



Action in Higher Education

A Case Study From the Gospels



BY ERNEST J. BURSEY

On Adventist college campuses we hear often about the need for integration of faith and learning. But there must be more to Christian education than a healthy partnership between spirituality and academics. Students need to experience the practical power of that partnership.¹ To use classic Adventist terminology, human beings created in the image of God are “endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do.”² James reminds us that faith must express itself in action to remain alive (James 2:17).

Students tend to underestimate their powers of influence. They see others as more equipped or more effective. Their failure to actively engage their environment needs to be addressed within the educational process. Completing a project that calls for initiative and creativity shows students that they can be

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agents of change and redemption.

Limiting student opportunities for service solely to extracurricular activities is a serious flaw. A major portion of service and outreach projects generated on a college campus ought to be integrated into the curriculum. Otherwise, the notion of service remains marginal and incidental.

My area of specialized training deals with the New Testament, particularly the Gospels. Graduate school study convinced me that the Gospels were

more than mere archives of historical information for reconstructing the life of Jesus. Each Gospel possesses literary integrity and deserves to be studied individually. Upon returning to the college classroom from graduate study I was assigned to teach several courses on the Gospels for general-studies credit at both the introductory and advanced levels.³ A respect for the particular emphases of each of the Gospels led me to shape the requirements differently for the study of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

In the early years I invested considerable time helping my students discover the basic content and arrangement of each of the Gospels. I wanted them to treat each one with a respect for its literary integrity and distinctiveness. At the same time, I wanted students to be open to each Gospel's radical critique of the culture in which we find ourselves.

Over time I concluded that courses on the Gospels ought to include three

components: the intellectual, the devotional, and the practical. The documents we scrutinize as “Gospels” ought to be more than specimens for objective analysis, though we do want to pay close attention to their literary features. If we simply examine and dissect them as if they were embalmed cats in an anatomy lab, we are using them differently than they were intended. When we honestly examine the Gospels, we are invited to listen receptively, to reflect and pray, to believe and act.

A helpful metaphor for a course on the Gospels is that of taking up residence in a house, whether it be the house of Matthew or the house of Mark.⁴ Dinner guests usually don’t bring their own sandwiches but sample the dishes provided by the host. Guests in a home are invited to enter into the family’s activities.

It is crucial to the integrity of a course that assignments calling for action grow organically out of the contents of the course.⁵ So a course must respect both a Gospel’s literary integrity and its distinctive expression of how the follower of Jesus should live. Several readings in Matthew emphasize peacemaking and taking the initiative to help a brother in spiritual crisis (5:7, 8, 5:23, 24; 7:1-5; 18:6-35). Throughout the Sermon on the Mount one finds emphasized the appropriate response when evil is directed against the follower of Jesus. (See the doubled last beatitude of 5:10-12; the last two antitheses in 5:38-48; and the singular warning of Jesus in 6:14, 15.) Christians are to be creatively assertive, going to the angry brother (5:24), dramatically turning the other cheek (5:39), walking a second mile (5:41), loving the enemy, and praying for the persecutor (5:44). Throughout Matthew, Jesus points to action as crucial (5:16; 7:15-27; 10:5-8; 10:40-42; 25:31-46). His illustrations suggest that the appropriate response to evil is assertive, redemptive, and creative—even surprising—action.

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Jesus’ followers are free from worry, and free to act. I am convinced that we must immerse ourselves in the world of Matthew, doing what lies at the very core of the book. I invite students enrolled in the freshman course, “Sermon on the Mount,” and the senior course, “Matthew and Luke,” to try out Jesus’ teach-

ing in Matthew. As a major part of the course requirements, they are to develop and carry out either a peacemaking project or a creative, assertive project on behalf of others. The project comprises from 20 to 30 percent of the course’s total points.

I, too, must be involved if I am to expect my students to take the assignment seriously. When we go over the course requirements at the beginning of the quarter I already have a project in mind for myself, and I describe it for the students. Throughout the quarter I hand out short published accounts of persons who have responded to human need or injustice in a creative, loving way. For instance, “The Underwear Lady of Wake County” in *Paint the World With Love* by Jeannette Johnson.⁶ Or a newspaper photo of the director of a homeless shelter dressed up in a tuxedo while serving a candlelight Valentine banquet to

homeless families. Regular reading in popular publications turns up these and other illustrations, which I keep in a bulging folder.

