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Discipleship as Means to Reinvent Higher Education

Alan Parker, D.Th.

Southern Adventist University, parker@southern.edu

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Abstract

This paper exams the purpose of Adventist Higher Education and how it can be achieved. It suggests that the purpose of Christian education is to transform believers into the image of Christ. It contrasts contemporary Christian education with Ellen White's vision of education and suggests that current models of education, especially in General Education, fall far short of this ideal. The paper concludes that character development, the transmission of strong biblical values and the holistic development of the overall person should be the purpose of Adventist higher education. The paper then suggests that the most effective way to accomplish this vision of education is through discipleship. The methods of Jesus' discipleship model are explored and implications of this model are applied to contemporary education. Three particular areas are emphasized: (a) service learning; (b) community experiences through cohorts; and (c) experiential learning. The author also uses two theorists of religious education, Groome and Browning, to develop a four-stage process of experiential learning in the classroom.

Key Words: Adventist, higher education, Christian education, methods, Scripture, traditional education, discipleship.

Introduction and Overview

What is the purpose of Adventist higher education, and how can it be achieved? This paper suggests that Adventist higher education needs to be reinvented in order to more effectively accomplish its goals. It looks at how the Bible shapes not just the *content* of the Christian faith but also the *process* of developing that faith. Thus, Christian education can be molded not just by the *message* of Scripture but also by the *methods* we find in the Bible. In particular, this paper examines Jesus' method of education and suggests ways in which education can be practiced as a form of discipleship.

Our first task will be to investigate the purpose of Adventist higher education. We will then critique contemporary Christian education and suggest that we do not adequately develop faith in students because we lack a coherent and intentional process of achieving emotional, spiritual, ethical and intellectual maturity. Our main section will draw principles for a discipleship model from the life of Jesus and look at how a discipleship paradigm challenges traditional education. Our task will be to look at the process of discipleship and to understand the unique ways in which Jesus approached the need for educating his followers. The final section outlines potential strategies and challenges with implementing a model of discipleship-based education.

The Purpose of Adventist Higher Education

What is the purpose of Adventist higher education? Some have felt that the main purpose is to teach students to be critical thinkers who can understand and process information. This concept is based largely on the premise that, "It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train young people to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people's thought" (White, 1903, p. 17). However, the context of this statement is clearly not "critical thinking" itself but character development and teaching students to "contemplate the great facts of duty and destiny."

Others have seen the purpose of Adventist education as preparing students for the marketplace, but within the context of a Christian worldview and philosophy. Most professors in Adventist institutions try to find links between the content of their particular subject and the biblical perspective. But could it be that we are missing the real purpose of Adventist higher education?

Seventh-day Adventists have taken education seriously. We are the largest centrally organized parochial school system in the world, with nearly eight-thousand institutions worldwide and nearly two million students (General Conference Education Department).

But our seriousness is not just in the quantity of the education we offer, but in the quality of

the education that we give. Adventist education has its impetus in a different view of what education is and how it is offered. Perhaps this is because we have a powerful and transforming perspective of education in Ellen White's writings. Her introductory remarks to the book *Education* are nothing less than radical in their appeal:

Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the pursuit of 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 (White, 1903, p. 13).

Notice the contrasts in this statement. White complains that contemporary education is "too narrow" and compares it with the "broader scope" of true education. She states that we set our sights "too low" when we could be grasping a "higher aim." She emphatically declares that education is "more than" we've imagined since it involves every aspect of humanity's existence.

A cursory look at the book *Education* suggests that Ellen White's vision for education is broad and all encompassing. Education has as its goal the redemption of the student, for "the work of education and the work of redemption are one" (White, 1903, p.30). It is about restoring the image of God in humanity. It is about giving glory to God. It is holistic, practically based, and eternal in its perspective. Rather than focusing on the transmission of content, it focuses on the transformation of character. Rather than focusing on the textbook, it deals with the book of life. The teacher is seen not as an expert but as a mentor. The outcome of this education is not to simply give the student skills for a career, but to empower students for a life of service.

