

SHARING CHRIST IN OUR CLASSROOMS: LESSONS FROM TEACHING RELIGION AT LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

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The Context

Teaching religion at Loma Linda University is both challenging and exciting. On one hand, it is challenging since religion is *not* the main concentration for most of my students. They have joined Loma Linda to become medical professionals such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health related specialists. Each student, nevertheless, is *required* to take one religious class per year. Loma Linda University is part of the Seventh-day Adventist educational system which emphasizes the “wholeness” in its educational curriculum—in other words, education must involve the development of the whole person. Students are encouraged not only to develop their academic skills, but also their emotional and spiritual capacities.

But to ask medical professionals to take “religious classes” amidst their heavy and burdensome academic schedule is challenging. I have found that many of my students (at least initially) wonder why they must take such a class. Maybe their reaction would be different if they knew that in the early 1900s the first medical students at the College of Medical Evangelists (what later became the Loma Linda University) were required to take mostly religious classes and very few medically specialized courses. That being said—the challenge remains real.

On the other hand, teaching religion at Loma Linda University can be an exciting adventure since the classroom is a mixture of students from various religious traditions—Catholic and Protestant Christians, Mormons, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, to mention a few.ⁱ Even students that are Seventh-day Adventists differ in their commitment and understanding of their own denomination. To complicate things, it is not unusual that few students will be atheists or agnostics.

Since my narrow specialty is Adventist studies, my classes have been related to Adventist history and its health traditions. So the question is: How do you introduce such topics to such a vastly diverse group of students with no particular interest in religion or Adventism? Could it be that our classrooms have become a “mission field”? Or as Dr. Richard Hart, the president of Loma Linda University, has recently asked: “Has the time come when we should openly invite students of other faiths to join our campuses as we look to share our message and strengthen our academic offerings?”ⁱⁱ

i As Jared Wright has reported recently, recruiting non-Adventist students is already “the norm” in Adventist Higher Education outside of North America. The data also makes clear that Adventist Colleges and Universities in North America have begun to go into the same direction. Instead of being “centers” of learning primarily for Adventists, our campuses are increasingly joined by students of other faith traditions. See: Jared Wright, “Recruiting Non-Adventist students Already the Norm in Adventist Higher Education,” *Spectrum*, Apr. 26, 2017. <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2017/04/26/recruiting-non-adventist-students-already-norm-adventist-higher-education>.

ii Richard Hart, “Being Distinctive or Being Inclusive?,” *Newsletter*, April 6, 2017.

Now, let me be clear: I do not believe that the classroom is a place for proselytizing. My job is *not* to make my students Seventh-day Adventists. However, I do think that it is my obligation to share and present Adventism and make students aware of my faith tradition in the best possible way. After all, I have personally decided to be a Seventh-day Adventist and my students have the right to know why I have made this choice and commitment.

So the question is—how are we to share the Adventist story in the classroom? And can it be relevant to this new generation of youth in the 21st Century? In the next section I will give three perspectives (approaches) that I have found helpful as I have taught Adventist heritage of health at Loma Linda University. Then I will conclude with some general observations of how these perspectives can be used in doing youth evangelism today.

Sharing Adventism in the Classroom

Since I am teaching mostly classes related to Adventist history on health, my experience has taught me to use three major approaches in order to make “religion” classes interesting, informative and exciting.

First, I have begun a “new-old” technique of teaching Adventist history through the means of “stories.” There are several benefits of teaching through stories. First, it makes learning “enjoyable.” Second, it puts the academic information within its proper context. And third, it helps students to learn and retain information much more effectively and efficiently. As John Walsh has pointed out, the majority of our audiences today “think in stories, they remember stories, and they will listen if you tell stories.”ⁱⁱⁱ Melanie C. Green, whose research examined the impact of narratives on individual beliefs also writes that “the power of stories has been recognized for centuries, and even today, in Hollywood and beyond, storytelling is a multi-million dollar business. Stories are a natural mode of thinking; before our formal education begins, we are already learning from Aesop’s fables, fairy tales, or family history. Indeed, some researchers have even claimed that all knowledge comes in the form of stories...Although this strong claim has been questioned, it is generally agreed that stories are a powerful structure for organizing and transmitting information, and for creating meaning in our lives and environments.”^{iv}

In my particular context of teaching the Adventist heritage of health, I have observed that using this method helps student to understand both – the development of the Adventist thinking on the subject of health and to appreciate the Adventist contribution to health and healthful living. What is fascinating, however, is that through the Adventist story I am able to share significant issues that relate to morality, ethics, social justice, culture, etc. Ultimately, I am able to share the “supernatural story” of God and guide students to realize (or at least become aware) of their spiritual needs. As noted above, this is a unique part of the Adventist educational tradition. The use of stories, therefore, is a useful tool for such educational purposes.

