When I stand in front of a room full of students, or talk one-on-one with them in my office, what can I expect? What can I hope for in terms of their spiritual growth and development?

I will address that question by referring to three specific goals that focus on God, people, and community, and will suggest three specific means for helping teachers reach those goals: the Bible, the writings of Ellen White, and the Cross.

**The Goals**

1. **Commitment to a Personal God**
   - While conservative Christians tend to talk of spirituality in terms of a “personal relationship,” I have found that not all my students relate well to that language. And if their expectation of a felt “relationship” does not materialize, they can easily conclude that God simply does not exist.

   Ellen White offers some helpful advice in this area: “Do not wait to feel that you are made whole,” she declares, “but say, I believe it; it is so, not because I feel it, but because God has promised.”

   C. S. Lewis points in the same direction. In the wonderfully backwards theology of *The Screwtape Letters*, where the chief demon, Screwtape, is teaching his understudy, Wormwood, how to draw the “patient” (a human) away from the “enemy” (God), Screwtape declares:

   “He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”

   But if that picture of a personal yet seemingly absent God is to be convincing, we need to provide our students with biblical examples. Particularly for those who do not “feel” God’s personal
Diversity of experience is not an easy concept for devout conservative Christians to accept. But the illustrations from Scripture and classwork can combine with a key Ellen White quotation to make the point with emphasis.

Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend.9

But the other part of the experiment is also important. After tallying the group responses, I ask each student to give his or her personal preferences. One class, in particular, struck me as interesting. While five of six groups opted for the praise psalm, when I asked for the individual choices, 17 voted for Psalm 34, but Psalm 88 was close on its heels with 14. As I noted to my students, in many churches the praise voices are often so strong that those in despair can easily feel overwhelmed. Yet those are precisely the people that Jesus came to help, the bruised reed that He would not break, the smoking flax that He would not quench.10

Diversity of experience is not an easy concept for devout conservative Christians to accept. But the illustrations from Scripture and classwork can combine with a key Ellen White quotation to make the point with emphasis. In the opening lines of the chapter entitled “In Contact With Others,” in The Ministry of Healing, Ellen White puts it this way: “Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experiences are alike in every particular.”11

2. Increased Sensitivity to the Needs of People

In Matthew 22:35-40, Jesus summarized His Bible in terms of two great commands: love to God and love to people. Everything “hangs” on these two commands, He said. It is striking, however, that when the New Testament boils these two commands down to one, it summarizes them in terms of the second commandment, not the
first. We have it that way from both Jesus and Paul. “In everything,” said Jesus, “do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” Similarly, Paul declared: “The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus deftly brought the two commands together in His parable of the sheep and goats. The sheep serve the incarnate God by helping people. The ultimate decision in judgment turns “upon one point,” wrote Ellen White. “When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and suffering.”

The Adventist understanding of “spirituality” requires not only attending to the soul, but also to the body. And in that connection I am encouraged by the significant numbers of my students who are intrigued and inspired by the work of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). Evangelicals have too often focused rather narrowly on the soul, while so-called mainstream Protestants are much tempted to minister only to the body. I want my students to do both. On that issue, Jesus does not allow us to choose sides.

3. Awareness of the Importance of a Community

In America, at least, individualism is so strong that many of my students do not readily admit the importance of “community.” They tend to focus on their own personal needs and renewal without considering how dependent they might be on others for good spiritual health. It is likely that the popular mantra, “I’m not religious, but I’m very spiritual,” is part of that same picture. Freely interpreted, I suspect those words mark a shift away from a cold Enlightenment rationalism and a rigid orthodoxy toward a more meaningful personal experience.

But the New Testament is clear on the value of community. Not only did Jesus call together a group of twelve, He also taught that the ecclesia (church) would be central to the work He left His followers to do. The procedure for reclaiming a sinner, for example, as outlined in Matthew 18:15-20, calls for the involvement of the community, the “church.”

In the Epistles, community also plays a central role with “body” perhaps being the most dominant model. “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ,” declares Paul, “and individually we are members one of another.”

One of the most striking corporate passages in the Epistles is 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17, which uses the imagery of the “temple.” Unfortunately, the forcefulness of the corporate image is not obvious in most English Bibles since English has no distinct form for the plural you. But the TNIV captures that point nicely: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.”

