

**Institute for Christian Education  
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## ***THE TEACHER AS A SYMBOLIC MODEL***

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## **THE TEACHER AS A SYMBOLIC MODEL**

A Christian secondary school in Aba, Nigeria, in the early seventies had seniors. To be a senior meant you were then in the fifth and final year of study. To help the finalist prepare adequately for the School Certificate Examinations, he was given "foxes" (a term for first and second year students) to serve him.

These boys ran errands. Serving a prefect was in itself like a school as many of them helped their boys acquire academic achievement skills.

I was sent to serve Senior Emeka Okeiyi, an SDA Christian and Prefect for Ahukana House. He was also teaching us English Literature and Chemistry. At first I was afraid because most of these prefects operated like naked gods, almost having absolute power over their boy servants. You could be severely punished for whatever misbehaviour, even imagined offences. And no one dared come to your rescue. But then the joy of being in a secondary school dried the fears and contained the anxieties.

"Are you a Christian? He asked admiringly.

"Yes, a Seventh-day Adventist," I replied.

"Good, we are brothers. Let us pray."

Senior Okeiyi committed me to God's hands through a touching prayer. I still remember the words of that prayer. From the start, the secondary school became for me a place where I could meet God, and a city of refuge. Before long, Senior Emeka Okeiyi had become a Christian model for me in several ways. I began to imitate some of his ways of life and behavioural dispositions. He and the principal, a renowned Adventist educationist, late Elder Joseph W. Wogu started a branch Sabbath School in the school which many of us attended. Later, some of us went through the baptismal lessons and were baptized while still at the secondary school.

This paper looks at the various ways through which the teacher can function as a model to his students.

## THE TEACHER AND TEACHING

Teachers are more than professionals, driven by an urge to impart to students in the best possible way the content of the subjects they teach. They are more than communicators, trained in the methodology of transferring information from one person to another. They are more than motivators, constantly on the lookout to light a lamp here and put out a raging fire there in the challenging environment of education.

Holmes (1987, p. 25) added that “the teacher is the key to a climate of learning. His teaching is his ministry. His enthusiasm about ideas, his scholarship, and the importance he places on teaching provides a model.” The teacher must keep up in his field and be involved in professional organizations. The Christian teacher has the same moral responsibility as other scholars to publish in his field as well as the additional responsibility of developing Christian perspectives when they are pertinent to what he writes. The Christian teacher thus creates a climate of both faith and learning in the academic community.

Teachers are persons, dealing with persons. That relationship brings out the best and the worst in both. To educate the whole person, to encourage disciplined learning and the quest for excellence is a sacred trust. It is a rare assignment. Love and hate, zeal and boredom, compassion and indifference, dignity and apathy compete for attention in the classroom. A Christian teacher is expected not only to understand this competition, but also to build better teacher-student relationships.

Holmes (1987, p. 25) has rightly counseled that the question a teacher must ask about his teaching is not, “What can they do with it?” but rather “What will it do to them? What sort of men and women will they become by wrestling with this material in the way I present it? And what sort of materials could I develop to help them become what they are capable of being?” To achieve this laudable objective, a Christian teacher must:

### **Be Genuine**

Strive to be authentic. Of Jesus Christ, it is noted that “the common people heard him gladly,” Mark 12:37 and he taught with authority, Matt. 7:29. Nothing turns off students like

pretension and hypocrisy. While recognizing your strengths and limitations, a Christian teacher must avoid projecting either an exalted or an impoverished view of self. Strength is empowerment to excel. Limitation points to an assignment for the future, something to be overcome if possible by that extra training or struggle or to be accepted by claiming God's assurance, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," 2 Cor.12:9, RSV.

### **Be Knowledgeable in the Truth**

Knowledge is power. And James Madison, the 4<sup>th</sup> President of USA added that, "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." A teacher who has knowledge in terms of content and communication, has an enviable advantage. Academic freedom which is the freedom of the teacher to teach, of the student to learn, and of the school to be an educational institution where the extremes of legalism and license are controlled, is a compulsory requirement for the Christian teacher. Academic freedom is not license to compromise faith and morals. Indeed, academic freedom is a responsibility to uphold the just, the lovely, and the good.

