

# Teaching About God and Human Life

“God and Human Life” is the name of an undergraduate religion course taught at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. It strikes me as paradigmatic of what undergraduate Bible teaching is supposed to be about.

Before I became a Bible teacher, I used to be a theology professor. My students came to school because they believed God had ordered them to. They came to prepare themselves to go where He commanded. I loved my work with them, but it was not enough. I hankered after a classroom filled with undergrads focused on future riches and fame, or on nothing at all. I wanted to teach youth who enrolled because of academic motivation and intellectual capacity, and those who were apathetic about the spiritual justifications for the existence of my school.

I saw my time with them as the chance to revel together at a neighborhood park instead of trying to get acquainted at a traffic stop. The park is the college Bible classroom, where conversations about Jesus Christ are legitimized both by structure and time, where the teachers are unapologetically Christian, where the textbook is God’s Word, and where the goals are to advance eternal purposes: to know God and Jesus Christ whom

He has sent (see John 17:3). By contrast, the “traffic-light encounter” represents Sabbath afternoon witnessing, or even on-campus chapel services and dormitory worships, by which conscientious saints strategize to interrupt keen and busy people with words about how good Jesus is. And He is good. And so is creative Christian zeal. But I wanted more than short, occasional encounters. I wanted hours together in the park.

## A New Opportunity

In February 1996, Andrews University’s General Education Committee came up with a new Bible class that would feature boundless associations between theology and everything from architecture to zoology (and everything in between); between existence and transcendence; between God and everything. The class, whose teaching I now share, is titled “God and Human Life” [GHL]. It was conceived to introduce the doctrines of revelation/inspiration, hermeneutics, the Trinity, and soteriology, terms as vital to most college students as *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*. To quote the university bulletin, it deals with “How God confronts human beings—includes the process of revelation, principles of interpreting Scripture and similarly inspired material, the nature of God and His expectations for humans, and the evaluation of these concepts as presented in Scripture and classic literature of various religions.”<sup>1</sup>

In truth, “how God confronts human beings” encompasses a much grander scope than mere

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The photos in this article show the author, Lael Caesar, interacting with his students.

scholastic attention to certain aspects of systematic theology. And this is by no means the exclusive province of the GHL curriculum. All of Scripture is an account of how God confronts human beings. And as Paul advises, it was all designed for our educational benefit (Romans 15:4). Bible classes, in academy, in college, or otherwise, ought to demonstrate that outside of biblical explanation, life is too fragmented to make sense. This is true integration of faith and learning.

**S**peaking and thinking about “how God confronts human beings” urges teacher and students to relate personally and practically to the issues and situations involved, particularly confrontation between people and the God of the Bible. Teachers who deal with the reality of how God confronts humanity must be deeply involved with their

subject, and with students. As Parker Palmer points out: “real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject.”<sup>22</sup> This relationship is vital if Bible classes are to truly engage students in grappling with how God confronts human beings.

Palmer also insists that students must be brought into relationship with the subject. There can be no doubt as to what—or rather *who*—the subject is in any Bible class at a Seventh-day Adventist academy, college, or university. The subject is always God. George W. Reid has lamented the “open, freewheeling, and exploratory” character of some [post-]modern Bible classes, which at times “provide little more than an occasion to ventilate uninformed opinions.”<sup>23</sup>

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Instead, Reid says, authentic college Bible study “leads to inquiry about God and His Word. Its point of ultimate reference is God, not human thought.”<sup>24</sup> The wide variety of religion classes, from Adventist doctrine, to personal spirituality, to business and social ethics, illustrates the many ways to engage students’ minds in thinking about God and His Word.

#### **The God I Teach About**

As a Christian teacher, I am certainly not unique in believing in a God who is directly involved with human life. Hindus, Muslims, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and ancient Greeks have all shared my conviction.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as I explain to my students, the notion of God’s association with human beings is not a new idea invented by your teacher over the summer.

