

# "In Control" or "BEING CONTROLLED"?

## *Perspectives on Redemptive Discipline*

**BY HEDLEY J. EAGER**

John was guilty. He had started a fight for the fourth time in as many months. Caught in the act, he could not deny it. The teacher took him straight to the principal. John had worked hard to control his temper, but the anger had come so suddenly that he was fighting before he realized it. What would his teachers think? Would he be sent home? He would be in even worse trouble when Mom and Dad heard about what had happened.

After his teacher talked to the principal, John received the verdict. He must pack his bags and leave. He could return next year on good behavior. The faculty and readmission committee would decide whether he would have to repeat the year.

What should be the school's approach for redemptive discipline in John's situation? And how about Bob's case?

Bob, a recent high school graduate, came to college to work for the summer. He received no handbook or orientation regarding the school's rules or expectations. Two weeks after arriving, Bob received a letter saying that he could not leave campus for the rest of the summer and would be on probation for the next semester. What regulation had he broken? He did not know. Instead of finding out, he left.

What do these examples have to do with a teacher being in control or being controlled? What redemptive discipline procedures do they suggest?

### **Understanding Oneself**

In the first example, John had not learned to control his anger. His punishment for fighting had consisted of carrying out an assigned penalty and saying he was sorry. He needed more than that to help him keep from lashing out. To control himself, he had to learn to understand himself.

School discipline codes<sup>1</sup> are usually written as formal systems with consequences of increasing severity. When a school discipline code lists specific consequences that teachers can apply readily, most feel comfortable in letting the code solve their

disciplinary problems. These teachers sense that specific directives and spelled-out consequences help them with classroom management. This helps teachers control student behavior, and this is good. However, more often than not, teachers lose sight of the goal of helping students to learn self-control. Why? Because the power of authority replaces the student decision-making process.

By reacting when the fight breaks out, the teacher responds with his or her authority, but too often that is where it ends.

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When this occurs, the teacher is “being controlled by the situation” rather than “being in control.” But if the teacher responds with authority to stop the fight, and then follows up with professional assistance<sup>2</sup> that helps the student learn how to control his anger, this is a redemptive approach. The teacher is doing more than managing the behavior of the moment. Helping students develop social maturity, responsibility, and self-control should be part of the disciplinary approach. This is redemptive discipline in action. Sending a student home without helping him learn how to handle his own needs is really evading the issue, as well as the responsibility of Christian education.

### **Understanding Expectations**

In the second example above, there was no excuse for this failure in communication by the school administration. Students deserve to be treated with respect. This includes sharing expectations, making sure rules are understood and accepted, and discussing any infringement before inflicting a punishment.

Different students will react differently to correction procedures. Their reactions will be colored by background, personality, and circumstances.

Through experience, teachers and others in authority develop ideas on how to discipline. They read guidelines and ideas of experts in the field of discipline, and then they try to put these ideas into practice. But Adventist teachers have a responsibility to utilize redemptive discipline. We are in the business of helping our students get ready for heaven. This calls for approaches that focus on motives and attitudes.

### **Redemptive Approaches**

What types of discipline are redemptive? Certainly they cannot be equated with weak discipline or permissiveness. They do require teachers to be in control of themselves and their procedures at all times. The goal is to help<sup>3</sup> students learn to control their behavior and prevent the recurrence of a similar mistake. “The human mind must be taught self-control.”<sup>4</sup> Patience is important. Many young people learn to take responsibility for their ac-

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tions only after several months of teacher guidance and support.

If teachers show students respect, personal interest, and love, they will respond in kind. We must take the initiative in building positive relationships with students.<sup>5</sup> If a particular student seems difficult, we must apply all of our resources in relationship building to gain his or her confidence. As we show trust and approval, the student will return the same.

Developing social responsibility in irresponsible students is a process that takes time. A farmer can't produce ripe fruit or vegetables without having spent the time required for preparing the soil, planting, cultivating, and harvesting. Likewise, teachers cannot develop social responsibility in students without spending time with them and helping them understand themselves better. The teacher must provide the kind of trust and support that will help the young person make

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positive decisions for self-control instead of giving way to the negative responses that follow many of the natural drives.

Redemptive discipline utilizes firmness in love. It leads students to shape their own behavior and accept the resulting consequences. We must help students recognize when negative attitudes or social pressures are gaining the upper hand. They need to know how to handle themselves in such situations. Through redemptive disciplinary procedures we can provide support<sup>6</sup> to students when they need it. As they fulfill their personal goals, we must provide encouragement and praise. This will strengthen both their social responsibility and their relationship with us.

### **In Control or Being Controlled?**

It is natural for a teacher or leader to want to be in control. When a student breaks a school rule or behavior code in your presence, what makes you react the way you do? Are you trying to demonstrate that you are the one with the authority and thereby prevent a recurrence? Or do you react because you love the student and want to be redemptive?

Many leaders or teachers feel they must immediately punish wrongdoing<sup>7</sup> on the grounds that swift retribution will teach the student not to misbehave again. When

the punishment is completed, the teacher feels that justice has been meted out. Control has been re-established.

But is the teacher really in control when, despite the punishment, the student later makes it obvious that no reformation has taken place? Is the teacher in control when students continue to do what they have been asked not to do?

A teacher once asked me to visit her classroom to help her understand why she was unable to control her students' behavior.

