

The College's Role in Integrating Faith and Learning

By Frank Knittel

WHEN this topic was given me, I understood it to mean that our educational endeavors at our colleges should inspire, nourish, and fortify faith in God, in His plan of salvation, in His redemptive promises. The reason I say that this should be the overall goal of our educational endeavors is that I am becoming weary of hearing people declare that we should "get God back into the classroom," whatever that means. I insist that the classroom is only one part of our educational goals, and I am not even sure that the classroom is the most important part. Therefore I want to explore with you the integration of faith and learning in a broad, total sense.

I will, however, begin with integration of faith and learning, as this unification ought to take place in the classes we teach, for what I have to say applies as much to the college classes I teach as it does to you in your individual schools. Many of you have received your formal training at an SDA college. What should that school have taught you? My first premise is that we should tell all teachers that faith must, first of all, stem from respect. You will notice I said *respect*, not adoration, love for the discipline, or hero worship of the teacher. These elements may exist, but respect for the teacher must come first. Respect is not the same as love for a teacher, nor does it follow that a student who likes a teacher on a personal level will have respect for that teacher.

Frequently a beginning teacher may try to be so much one of the students that ultimately he descends to their level, which is not very high. If your students get into the habit of calling you by

your first name, joshing around with you on a familiar, intimate basis, or spending a great deal of time in your living quarters—then the respect your students should have for you will surely become jaded. The moral and spiritual leadership that you are required to impart will give way to an easy intimacy that places you on the same professional and personal level as the students. Since you are on the same level, you will not be able to draw them up.

A further consideration is involved with respect and with faith in us as educators. When we are so immature as to allow ourselves to become the champion of every student's alleged grievances, then the respect that students should have for us has given way to their using us as an "ombudsman" for their real or imagined woes, using us as their weapon against the school as a whole or against other teachers, using us as their solace when through their own neglect they failed and now want our lachrymose sympathy rather than our firm delineation of their faults. Students have no faith in such teachers. The ensuing lack of professional confidence in a staff member leads to personal repudiation of what the teacher is supposed to stand for, when it becomes clear that the teacher stands for nothing.

Courses Should Be Well Organized

Let us follow a teacher into the classroom. Faith and learning are synonymous only when the teacher inspires faith in his subject. How is this faith established? First, the content should be meaningful, pertinent, applicable, and intellectually stimulating. The course should be so well organized that the students know exactly where they are going and where they have been. No faith is generated by ambiguity about assignments, projects, method of grading, and

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relative importance of facts. Assigning one hundred dates in a history class and then asking for two on the upcoming test will surely shatter faith in the teacher, history, dates, and the whole system of Christian education. Our colleges should train teachers to avoid such poor practices.

In one of my Bible classes years ago the teacher casually remarked during the first week of school that we should learn the books of the Bible. About twelve weeks later, with no further reminder to the class, that Bible teacher sprang upon us a test over the books of the Bible. You can imagine how the class reacted to a 66-point test for which they were psychologically and academically unprepared. The teacher gamely stuck to his guns. Through the years I have fallen into conversation with other students who were in that class. To this day any one of those students is likely to mention that very test, and I can assure you that the memory rankles even after thirty-seven years. A number of those students got nothing from that Bible class but a bad remembrance. What a dismal heritage for that teacher! For those students, there was no integration of faith and learning.

The best way to ensure organized classes is to prepare a detailed syllabus for each class taught—a syllabus that outlines the class for the entire semester so that students know at the beginning of school exactly what will be studied every day of the semester. This should include the schedule for all major tests and the deadline for all projects. A truly professional administrator will demand these syllabuses from his teachers every year.

The integration of faith and learning likewise will not occur if the classroom procedure is haphazard or undisciplined. I know that on the typical secondary-school campus the slightest catalyst can cause class interruptions or total dismissal. Here in America we have become convinced that anything and everything students want to talk about is “meaningful,” and that we should drop well-planned lessons for the day in order to hear out the youth. I have often heard the comment, “Well, we just spent the class period talking about that because I thought it probably was more important than the lesson.” I make no apologies for declaring that most of the time this reasoning is totally unjustified.