Addressing the powerful modern impulse to prefer the strictly personal to the communal, Elton Trueblood quotes Robert Fitch, at that time dean of the Pacific School of Religion: “Of course religion ought to be personal, but if it’s nothing but personal, it’s something brand new in history. There never was any purely personal religion, in the whole history of the world, except for a few isolated mystics.”

The power of a community to transform society is well illustrated in the work of William Wilberforce and a group of committed Christians known as the Clapham Circle, a community located just outside London that was active from about 1790 to 1830. Not only did Wilberforce lead the heroic campaign that brought slavery to an end in the British empire, but he and his fellow Claphamites also spearheaded a many-pronged movement...
that sought the “abolition of every lesser social ill,” to quote a line from Eric Metaxas’ biography of Wilberforce. At one point, Wilberforce himself was “officially linked with sixty-nine separate groups dedicated to social reform of one kind or another.”

Trueblood captures the essence of the New Testament teaching when he speaks of “a fellowship of consciously inadequate persons who gather because they are weak, and scatter to serve because their unity with one another and with Christ has made them bold.”

In short, the communal focus must be part of the Adventist vision of spirituality, however unpopular it may be at present in contemporary culture. Community is central to Jesus’ vision of what it means to belong to Him.

Specific Issues

In discussing spiritual growth, I will focus on three specific issues that relate to the three goals noted above. Two of them are authorities in Adventism—the Bible and Ellen White. The third is the Cross, arguably the most powerful of New Testament symbols.

1. The Bible

In the spring of 2010, a special “Sabbath Issue” of The Collegian, the student newspaper at Walla Walla University, reported student perspectives on the “authorities” in their life. I was particularly interested in the response to this survey question: “Which of the following hold some authority in regard to what Sabbath means to you?” Choosing from the accompanying list, the some 330 respondents indicated personal experience (91 percent), family (90 percent), Bible (80 percent), and Ellen White (22 percent). I’ll comment on the Ellen White response in the next section. But first, I want to focus on the Bible’s rating in this survey.

While it is encouraging that students gave relatively high marks to the Bible, my experience over the years suggests that they have difficulty applying biblical teachings to contemporary situations. Surveys I have taken in class repeatedly confirm that about half of my students either consciously or subconsciously hold the view that if God said it, it really should apply to all people at all times and in all places. In short, when we embark on the work of “exegesis,” that is, seeking to interpret passages within their original context, we are already subtly undermining biblical authority for many of our students.

What did Ellen White mean when she wrote: “The Bible was given for practical purposes”? How can we make the Bible useful in our search for God and for spiritual growth? Recently, I have been emphasizing two passages from Scripture to help my students grasp a crucial truth, namely, that the Bible does not automatically apply itself in our lives.

The first passage is Isaiah 55:8 and to claim that based on my own opinion. But Ellen White’s view of the Bible enabled her to say, without diminishing the authority of Scripture one iota:

“The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. . . . The writers of the Bible were God’s pen-men, not His pen. Look at the different writers. It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with

9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

In other words, while the Bible points us to God, it never gives us God Himself. Ellen White suggests the same thing when she declares: “God and heaven alone are infallible.”

And here, on the authority of Ellen White, let me wax bold and say that everything in the Bible points to God even when it does not sound like God to us. And that last point is a crucial one, for given my conservative nature, I never would have been brave enough thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind.”

And that points to a second passage, 1 Corinthians 10:11. In the TNIV it reads: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.”

Examples—that is the crucial word. In context, Paul is showcasing the story of Israel’s apostasy as an “example” from which the believers are to learn. But we can learn from good examples, not just from bad ones. Thus the whole Bible can be seen as a book of examples, a treasure trove that enables us to solve the problem of “contradictions” in its pages. Once we recognize that God is speaking to different people in different times and places and under
different circumstances, the truth begins to dawn that the contradictions are not just irritants to test our faith, but are absolutely essential for effective witnessing. They help us work with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. Here the “example” of Paul shines bright. “I have become all things to all people,” he declared, “so that by all possible means I might save some.”

This helps to see the Bible as a God-given compilation of “examples.” One of the best places to observe this compilation at work is in the Book of Proverbs, where we find a host of “contradictory” examples or illustrations that require a Spirit-guided choice. Proverbs 26:4 and 5 offer one of the best “examples” to make that point for us. Verse 4 declares: “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you yourself will be just like them” (TNIV).

That is good counsel. But then the next verse: “Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” Also good counsel, but just the opposite. Seeing those proverbs side by side should drive us to our knees to prayerfully consider when it’s time to speak up and when to shut up.