Up to half of the students in a class in the Sermon on the Mount or the Gospel of Matthew will choose to complete a peacemaking or reconciliation project. Each student discusses his or her plans with me. Confidentiality prevents a discussion of the particulars of the peacemaking projects. But they often involve long-standing hostilities or misunderstandings between family members, sometimes resulting from the breakup of a marriage. Alienation from parents or grandparents occurs more often than with siblings. Problems with in-laws and break-ups of friendships are frequent matters of concern. As one person explained, "Neither of us wanted to be mad at each other and we were glad that things were finally out in the open." The project can give students the incentive to do what they know needs to be done.

For specific help in approaching another person I invite them to read *Caring Enough to Confront* by David Augsburger, especially the chapters on owning one's anger and confronting without condemning.⁷ Students develop a sequence of actions: praying for the other, writing a letter, making a phone call, and then visiting. Often the attempts at conciliation come after years of animosity and distance.

The required minimum of six or eight hours often is usually only the beginning of the process. As one student put it, "I am grateful that your assignment gently pushed me into taking the first steps." I am more interested in that they make an attempt than in whether the venture is completely successful. Obviously, the outcome of a project involving the feelings and responses of other persons cannot be predicted.

A long-term study of the book of Mark has led in a slightly different direction. In Mark the heart of Jesus' teachings on the Christian life is found in chapters 8-10. Three times Jesus announces His intention to go to Jerusalem and die (8:31, 32; 9:30-32; 10:32-

34). Each time His disciples respond in a wholly inappropriate manner. They are obsessed with visions of future power and greatness (9:33, 34; 10:35-41). Jesus then describes His radical understanding of the uses of power and privilege: "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35, RSV).⁸

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom to many" (Mark 10:42-45).

This final speech climaxes Jesus' teaching in chapters 8-10 on discipleship and allows the reader/listener to interpret the Passion narrative as the model for a radical life-style. Translated into the terms of our age, Jesus demands an inversion of power and status to be used to help others rather than for personal advantage.

Consequently, I ask students enrolled in the course on the Gospel of Mark to develop their own inverted power project. They typically isolate their advantages in terms of time, money, health, and energy; less commonly their particular academic and professional skills. The resulting

projects more closely resemble conventional community-service outreach than those for the courses on Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount. Yet students consistently sense the impact of a life of service on both the giver and the recipient.

In a course on Luke and Matthew I have generally devoted most of the class time to the study of Matthew. But those who urge that social justice is an indispensable part of Christ's teaching find strong support in the Gospel of Luke. In the Magnificat the mother of Jesus declares that God has "put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1:52, 53). John the Baptist tells his converts, "He who has two

coats, let him share with him who has none" (3:11; compare Zacchaeus' promise in 19:8). In rapid succession Jesus pronounces His blessing on "you poor" and "you who hunger now" and His woe on "you that are rich" and "you that are full now" (Luke 6:20, 21, 24, 25; compare with Matthew 5:3, 6).

Jesus inaugurates His public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth by reading a scripture lesson from Isaiah 58 and 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . , to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives . . . , to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Parables of Jesus found only in Luke include the merciful Samaritan (10:30-37); the neighbor who shares bread (11:5-8); the rich fool who dies before he can build a bigger barn (12:13-21); the wise steward who gives regular meals to those under his charge (12:42); and the rich man who fails to heed the words of Scripture and care for the needs of the sick man Lazarus at his gate (16:19-31).

Students from a middle-class background frequently seem blind to the message of social justice that shines throughout Luke. They have no personal experience with the taste and smell of poverty. My colleague, Pedrito Maynard-Reid, invites students of the book of Luke to spend a night in a homeless shelter or with a family of His-

panic migrant workers.

The Gospel of John presents the greatest challenge. I regularly offer students in this class the opportunity for a weekend retreat of journaling, prayer, and small group sharing. This past year the weekend included a foot-washing service (John 13:14; 14:16, 17, 26; 16:12-15) by a mountain stream. But this is not enough.