An academy teacher told me that in his school—a boarding academy—this past year some of his students were out of class for almost six weeks because of various planned and unplanned activities. Let me give you a list of these activities—perhaps you can identify your school program or one somewhat like it: There was a

Bible Conference, which took two days; Festival of Faith, three more; music festival, two days; senior class picnic, one day; junior-senior picnic, half a day; school picnic, one day; essentially a dismissal of classes the day the school annuals arrived in order to get signatures; Ingathering, one day, plus another full day for those who wanted to go the second time; an extra day added to Christmas vacation because students were successful in special school projects; student governance day, one day; taking of class and individual pictures for the annual, one day. I already have a total of more than three weeks of days off, and the list is incomplete. Long ago schools should have taken a firm stand on these issues.

Why should a student have any faith in such a program? But instead of blaming the school as a whole, let's look at our own classes. How often do we slosh through a day because we did not get something prepared? How many times do we fail to give a test on the assigned day because we did not get it made out in time? And how long do we keep papers before returning them simply because grading papers is not one of our priorities? Are we faithful in making precise assignments, or do we often issue a vague statement like, “Just read ahead in your book for tomorrow”? Do we fail to take record in class?

My friends, if we miss the obvious fact that students have no respect and no faith in this approach to learning, we are missing the most obvious feature of education. We probably will not hear students complain about most of this today. But what will they say in ten years about the integration of faith and learning in our classrooms?

We should constantly remind ourselves that education is a buyer's market. We can wax eloquent about the duty of parents to provide Christian education for their children, but it is our duty to make sure the commodity we offer is the best on the market. We must do everything we can to create faith in our service. Simply calling a school program Christian education is not enough. Many things pass as Christian education that actually are not. Sometimes these efforts have been Christian, but they have not always been education. Christian people do not always produce Christian education. Our colleges should know and teach the difference.

The Teacher's Attitude

Another feature of the faith-learning combination that is exceedingly significant is the teacher's attitude toward everything related to the church. If a teacher makes sneering, slurring, or sarcastic comments or asides about church organizations, preachers, administra-

tors, General Conference officials, church programs, or church standards, that teacher will never integrate faith and learning. By his attitude he destroys the very roots of faith. Too many of our students come from homes where these negative emotions are openly articulated, but when they attend our schools, they have the right to something better from us.

A teacher who is not totally, unequivocally, and openly committed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church has absolutely no business in our church education, for he will destroy souls. If we have complaints about our church, then let us be morally unafraid to express our concerns where they should be expressed—to people who can by their position study and analyze our comments and channel them to the person or group responsible for establishing church policy and actions.

A father once came to me to say that if his boy had to take another class from a certain teacher, he would pull him out of our college and send him elsewhere. He stated that the teacher in question subtly filtered through to his students innuendoes and implications about the Seventh-day Adventist Church that were calculated to destroy their confidence in the church that supported their college. This made the father bitter about the role of that teacher in a church college. The saddest part of this was that the father was not even an Adventist, and had sent his boy to our school because he felt that the school and the church were what his boy needed. When his boy complained of the teacher's attitudes, the father was justly concerned.

Promoting Unity

Another way a teacher can destroy faith in learning is to gather a group of dissident students about him—and then have the group start so-called prayer meetings to pray for other teachers who, of course, do not understand young people nearly so well as the teacher who leads out in the prayer sessions. Add to this the teacher who agitates to have vespers meetings in his own home for selected students, and you have a situation that will kill all faith in the educational process of the school. Any principal worth his salt will see these little home vespers programs for what they really are—subtle movements toward disunity—and will not allow them. After that, the praying teacher and students are the underdogs, because “the administration is jealous,” and seeds that destroy faith are firmly planted. From that point on, in the minds of those students, the leadership is suspect, and that means everything else about the place is suspect. This chain of events leads

eventually to cynicism toward the entire church program.

My final thesis is that we destroy that fine marriage of faith and learning when we play games in our interpersonal relations with students, or when we play games with other adults while students are onlookers. Let's first define the games we play with students. Consider our attitude toward wrongdoing. Our most kindly, compassionate feeling should gravitate toward those who err most. Sadly, the reverse is usually true. All too frequently we are punitive rather than corrective in our dealing with the wrongdoer. Punitive reproof certainly has no place in a Christian setting.

Discipline committees are often dominated by administrative officers whose vision is badly clouded by so-called administrative necessities. Most principals would do well not to be members of discipline committees. If the principal is a member, then the other administrative officers should not be members. Few administrators will agree with this because of our obsession with administrative rights and privileges. Frankly, the good administrator can be defined by the number of committees of which he is *not* a member. At one time the president of Southern Missionary College was a member of twelve committees. At the present time he holds membership in only one, and our college is the better for the change.