The God of the Bible is the one whose initiative makes everything possible (Colossians 1:16), from creation, to revelation, to science, to eternal salvation (John 1:1-3). He is the first and the last (Revelation 1:17); the beginning, the sustainer, and the climactic end (Revelation 21:6; 22:13; Colossians 1:17); the one who cannot be circumscribed by the most meticulous of creaturely observation, but whose self-disclosing witness is always completely reliable (John 10:35; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:21); the one who, paradoxically, is both presumed and introduced in the first words of the Bible: “In the beginning God . . .”

(Genesis 1:1). The biblical witness to God as creation's rational core grants us insight we would otherwise lack into the explanation of origins. It also gives us Earth's clearest articulation of the meaning of life and individual destiny.

### **Integrated Thinking**

This breadth of "God understanding" hints at the counter-intuitiveness of imposing category distinctions upon Him as our subject and the confrontation that is His purpose. Here are six reasons why Bible classes are an excellent venue for integrated discussion of these themes.

#### **1. Reversing the Fragmentation of Knowledge**

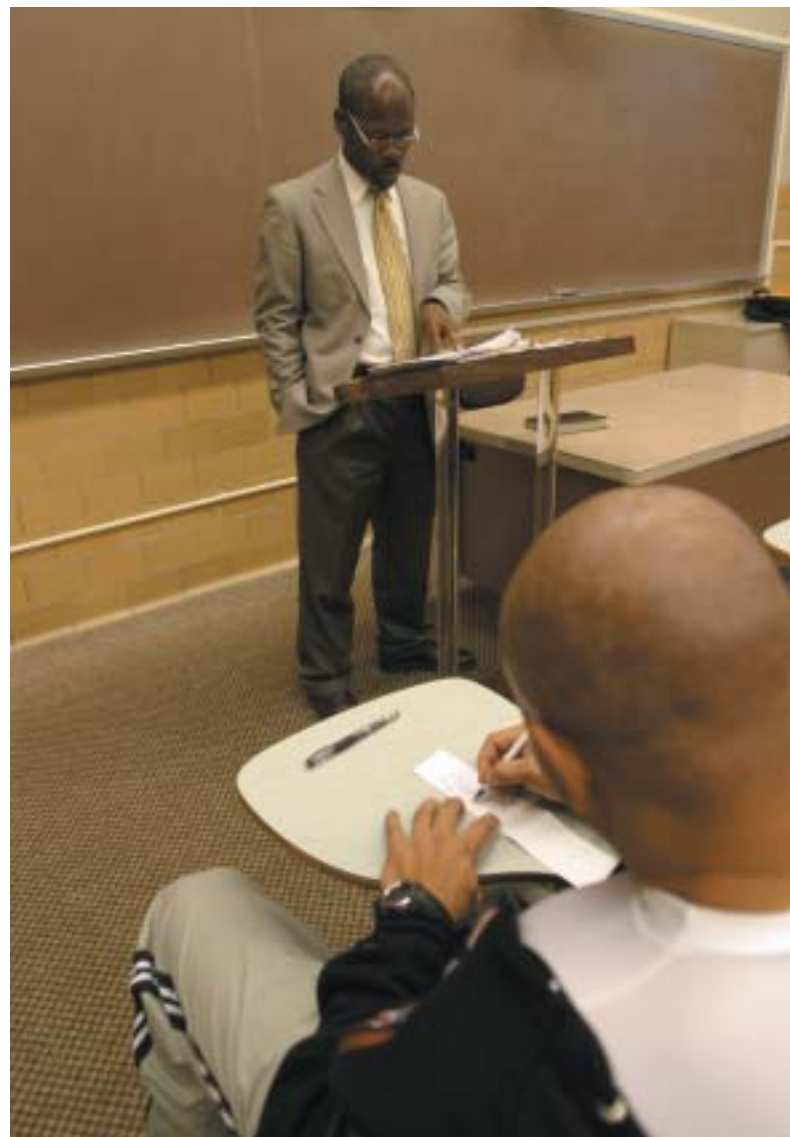
First is their ability to reverse the awkward fragmentation of knowledge that new college students face. Paul speaks truthfully when he insists that "we know in part . . . , we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12, NIV). Our knowledge is partial because humans are limited. The need for dividing data into manageable bits that produce 50-minute lectures, semester-long classes, and lifelong careers has produced category distinctions particularly unhelpful to the human progress that education so vociferously celebrates.