What did I find? First, some positive aspects. She gave clear expectations. She asked her students not to call out answers or responses to her questions, but to raise their hands and wait to be called upon. I also observed that as the lesson proceeded,

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the students ignored her request and began calling out. She accepted these students' answers and proceeded with the lesson.

Although this teacher had shared her expectations, in practice she ignored them by accepting the opposite behavior. She responded to students who called out answers, and thus allowed chaotic interference with her teaching.

I pointed out the problem to her. The next day she tried my suggestion—accepting answers only from the students who raised their hands and waited for her to recognize their responses. She also let those who called out know that she could not accept their response. As a result, she had a better classroom atmosphere, more respectful students, and a feeling of control.

In another classroom, one student persisted in interrupting the teacher's science presentations. The teacher gave firm and clear behavioral expectations, but the student continued his misbehavior. The teacher immediately sent the student from

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the room. In a few minutes the teacher followed the student into the hallway. For three quarters of an hour the teacher and student argued about who was right. This teacher was being controlled, and was certainly not in control of the situation.

In applying redemptive discipline, teachers must be professional and consistent. They must communicate expectations effectively. But more important, Christian teachers must help students learn to take responsibility for their behavior.

As teachers, we can expect students to learn self-control, a major goal in redemptive discipline, only when we are self-controlled. We must ensure that students experience the natural consequences of their behavior, while providing them with loving support.

**The Perspective of Redemptive Discipline**

Making redemptive discipline practical, acceptable, and understood by students is not always easy. We must apply basic beliefs and communicate certain principles so that our students understand why we interact with them the way we do.

The basic philosophy of Adventist education includes three major doctrines—belief in a creator God, in salvation from sin through Jesus, and in the promise of redemption into the kingdom of glory at the second coming of Jesus. These beliefs are also the driving motive for redemptive discipline. We want our students to become disciples of Jesus and to be saved in the heavenly kingdom.

Consequently, we must guide learners in making redemptive decisions. Such

decisions will establish habits of self-control, respect for others, and a self-respect that will reflect the character of Jesus in the student's life.

A redemptive philosophy includes the principles of unconditional love, the importance of people, respect for others, and loyalty and submission to God's will. These principles deal with relationship building.

Students and teachers share in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Becoming Christlike does not just happen. The Holy Spirit gives power to make successful decisions in achieving the goal of becoming like Christ. With a life of greater experience, teachers can be examples of Jesus to their students and thus help them to practice positive decision-making.

Adventist philosophy accepts the Ten Commandments as presenting universal values for Christian living. As teachers, it is our personal challenge to lead our students to embrace Christian values for themselves.

Within this philosophical framework teachers can develop a set of guidelines to help students learn self-control and become socially and morally responsible. Discipline will be ineffective if it is seen as a procedure for correcting students' bad behavior or handing out punishment, hoping that this will correct all ills. Instead, discipline is the procedure of *making disciples*. To be successful it must focus on the goal of helping students become responsible citizens.

As Adventist teachers we have a responsibility to spend time helping our students to achieve self-understanding. They need time to understand our expectations and to put them in perspective with the philosophy of both the school and the Adventist Church. We must help students identify and develop their personal values. This procedure involves correcting students "gently" as Paul directed. "Brother, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."<sup>8</sup> This does not mean preaching at students. Our example is the best "preaching" that we can give.

If we teach kindness and example, then students will be more likely to accept

## *Redemptive discipline utilizes firmness in love.*

our help. We will then be able to lead them to formulate Christian values and principles to live by. Through discussion and guidance they will be able to understand the inner drives that carry them into trouble. Personal one-on-one interaction in a non-threatening atmosphere is essential for redemptive discipline approaches to be effective.

Ellen White clearly explains the folly of using demanding and exacting methods of control. "When the system which has held them to set rules is broken up, they [students] seem to be incapable of thinking, acting, or deciding for themselves."<sup>9</sup>

Only through open discussion in a warm, accepting, unthreatening atmosphere can we help students see the benefits and potential dangers of different options. Then we can be firm about the realistic expectations or rules that they have helped us formulate. Through these means young people can be led to develop strong characters.

On the other hand, when students are overpowered by adult demands and have no opportunity to reason out the best choice for themselves, this leaves no opportunity for independent thought and decision making. Ellen White says these young people "will ever be deficient in mental energy and individual responsibility."<sup>10</sup> They will be influenced by every whim or fancy.

When a student makes a mistake, ask him what he is going to do to fix it and prevent it from happening again. In this way the student is helped to assume responsibility for his actions. When the student is led to think and decide as a part of the correction, redemptive processes are at work.

### **Summary**

As we seek to apply redemptive discipline, we must clearly state our expectations and make sure we honor these expectations. We must help students understand them-

selves and their inner drives, and teach them to relate these drives to the events in their lives. We must help them learn to face temptation with the help of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We must assure them that we are their friends, ready at any time to give them support and help them through their difficulties. While they must learn to control their own behavior, we will be there to give the kind of support that helps them bear the consequences of their error. We won't leave them to themselves. We will stand by them as they come to grips with the adjustment and change that is necessary to be victorious in Christ.

What a tremendous privilege we have to practice redemptive disciplinary opportunities with our students! We can be "in control" if we plan redemptive opportunities to interact and build relationships with students. By so doing, we can nurture their growth toward Christlikeness. ✍

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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