

The Church *and* Education



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 10:30–37, Matt. 5:14–16, Luke 4:18–23, Jer. 29:13, Matt. 7:7, 1 Thess. 2:6–8.*

Memory Text: “Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us” (*1 Thessalonians 2:6–8, NKJV*).

Since the earliest times in which the faithful have gathered to worship God—in synagogues, homes, and churches—the Bible reveals people who, through their study of the Scriptures and through their worship, long to know God and to understand His will for their lives. The Bible also repeatedly reveals that the church is a place where serious and relevant discussions should take place and where people can grow in their knowledge of God and His will for their lives.

Sometimes we are afraid of asking questions. However, in the Bible we often find that questions are used to bring people to a clearer understanding of God. In a similar manner, stories are used throughout the Bible to create opportunities for people to rethink their commitments. Jesus was particularly focused on this type of education with His disciples and followers.

If the church is to be a place of education, it must provide the space for genuine dialogue to occur. Just as we were repeatedly told as students in school, “There is no dumb question,” we must provide within the church a safe environment for each person to grow in grace and in understanding of God and His plan for their lives.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 28.

True Christian Education

The story is told of a rabbi who looking into the sleepy eyes of the young men who sat in his classroom, asked: “Students, when does one know when the night is ended and the day has begun?”

Several of the students cautiously raised their hands. “Rabbi,” one asked, “is it when you can tell the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree?”

“No.”

Another student raised his hand: “Rabbi, is it when you can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat?”

After listening to a host of answers, the rabbi announced, “Students, one knows the night has ended and the day has begun when you can look at a face never before seen and recognize the stranger as a brother or sister. Until that moment, no matter how bright the day, it is still the night.”

Read Luke 10:30–37. What was the point that Jesus was making with this story? And what should this tell us about what must be part of any true Christian education?

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have been blessed with an abundance of doctrinal light and truth (the state of the dead, the Sabbath, 1844 and the judgment, the great controversy, to name a few teachings) that even most of the Christian world still doesn’t understand. And yet, however crucial these truths are, what good do they do us if we are not kind to people, if we display prejudice against others, and if we allow the cultural and social biases of our environment to cause us to treat others as inferiors?

True Christian education, if nothing else, must cause us to rise above these human foibles and evils and see others as Christ sees them, beings for whom He died, beings whose sins He bore on the cross, beings for whom He paid an infinite price. If we uplift the cross, as we must, then we will see the value and worth of every human being and, ideally, treat them as they truly deserve, in keeping with the value that God has placed on them. Christian education must include this teaching or else it is not worthy of the name “Christian.”

What prejudices does your culture and society teach, either subtly or even openly, that, as a Christian, you must rise above?

Called to Live as Light

Everywhere we look, it seems as though our planet is turning in upon itself, exchanging light for darkness. Yet, we also encounter darkness much closer to home as we consider our own experience in this difficult and challenging world. For we, too, understand the horrors that this life brings us as we struggle with illness, as we deal with the loss of loved ones, as we watch families succumb to separation and divorce, as we struggle to make sense of many of the evil things in our society and culture.

Yet, amid this landscape of moral bankruptcy and spiritual darkness, in the midst of all this external and internal noise, we hear Jesus' words to each of us:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (*Matt. 5:14–16, NIV*).

What do these verses teach us about how we are to live and how, as Christians, what we do impacts how others see God?

Sitting by the Sea of Galilee that day under the hot sun, how would Jesus' audience have understood His words? Those who heard His words knew all about light and darkness. Certainly they had much darkness to fear. They lived under Roman occupation, in a militarized society that despite their lack of telephones and computers and the World Wide Web, in many ways was as efficient as our own, and in some ways even more terrifying.

The Romans were everywhere, reminding the masses on the hillside that those who insisted on making trouble quickly would find their way to the torturers—and to a naked death on a Roman cross.

And yet, here was Jesus, calling them to live as light. To be merciful. To be pure in heart. To be makers of peace. Christian education must, then, include teaching our students to be lights in the world, to be able to make choices and decisions that will reveal the reality and goodness of God to others.