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**C**onstrained to choose which information bits to absorb, far too many students acquire a "distinction education" instead of a distinctive one. In the university in particular, many courses merely sensitize enrollees to the distinctions between what is legal and what is ethical, between social or environmental sensitivity and commercial success, between international relations and enlightened national self-interest, between faith in a supreme deity and the study of autonomous rocks. Many students learn to accept, to adjust to, or worst of all, to take advantage of these distinctions. But as a venue where God faces humanity, the Bible class provides a context that promotes the integration of these academically and professionally separated categories.

#### **2. Providing a Sense of Purpose**

Second, the Bible class can bring a sense of purpose to students' lives. Human ambition and divine destiny, personal desire and divine design are far more biblically compatible than many imagine. Students who have grown up



in a culture where science teaches that God is unnecessary will be amazed at the level of insight for living available in 1 Samuel 23:1-13. In that account, God protects David by revealing a series of actions still in the future. As students learn how much spiritual guidance the Bible's God can give them, they will enter into dialogue with Him. And the God of David will gladly talk with them about the pros and cons of their hypotheses, to the benefit of their future plans.<sup>6</sup>

#### **3. Challenging the Disciplinary Credibility Scale [DCS]**

Effective Bible classes also challenge the disciplinary credibility scale, one of higher education's most sacred properties. Because the social sciences and humanities do not establish and state their facts in a uniform way, or teach from the same materials across the board,<sup>7</sup> they have trouble claiming the same authority or credibility as physics and other hard sciences.<sup>8</sup> Again, because some disciplines produce quantifiably greater academic and intellectual advantage, or professional success, measured in terms of larger salaries, fatter perks, and/or greater public esteem or acclaim, they are seen as more valuable.

**B**ible classes do not register on any list of high-value classes based on financial calibrations. Biblical scholarship is not a lucrative career. Students do not see general-education Bible classes as honing their money-making skills. Further, because Bible is not a hard science, college religion classes are hard pressed to compete for credibility, authority, and validity with math, computer engineering, chemistry, biology, or physics.

But effective Bible classes enable the teacher and students to reflect on the only true scale of values. As college youth dream of future fame, scholarly attainment, prosper-

physics continued to think in unscientific ways about motion. Researchers designed experiments that exposed the inadequacy of the students' ideas, and highlighted the gap between their beliefs and the principles taught in the class. Thus challenged, "the students performed all kinds of mental gymnastics to avoid confronting and revising the fundamental underlying principles that guided their understanding of the physical universe."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the facts they had memorized and the exams they had passed had not altered their thinking about basic physics. Researchers now know that "some people make A's by learning to 'plug and chug,' memorize formulae, sticking num-



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ity, and entertainment, Bible study helps them to remember the real purpose for living: Not science versus history, but serving versus being served (Matthew 20:28). And they are challenged by Jesus' famous question about gaining the world in exchange for one's soul (see Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36, 37). Again, as they consider the relative validity of human observations and divine declarations, they may determine to live by "every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," laboring, not "for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life" (Matthew 4:4; John 6:27, NAU).

