

THE MINISTRY OF BIBLE TEACHING

BY V. BAILEY GILLESPIE

I was a youth pastor, building a thriving ministry in Southern California in a friendly, supportive church. My seminary classmates were all following their call to ministry. And then I got the phone call. “Bailey, have you ever thought about teaching Bible full-time?” The local academy principal wanted me to begin a ministry at the local Adventist school, and I had to make a decision.

Although I had taught on occasion before, I’d never thought about making this kind of career change. But I was being given the chance to teach Bible and music, both areas I loved. So after prayer and thought, I said, “Yes.” Then with enthusiasm, I began to make the move from full-time pastoral work to full-time teaching.

To my surprise, I began to receive a number of critical phone calls. “I’m so sorry to hear that



you've left the ministry!" The astounded reaction was from one of my best friends in ministry, who viewed the move into teaching as a denial of my calling. Our discussion lasted a long half-hour. Another call came, and the concern was repeated.

I thought I was ministering to a different group of people, not leaving the ministry. But a number of identity tags began to be eliminated from my life—no more invitations to workers' meetings, mailings from the ministerial department were not forwarded, conference youth ministry information failed to reach me anymore. These subtle signs reinforced my concern that teaching was not considered a mainstream ministry, and in fact, I found it easier and easier to distance myself from other ministerial matters.

What Does Research Suggest?

But our own denominational Valuegenesis research supports the idea that religious education is one of the venues where young people clarify their vision for their lives, learn values and life-affirming choices, and meet Jesus as a personal friend. Most important to parents and teachers is Adventist schools' nurturing of spiritual faith. The findings suggest that students like their church school because it helps them develop their own religious faith. For example, when asked, "How much has each of the following helped you to develop your faith?" 74 percent responded that attending an Adventist school helped this happen. And the value of religious education seems amplified because we have trained, committed, and creative religion teachers in our schools who are professionals in teaching faith. We've learned, for example, that 63 percent of grades 6–12 students in Adventist schools say that the Bible teacher is an important factor in their faith decisions.¹

What's So Unique About Bible Teaching?

Religion teaching in Adventist schools is an important and integral part of the faith-development process. Ellen White suggests that those who attend our colleges and universities should have a training that is different than that given in public education: "Our youth generally, if they have wise, God-fearing parents, have been taught the principles of Christianity. The word of God has been respected in their homes, and its teachings have been made the law of life. They have been brought up in the nurture and admonition of the gospel. When they enter school, this same education and training is to continue. The world's maxims, the world's customs and practices, are not the teaching that they need. Let them see that the teachers in the school care for their souls, that they have a de-

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cidated interest in their spiritual welfare."²

Tragically, only slightly more than one-third of the potential students from Adventist homes take full advantage of this unique ministry. Other youth must wait until the weekend, when their Sabbath school teachers and local pastors provide this value-added education. In Adventist schools of various sizes and types, teachers lead young people in Bible study and religious discussion, seeking together to understand the Bible's meaning and significance for Christian living. Despite their weaknesses and difficulties, God has used the efforts of devoted teachers to accomplish significant results in the lives of those they teach.

A Lot of Money "Just for a Bible Class"?

All too often we hear those words, "Adventist education is so expensive; it's so much money for only a Bible class." And, of course, if that were all that students got for their money, this criticism would be justified. But that is not all that our schools provide. If the school has the luxury of having full-time religion teachers, the possibilities are far greater than many expect.

Perhaps one reason why many parents feel dissatisfied with their schools is that the teaching of religion seems too general and vague. If the Bible curriculum has been reduced to a discussion of generalized Christian theological concepts or philosophical principles, then the study too often ends only as a theoretical exercise, without sufficient carry-over into daily life or application to home, school, relationships, recreational choices, and other areas of students' personal experience. Findley Edge, a religious educator, suggests a way out of this dilemma. "The objectives that Christian teachers seek may be subsumed under three general headings: knowledge, inspiration, and conduct responses."³

Men and women who teach the Scripture have a responsibility to move beyond the content and cognitive insights of textual material or theology, as important as these are. Going beyond conceptual theology and textual exegesis to inspiration (worship, praise, gratitude, forgiveness, and personal freedom) and then helping students make choices that impact their own actions, and respond to God's leading, helps make the religious educational endeavor more professional and balanced as well as more complete.

There is a natural learning progression in religious instruction. First, the teacher helps the students understand the biblical story or passage. And then, the instructor

moves logically to building Christian attitudes, actually naming the virtue he or she would like students to understand (honesty, purity, love, goodness, kindness, friendship, etc.). Once the values in the text or Bible lesson have been clarified and other stories or passages in the Bible have been explored and compared, the next logical step for the religion teacher is to move to the most difficult goal—response. Helping students to commit to and practice this new attitude is the test of creative teaching.

You see, no religious truth is truly learned unless it makes a difference in one's life. Teaching commitment to an attitude was the purpose of Jesus' ministry—not just sharing information about God, or clarification of His requirements, but making a difference in His hearers' lives. And it must have worked, for in 300 short years, the civilized world of the West was populated with a thriving Christian community and a growing, active church. So answering the questions like, "What difference will this attitude make?" "What problems will class members face if they express this new attitude in some part of their

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lives?" "What temptations might come if they live this attitude?" or "What might keep us from having this attitude?" are all-important questions to ask on this journey.