What are ways that we can, indeed, point others to the reality and goodness of God?

Living as Disciples

If the church is serious about being a force for Christian education, it is imperative that we begin with Jesus. Jesus called disciples. He trained them to do mission by walking with them. Jesus provided opportunity for them to be involved in the lives of people whom they were to care for and to love. And daily Jesus challenged them by His vision of what this world could be when people begin to treat each other as brothers and sisters.

Read Luke 4:18–23. What is Christ’s message to all of us, as His followers?

For three years the disciples watched as Jesus, their Teacher, lived out the ideals of the kingdom—ideals announced in His first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth. Forgiveness, grace, and love walked hand in hand with loneliness, commitment, and hardship. If there was a lesson to be learned, it was the lesson that discipleship is not something one takes lightly. You are a disciple for life—not just for one day.

“The Saviour’s commission to the disciples . . . includes all believers to the end of time. . . . All to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in trust with the gospel. All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men. For this work the church was established, and all who take upon themselves its sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 822.

As disciples of Jesus, we today must make certain that Jesus is always the center of both our fellowship and our worship. It is good to remember that it was Jesus who invented discipleship. Though the rabbis of His day attracted followers, it was Jesus who called men and women to follow Him. The rabbis could never have imagined a call so radical as to suggest that being with Jesus was more important than all of their commandments.

And, as disciples of Jesus, we not only have respect for all people but will work to provide the kind of place where all people can grow and develop.

Hence, all Christian education must include this sense of mission, of purpose, not just to earn a living but to do in our own sphere what Jesus calls us to do: to follow in His footsteps of ministering to those in need and to share with them the good news of the gospel.

Seeking Truth

Albert Einstein, often regarded as the father of modern physics, wrote: “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

We do live in a world of mystery, don’t we? Modern science has shown us an incredible complexity that exists at pretty much every level of existence. And if it’s like that for mere physical things, how much more so for spiritual things?

What do the following texts teach about the search for truth, for answers? *Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:7; Acts 17:26, 27; Ps. 25:5; John 16:13; 17:17.*

The Bible is full of stories of curious people very much like each of us—men and women who have questions, fears, hopes, and joys, people who, in their own way, are seeking truth, seeking answers to life’s most difficult questions.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (*Eccles. 3:11, NKJV*). What does Solomon mean here? Some translate the Hebrew word *‘olam* as “eternity” and others as a “sense of the past and the future.” So then, according to this verse, God has placed in the human heart and mind a sense of the past and the future, eternity itself. That is, as human beings, we are able to think about what has been called “the big questions” about life and our existence in general.

And, of course, here is where Scripture plays the central role. Who are we? Why are we here? How should we live? What happens when we die? Why is there evil and suffering? These are the questions that seekers of truth have been asking since the beginning of recorded history. What a privilege, and what a responsibility, to be able to help point these seekers toward some answers now. What is Christian education if not pointing people to these answers, as found in the Word of God?

Why must the Scriptures play the major role in answering the big questions in life?

Sharing Our Lives

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:6–8. What is Paul saying here that we could and should reflect in our schools and churches?

Confronted by the breakdown of community in society, we live in an age in which the biblical understanding of the church has never been more meaningful. As Matthew 18:20 reminds us: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” The New Testament vision of what church and community is took shape primarily in the homes of believers. It was here that the community met in small groups, praying, singing, celebrating the Lord’s Supper, learning and sharing Jesus’ words with each other.

These worshiping groups also became the first church schools, as this was the place in which new members were introduced to the Bible and to this new life that was found in Jesus. Paul’s writings, such as Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (*NIV*), suggests that the church took this work of education most seriously.

These early believers soon discovered that it is in community that the gospel can best be lived out. In community, we have reason to sing louder, to pray more fervently, and to be more caring and compassionate. When we hear others speak of God’s goodness, we sense how good He has been to us; when we hear of one another’s struggles and hurts, we sense God’s healing in our own lives, and we experience a renewed desire to be instruments of His grace and healing.

