



IMPRESSING Christ UPON OUR STUDENTS

After a busy day of absorbing lectures and studying in the library, I dropped my things at the front door of our home and followed my nose directly to the kitchen. There I greeted my wife, Bernie, who was busy preparing supper for the family. A few moments later, we heard our 3-year-old exclaim excitedly from the living room, “Look! Look at me!” Not knowing what to expect, Bernie and I quickly poked our heads into the living room. There we saw our young son shuffling across the carpeted floor, wearing my pontoon-like shoes overtop his tiny ones and dragging my textbook-laden Samsonite briefcase along beside him. When he saw us, he

broke into a broad, toothy grin and proudly declared, “Look, I’m Daddy! I’m Daddy!”

At that moment, I was struck, in a simple and yet profound way, by the seriousness of the responsibility Bernie and I had assumed when we chose to have children. We had created three little sensory sponges that were hard-wired to imitate human beings who served as role models in their young lives.¹ And whether or not we fully realized it at that time, during their formative years, we, along with their teachers, were their most influential role models.

By Beholding We Are Transformed

Social learning theory—alternately termed observational learning, vicari-

ous learning, or modeling—is historically associated with Albert Bandura and continues to be a very influential theory of learning and development.² Bandura’s contribution to this theory is only a half century old, but the principles of the theory are ancient. Nearly 2,000 years earlier, Paul confirmed, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that by beholding the glory of God—that is, His character—we become transformed into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18). Undoubtedly, the Holy Spirit has much to do with this transformation. Still, it seems to me that the principle that our observation of others results in our being transformed, at least in part, into their

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image is a divinely ordained mechanism of human development. Children learn “by internalizing the activities, habits, vocabulary and ideas of the members of the community in which they grow up.”³ Their attitudes and beliefs are also formed through this modeling process. How important it is then, that as adults with an interest in the growth and development of young people, we carefully consider and monitor the “community” in which our young people participate. Obviously, a critical component of every child’s “community” is the school he or she attends and, within the walls of that school, the teachers who interact on a daily basis with students.

The Christian Teacher’s Solemn Responsibility

James wrote in his letter to the early church, “My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1, NCV).⁴ While the context of this passage was religious teachers in the fledgling Christian Church, the principle applies equally well, I believe, to educators at all levels in Adventist schools today. We need to reflect seriously on our responsibility as teachers because our students are seeking out role models, consciously or subconsciously, to assist them in defining who they are and who they will become. It is because of the potential influence that teachers have over their students that James declares we will be judged more strictly. Long-time Adventist educator George Akers reminds us not to “ever underestimate the impact of a teacher! These youngsters are hero-worshippers by nature, and the influence of godly teachers on their emerging characters is incalculable.”⁵ And while Akers’ use of the term *youngsters* may imply application to lower levels of education only, I believe that college-age young people continue to look for positive adult role models to

guide them on their journey to becoming mature Christians. Although I had assumed this for a long time, it became clearly evident to me recently, coincidentally enough, during the writing of this article.

A college student sat down beside me after one of our mid-week community worship services and inquired if he might ask me a personal question. Although I had no idea where this conversation was heading, I replied, “Sure, go ahead!”



“How old are you?” he inquired. When I told him, he explained that he was encouraged to see that it was possible for someone, such as me, to fall in love with Jesus and to stay in love with Him over the years (at least to the ripe old age of 59)! I quickly explained that my “marriage” to Jesus was not perfect, and that I was not exempt from the spiritual warfare raging around me—however, I *was* committed to building my relationship with Christ on a daily basis.

I don’t know this young man very well—I’ve never had him in any of my classes at the university—so I don’t know what he had seen or heard to make him say what he did. But apparently he had been watching and listening to whatever I was modeling on campus day after day, which had had

an impact on him.

Likely, there are a few teachers in Adventist schools who have no desire to be anyone’s role model or to be viewed as an example of what a life committed to Christ might look like. They simply want to teach their subject matter and keep their personal lives to themselves. But for any teacher, and especially a Christian teacher, to say, “I have no interest in being a role model for my students and, furthermore, I *refuse* to assume this responsibility”

would be like my saying, *after* my children were born, “I don’t want to be a father, and I certainly don’t want to assume the responsibility of being a parent.” It’s too late at that point! And for teachers at an Adventist school, it is too late the moment they step into the classroom.

Fortunately, most Adventist teachers recognize as central to their calling the impact that they *can* have on their students’ personal lives. In fact, when I ask freshman education students their reasons for choosing teaching as a career path, the majority of them cite the desire to positively influence the lives of young people for Christ. When teachers keep this lofty goal in mind, they fulfill the expectations that

most parents, the church, and God place upon them—as summarized in the following General Conference policy statement: “The teacher holds a central place of importance. Ideally, the teacher should be both a committed Adventist Christian and an exemplary role model of the Christian graces and professional competencies.”⁶

The Teacher as Role Model

Serving as a role model for students of all ages is a profoundly important part of our vocation. It is not merely a recommended “add on” that we might accept if we are so inclined. Instead, it is a fundamental and central component of teaching.

Years after studying with a teacher

who had an important impact on our lives, most of us have forgotten most of his or her subject matter, but we remember the person. Some 25 years after enrolling in her classes, I remember little of the specifics in her graduate lectures, but I do remember Ms. Henderson (not her real name). I recall her pleasant smile and friendly, welcoming ways. I remember how she taught without pretense; how she valued all students as individuals and praised their contributions to the class. I remember wanting to teach like her; to be like her. And most of all, I remember her humble declaration that one day she would like to sit as a student in one of my classes.