A number of years ago I was especially impressed by a most unusual situation at a certain academy. I was a member of the General Conference accreditation team. During our visit to the school we met with a group of about twenty students. After asking them many questions, we finally told them to write down the name of the first person on campus with whom they would like to counsel if they had any sort of problem, whether or not that problem involved the school. Out of that group of twenty students, nineteen responded spontaneously that they would first like to speak to their principal. No higher tribute could have been paid.

Should not each of us be the first person to whom our students would turn in time of trouble? How often do we brag about the way we really let a student have it full blast? We regale each other with our accounts of putting down the smart alecks. I often wonder how badly we all are bruised by this. A student humiliated by his teacher loses faith, but a student who humiliates himself and is then given a loving hand by his teacher gains faith.

We must reach a compromise between the staff member who is the emotional wailing post

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for all the students who are in trouble and the staff member who simply writes off all bad actors as incorrigibles. The teachers in bygone years who did something for my life, who inspired me with the principles of a faith-learning integration, who gave my life real direction, were the academy and college teachers who told me, "One of these days you are going to wake up to the fact that your life will be in shambles unless you get a different focus on a lot of things," or "A lot of us are praying for you, but you do your best to make the possibility of answers to our prayers mighty bleak," and finally, "Someday I hope you grow up. When you do, you are going to think back on your ideas now as terribly immature. I just hope by then it's not too late."

Does this mean we should be harsh, unsympathetic, stern, unyielding? Indeed not, but our world of problem solving is presently saturated with people who are queasy about calling sin by its right name, who try to excuse all misconduct because of environment, and who try to blame society for each person's guilt. We need to look at our own personal faith to see whether we can't grasp something for our lives that transcends our previous experience. This is the true integration of faith and learning, this is what we need to teach our youth. We must experience this transformation ourselves in order to impart it to others.

Granting Requests Cheerfully

One further concern with the matter of interpersonal relations: By all means let us abandon some of our grudging stances. One of the quickest ways to destroy faith in our dealings with students is for us to grant requests or favors with an "I want you to know you don't deserve this, but I am doing it anyway just to show you that I am not as cobby as you are for asking." Friends, whatever Jesus grants us in this life or in the hereafter He does not grant with a frown, an excuse, or anything else designed to make us feel guilty. If we are not pleased to do something, then let us either not do it or make up our minds to do it cheerfully.

I long ago learned a humiliating lesson in this respect. A student wanted a request granted, and after giving him a hard time, I finally said, "I'm going to let you do what you have asked. But I really don't approve."

He looked me straight in the eye, and then said, "Why did you say Yes then?"

"Well," I replied, "I decided to do you a favor."

He looked at me steadily and replied, "I won't

do it on that basis. I don't need your charity." He then rather loftily strode from my office.

I looked at his retreating figure and said to myself, "Well, you old so-and-so!" And then I suddenly thought, You know, he's right. He doesn't need my charity. He needs a straight answer based on some straight considerations.

I never made the same mistake again. That boy is now a minister in our local conference. I hope by my error he learned how not to deal with others.

Dealing Fairly With Students

Finally, we must deal fairly with our students, for faith will evaporate at the first indication that we are even slightly off base. Let me be specific. Occasionally a teacher will give a student the strong impression that at an appropriate time the teacher will to some extent champion the case of the student, whether the issue be disciplinary or some other matter. But in the final showdown the teacher sits by in unholy silence and lets matters take their course. If we do not plan to personally intercede in a matter, then we must not lead anyone to think we shall. Students will find out about us, and their loss of faith may some day confront us in God's final judgment.

One further note in this vein. I am convinced that we all talk too much about our students. A counselor's privileged information should never be repeated to anyone else. A counselor who makes the principal or any other person privy to private matters involving students should be dismissed at once with censure. Counselors should have no part in any administrative dealings involving the lives of students, including membership on committees that make rules. The counselor may be a resource person, but his role should end there. Administrators and other staff members share too much personal information about students with too many other people, and shattered privacy is a common complaint among students and parents. Not to honor a student's right to privacy is dishonest, and you may be sure students *will* find out.

The problems I have referred to are not unique to the secondary school scene—they are universal. But their universality need not make us feel they are inevitable, for they can be remedied. I pray that we as teachers and administrators can so conduct our learning process that faith and learning cannot be separated, for indeed, in the highest sense, education and the plan of redemption are one and the same.

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