Under the heading of “Tactfulness” in Gospel Workers, some remarkable words from Ellen White expound powerfully on this principle as it applies to ministers. She urges them “to study to be skillful when there are no rules to meet the case.”

Discovering the “example” nature of Scripture has transformed my devotional life. Instead of seeing Bible study and prayer as divinely mandated external requirements to keep God happy, I am driven to seek God’s counsel in Scripture and through prayer so that I may know how to live my life in contact with others. And this is not simply petitionary prayer seeking answers. It is something much closer to praying “without ceasing.”

“Purifying prayer” describes that process more fully by identifying its purpose.

I urgently need “purifying prayer” because when I recognize that Scripture provides “examples” or “illustrations,” I am confronted with the reality that I must make choices. And my mind, my reason, is the only part of me that can make such choices. Only my reason can tell me which “examples” to use in writing this article. Even if I were to get a vision, I would still have to use my reason to ascertain whether the “vision” came from God, from the devil, or from eating too many pickles late at night.

But my reason, while essential to the process, is notoriously unreliable; it has been twisted and distorted by sin. So with unceasing prayer I must constantly remind myself that I am doing God’s work, not just my own. I thus become more likely to reflect His will and way. Why just “likely”? Because I am a flawed human being, I need all the help I can get, not only from God, but also from God-fearing human beings. Even then, being human, I still may not get it just right.

In that connection, I am intrigued by some striking words from Ellen White to a brother who was inclined to be too rigorous in his work with others. “You need to educate yourself, that you may have wisdom to deal with minds,” she wrote. “You should with some have compassion, making a difference, while others you may save with fear, pulling them out of the fire [Jude 22-23]. Our heavenly Father frequently leaves us in uncertainty in regard to our efforts.”

In our work for the Lord, we must somehow find a way to be confident—but allow enough uncertainty to allow others to give us wise counsel.

2. Ellen White
One well-known and prolific Adventist author told me that his Ellen White books outsell his books on the Bible by 10 to one. But alongside that high level of interest in Ellen White arises a great angst about the role she has been forced to play in Adventism. The Collegian survey noted above indicated that only 22 percent of the students surveyed granted her any kind of authority at all. We’re not talking about an absolute and final authority, but any authority. How did that happen?

In my view, a key factor is the widespread tendency to impose Ellen White as a final authority on every possible subject. And because we have not done our homework in studying the Bible, the same unevenness that affects our study of the Bible is greatly magnified when we read Ellen White. Very few of my students from Adventist homes have read any of Ellen White’s books, to say nothing of carefully studying what she has written. But they have been told—over and over—what she condemns.

Is there hope? Indeed. Three suggestions:
First, we should view her as an illustrative authority, just as I argued above for Scripture. Not everything Ellen White wrote applies to all people at all times. This is especially evident in the
early volumes of the Testimonies for the Church. Under the heading of “Christian Temperance,” for example, a hard-hitting 1869 sermon on health reform in the Battle Creek Church calls the saints to account. Here is one of the more vivid lines: “I can select family after family of children in this house,” she exclaimed, “every one of whom is as corrupt as hell itself.”

But the very next testimony in volume 2 is entitled “Extremes in Health Reform.” Here she is addressing a curmudgeon of a man who was virtually starving his pregnant wife to death. Mrs. White’s liberalizing counsel is startling, even shocking. The woman should have “a moderate amount of milk and sugar” and “white bread raised with yeast for a change.” “In some cases, even a small amount of the least hurtful meat would do less injury than to suffer strong cravings for it.” Either of these “extreme” counsels could be unhealthful if we apply them as absolutes.

We thus can view Ellen White’s writings as being fully inspired, but not universally applicable. They are full of examples that illustrate how God has dealt with different people in different times and places, but they need to be applied prayerfully, using common sense.

Ellen White once wrote, “Arbitrary words and actions stir up the worst passions of the human heart.” I am convinced that our often arbitrary use of her writings has contributed to the deep antipathy toward her that I see in my students. That needs to change.

My second suggestion is to read Ellen White’s autobiography as found in the first volume of the Testimonies. It covers her life only up to the death of her husband, James, in 1881. But it is a powerful presentation of the “real” Ellen White, one who was often in the depths of despair. “Many times,” she declared, “the wish arose that I had never been born.” And “I coveted death as a release from the responsibilities that were crowding upon me.”

