—is it obvious in our personal observance?

It is of infinite value for a secondary student to *confront* the notion that the Bible is, from Heaven's perspective, a very simplistic and elementary explana-

tion of the personality and majesty of God—and yet many great human minds have barely tapped its basic resources. To leave the notion that memorizing a gospel presentation and an outline for every major doctrine held by Seventh-day Adventists constitutes an adequate religious education is foolish. The goal of a Christian education is to produce an awe of the Infinite and a profound respect—even love—for His creation, including humankind.

### A Disciple Making Disciples

A religion teacher interested in integrating faith and learning must first be a disciple of Christ with the goal of making disciples. This seems too obvious to mention, but in my experience it is a constant struggle because even ordination doesn't shield one from the daily onslaughts of the enemy. In fact, it is probably more important for a student to be aware of your approach to life's struggles than to somehow think you must be above such problems. Consider this from *Personal Disciple Making*, by Christopher B. Adsit: "So just what is a disciple? A disciple is a person-in-process who is eager to learn and apply the truths that Jesus Christ teaches him, which will result in ever-deepening commitments to a Christ-like lifestyle."<sup>5</sup>

When an adult disciple can become vulnerable enough to share appropriate personal examples of spiritual struggles and venture solutions, growth can occur. For the student, such growth means increased understanding and a healthy respect for spiritual adults.

### Modeling Acceptance

It is important for the religion classroom to be student-centered rather than teacher-centered. The value of each student must be communicated through classroom atmosphere and teacher emphasis. A spirit of acceptance must be modeled by the instructor (and possibly even enforced) until genuine appreciation sets in on the part of the students.

*Growing to Christian maturity requires a Christian friend or parent or teacher, or a Christian community. Another way to say it is: To become Christian, one must be part of a Christian relationship. He must feel ac-*

*cepted, affirmed, cared for deeply by at least one other person. But to be in a loving relationship with many other persons in a Christian community is even better.*<sup>6</sup>

My objectives for each religion course I taught at Andrews Academy included this phrase or one much like it: "In completing this course you will . . . demonstrate a thoughtful Christian demeanor by demonstrating respect for views differing from yours during class discussions." The next objective stated that "You will reverently approach each class period and guard the time set aside for this study. You will learn to reverence God and respect yourself, your peers, and your teacher."

### Avoid "Put-Downs"

During open discussion or the reading of papers following a writing assignment, views are often expressed that sound "off the wall." I always seek to show acceptance of the person and, if possible, to find validity in his or her opinions. I gently but firmly stifle any "put-downs" students might direct to one another.

One way to make the Bible classroom a welcoming place is to draw out the quieter student, while encouraging the vociferous to include others instead of dominate. Often during the time just before class begins and even a little into the period before prayer or worship, personal or even playful bantering can be wholesome if the teacher consciously draws in the outcast or shy without singling them out or overdoing it by excluding recognized leaders and regular students.

The success of the foregoing examples hinges on the teacher's rapport and credibility. This usually takes some time and requires considerable effort. Developing this kind of rapport will serve you well when you must confront spiritually life-threatening issues such as these: "What exactly is faith?" "Why are people in the church such hypocrites?" "Where was God when that car crossed the line and killed my sister?" Or "How can you prove that God exists?" These concerns will often come out in class discussion or in writing assignments.

The discerning teacher will thoughtfully and seriously deal with these issues in class while making a point of providing the troubled questioner with opportunities for personal dialogue. Often the real ministry of the Bible teacher begins in the classroom but actually culminates in the office, the hall, or the sidelines of the ballfield. The issues of faith and life are too important to confine to the classroom, but the Spirit-controlled atmosphere of the classroom should encourage the beginning of life-changing dialogue.

### Conclusion

Obviously, this article is not the last word on the integration of faith and learning in the religion classroom. It does seem obvious that the success of this important concept depends on the religion teacher and his or her relationship to Heaven. A disciple making disciples and modeling the Christlike value of acceptance—this seems like a good place to start prayerfully transforming the religion class from "just another class" to one of eternal consequence. ✍

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Christopher B. Adsit, *Personal Disciple Making: A Step-by-Step Guide for Leading a Christian From New Birth to Maturity* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1988), p. 78.
2. Kenneth O. Gangel, *The Church Education Handbook* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1985), p. 163.
3. John H. Westerhoff, *Tomorrow's Church: A Community of Change* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976), p. 24.
4. *Teacher's Guide for Special Methods Course: Teaching Religion in the Secondary School*, prepared by the North American Division Office of Education, 1984. Check with your union conference office of education for a copy.
5. Adsit, p. 35.
6. Phoebe M. Anderson and Thomas R. Henry, *Teach What You Preach: The Great Commission and the Good News* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), p. 2.