#### **4. Straightening Thinking About God**

A fourth and major contribution of Bible classes is their potential for unraveling twisted thinking about God. In the early 1980s, Ibrahim Abou Halloun and David Hestenes, physicists at Arizona State University, discovered that many students who earned an "A" in introductory

physics continued to think in unscientific ways about motion. Researchers designed experiments that exposed the inadequacy of the students' ideas, and highlighted the gap between their beliefs and the principles taught in the class. Thus challenged, "the students performed all kinds of mental gymnastics to avoid confronting and revising the fundamental underlying principles that guided their understanding of the physical universe."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the facts they had memorized and the exams they had passed had not altered their thinking about basic physics. Researchers now know that "some people make A's by learning to 'plug and chug,' memorize formulae, sticking num-

bers in the right equation or the right vocabulary into a paper, but understanding little. . . . Even when learners have acquired some conceptual understanding of a discipline or field, they are often unable to link that knowledge to real-world situations or problem-solving contexts."<sup>10</sup>

**C**onscientious teacher response to this problem may engender frustration among well-intentioned students, particularly those fixated on their grade-point average. Though this focus is no student invention,<sup>11</sup> educators are very much aware that in many instances, 'getting an A' ranks higher on the undergraduate's scale of values than understanding the concept. Besides this, there is the Bible classes' low position in the hierarchy of undergraduate val-

ues. Fortright students have made it clear to me that they don't want to work very hard in Bible classes—because they have other, more significant things to do; further, they want me to tell them what will be on the quiz and exam; which they expect should be quickly completed with little mental effort.

**M**eaningful study about God is hardly helped by this kind of environment. Helping students understand how God confronts human beings means avoiding simplistic objectives focusing on memorization and regurgitation, in favor of those “that embody the kind of thinking and acting expected for life.”<sup>12</sup> Bible teachers have a solemn responsibility to help correct students' twisted thinking about God, which relegates Him to insignificance or limits His involvement in academics and human life. The conscientious Bible teacher cannot be content to dispassionately communicate theological information. The goal of the study of God is not memorizing data, or grasping theoretical concepts, or earning an “A.” It is experiential. It is linked “to real-world situations [and] problem-solving contexts.”<sup>13</sup> The goal of Bible class is to improve the mind and the present quality of life, and to experience the thrill of everlasting intimacy with God. Godliness, Paul insists, is profitable both now and tomorrow, here and in the next life (1 Timothy 4:8). To the extent that focus on grades and preparation for exams obscures the vital, life-altering goal of reveling in godliness, of basking in the sunlight of God's love more fully than ever before, to that extent Bible teaching has failed. Helping students see grades as secondary, and a life-changing experience with a God of love as primary—this continues to be one of the great goals of my Bible teaching. And I say boldly: Achieving that appreciation is one of the most liberating thrills in all academe.

### **5. Bringing a Practical Orientation to Life**

Bible classes also provide a much-needed practical orientation for life. Students who understand God's rightful place in their lives, understand that living with and for Him is wholly and thoroughly gratifying. Life with God is both wholistic and good. It is very different from the schizophrenic tyranny that drives people to compartmentalize their lives into discrete areas such as sleep[lessness], diet, work, church, entertainment, etc. With the fine discriminations of the Holy Spirit for their guide, and God's glory as their purpose, students may commit to sleeping well, eating right, enjoying refreshing friendships, and renewing their minds with invigorating recreation and regular spiritual communion. Such a life-affirming practical orientation strongly contrasts with the sad combinations of sleep loss and wretched nutrition (junk food) that so effectively undermine the physical health and the powers



of concentration so necessary for the student to do his or her best.

**S**tudents need to see that it is God's deep passion for their physical and social happiness, for their total success, that expresses itself as guidelines for healthful and temperate living. Learning of God as Lord of human life delivers conscientious and forward-looking youth from some misguided notion that they must serve two masters, God and ambition. If they will live now as healthy, happy subjects of His kingdom, He promises to grant them the desires of their heart (Psalm 37:4).