Jesus in John repeatedly commanded His followers to love one another (John 13:34, 35; 15:12-14). Yet the book provides only a limited description of how this love is to be concretely expressed. Jesus' act of foot-washing and His command for His followers to wash each other's feet point to the practice of hospitality, especially by Christians toward one another. The appeals for solidarity throughout Jesus' farewell discourse (chaps. 13-17) make sense for a group undergoing hostile scrutiny and persecution (15:18-21; 17:14). We can presume that in the close quarters of urban apartments characteristic of the Roman city, non-Christians would be aware of the care and hospitality of Christians toward one another, especially in times of danger. To care for other Christians might even put one's own life at risk (15:12-14). But Jesus' commands sound foreign to North American students who have not been persecuted for their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Students do resonate with the strong roles given to women and Samaritans in the Gospel of John. Jesus' openness to the intelligent woman at the well and to the Samaritan villagers in chapter 4, the frank exchange between Jesus and Martha in chapter 11, and Jesus' singular attention to Mary Magdalene in chapter 20, all serve as an incentive for confronting racial and gender bias within ourselves.

Perhaps the richest possibility in the Gospel of John lies with the scene of Jesus washing His disciples' feet (13:1-15). By word and deed the class re-enacts the scene. But we must come to understand the meaning of washing another person's feet. John, like Mark, emphasizes a life of service in which those with high status serve those below them. This spring when I teach a course on John I plan to explore with my student colleagues the meaning of the foot-washing service. Through prayer, reflection, discussion, and ritual I believe

God will show us our basin and towel.

For me, the highlight of one of these courses comes near the end of the quarter when I read the reports of student projects. I require only a brief description of the project and the total time spent. But nearly always students report at length on their feelings about the project. Without any solicitation on my part, many students express their intention to continue the project beyond the quarter. Reading their stories of private courage and public service is an emotional experience that stirs my passion for teaching near the end of a quarter when my own energies are lagging. No

single set of papers that I read does more to encourage me to do my best than these. (See box.)

Although these classes challenge students to put their faith into action, this is only a beginning in fulfilling the three R's of the Christian educational process—reading, reflecting, and responding. ⁸⁷

I would enjoy networking with others teaching in Adventist colleges who seek to incorporate service within the curriculum and who are willing to share what they have developed. Please write to Dr. Ernest J. Bursey, School of Religion, Walla Walla College, College Place, WA 99324, U.S.A.

Sample Projects

Here's a sample of projects that students have generated over the past four years:

1. A former student missionary selected and anonymously sent inspirational material to a student missionary with whom he was not personally acquainted.
2. An older college student wrote letters of appreciation to former high school teachers, recalling memories and describing their personal influence on him.
3. An aviation major gave free airplane lessons to young, high-risk teens, hoping to let them experience something both exciting and positive.
4. A group of four students organized finger-puppet shows for residents of a nursing home. The puppeteers sang funny songs and performed secular and religious skits.
5. Concerned about a classmate paralyzed due to an accident, one student videotaped campus activities and messages from friends and then viewed them together with his classmate in the hospital.
6. Two shy students volunteered to help at the information booth in the emergency room of a local hospital.
7. A student and her husband took a nursing-home resident for rides in the country; another planned outings for residents at a local park. One musical student brought a guitar and an amplifier to a nursing home and performed music with residents, who played or sang their favorite songs.
8. Two senior students painted a building at the local homeless shelter under the supervision of one of the residents.
9. A new Christian asked to join a local group of older persons concerned about high school pregnancy and abortion. Unknown to the other members of the group, the student had become pregnant and had an abortion while attending the local high school.
10. Two young men showed up at the women's dorm to do cleaning and ironing for the residents. (Prior arrangements were made with the deans.)
11. One member arranged for a blood drive by the Red Cross at a local Seventh-day Adventist church on the Sabbath of Easter weekend. The project eventually involved more than 50 volunteers and required ongoing conversation with pastors and church members about appropriate Sabbath activity.
12. Two brothers ran a free baseball camp for kids unable to pay the \$100 fee for the regular baseball camp.
13. A young woman stood at the exit of a local grocery store without curbside service and offered to carry the bags of elderly persons to their cars. Similarly, a young man in a car offered free rides to persons his own age who were waiting for the bus.
14. A recovering alcoholic mother spent a day with a single-parent family at a women's shelter, providing special treats for the children and discovering an abused child

Sample Projects

with the same first name as her own.