According to Ellen White, true education happens when students experience a knowledge of God through His Word, nature, and Spirit-filled teachers, "In a knowledge of God all true knowledge and real development have their source" (White, 1903, p.14). The same theme is reiterated throughout the book. Throughout her writings, she shows that education is not about becoming more intelligent or skillful. Instead, it is becoming like Christ (White, 1991, p. 78).

But how will such broad goals be achieved? In yet another radical statement she declares, "here is no education to be gained higher than that given to the early disciples, and which is revealed to us through the word of God" (White, 1913, p. 11). Jesus' method of education through discipleship is the radical motif that challenges traditional education. What we need, she continues, is "something greater, something more" than that which can be obtained merely from books. It means a transformational personal and experimental knowledge of Christ which gives freedom from addictions, selfishness, and sin. Ellen White's call for "something more" suggests that traditional educational models fall far short of what God intended. It is in light of her radical vision that we can understand her criticism of amusements, sports, and some academic pursuits. She wants nothing to get in the way of the object of education: the redemption of humanity and its restoration into the image of God (White, 1903, p. 17).

It is useful to contrast this kind of education with secular education. In what ways are the two different? Howard Hendricks states it succinctly: "Secular education seeks to make better, more effective, more successful, more intelligent people. The Christian educator aspires to nothing less than the transformation of a believer into the image of Christ" (Hendricks 1991, p. 15).

Hendricks elaborates that while secular education is driven by reason, Christian education is driven by revelation. Reason alone will never lead you to the resurrection or to sacrificial love. Secular education is concerned with business and money, molecules and matter, people and issues. Christian education is concerned with things that last, such as character and the kingdom of God. Secular education helps a person fit into the world; Christian education helps lift a person above the world. Hendricks comes to the same powerful conclusion as Ellen White: "Christian educators should view themselves as nothing less than disciplers" (Hendricks, 1991, p.17).

In a similar vein, Arthur Holmes, in his classic work on Christian education, (Holmes, 1975) challenges the notion that the Christian college is simply a "defender of the faith." Christian higher education does not exist to "offer a good education plus biblical studies in an

atmosphere of piety.” Neither is our purpose just to “train people for church related vocations.” He shows that neither of these reasons justifies the expense and time of offering a distinctive Christian education. What is unique about a Christian college, according to Holmes, is that it “cultivates the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture” (Holmes, 1975, pp.4-6).

In order for a true integration of faith and learning to take place, however, we have to see a liberal arts education as not simply transmitting content or even values but about the “making of a person” (Holmes, 1975, p. 29). It is about imaging God in every phase of our human existence. A Christian liberal arts education is about “teaching students to be responsible agents in all of life’s relationships, which presupposes our development as reflective and valuing beings” (Holmes, 1975, p.33).

This understanding of Christian higher education as person-making leads Holmes to end his book with a discussion of two significant ingredients to the task: community and experience. Thus Holmes shows that the task of education cannot be confined to the classroom. He argues that young people tend to assimilate values “more from example than from precept, more from their peers than from their elders, and more by being involved than by being spectators” (Holmes, 1975, p.82).

There is clearly a need for values-based education, as emphasized by the works of Holly Thomas Lickona (2004) and Shepard Salls (2007), but values are hard to teach in the classroom. They are usually the result of reflections on life-engagements. When Jesus wanted to teach values, He did not set up a school but a ministry of discipleship. Jesus not only taught His values; He modeled and lived them within a community of believers. He helped His disciples to reflect on those values and fashion them into unflinching principles of behavior tempered by compassion. His classroom was woven into the fabric of their lives.

The need for intentional community and experiential-based learning is critical for Christian higher education. I believe that discipleship pulls together the different strands of what Christian education means. It creates a coherent and intentional process by which students can develop character and values, discover mission and vocation, and reflect critically on faith and culture. This happens from within a community and while engaged in practical life experiences.

Weaknesses of Contemporary Christian Education

How is this view of discipleship-based education different from what currently happens in our classrooms? Much of contemporary Christian education tends to be theoretical, classroom-based and disconnected from student life and community. Teaching students to make wise choices and helping shape their character is considered incidental (although important) to the real task of teaching the subject of the course.