A second perspective that I have found helpful when sharing Adventism in the classroom has to do with the concept of “being real.” I not only tell the Adventist story, but I share the “true story” of my church. Seventh-day Adventists have

iii John Walsh, *The Art of Story Telling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 21.

iv Melanie C. Green, “Storytelling in Teaching,” *Observer*, Apr. 2004. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/issue/april-04>.

often had the tendency to idealize their movement. (To be fair to my own faith tradition, such tendencies are tempting for any religious group or organization). Take for example one of the main founders and visionary leaders of the Adventist denomination: Ellen G. White. Possibly because of her prophetic status, her image has often been *mis*-represented. Perhaps, we—as Seventh-day Adventists—have unintentionally created this “unreal” and “unrealistic” holy persona that nobody can relate to. Consequently, two extreme attitudes toward Ellen White have developed over the years: those who reject her and claim she is no longer relevant and those who magnify her beyond her prophetic significance. Both extremes are particularly damaging to Adventism and its mission.

Sharing the Adventist story is important, but sharing the *true story* of Adventism is by far more important and essential in explaining our heritage to the world. One example that I often give to my students is the marriage relationship between Ellen White and her husband James White. While it seems that they truly loved each other, like all families—they also had their marital struggles. In 1876, for instance, James was in the East doing evangelism while Ellen stayed in the West. Judging from some letters that Ellen White wrote to her friend, Lucinda Hall, we know that the Whites went through some major disagreements. In fact, Ellen and James White were contemplating living and working “apart” from each other (at least for a while) since they could not stand each other’s company. The tone in the letters was anything but Christian. It took several correspondences until Ellen White realized that she needed to apologize to her husband and ask for forgiveness. She also asked Lucinda, her friend, to burn her letters as she felt embarrassed that she had written them.^v

The point being is that giving the “true story,” helps students to relate to the Adventist story and consequently to apply and relate it to their own story. After all, the candid reality of Adventist history reveals the principle that God is more than willing to work with imperfect, struggling people who desperately need Him and His amazing grace. This is the “good news” that we find in the Scriptures. In fact, this must be “the core” of any evangelism that we attempt to do. The story of Adventism is not a perfect story, but that is precisely why it can, if presented accurately, be attractive and appealing to students and people in general.

My third perspective relates to the above point. I challenge my students to “try” and “experience” God personally before making any judgment about the importance of spirituality in their own lives. My logic is simple: You cannot evaluate a “chocolate” before you taste it. From an Adventist context such a challenge is logical. Writing on the topic of education in the 1900’s Ellen White noted that its primary aim was (and still is) to bring students into a personal relationship with God. Within the context of the Great Controversy story she penned: “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one. . . . To aid the student in comprehending these principles, and in entering into that relation with Christ which will make them a controlling power in the life, should be the teacher’s first effort and his constant aim. The teacher who accepts this aim is in truth a co-worker with Christ, a laborer together with God.”^{vi}

Beyond that, she saw the ultimate revelation of true education in *service* for the good of humanity. “Our ideas of education,” she wrote, “take too narrow and

v I am personally glad that Lucinda Hall did not burn the letters. See: Ellen White’s letters to Lucinda Hall, May 10, May 12, May 16, May 17, 1876, Heritage Research Center, Loma Linda University, CA.

vi Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 30.

too low a range... True education means more than pursuing a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It *prepares the student for the joy of service in this world*, and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”^{vii}

In line with that, I ask all of my students to read the book *Ministry of Healing*. For one, it was written to help Loma Linda and the Adventist medical education financially. The book curiously, was published in 1905 – the same year when the Loma Linda Sanitarium was purchased. And two, the book explains the general Adventist philosophy of health and its relation to mission. Surprisingly (or maybe not so surprisingly) this book has had a huge impact on many of the students as they read and study the Adventist story of health and healthful living. So, let me share with you some of their responses before we make some concluding remarks on how one can apply the above principles to youth evangelism today.

At the end of my classes, I ask students to respond to a question on how knowing the Adventist story of health may impact their future practice of medicine and/or their personal life.^{viii} One student, a Christian, wrote:

Before entering Loma Linda University, I knew very little about Seventh-day Adventists, their mission, and their works. Since entering this school, interacting with SDA classmates, and of course, after having taken this class on SDA history, I have come to greatly appreciate the SDA mission and to understand the meaning of “To Make Man Whole.” I absolutely love the wholistic approach to healing – mind, body, and spirit. As Ellen White emphasized in her book, *The Ministry of Healing*, the three are interconnected and to be sick in one area will affect all others as well... This course has been very enjoyable for the background of why LLU has its motto: “To Make Man Whole”... and why our very education is structured the way it is. This course has made me even more appreciative to be receiving my education here.

Another student, not particularly religious, noted:

I came into this class very skeptical of a religious class, for I don’t consider myself of a particular religion... As the class progressed through the weeks and I began to understand the SDA philosophy I found myself agreeing more and more [with it]. I believe this class has strengthened my relationship with God immensely. Especially from reading *The Ministry of Healing*—the concept of prayer became more clear to me as a personal connection with God... I intend to bring prayer in my [future] medical practice.