In today’s passage, Paul is asserting that the gospel of God is everything: the power of the Cross, the resurrection of the Lord, the promise of His return. There was simply no better news in all of the world, and Paul spent his life abandoned to the challenge of first and foremost sharing the story of Jesus with the greatest integrity and commitment.

Yet, here Paul suggests that the message of the gospel can best be understood, can best be experienced, through the act of sharing life together. We must never forget that people are closely watching to see if our lives illustrate the message of grace that is found in the Bible.

Think hard about how you live, and ask yourself: What kind of witness am I to those around me?

Further Thought: “Christ disappointed the hope of worldly greatness. In the Sermon on the Mount He sought to undo the work that had been wrought by false education, and to give His hearers a right conception of His kingdom and of His own character. Yet He did not make a direct attack on the errors of the people. He saw the misery of the world on account of sin, yet He did not present before them a vivid delineation of their wretchedness. He taught them of something infinitely better than they had known. Without combating their ideas of the kingdom of God, He told them the conditions of entrance therein, leaving them to draw their own conclusions as to its nature. The truths He taught are no less important to us than to the multitude that followed Him. We no less than they need to learn the foundation principles of the kingdom of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 299.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1850. Stevenson recounts how one night, as his nanny was getting him ready for bed, he slipped over to the window and saw a captivating sight. It was a lamplighter, going from one gas lamp to the next. With childish delight, he called his nanny over to him and said, “Look at that man! He’s punching holes in the darkness!” What role has God given you in bringing light and love to your community? If you are not sure, invite several church members to sit with you and discuss what you might accomplish together.
- 2 If the church is to partner with God in reaching out to the world, we must embrace Jesus’ words and ministry. The very reality of the Incarnation—of God coming to us, to live in our world, to struggle and to laugh and to cry with us—reminds us that we are called to care for those around us. How will you do this? How might you employ the young people in your congregation to help with this work?
- 3 Think about the responsibility that we as Seventh-day Adventists have to teach others the wonderful truths that we have been given. How can and should the local church play a key role in teaching these truths to others? At the same time, how can the church be a safe place to discuss these truths with those who are asking hard questions about them? What can you do to create an environment in which serious questions can be addressed?
- 4 In class, talk about the cultural biases of the society where you live. What are ways your church can teach others to rise above those biases and follow, instead, the teachings of the Scriptures?

Internship Crisis in France

By ANDREW MCCHESEY

Elisabeth Birba was dismissed without explanation only a week into an eight-week hospital internship in France. She was devastated. She needed the internship to pass second-year exams. If she failed, she would lose her stipend for food and housing. Her family lived far away in the West Indies.

Elisabeth fell to the ground and wept. As she cried, she felt impressed to call a friend. Three times she sensed that God was telling her to make the call.

Finally she called. "I lost my internship," she said.

The friend was surprised. "Do you believe in God?" she asked.

When Elisabeth confirmed that she did, the friend gave her the phone number for another hospital. "Call this number if you believe in God," she said.

Elisabeth knew it would be difficult to obtain a second internship on such short notice. She wondered what to do. Then she remembered that she had an emergency phone number. Before leaving for France, she had received the number from a Seventh-day Adventist woman in the West Indies. "If you ever have trouble in France, call my sister Vivian," the woman said.

Elisabeth had accepted the emergency number out of politeness. But now she was so distressed that she called Vivian and told her about the internship.

"Only God can help you," Vivian said. "The only thing we can do is pray."

She asked whether Elisabeth had a Bible. It was covered with dust, but she had one. "You are going to memorize Psalm 91," Vivian said. "Make that psalm yours. When you repeat it, remember it is about you."

Elisabeth wept as she read Psalm 91. Her tears left wrinkles on the page.

Then she called the hospital to inquire about a last-minute internship.

"Call back in three days for our decision," a woman told her.

She prayed and fasted for three days. She cried. She memorized Psalm 91.

On the third day, the woman offered Elisabeth an internship. "You're lucky," she said. "The boss didn't want you but changed his mind at the last minute."

Emotion overwhelmed Elisabeth. That night she could not sleep. She realized that God had given her the internship. At 4:00 A.M. she called Vivian.

"Is something wrong?" Vivian asked.