In many Adventist colleges, classes are largely lecture-based with limited opportunities for experiential learning. Spirituality is typically programmed in either classes or worship experiences and community service is largely voluntary or incidental. There are several potential weaknesses to this approach, such as:

1. General education (GE) courses are insular, with each department shaping those courses without reference to a bigger picture or process. There is very little coordination or synergy between departments as to how GE courses are taught or in what sequence they are offered. The broad vision of education is, therefore, lost.
2. The student’s level of character development is often subsidiary to the needs of the course. Very little attention is given to the emotional development of students, and maturity is assumed rather than actively directed and promoted.
3. The focus of GE courses tends to be content or skills based, and by necessity they are introductory. They expand a student’s horizons but generally lack significant depth and substance.
4. Discipline-specific programs (for majors) are often relegated to the student’s final two years, with students feeling overwhelmed and confused by the amount of material they have to cover in order to be competent in their fields.
5. In this approach, faculty and staff are largely disengaged from student’s lives. Interaction is generally limited to the classroom, especially with large GE classes. Since lifestyle and work issues take place outside of the classroom, students quickly learn their own coping mechanisms, which may be totally unrelated to the class content they are learning. Without mentoring, youthful decisions lead to lifetime habits that may

endanger the student's future success, both temporal and eternal. Since many of these decisions are made in the first two years, students are often on their own, drifting between departments, trying to find their major while at the same time making poor choices without guidance.

6. Students fail to find meaningful spiritual or learning community in their first two years. Since they largely interact with strangers in their GE classes and at the closest churches, they have little sense of connection to either their teachers or to their classmates. Peer connections outside the classroom become paramount, with the attendant dangers from this approach.
7. Genuine faith community is often absent. Students experience community through dormitory living that more often than not leads to programmed faith, peer-based decisions, late nights, escapism, and superficial spirituality. Students may make adjustments to behavioral expectations, but true character is seldom developed, and underlying issues such as sexuality and faith development are not addressed. What should be fostered is open dialog in a positive and nurturing faith environment, but this is often neglected or suppressed. The goal of university community should be social adjustment, holistic living, emotional maturity, biblical faith, wise choices, and sound doctrine. What actually happens on campus is quite different.
8. During their university years, students go through an incredibly transformative period. They often decide on their career and calling, develop their belief systems, engage in serious dating and even marriage, make faith commitments, establish their worldview, etc. The need for community, dialog, mentoring, and a sense of mission and values is more critical now than perhaps at any other time of their lives. Yet, most of this formative development takes place *outside the classroom* rather than in it.
9. The net effect of this approach is that students gain knowledge and skills (probably in that order) and awareness of Christian values but often at the expense of holistic living and true Christian character. The liberal arts approach produces broadly knowledgeable students with initial competencies but who may lack substantial faith, emotional maturity, intellectual depth, genuine integrity, and a living connection with Jesus Christ.

It seems clear to me that the time has come for us to reinvent our methodology for achieving the goals of Adventist higher education. Ellen White's original vision for Adventist education needs to be recaptured. We need to bring back an integrated, coherent approach to the task of educating the *person* rather than equipping the *product*. I believe that Jesus' method of discipleship provides the building blocks for the process we need in order to be more effective in achieving the grand purposes of Adventist higher education.

Jesus' Method of Discipleship Education

What was Jesus trying to achieve through his discipleship program, how did he go about it, and what can we learn from it for today's educational process? In this section we will tackle each of these questions, before we compare Jesus' method of discipleship with that of contemporary education.

Understanding Jesus' Discipleship Ministry

Jesus did not invent discipleship, but he did use it in new and powerful ways. Rabbis, in the time of Christ, often had disciples who hoped to one day become teachers themselves. "To an extent, the function of the disciple is similar to that of the rabbinical *talmidim* (cf. 1 Chr. 25:8; RSV "pupil"), who studied the Law under the guidance of a particular teacher; however, akin to the alternate Greek sense of the disciple as an apprentice, these students themselves sought to gain ordination as teachers" (Myers, 1987).