### **6. Sharpening the Great Controversy Perspective**

The sixth area where the college Bible class can promote integrated thinking is in linking the story of Lucifer's rebellion to the origins of “art for art's sake” and “knowledge for its own sake.” Before Lucifer introduced a

skewed system of values, everything was done to the glory of God. Later, the idea of objectivity allowed things to be assessed and appreciated apart from the celebration of divine love. At times, in this new context, created beings claim applause for their work instead of ascribing all glory, laud, and honor to God. In the spirit of Lucifer's original search for recognition, humans seek to compete for recognition with the One who brought them into being. Rather than gratefully serving God and their fellow man as artists, scholars, artisans, administrators, or housekeepers, Earth's fallen creatures chase after personal aggrandizement and indulgence, public recognition, and money.<sup>14</sup> These dimensions of human selfishness are products of Satan's war against God's order and his jealousy of Jesus' supremacy. Bible teaching can refocus students' thinking by showing how the Great Controversy theme explains and corrects this skewed emphasis and is the key to a comprehensive understanding of human life and God's relation to it.

## Conclusion

Students attend college to obtain training for academic and professional careers. A Christian school must incorporate both knowledge of God and a commitment to service into that training. Effective Bible classes connect students with a God whose boundless power is at the service of His infinite, personally caring love. No one's actions, attitudes, and choices are beyond the sphere of concern of this limitlessly loving God. This reassurance will give our youth confidence for living and decision making because God's solicitude and power are always available on their behalf. Further, because God cares so completely and is willing to help them, they may ask His advice about their best course of action. Wherever His counsel leads them professionally and academically, they may safely follow without having to waver between conceit and inferiority, foolhardiness and insecurity. This enables them to live full and balanced lives of study, play, and worship that bring glory to God in the here and now, and get them accustomed to sharing and serving in His splendid company forever. ✍



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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Andrews University Bulletin* 94 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 2005), p. 186.
2. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. xvi.
3. George W. Reid, "Building Faith in the College Religion Class,"

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*Journal of Adventist Education* 53:2 (December 1990/January 1991), p. 26.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Hindus hold that the *Bhagavad-Gita* was spoken by Lord Sri Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, to His intimate devotee Arjuna. The Hindu *Vedas* are accepted as originally spoken by the Lord [Vishnu] himself to Brahma, from within his heart. Muslims believe that the Qur'an was given

through revelation to Mohamed. The church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints holds that the *Book of Mormon* was made available to the world through Joseph Smith's obedience to the instructions of Moroni, the messenger of God. And ancient Greeks depended on the oracle of Delphi.

6. Through the years that I have taught GHL, I have consistently required students to memorize a quotation that crystallizes this concept of divine willingness to guide humans who are willing to be led: "Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work. Let your prayer be, 'Take me, O Lord, as wholly Thine. I lay all my plans at Thy feet. Use me today in Thy service. Abide with me, and let all my work be wrought in Thee.' This is a daily matter. Each morning consecrate yourself to God for that day. Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life into the hands of God, and thus your life will be molded more and more after the life of Christ" (Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* [Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1981], p. 70).

7. They do not exhibit the "Epistemological, linguistic and curricular convergence [that] are found in physics, . . ." for example, where people all over the world use the same introductory physics textbook, Halliday and Resnick's *Fundamentals of Physics* (1988); Janet Donald, *Improving the Environment for Learning: Academic Leaders Talk About What Works* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 31.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

9. Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2004), p. 23.

10. *Ibid.*

11. "Students quickly intuit that grades are the medium of exchange. The accounting procedure in higher education has thus led to a distortion in students' educational goals that may only be rectified by major administrative and programmatic changes" (Donald, p. 22). It may be noted that it is competition, not evaluation itself, that is the culprit. Part 2 of this article explains more about my personal struggle against this distorting phenomenon of competition in the context of student assignment evaluations.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

13. Bain, p. 23.

14. See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 21: ". . . in the heavenly courts, in His ministry for all created beings: through the beloved Son, the Father's life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all. And thus through Christ the circuit of beneficence is complete, representing the character of the great Giver, the law of life." All of creaturely effort was originally a declaration of praise and gratitude to God, the Great Giver of life, and breath, and everything. Lucifer's radical modification is what selfishness is all about—breaking the circuit of life by validating ingratitude and stealing from God to give to undeserving selves.