But one kind of knowledge is infinitely superior and can empower the teacher to build bridges toward the most difficult of students. Such knowledge will pierce the heart like hot knife through butter. At a time when standards are collapsing; morality is downgraded; truth replaced by test-tube; and moral absolutes replaced by situation ethics; animal rights elevated over human rights; religious freedom proscribed by law; when moral confusion and the 'it doesn't matter syndrome' are holding sway; an experiential knowledge of God is essential. Knowing God personally provides a totally different perspective on teaching and students. "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Prov. 1:7). If one is to be wise or have knowledge or good understanding, then the fear of the Lord must come first. Consider Jesus as the supreme model. The secret of His success as a Teacher was not so much in the information He conveyed but in the transformation He was able to bring about in His hearers. A prostitute discovered she was a child of God (John8:9-11). A fraudulent man saw the Saviour visit him (Luke 19:1-8). A leper discovered God's image in him (Luke 17:11-19). Jesus could

transform people because He lived a life with twin links - to people and to God. A Christian teacher who does not know God personally, does not take the time to talk to Him every day, does not read His word or have a personal burden for every student within reach, is in the wrong business. No amount of training can substitute for a transforming experience with God.

For teachers, White (1974, p. 526) wrote, "Let every teacher who accepts the responsibility of educating the youth, examine himself. Has the truth taken possession of my soul? ..."

A Christian teacher must agree with Gaebelein (1968, p. 20) and Holmes (1987) that all truth is God's truth no matter the subject or discipline the truth is found while all lies are Satan's, John 8:44. However, indeed the gulf between the Christian and culture, science and faith, reason and revelation, natural and spiritual, or secular and sacred are almost nonexistent in reality. No wonder Paul tells us to do everything "heartily, as to the Lord" (Col. 3:23). No matter what sin has done to distort God's work, the world is still God's creation, of value to Him and humanity. John Calvin, quoted in Knight (2001, p. 5) was correct in stating that "A residue of the image of God continued in man after the fall. Some sparks still glint in the degenerate man." Every Christian teacher must believe that in all he does educationally, socially, artistically, or morally, he is handling God's creation.

### **Be Up-To-Date**

A Christian teacher needs not be academically expired; he should know the latest research findings and methodologies in his area of specialization. Changes in concepts and discoveries in science and technology keep the teacher at alert to know what is happening in his field and reflect these, in his syllabi and content.

Beitz (2001, p. 3) has correctly observed that in our world, we are faced with lots of knowledge but little understanding; lots of means but little meaning; lots of know-how but little know-why; lots of sight but little insight. We say much but mean very little. The Christian teacher should make a difference if he is to succeed in training the whole man.

**Be an “Integrator”**

Integration of faith and learning (IFL) which Rasi (2000, p. 2) defined as “A deliberate and systematic process of approaching the entire educational enterprise from a Biblical perspective. Its aim is to ensure that students under the influence of Christian teachers and by the time they leave school would have internalized Biblical values and a view of knowledge, life and destiny that is Christ-centered, service-oriented and kingdom-directed.” This integration is an essential requirement of a Christian teacher. Faith, learning, and practice must be integrated. The metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological approaches of our education must have a focus on this wholistic philosophy. Such a teacher helps the students see Christ in and out of the classroom.

There is the strong misconception that character development is the focus of Adventist education. The primary aim of Adventist education is bringing the student to Jesus Christ for salvation. There are secondary aims which include: character development, development of the Christian mind, development of social responsibility, development of physical, social and emotional health, and preparation for the world of work. Apart from the primary and secondary aims, the ultimate aim of Adventist education is service to God and humanity, here and hereafter. In all these facets of education, the teacher, the divine model, shows the Light and his students find the way.

**Be Prayerful**

In every activity, God takes pre-eminence. In this regards, Ikonne (1998, p. 4-9) counseled that, “As we pray in the class to start our studies, so we should pray on the football field before we start to play.” The counsel to pray without ceasing, 1 Thes. 5:17 equally applies to and includes the Christian teacher.

The need for prayer is widened by a holistic world view of education which trains the 3H's - hand, head and heart. White (1974) added that, “Education comprises more than just a knowledge of books. Proper education includes not only mental discipline, but that training which

will ensure sound morals and correct deportment.” However, despite the rope and hangman, despite the electric chair and gas chamber, some students kill, steal, and go into various crimes. Holmes (1987) was stating the obvious when he said, “We face a generation of students for whom much in life has lost its meaning, for whom morality has lost its moorings, for whom education has lost its attraction,” and such students are tending to become “mere statistics in the educational almanac.” Such heart-rending situations call for prayer and fasting as well as nourishing the students on a daily diet of salvation messages.