However, Jesus did not simply see his disciples as learners but as committed believers who were dedicated not just to the Master's teachings but to the Master Himself. As Dwight Pentecost points out, "in discussing the question of discipleship.... We are dealing with a man's relationship to Jesus Christ as his teacher, his Master, and his Lord" (Pentecost, 1971, p. 14).

We see this element of discipleship when Jesus asks his followers to count the cost of commitment, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). The disciples who follow Jesus most closely are able to declare, "See, we have left everything and followed you" (Mark 10:28). Jesus asked his disciples to not only be learners who were radically committed to him, but he

also invited them into a ministry, into a missionary calling. “The disciple of Jesus is called to serve other members of the eschatological community (cf. Mk 1:31) and, through the missionary enterprise, those outside the community as well” (Sweetland, 1987, p. 35).

The disciples were sent on missionary journeys (first the twelve, then the seventy) and daily participated in Jesus’ mission. Jesus not only announced the kingdom, he also invited his followers to join him in inviting others to join the kingdom life.

It is also clear from how Jesus disciplined others that he saw discipleship as a process rather than an event. From the call of the first four disciples in John 1 we see a gradual growth in both the disciples’ understanding of Jesus’ mission as well as their ability to participate more effectively in it. We see them moving from unbelief to belief, from brashness to humility, from anger to love, from prejudice to hospitality, from fear of the leaders to holy boldness, from position-seeking to readiness for persecution. A close look at Jesus’ model of ministry indicates that he was molding and shaping character rather than simply transmitting truth. Michael Wilkins summarizes it well: “Discipleship and discipling mean living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image” (Wilkins, 1992, p.42).

Lastly, I see Jesus uniquely adapting the discipleship model by calling his followers into community not only with himself but with each other. He declared that this was the ultimate fruit of discipleship, for “by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Michael Wilkins notes that the plural form of disciples is almost always used because “individual *disciples* are always seen in conjunction with the *community of disciples*, whether as Jesus’ intimate companions or as the church” (Wilkins, 1992, p. 40).

I believe that Jesus also draws on a richer tradition than just that of rabbinical discipleship, for I see in his ministry echoes of the schools of the prophets. Among the Israelites, these schools were set up as “a barrier against the wide-spread corruption, to provide for the moral and spiritual welfare of the youth, and to promote the future prosperity of the nation by furnishing it with men qualified to act in the fear of God as leaders and counselors” (White, 1894, p. 61). The biblical model of discipleship is to equip young people for positions of leadership by associating them with mentors who can help train their characters, nurture them in community, and engage them in God’s mission to the world.

In harmony with Jesus’ method of discipleship and the intent of the schools of the prophets, Ellen White gives an appeal to Adventist education:

Our schools must be more like the schools of the prophets. They should be training schools, where the students may be brought under the discipline of Christ and learn of the Great Teacher. They should be family schools, where every student will receive special help from his teachers as the members of the family should receive help in the home. Tenderness, sympathy, unity, and love are to be cherished. There should be unselfish, devoted, faithful teachers, teachers who are constrained by the love of God and who, with hearts full of tenderness, will have a care for the health and happiness of the students. (White, 1901, p152).

The Purpose of Jesus’ Discipleship

It is clear that Jesus made discipleship a priority in his ministry, but why? Surely it would have been more effective to generate a mass movement of revival? What purpose did Jesus have in mind when He made discipleship His preferred means of accomplishing His goal? While Jesus did preach to the masses, Robert E. Coleman argues that Jesus’ primary concern was with his disciples: “His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes but with men whom the multitudes would follow.... The initial objective of Jesus’ plan was to enlist men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his work after he returned to the Father” (Coleman, 1993, p.27).

Coleman explains Jesus’ method further: “One cannot transform the world except as individuals in the world are transformed, and individuals cannot be changed except as they are molded in the hands of the Master. The necessity is apparent not only to select a few helpers, but also to keep the group small enough to be able to work effectively with them ”(Coleman, 1993, p.27).