Here is a short excerpt from a non-Christian student:

Coming into this class, I had no idea what to expect or how to relate it to my future occupation. Was it going to be a boring history class that enumerates dates after dates in a chronological order? I was dreading that. However, halfway through the class, I started to get interested

vii Ibid., 13. (Emphasis supplied).

viii These responses comes from an essay that I ask students to write as part of their final exam. I have kept the original writings as the students had expressed themselves.

and started to realize that all these [health] principles are applicable to me and my future occupation. Subjects like a balanced life and wholeness are absolutely essential in PT. As a physical therapist, I try to think of preventive care versus immediate symptom treatment. This absolutely overlaps with the principles that Seventh-day Adventists follow... Knowledge of how to live a balanced life will benefit me and my patients in the long run.

And here is a writing from a Seventh-day Adventist student:

This class has given me a more wholesome view of Adventist practices, the reasons behind them, and the health message. I was actually born into the Adventist church, but didn't grow up going to Adventist schools. Though my parents and church taught me about God and the Bible, I must confess I didn't know much of the background of my own church... This course has helped me reflect on my beliefs and look into the reasoning behind why I have always lived a certain way. Many times, growing up, Seventh-day Adventist beliefs just seemed like silly rules—not being able to go to a friends' birthday party on a Friday night or eat a pepperoni pizza.

After much reading and pondering on Ellen G. White's writings (which I hadn't done much of before), I realized that there is a reason to it... It is about choosing to live a better life; to be able to hold an even better relationship with Christ; and be more able to do God's work.

I think many of the things will be of value to me because I do want to live a life to serve God, and this class has not only helped me learn how I can do that but has also encouraged me to do so.

Conclusions: Perspectives on Youth Evangelism

There are several conclusions that can be drawn as a result of the experiences I have had with my students that could be useful for reaching the youth of today. These principles can be applied in various context, such as church, home, or schools. First, teaching the Adventist story may help young people with their sense of “identity.” Knowing who you are gives one a sense of belonging, a sense of being a part of a community – something bigger than your individual self. Richard Rice is right when he notes that “community is the most important element of Christian existence. Believing, behaving, and belonging are all essential to the Christian life, but belonging is more important, more fundamental than the others.”^{ix} In fact, the first church of Christians grew rapidly because believers belonged to a community that cared for one another (See: Acts 2:46; Acts 4:32; Gal. 6:10).

Second, the Adventist story could be used as a tool for teaching Biblical beliefs and practices. For instance, the Adventist story is fascinating because it attempts to resemble the two major concerns of Jesus – the “future” and the “now.” On the one hand, Jesus taught people about the “kingdom of God” that was coming—the “future.” On the other hand, however, He was constantly concerned with people and their present needs—the “now.” Ellen White points out that “Jesus devoted more time to healing the sick than to preaching.”^x

ix Ricard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), 6.

x Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1942), 19.

In a similar way—Adventism has the same two concerns. The Second Coming of Jesus is a major Adventist belief. Its significance is underlined in the fact that it is even a part of our very name. The concept of the coming of Jesus is especially comforting since it gives hope and meaning to a world that endures suffering, injustice and fear because of sin and its consequences. However, Adventists are also concerned with life here and now. It is no accident, I think, that our church has the largest Protestant health and educational systems in the world. Adventist missionaries are literally serving humanity in all parts of the world. This is a crucial component of Adventist “mission and evangelism.” Knowing the Adventist story, then, is essential for one’s identity and mission.^{xi}

Third, successful youth evangelism involves being “authentic” or “real.” Authenticity is a tool through which others see your vulnerability. In addition, it builds trust. The Adventist story can be used for evangelism because it is a real-life story of struggling people. We may note that the whole Sabbath-keeping movement was started by young people who were not perfect, but willing to serve God despite their flaws and disappointments. What is distinctive about Seventh-day Adventists, then, is not their vast Biblical knowledge of prophecy or their peculiar theology—but their willingness to serve God and fulfill His mission by bringing the “everlasting gospel” to a dying world. It is an authentic and down-to-earth story. It is a story of youth for youth.

A fourth lesson for successful youth evangelism is the emphasis on “personal experience.” By its very essence, faith in God cannot be forced on people no matter how logical one’s reasoning may be. In fact, logic cannot fully explain the Divine. Spiritual realities, therefore, cannot be imposed; they must be experienced. True evangelism must encourage young and old to take time and “experience” God for themselves in order to make an intelligent decision about Him.

Thus, I propose that the Adventist story can be a great tool for mission and evangelism to the youth. Young people are drawn to communities of like-minded people with stories similar to theirs. They also are willing to listen to those who are “real” and “authentic” and dislike artificiality. And they desire to “experience” things for themselves. Youth evangelism will do well to work with these principles in mind.

xi It is interesting to note that during each of the 2018 Spring and Autumn Councils of the General Conference Executive Committee, time is set aside for personal testimonies addressing the question, “Who Are We and Why Are We Here?”