But for all the pain, she remained faithful to her God. Typically, published accounts of Ellen White’s life have removed the pain. The picture has been “retouched.” But experiencing the real Ellen White consistently impresses my students. And the gems in her writings become even brighter against that melancholy backdrop. A few months ago, one of my students wrote these comments in response to a cluster of assignments that dealt with Ellen White: “It almost bothers me how you have collected such powerful, insightful, and balanced quotes from Ellen White. I always am wondering why nobody else seems to notice these things. One particular favorite appeared in this same assignment when she explains what we must agree with: the two Great Commandments. Never until WWU have I read or heard of a helpful Ellen White.”

My third suggestion is simple: Read what Ellen White wrote, especially her five books that focus on Jesus: Steps to Christ (1892), Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing (1896), The Desire of Ages (1898), Christ’s Object Lessons (1900), and The Ministry of Healing (1905). A number of my students have also found Messiah, Jerry Thomas’ contemporary adaptation of The Desire of Ages, to be very helpful. Blessings is his more recent adaptation of Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing. Education (1903) is another jewel.

And here I must report the stunning experience of a colleague who was teaching the university’s sophomore-level class on Christian Beliefs. He required his students to read one of two books. Devout conservatives who might be suspicious of C. S. Lewis were to read Mere Christianity; those with hostile feelings toward Ellen White were to read Steps to Christ. Regardless of the book they chose, in a written response they were to identify the best part of the book and what they would leave out if they were to shorten it.

Most of the 50 students chose Steps to Christ. Across the board, my colleague reported, they were deeply moved. Without exception they identified the chapter, “What to Do With Doubt,” as the most helpful one. It should be “required” reading for every Adventist, they said. Furthermore, they couldn’t find anything they would leave out.

We should not expect such a marvelous testimony in all cases. But I do believe that we can recover our heritage and our students can discover the great blessings that can come from reading Ellen White.

3. The Cross
As the most visible symbol of Jesus’ work on our behalf, the Cross continues to exert a powerful influence. The doctrine of the atonement, however, which seeks to interpret the meaning of the Cross, has proven to be very divisive throughout Christian history. But if we can grasp the idea of diversity in Scripture, the diverse interpretations can be combined to help in nurturing spiritual growth.

I will be tantalizingly brief here because the topic is huge. But I want to capture the essence of the issue because it plays such a crucial role in personal religious experience and in the larger life of the corporate body.

What happened on the Cross? And how is that event to be understood and applied in the life of the believer? Everyone agrees that Christ died for our sins. That’s not the issue. The great divide comes over the question of whether the Cross points heavenward as a sacrifice satisfying the heavenly court (objective atonement) or earthward as a teaching device that shows God’s self-sacrificing love for His chil-
Summary

Three goals: finding a deeper relationship to God, to people, and to community; and three means to help us reach those goals: Scripture, the writings of Ellen White, and the cross of Christ. The goals are the same for all of us, though the intensity of each will vary from person to person. But our greatest diversity will come in our use and understanding of the means for reaching those goals. Some students are not able or willing to read extensively. That will certainly affect their use of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. But even those who do read will gravitate to different passages, to different emphases.

Perhaps the most important lesson is how we relate to Jesus’ death on our behalf. Here the diversity of perspectives in the New Testament should correlate with the diversity of God’s children in our world. Our goals are the same, but the way we reach them will often differ dramatically. If the church can understand that diversity, it can be the home for us all. 69

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
3. Bible texts credited to NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
5. Philippians 4:6, NRSV.
6. Philippians 4:8, TNIV. Bible texts credited to TNIV are from the Holy Bible, Today's New Interna-
tional Version. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
9. Psalm 88:15-18, TNIV.
10. Matthew 12:20, KJV.
11. Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1942 [1905]), p. 483. The second sentence has been slightly modified. The original reads: “There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular.”
12. Matthew 7:12, NRSV.
13. Galatians 5:14, TNIV.
15. Romans 12:5, NRSV. “Body” imagery is well developed in 1 Corinthians 12 and in Ephesians 4:1-16.
16. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, TNIV.
19. Ibid., p. xvii.
23. NRSV.
24. White, Selected Messages, op. cit., Book 1, p. 37 [The Review and Herald, July 26, 1892].
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31. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 360 [1870].
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33. Ibid., vol. 6, p. 134 [1901].
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