This was the essence of Jesus’ approach to ministry. He knew that in order to be effective in the long run, in order to transform the world, he needed to first transform a few select individuals—future leaders. Discipleship was at the heart of what made Jesus such a revolutionary. Coleman concludes: “Though he did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, so that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of his strategy” (Coleman, 1993, p.30).

Jesus' program of discipleship was remarkably successful. If you think of his starting material, it's clear that these were not the brightest or the most talented students. They were certainly not the kind of group that I would have chosen for such an important mission! "Yet Jesus saw in these simple men the potential of leadership for the Kingdom" (Coleman, 1993, p.26). As these disciples were transformed through discipleship, they were able to reach "all nations" with the gospel of Christ and his kingdom. They moved from being fearful and hesitant to being bold and unwavering in their integrity and commitment. They turned the world upside down.

How did Jesus go about turning his raw material into world transformers? We catch a hint of his approach in Mark 3:14: "He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be *with him* and he might *send them* out to preach" (English Standard Version). Jesus appointed a community to be *with him*, to experience the kingdom by being part of his life and mission. He also engaged them in service so that he could *send them* to share the good news of the kingdom with others. The closest description of Jesus' method of discipleship that I can come up with is *missional community*. He brought them into community and he empowered them for mission. "Amazing as it may seem, all Jesus did to teach these men his way was to draw them close to himself. He was his own school and curriculum," (Coleman, 1993, p.33).

As Christ's ministry became more intense and drew to a close, he spent more time with his disciples, not less. This was particularly true after the crowds attempted to make Jesus king (John 6) and for much of the last year of his life. During this time period, we see Jesus withdrawing from the multitudes to focus on an intensive training of the disciples. One example of this is found after the raising of Lazarus. "Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples" (John 11:54).

Jesus ate with his disciples, slept with them, talked with them, and prayed with them.

They watched him perform miracles and teach about the kingdom, and he often drew them into discussions through his perceptive questions. Their communal life in the mission of the kingdom was the basis of his education, and it appears to have been the highest priority of his active ministry.

While we obviously have to contextualize Jesus' approach to discipleship, since some aspects of Jesus' discipleship model are obviously related to the culture of his day, we must nevertheless recognize that Jesus established discipleship as a mandate for the Christian faith (Matthew 28:19).

The Process of Discipleship

In the biblical model, discipleship occurred when a community of thirteen engaged in a missional task and reflected on that mission. Jesus, as teacher, also modeled a way of life which provided the disciples with the attitudes and tools needed to be effective representatives.

We also see that Jesus ministered to different groups in different ways. To the crowds he spoke in parables and performed healings. Some of these became his disciples, and he was able to speak more directly about his mission to this group. A select group of disciples were more constantly connected with him, and these he sent on a mission. The Twelve he associated most directly with himself, and of these, three were particularly close to Him and became leaders in the Christian faith.

Not only did Jesus approach the groups differently, but he also had a clear process in mind for how discipleship would take place. A.B. Bruce in his classic study, *The Training of the Twelve*, looks at three stages in the history of the apostles. First, they were simply believers in Jesus as the Christ and were his occasional companions (John 1-4). In the second stage, they abandoned their secular occupations (e.g. Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9) and were continually with Christ. In the last stage, they were chosen by Jesus from the mass of his followers and formed into a select band to be trained to be leaders in the church (Bruce, 1971, p. 11-12).

So we see that Jesus gradually led his disciples into a closer association with himself, but he also dealt with the different groups that he met in different ways. Wilkins notes that Jesus gave parables that had one intention for the crowd (hiding the mysteries of the kingdom) and another for the disciples (revealing the mysteries of the kingdom). Discipleship teaching that is directed at the crowds deals mainly with the act of becoming a disciple (evangelism); whereas teaching directed to the disciples themselves deals with Christian growth (Wilkins, 1992).

Thus, for each group, Jesus tried to bring them closer to the discipleship core. The crowds were called to commitment, and the committed were called to a commission. Of those commissioned, some were consecrated to leadership, and of those, some would form his inner circle. In turn, each of the discipleship groups would minister to each other as well as to the crowds, thereby completing the discipleship process. Those who became disciples were called to make disciples of others, as Jesus commanded so directly in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19, 20).