So What Else Can Religion Teachers Do?

The spiritual dimension of life is difficult to clarify since religious experience is such a personal commitment, but Bible teaching is a true ministry that moves well beyond mastery of subject matter and adequate communication of God's plan for students' lives. A list of the things that are included in ministry for the young might be endless, but let me identify 10 areas that the religion teacher, or at minimum, those responsible for the religious life of a school, might target to increase student commitment to God.

Our Valuegenesis research of Adventist students in denominational schools identified some areas as particularly important and revealed a significant correlation between a mature faith and commitment to the church. It suggests we can do some things to enhance our students' commit-



ment to God and the church:

1. Encourage their commitment to personal piety through shared devotions, worship, and prayer by the community of students and faculty—in essence, creating “church” for them every day.

2. Schedule weeks of prayer, and encourage student participation in spiritual activities.

3. Create a climate rich in personal testimony and witness by their teachers and friends, helping them to build their own testimony of God’s grace.

4. Ensure that a personal, loving relationship with Jesus is modeled by caring adults.

5. Help them understand God’s guidance, wisdom, and direction for their lives, as well as His discipline, correction, and forgiveness when they make mistakes as they develop strong morals and a desire for personal growth.

6. Give them a working knowledge of God’s principles of living so that they understand the practical issues that govern life and have the wisdom to tackle life’s complex situations and apply their new attitudes about God.

7. Help them learn how God’s strength helps them face difficult times.

8. Give them a sense of purpose and of personal value through knowing that God made them unique, loves them unconditionally, and wants to be involved in their choices every day.

9. Encourage the development of strong character through openness to the power of the Holy Spirit.

10. Promote praise and thankfulness, strong morals, and a desire for commitment to personal growth.

All these can be products of the multi-faceted ministry of the religion teachers in Adventist schools.

The Challenges of Bible Teaching

What makes religion teaching unique is its dual focus—*knowledge* and *spirituality*. Religion gives us hints about the organization of the kingdom of God, but spiritual life implies concern for the hearts, minds, and actions of people who commit themselves to God’s purpose and mission. That is why it is important to recognize that not everyone is equipped or even gifted enough to fulfill this calling. Just because someone in your school seems “religious” or “spiritual” or seems to take a particular interest in prayer or service may not make him or her the best person to fill both roles of this crucial position. Schools with small budgets often take the easy way out and ask someone who seems “religious” to teach Bible, but the results often reflect a failure to recognize the skill needed to faithfully and clearly communicate both a knowledge of the Bible and the intent of the message of Jesus.

Like other disciplines, Bible teaching is a profession, in that it has a distinct content for students to master. In the Middle Ages, theology was thought to be the “queen of the sciences,” and many began their academic careers by mastering this area of study before taking law or medicine, or entering politics. The field of religious studies has disci-

plines—Old and New Testament studies, often called biblical studies; ethics, psychology of religion, comparative religion, sociology of religion, theology—both biblical and systematic—to mention just a few. Careful understanding of the “content” or “knowledge” area of any discipline is crucial for mastery.

Would you let a person trained in communications teach accounting? Or let someone teach English as a second language who speaks only Japanese? Of course not. Likewise, trained professionals, gifted in teaching and skilled in the knowledge of Scripture and theological thinking, are the best choices to teach students about religious topics. When this is coupled with personal piety and understanding of spiritual and faith formation, you have an ideal match that will benefit our young people.

That is why it is crucial that schools hire Bible teachers with appropriate training and that these teachers keep up-to-date by participating in professional organizations and by reading journals in their discipline. Religion teaching is a constantly evolving area of study because as new research on the psychology of learning and faith development become available, they can be applied to the study and practice of religion and adapted to the needs of the students, resulting in better learning and personal commitment. A trained professional will keep abreast of these changes, developing fresh and creative methods of adapting curricula to meet emerging challenges. The professional Bible teacher will look for ways to use exegesis to move students to conversion, commitment, and a growing faith life.

Administrators must recognize that the ministry of Bible teaching requires more than hiring a devout person who shows up at class on time with a comprehensive lesson plan covering the topic of the day. Ideally, the Bible teacher becomes a pastor, friend, mentor, guide, and model of the love that Jesus shared with His disciples as He prepared them for the kingdom. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. V. Bailey Gillespie and Michael Donahue with Ed Boyatt and Barry Gane, *Valuegenesis Ten Years Later: A Study of Two Generations* (Lincoln, Neb.: AdventSource and Hancock Center Publication, 2004), p. 302. Order your own copy of the complete Valuegenesis research project that compares the responses of young people from the 1990 and 2000 data sets on faith, values, and commitment. Contact the Hancock Center at <http://hcyfin@lasierra.edu>.

2. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943), pp. 501, 502.

3. Findley B. Edge, *Teaching for Results* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), p. vii.