Ever since then, from time to time, on days when I think a lecture I've presented has gone particularly well—and on those days when I know it has gone horribly wrong—I have asked myself, "I wonder what Ms. Henderson would have thought if she'd attended my classroom today?" A quarter of a century later, she continues to help mold me as a Christian teacher.

Held to a Higher Standard

As teachers, we share in the responsibility of guiding human beings for good or for evil by our actions, our words, and our very looks.⁷ This is why "we who teach will be judged more strictly." People in positions of power over others are held to a higher standard—and rightly so. Whether or not I choose the responsibility, when I stand in front of my class in a church school, I stand in the place of Jesus. And thus the consequences of my teaching extend far beyond whether or not Johnny learns to read or Suzie understands how to solve differential equations, important as these accomplishments may be. "The Christian teacher functions in the classroom as God's minister in the plan of redemption."⁸ At the very top of the list of objectives for the class is the eternal salvation of each student. What an awesome responsibility! As teachers, we need to seriously reflect upon our readiness for such an assignment. How do we prepare ourselves for undertaking of this magnitude?

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together."

Parker J. Palmer points out this vital truth: "we teach who we are. Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together."⁹ In light of this, each of us who teach should reflect seriously upon who we are. What is the condition of our soul? Is there harmony between what we're saying and what we're teaching—between what we want our students to become and who we really are?

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonian believers, referred to his conduct and that of his companions during an earlier visit to the church. "We did this . . . in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate" (2 Thessalonians 3:9, NIV).¹⁰ Taken out of context, this statement could easily appear arrogant and pompous. However, Paul simply wished to make it very clear to his readers that there was no contradiction between his teaching and his actions.

Christian teachers are called upon to meet this same standard; to ensure there is congruence between what we teach our students—what we want them to become—and what we model for them. Only when we reveal in our own characters the principles that we seek to teach will we be able to have a permanent influence for good on our students.¹¹

The success that Jesus enjoyed as a teacher with His class of 12 students reflects this principle. "The most complete illustration of Christ's methods as a teacher is found in His training of the first disciples. . . . To them, above all others, He gave the advantage of His own companionship. Through personal association He *impressed* Himself upon these chosen collaborators."¹² As a signet ring impresses its seal upon the warm wax, so the Savior impressed His character upon the disciples. Or in Palmer's words, He projected His soul upon them. While they ate together or walked along the seashore; as they sat on the mountainside reflecting upon eternal truth or went about providing for a needy family; whether worshipping in a synagogue or fellowshiping at a wedding feast, Jesus modeled for His disciples, His students, who He was in His innermost soul and who He wanted them to become.

The Teacher's Mandate

As Christian teachers today, our mandate is similar, to impress the person of Christ upon our students. We may do this in the classroom by seeking ways to effectively integrate our faith into the academic content of our lessons. However, opportunities may just as easily present themselves in the lunchroom or playground, on field

trips, and even in the supermarket outside the regular school hours.

The extent to which we are able to impress Christ upon our students, in any situation, will depend upon the condition of our innermost being and how closely it reflects the image of the Savior. Paul encourages us to “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1, 2, NIV). This is a tall order—to be imitators of God and to live a life of love. How do we even begin to do that? The starting point, I think, is found in that very same verse—recognizing how much God loves us. He refers to us as “dearly loved children.” Christ loved us so much that He was willing to sacrifice His very life for us. That should be our motivation to imitate Him: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NIV).

The philosopher of Adventist education, Ellen G. White, explains: “As we meditate upon the perfections of the Savior, we shall desire to be wholly transformed and renewed in the image of His purity. There will be a hungering and thirsting of soul to become like Him whom we adore.”¹³ “The love that was manifested toward him in the death of Christ, awakens a response of thankful love, and in answer to sincere prayer, the believer is brought from grace to grace, from glory to glory, until by beholding Christ, he is changed into the same image.”¹⁴ As an example of this transforming power, White describes the beloved disciple, John, in this way: “In adoration and love he beheld the Savior, until his character reflected the character of his Master.”¹⁵ What an illustration of the power of modeling!

By Beholding, We Are Changed

Do you desire to reflect Christ in your character, even as John and his fellow disciples did? Do you wish to impress Jesus upon the young people you teach? How can you do this? *Behold the Savior, and you will be changed.* Two factors are important: the amount of time we spend beholding and the

quality of that time. Of John it is said he beheld the Savior *until* the change took place. We aren’t told how long it took, but John continued to behold Jesus until the transformation occurred. If we sense that our characters have not been completely changed, perhaps we haven’t allowed sufficient time to observe His lovely character.

Ellen White suggests “it would be well to spend a thoughtful hour each day reviewing the life of Christ from the manger to Calvary. We should take it point by point and let the imagination vividly grasp each scene, especially the closing ones of His earthly life.”¹⁶ What do you suppose would happen if we beheld the Savior for *a thoughtful hour* each day, allowing Him to model His perfect character to us? Based on research by Bandura or other social learning theorists and the testimony of Scripture, I believe we would begin to reflect the character of our Master. Then, as we model the beauty of Christ to our students, they too will be transformed. “This is the secret of power over your pupils. Reflect Him.”¹⁷



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