If Jesus engaged different groups in different ways, then I believe that the onus is on educators to make sure that while we teach the multitudes, we also have effective methods to help people transition into missional community. We have to engage our audiences differently. We must teach the crowds, but we also need to have smaller groups of students that we are personally discipling and growing deeper with: students who can in turn disciple others.

We can quickly tell if discipleship is happening by looking at the fruit of our programs. Do people leave our institutions as both discipled and disciplers of others?

What specific steps did Jesus take to make disciples out of his followers? I suggest the following based on my study of the gospels:

1. *Confrontation*. Before a person would follow Christ, they were often engaged in a personal confrontation with him where they had to grapple with the power of his presence in their lives.
2. *Call*. Sometimes Jesus would call a person immediately, other times he would call repeatedly and there were times when his calling was delayed. At some point, the call would come, first to embrace salvation and then to embrace the mission. With 4 of the 12 apostles, we see a repeated call into deeper discipleship and mission.
3. *Commitment*. Once the call came, the disciple was asked to make a commitment, often a radical commitment, surrendering all their worldly possessions and joining Jesus in his mission.
4. *Competence*. The disciples who had lived with Jesus and seen Jesus’ life modeled to them were now equipped to go out and engage in the task of mission. This was really an internship under Jesus’ supervision where they returned to tell Jesus their experiences and to receive counsel from him. Jesus was helping them grow from commitment to competence as a Christian missionary.
5. *Commission*. Finally, the disciples were equipped to operate under the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than under the direct supervision of Jesus. They had now become both disciplers and trainers of others. Rather than making more disciples to be like them, they were making disciples to be like the Master. They were to baptize and teach as they took the gospel to all nations.

The goal of discipleship is to create a mature and competent member of one’s community, who understands the goals and vision of the community, who effectively contributes to society, who lives out community values, and who also has the ability to inspire and teach others to be disciples. From a spiritual perspective, a disciple is a person who has a love relationship with God, reflects Christ in their daily living, and participates in the mission of the church through obedience and sacrifice.

Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education

At the beginning of this paper we discussed the need for Adventist higher education to be reinvented, suggesting that Jesus’ model of discipleship would be the key to re-envisioning our task. In this final section of the paper, I will suggest ways in which this model can be implemented and also compare his model of discipleship with contemporary theories of education.

The Need for Character Development

Ellen White clearly saw the need for character development, but how can we enable it to happen through the process of discipleship? First, we need to be intentional. We cannot expect character development to happen by itself. We have to start looking at the emotional, ethical, and spiritual needs of those who are entering our universities and colleges. How can we offer age-appropriate intentionality to grow young people into followers of Christ? How can we help them understand the kingdom of God and the mission of the church? How can we help them overcome the spiritual and emotional bankruptcy of their families, their churches, and their past?

Each stage of the GE program, as well as each department, needs to have a model of learning whereby the character development of students can be nurtured. It may even be possible to have an honors program that uniquely helps young people become disciples of Christ and that follows Christ's process of disciple-making (see the proposals later in this paper).

The Need for Community

Another critical aspect to discipleship is the development of community. Since students will look for community anyway (often through peers or the internet), we need to be proactive in involving students in genuine community. This means connecting them to a local church. This means professors spending time with students in small groups. This means spending more time with the students outside of the classroom than we currently do. It means becoming a "Facebook" friend or starting a "Twitter" account. It means helping students to understand relationships and giving them advice on how relationships work. It means "hanging out" in addition to lecturing. It means having students write journals and share their hearts with us. It means experiencing true biblical community.

The Need for Mission

The whole purpose of biblical discipleship is so that mission can be achieved, God can be glorified, and the gospel proclaimed. Unless we have a clear mission for our teaching and unless we are training our students to think with a missional mindset, we have failed in our task. Students are to see the world in its need and be inspired to share their resources and time. They will likely only do this when they see this modeled in our lives. When they see us passionate about the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden and the lost, this will ignite a passion in them. They also need to see how we apply our Christian worldview to our particular disciplines. They need to see that we believe in the mission of the church and in evangelism. They need to engage in mission and reflect on mission.