"Don't worry," Elisabeth said. "Please take me to the Adventist church."

Elisabeth went on to be baptized and to receive a master's degree in France.

"If I had not surrendered to God the day that I called the emergency number, my education would have ended," said Elisabeth, 27. "God can do anything. With Jesus I have succeeded."



Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help people in France and around the world learn about Jesus.

Part I: Overview

This lesson begins where all education should: with the value of the student in the light of the Cross. The education coming from the church and its departments must penetrate and rise above any cultural trends that are antagonistic to the kingdom of God.

And yet, we live in a web of competing worldviews and cultural currents that are continually bombarding children and adults alike. This clash causes many truth seekers, young and old, to doubt and raise questions. Yet, our local churches should provide opportunity for these questions to be fielded. Whether the church speaks to the confusion, moral darkness, or gnawing despair of the world, if our answers bear the truth we have learned from Jesus, then we will be fulfilling Jesus' commission to be salt and light in this world (*Matt. 5:13–16*).

After we are done thinking of all these glorious aspirations to spread the truth of God around the planet, it is important to remember the simple things that can make or break our mission.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration and a Proverb

Saying the word *church* can conjure up radically different things in different people's minds. To illustrate this idea, think back to your school days. Do memories of arithmetic, geography, and science flood your head? Probably not; this is ironic, because that is why we were sent to school in the first place. What probably fill our minds are the pictures of friends, enemies, teachers, and the variegated experiences we had with them all.

Church is much like that. Ideally, it is intended to be a place of worship, of listening to and accepting the gospel, studying the Scriptures, organizing our efforts to win souls, and fellowshiping together as brothers and sisters in the family of God. For many, though, it becomes the locus of hurt feelings, petty doctrinal debates, and gossip. The social side of church often overshadows all the other functions that church is supposed to fulfill. Many just stop coming because the complex and hurtful social dynamics (sometimes with only one or two people) make it virtually impossible to worship and enjoy the presence of God undistracted. So, what is the solution?

There are many different approaches that we could take to answer this question, and, of course, the number of books written on "how to do

church” are legion. The lesson, however, brings out a very simple idea that is worth its proverbial weight in gold if carried out. The idea basically is this: *Of what value or effect is all the doctrinal light we possess as a church if we haven’t learned how to be kind to one another?* This is a prerequisite for church really to function as church. It echoes the Indian proverb that says, “There is no point in giving a man a rose to smell after you’ve cut off his nose.” Jesus is the sweetest-smelling flower there is, but if our unkindness toward others has hurt them (cut off their noses), it will be very difficult for them to appreciate the Jesus we want to share with them. The lesson uses the parable of the good Samaritan (*Luke 10:30–37*) to highlight this principle of kindness, which is requisite and elemental to Christian education. Another story, offered below, underlines this idea from a different vantage point.

Scripture

Let’s look at the story of the woman “possessed with a spirit of divination” (*Acts 16:16*). Does she spew out a litany of curses and lies? Her message is, “These men [Paul and Silas] are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation” (*Acts 16:17*). Paul finally had enough and cast out the evil spirit. But why stop her if she is endorsing the evangelists and their message? Here’s why: *Because the right message with the wrong spirit helps the cause of Satan rather than the cause of God.* This is why being kind and gracious to one another at church is more than just banal advice. People often accept or reject the truths of a church’s message based on how they are treated by the members. Of course, we like to think that these members became Seventh-day Adventists because of the impeccable logic of our theology, but the fact is, if someone hadn’t invited them over to lunch after church, they could have just walked out the church doors and never come back.

Someone might protest and say, “What about the Holy Spirit’s role in conversion and member retention? Doesn’t the direction of this discussion de-emphasize the Spirit’s role?” The Spirit is readily identified with gifts such as prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, and teaching (*1 Cor. 12:8–10, 1 Cor. 12:28*)—elements for good Adventist education. These works-oriented endowments are so important within the church, but their influence can become mitigated without the Spirit’s relational gifts, such as helping one another (*1 Cor. 12:28*), serving one another (*Rom. 12:7*), showing mercy and encouraging one another (*Rom. 12:8*), along with the full bevy of the Spirit’s fruits: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (*Gal. 5:22, 23*). Finally, Paul wraps up both lists of spiritual gifts (*Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12*) with a more “excellent way,” the way of love (*1 Cor. 12:31–13:1*). Paul elaborates in *Romans 12:10*, encouraging us to “*Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another*” (*emphasis added*).