### **Be a Disciplinarian**

Discipline is the acid test of a Christian school. Musvovi (2000) agrees with Frank Gaebelein that if there is a gap between professed principles and actual practices, this is as dangerous as a time-bomb.

The word discipline comes from Latin “disciplina” which originally had to do with teaching and learning. From the root word, it meant “following or studying under an accepted leader.” Overtime, school discipline developed some negative connotations and words like “harsh,” “brutal,” “wicked,” “flog,” “whip” came in. Hoover (1982) reported that early colonial schools were equipped with whipping posts where misbehaving students were tied and flogged. Therefore the phrase “beat the devil (hell) out of him.” It is good for the Christian teacher to know he is an imperfect creature and avoid becoming a god. A Christian teacher approaches discipline from a different perspective. He knows from the onset that he is dealing with imperfect minds that need nurturing. Indeed, Milosz, quoted in Sire (1990, p. 20), stated that “Whoever says he’s 100% right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal.”

Discipline means to make a disciple. The aim of good discipline centers on helping the individual adjust to the personal, social, and spiritual forces of his experiences and environment. It entails helping the learner to develop responsible behaviours in line with the 3C’s - Cooperativeness, Conformity, Consistency, and most importantly, the Control of self.

The focus of a Christian teacher should be to produce Christian persons who will ask, “What will Jesus do in this situation?” at all times. This is the right mindset.

Indiscipline which is the opposite, arises from inadequacies and the denial of reality of basic principles of behaviour. The Christian teacher can help remedy the situation by caring, (liking the student), understanding (empathy and tolerance), recognizing (self worth) and appreciating (status, unique individual contributions) the student.

However, in all these, acceptable Christian standards must be followed backed by well thought-out rules and regulations. Though White (1974, p. 526) counseled that "rules should be few and well considered," she equally observed that "once rules have been established, they should be enforced." Through proper discipline, students are taught that the world is not a play ground, and the government of God knows no compromise with evil.

Above all the government of a Christian school is a fore-taste of the government of God.

#### **THE TEACHER AS A SYMBOLIC MODEL**

We hear statements like: Show me your teacher and I tell you the type of student you are; show me the seminary where you studied and I tell you the type of minister you are. A strong relationship that transcends academic pursuit exists between the teacher and his student. From the Adventist world-view, the teacher is not just one who stands in front of the class propounding theories. Answering. Discussing. Clarifying. Activating. He does all of these and more.

The teacher is an embodiment of what the student aspires to become in life and it is the most important work ever assigned to teachers to deal with directing the minds of students.

This makes a case for Bandura's (1972) observational learning from teachers' socialization and relationships. Instead of learning by trial and error - by acting and having successes reinforced and failures punished - students profit by vicarious learning in which they observe what their teachers do and notice the consequences.

Students store information about a model's behaviour in memory - how to sing certain parts, how to give a Bible study, how to arrange the church for service, and use these information as guide to their behaviours far into the future, especially from the ages of 5-7 years.

Through observation, students acquire a full range of attitudes, emotions, social skills, and



styles. Many students come to school not socialized. Almost everything they know about their culture, traditions, rules, social group, and behaviours that make each culture distinctive, is learned. Much of this knowledge comes from watching the teacher not only in the classroom but in various spheres of life. As Wallace (1989, pp. 25-35) maintained, "learning is not limited to certain subjects, to certain time periods, to certain places. A child educated only at school is an uneducated child." As long as there is life, learning goes on in different spheres inside and outside the classroom. And in most settings, the teacher is the point of focus.

### **A CONVERSION EXPERIENCE**

No responsible student will aspire to be like his unchristian teacher. Most students like to model themselves after their good, responsible teachers. Thus the teacher should be on his guard in this regard as he is daily copied by his students.

His best safeguard is a close relationship, an encounter with the Man of Calvary, Jesus the Christ. This relationship will be seen in teaching methodology, in the mode of dressing and physical appearance, in conversation, in time management, in disciplinary measures, in human relationships, is all and in all.

A student that makes such a teacher his model has achieved a strong link with heaven. It is then that the teacher, to the student, has become an agent of good life here and later eternal salvation.

If knowledge is power, example is even more powerful. What defined Jesus as the Master Teacher was His life. "What He taught, He was" is the way Ellen White (Ed. P. 13-16) puts it. No contradictions. No pretensions. No wavering. A student that deals with such a teacher had found the magnetic pull of Christian relationship.

What teachers do and say are coded in the students brains. The words teachers speak when teaching are repeated by their students in conversations and writing. The brief devotions teacher go into before teaching are expanded and preached by their students. It is "like teacher, like student." We are, personality wise, to a large extent, what we received from our teachers.