15. One class member worked with several other persons to organize and set up the guidelines for a peer-counseling program at the college. The program has flourished and received national coverage.

16. Two freshmen made cookies from scratch and personally delivered them to the children in the first- and second-grade classrooms of a local public grade school.

17. A young man visited homes in the neighborhood of the college and asked the residents what they thought about the students.

18. A resident in student housing went from room to room with a vacuum sweeper and offered to vacuum the carpet, then gave a brief prayer for the person in the room before leaving. (He noted, "Several times the guys told me that they needed the prayer.")

19. A homeowner invited the geriatric day-treatment group at the mental health center to plant gardens in her own back yard.

20. Students regularly conjured up plans to make special treats and perform helpful deeds for others while remaining anonymous. A student body president wrote anonymous notes for people she knew were going through hard times.

21. A shy Adventist auto mechanic and "fixer-upper" drove to a nearby town one Sabbath morning and spent the day fixing up a broken-down car, two bicycle tires, and porch steps, all without cost, for a middle-aged stranger of a different race. (The recipient asked, "How often do Adventists do this sort of thing?" Embarrassed, he replied, "I'm not sure.")

22. Several students organized a free car wash for college students. Another student, mother of three, planned a car wash for her children and friends to raise funds to buy and plant needed trees in the community. Another teamed up with a troubled young teenager to hold a free car wash in a nearby city where no one knew them.

23. A couple cleaned up litter on a beautiful mountain trail, fielding questions from persons who assumed they were paid to do so.

24. Troubled by the sight of her own compost pile, one member designed a backyard composter from used plastic dumpsters and prepared a brochure of instructions for the local recycling committee.

25. A man offered his muscle and mechanical abilities without cost to an elderly couple he knew, offering to do whatever they needed done for a day. They kept him very busy.

26. A 20-year-old freshman collected and delivered needed baby clothes for two single mothers the same age as herself.

27. A self-styled lover of animals got involved with the local Humane Society as a volunteer dog walker.

28. Two young outdoorsmen drove to a scenic area and offered to help less-experienced campers set up their camp, then prayed with them before leaving.

29. An education major continued to help the second graders in a public school after her education class was finished. She designed self-esteem autograph booklets for each of the children, writing something positive in each booklet herself.

30. A young man volunteered to spend a day with 14 children at a day-care center, where he learned about the needs of children without dads. Another self-styled nonlover of children spent the day helping on the playground of a local public school.

31. A reserved man agreed to spend time with the son of a single parent attending college, helping him with homework and learning how much fun Nintendo can be.

32. One class member showed up at a teenage drop-in sponsored by a local non-denominational Christian organization, played pool or floozeball and just talked. She discovered that she shared a common humanity with young people from a different social level.

33. A shop teacher taking summer courses volunteered to build an access ramp for the local hospital, working under the supervision of one of his former high school students.

34. A married student who admitted to being an insensitive egoist covenanted to saying "Yes" whenever his wife and relatives asked for him to help, instead of the usual "I'm too busy." He had no difficulty in completing the required minimum number of hours.

35. A class member began a small group Bible study for persons burned by religion.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I am indebted to Lucille Knapp, a former colleague in the School of Theology, for her example. While several of us were still talking about the place of Christian service within the curriculum, Lucille incorporated a service component in the New Testament courses she taught during the last several years before her retirement.

2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952), p. 17.

3. At the freshman level, a four-quarter-hour course on the Ministry of Jesus, a two-hour course on the parables of Jesus, and a two-hour course on the

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Sermon on the Mount. At the senior level, a three-hour course on the book of Mark, a three-hour class on the books of Matthew and Luke, and a three-hour course on the book of John.

4. For Matthew and to a lesser extent, Mark, the "house" is a place for Jesus' teaching and those who would be His students. See Matthew 5:15; 7:24; 10:6, 25; 12:46-13:1; 13:36; 13:57; 23:37, 38; Mark 3:19-35; 7:17.

5. An oral performance of the book by the members of the class serves as the finale of a course on the book of Revelation. This public presentation conveys part of the first blessing of the book: "Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein" (Revelation 1:3).

6. Jeannette Johnson, *Paint the World With Love* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1991).

7. David Augsburg, *Caring Enough to Confront* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1981; previously published in 1973 by Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania).

8. All texts quoted in this article are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, and are used by permission.