To love one another is such a common refrain in Christian circles that at times our demonstration of this principle runs the risk of becoming stale or perfunctory, with members going through the motions of outwardly showing love that does not extend beyond the Sabbath service. But can we really be *showing* love if kindness is not being shown at the same time? For the church to be a place of learning and growing will not only take competent, Spirit-filled pastors and teachers, but it also will take the kindness and love of Spirit-filled members.

A Statistic

A certain statistic derived from the Gospels and Acts has the potential to radically change the way we see ourselves in relationship to Christ. That change in relationship also is relevant to the topic of education. First, some definitions: look up the noun *Christian* in any dictionary, and the first definition will be something like, “a person who believes in Jesus and/or His teachings.” The word *Christian* serves to show religious affiliation. Acts tells us that Christ’s followers were first called Christians in Antioch (*Acts 11:26*), and this appellation most likely wasn’t a self-designation.

The number of occurrences of the word *Christian* in the Bible is three (*Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28, 1 Pet. 4:16*).

But today that title is virtually the exclusive and universal term to designate an adherent to Christianity. So, what were the “Christians” called back then before the Antiochian designation? The following statistic answers the question and provides the contrast with the first statistic: The number of occurrences of the word *disciple* in the Bible is 256.

When one self-designates as a Christian, it usually evokes the idea that we adhere to a set of beliefs. But what if we self-designated as disciples? Disciples are students, hands-on learners, and apprentices. Of course, they believe what they were taught, but they are more than believers; they learn the skills of their master so as to repeat them. They make life careers of the same craft that their masters were involved in. And when the master dies, his disciples are the closest thing to an advertisement for the ideals and practices to which their master devoted his life.

Just as most of what we know about Socrates is through his star pupil, Plato, the world has the right to draw conclusions about Jesus through beholding the life of His star disciples: you and me. Also, it is a mistake to think that the term *disciple* (in Greek *mathetes*: learner, pupil) is reserved for the original Twelve. When Luke wrote of the mass conversions in his sequel to his Gospel, he spoke of the increasing number of “disciples” (*Acts 6:1, Acts 6:7*). Ananias, Tabitha, and Timothy are all called disciples (*Acts 9:10, Acts 9:36, Acts 16:1*). Referring to all these “Christians” as disciples is simply an acknowledgment of their

obedience to their Rabbi, who commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (*Matt. 28:19, ESV*).

Part III: Life Application

The church has been called a hospital for the spiritually hurting. This is a much more common metaphor than the one that calls the church a university for those perishing in ignorance and spiritual darkness, a university in which we are all called to enroll as lifelong scholars-in-residence, learning from Jesus of Nazareth, the Master Teacher. But the two metaphors, hospital and university, really need to be yoked together in order to give us the fullest understanding of the word *church*. That is, our spiritual healing should be coupled with a religious education that trains us to be disciples.

Discussion:

- 1. We have our devotional lives, we have Sabbath Schools, and we have the sermon hour. If we are honest, though, as the years pass by, it seems that everything starts to repeat, and the thrill we had at the beginning of our Adventist experience begins to wane over time. What are ways we can augment our personal Christian education or breathe new life into our normal church learning routine?**

- 2. When we go to a new church, the first thing we notice is not how good the sermon was or how the potluck tasted. We notice the temperature of the church: Was it a cold church or were people friendly? The tricky part is, if it is my church, I may be having a**

great time with my half dozen friends as we fellowship, study, and laugh together. The church is hot, right? For me, yes, but not for the visitor or the loner who is looking at all this tight-knit camaraderie and feeling like an outsider. Church members need to take a moment to assess their surroundings and seek out those who are withering on the outskirts. What are some strategies that safeguard people against feeling left out of God's family?

Notes