To make the student understand this and be able to enter into a relationship with Christ should be the teacher's first effort and constant aim. Knight (2001, p. 5) said that a teacher who accepts this responsibility is a co-labourer together with Christ.

If the teacher is not connected with heaven, he has no Christ to offer. He will be a misleading model. There is a need in the Seventh-day Adventist world-view to answer the crucial questions: What type of models are our teachers? If all the youth must receive some type of educational experience before they can take control of society's responsible position; what kind of teachers will implement this? If education and redemption are one, are the teachers not evangelists? Can they afford to joke with the tenets of Adventism? God forbid that our students will score A's in various subjects and F's in eternal life. A focus on the production of not only a renaissance men and women but redeemed sons and daughters of God is the greatest contribution ever made in educational philosophy. Beitz (2001) has rightly observed that apart from bringing the student to Christ, there is no other reason for us to exist as educators. Every other school provides the other services needed from schools.

Fagal (1989, pp. 4-5) was speaking the obvious when he stated that "rather than helping students to understand and appreciate Adventism more fully, some teachers undermine, challenge, or ridicule certain Christian beliefs, whether in or out of the classroom. Some students have found their confidence in the Bible or the writings of Ellen G. White shaken or even destroyed." This runs counter to our world-view of seeing our schools as evangelistic grounds. The *AID Working Policy*, (1996, p. 155) observed that, "indeed, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is so dependent upon its educational institutions that it is doubtful it would long exist as a significant force without them." Our educational institutions are strong arms of the Church.

When you accept Christ as Saviour, you become a Christian teacher. Then the injunction to "go," "preach," and "teach" (Matthew 28:19-20) makes a full meaning to you. **CHRISTIAN**

#### **TEACHER AS A THERAPEUTIC INSTRUMENT**

It was Lord Chesterfield (1694-1773) quoted in Myers (1995) who said that learning occurs

not only through conditioning but also from our observations of others. Therefore, he opined that, "We are, in truth, more than half what we are by imitation." Karrer (1996) added that "teachers teach in the same way they were taught." However, if in a school, we have teachers who need to be updated on their assignments, the following can be of help: Organise a colloquium for the teaching staff; provide some special readings like *Education* and *Journal of Adventist Education*, conduct some induction training especially for new teachers, send them to Faith and Learning Seminars, dialogue with them through brainstorming sessions, give them copies of your basic philosophy of education, have a committee to do a profile of an ideal SDA teacher; and at the end of the school year, teachers that meet these requirements are positively reinforced. In all, it should be noted that if a teacher teaches but models a different response, the student imitates what he does and not what he says.

Behaviours of teachers are imitated by their students through a cognitive coding of the observed behaviours. As Akinboye (1997, p. 2) saw it, this takes place on two planes: the acquisition phase when the student is exposed to the teacher and he imitates his teacher's behaviour; and the performance phase which involves "do as I do." Like the encounter between the apostles and the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:4), teachers are repeating to their students what Peter told the lame man, to "look at us."

When our students "look at us," what do they see? Hatred and rancor? Fault-finding and hypocrisy? Destructive criticism and animosity? Christlike character? Or a representative of the son of darkness! I propose that our students see Christ in us, on us, and through us or we are not teachers but cheaters. Every Christian teacher must convey the truth through his or her personality.

As this imitate-act continues, the teacher becomes a therapeutic device, a strategy for the student to learn adaptive behaviours and give up maladjusted dispositions and actions. As the teacher begins a class with a prayer, the student learns to put God first in everything. As he visits, attends, and prays for his sick student, the student learns concern for others. As the teacher

counsels, the student is led to the Wonderful Counselor. As the teacher preaches, the student is led to the word of God. And as the teacher testifies to the goodness of the Lord, the student learns faith in a God that is mighty to save. A unique opportunity has been created for the teacher to strengthen the student's Christian commitment. What is more, Beitz (2001, p. 2) added that it is not when we lock our believes in the *Church Manual*, or teach them in the Bible doctrines classes, or through pronouncements from the GC sessions, or by the development of a new statement of educational philosophy can they change lives. It is only when we live our believes that they will be transmitted to the younger generation. It is not practically possible for you to take somebody farther than you have gone. You cannot give what you lack.

Using the concept of the "weaker brother" (1 Cor. 8; 9), Apostle Paul tells the Christian teacher of his dual responsibility. As an educator, help him to gain spiritual strength and maturity of faith as well as guidance and fellowship in the exercise of liberty. To avoid becoming a stumbling block to the "weaker brother" student, the Christian teacher will need to scrutinize his pedagogy, organize his curriculum, observe decorum and etiquette, and mind his public utterances and gestures.

With the passage of time, it becomes a matter of show me your teacher and I will tell you the type of student you are. Students do more than looking, listening, and following their teacher. They apply cognitive processes to the stimuli they encounter, selecting among the stimuli and organizing and transforming them. Thus these stimuli (teacher's behavioural dispositions) in various spheres are seen as providing information and it is the student's interpretation of the stimuli that affects behaviour for better or for worse. If it is for better, Christian character is in the making.

#### **THE "HIDDEN" BUT REAL OBJECTIVE**

Usually, teachers have objectives for the courses they teach. At the end of the semester, each student in a class for a particular course is expected to have known, acquired, understood, ... from the course. It is academically required that the objective(s) of a course be written and

made known to the student at the inception of the course.

Christian parents and students look for more than the above. They look for more than good grades and other modes of academic achievement. They need more than each of these or all of these combined. They need that teacher who has something extra to offer them outside the course objectives. This is the "hidden" objective. It is hidden as it is usually not written in the course syllabus or in most cases verbally told the students.

The way the teacher relates to his students, his concern for them, what they learn from his manners and approach to issues, are powerful molders of their (students') personality. How important then for the teacher to be a professing and practising Christian. Good personality make-up is better molded when teachers see themselves as servants of God and their students as children of God for whom Jesus died.

No wonder Akers (1994, p. 2) counseled that "heavy-duty spiritual and survival skills must be built into young lives now in our classes, on our campuses." Involved here is the spiritual transfusion of the blood of Jesus. And God's servant told us that "in the night these words were spoken to me; charge the teachers in our schools to prepare the students for what is coming upon the world." This preparation is within and outside the classroom and the teacher is expected to function as a real model.

A true knowledge of God, fellowship with Him in study and service, and likeness to Him in character development are to be respectively the source, the means and the aim of our education. For this aim to be achieved, you need Christian teachers. It is thus a truth that there can be no Christian school without Christian teachers. The call of a Christian teacher is a call to a life of high sanctity not high society; high faith not high fashion; high love not high lust; high hope not high hypertension.

In employing teachers in our schools, this vital issue of acquisition of spiritual surviving skills and the hidden but real objective of the good model need not be neglected, excused away, or outrightly not considered important. Emphasis need not only be placed on qualifications,

experience, and how much to pay the applicants with star studded curriculum vitae. It is not surprising that the Ellen G. White said that “our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range” (*Education*, p. 13). To open the mind to divine understanding, to correct it in love, to refine it with wisdom from above, to enable it know and digest the truth, master and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties and applications, is an objective assignment for the Christian teacher.

As a denomination, one of our greatest needs is that of Christian teachers who know that their primary function is to model men and women under their care to become candidates of heaven, equipped to serve God and humanity, prepared for the life here and hereafter. Anything less than this makes one not a true Christian teacher. This modeling function makes the teacher to be like the teacher-sent-from-God who came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). We have the “lost” in our classes. Are they leaving our classes, our institutions still “lost?” There is an urgent need to answer the question :What kind of students come *into* our schools and what kind of students come *out* of our schools? There must be a difference in their personalities between the time of registration and graduation. This difference is the *raison d’etre* for our schools.

Mercedes Dyer, a former Dean of the School of Education, Andrews University, Michigan, and one-time teacher in the primary school at Emmanuel Missionary College, counseled teachers thus: “Whatever you do, be it ever so humble a task, give it the best of your ability. Remember you are building a character for eternity. Your thoughts, your words, your acts, should be as perfect as possible” (Dyer, 1989, p. 32).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Christian teacher trains the student for life here and hereafter. For the student to be so adequately trained, the teacher should be in touch with heaven. Then, he becomes a Christian model, a symbol of what the student aspires to be; as Senior Emeka Okeiyi was to me. If the teacher is experiencing the joy of salvation, the student is imitating a heaven-sent agent of salvation.

A Christian teacher is like the Teacher sent from God. He should be pure like Joseph; exemplary like Samuel; faithful like Abraham; meek like Moses; steadfast like Elisha; noble like Daniel; firm like Peter; self-sacrificing like Paul; heavenly focused like John the Revelator; a model like Christ; and eternity bound like a saint.

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