Experiential Learning

One of the most obvious aspects of Jesus' discipleship is that it engaged his followers in experiential learning or what Stephen Kemp calls "situated learning" (Kemp, 2010). David Kolb popularized experiential learning in order to "emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process" (Kolb, 1984, p20). Kolb drew originally on a thesis first articulated by the Russian cognitive theorist L.S. Vygotsky, "that learning from experience is the process whereby human development occurs" (Kolb, p. xi). This is similar to the popular idea that if you want to teach a person to swim, you don't do it by simply giving a theory of swimming. They need to jump in the water! In the same way, trying to teach a person the Christian life by sitting in a classroom discussing it is obviously inadequate. We can learn from Jesus' method of discipleship by helping students to engage in actual life experiences and then to meaningfully reflect on those very experiences.

Kolb suggests that we move from concrete experience, to reflective observation, to abstract conceptualization, to active experimentation, and then repeat the cycle. Thus we move from experience to knowledge back to experience. Jesus certainly engaged his followers in experiential learning. Often he would allow an experience to happen; he would then would ask penetrating questions about their experience and ultimately lead them back to engaging in that experience in a more meaningful way. See Appendix A for my approach to integrating experience and knowledge.

Service learning is a great tool for this and one that is gaining popularity. However, I think that much of service learning can end up being little more than community service with an essay. We need to make service learning a lifestyle by which students enter into genuine community with others and where they can meaningfully reflect on their incarnational experiences.

Implementing the Discipleship Model at Southern

Here are some suggestions for how we could go about implementing a discipleship program at your institution of higher learning. Some of these suggestions have been implemented at Southern Adventist University (where I work) and some of them are still in the idea stage and need further development.

1. *Develop a cohort system*

There are several ways this could be structured. One potential way is to have students sign up for their cohort when they first choose a major and then meet once a week for the rest of their four years. If each semester is worth ½ an academic credit (1 credit per year) then it would only take four credits to implement this program. Of course, as people change majors, this would cause a change in the makeup of the cohorts, but a sense of community could still be developed. Another way, would be to have a freshmen cohort where students spend one semester together. At Southern Adventist University (Southern), we call this class, “Southern Connections” and it is worth 1-credit.

2. *Implement small groups*

Small groups could be developed as a way to replace or complement the existing worship system. Students would be able to participate in these small groups and use a core curriculum that would achieve some of the outcomes of discipleship. At Southern, we call these groups “Life Groups” where the focus is on conversation and spirituality. Life group leaders are assigned a coach to support and mentor them and these coaches meet weekly with the chaplain’s office for advice and direction. Students receive worship credit, but the Life Groups are a complement to the existing worship program.

3. *Start a semester program of evangelism*

Students could begin a discipleship track that would launch them into community, mission, and discipleship. This program would begin with a cohort of students that would take common classes for a semester, engage in Bible studies and community service, and also experience some reaping through a public evangelism series. Students would be inspired by experiencing a shortened version of the complete evangelism and discipleship cycle. Students would also be introduced to key spiritual disciplines and would grapple with their calling in a nurturing and evangelistic environment.

At Southern, this program is called SALT (Soulwinning and Leadership Training) and is available to students from any discipline who wish to take it. The program is 16 credits, but students can spread it out over more than one semester and many of the credits count toward their regular general education requirements (especially in religion).

4. *Develop a cohort honors society*

Unlike the generic cohort system, the honors system suggests that discipleship should be voluntary rather than mandatory. Those who join could be formed into cohorts, and students would need to fulfill requirements in order to stay in the discipleship program. An internship in one’s discipline could be part of these requirements. The focus of the honors society would be less academic and more personal in nature, helping students to develop the skills, knowledge, and character traits that they need to be effective disciples of Christ and more competent members of their communities. A process of discipleship could be followed based on the biblical model of discipleship:

- a. *Confrontation*. Year 1. Students would experience God and His Word for themselves. The environment for this would be fostered experientially through a retreat where students understand both their own worldview and the picture of God in the Bible.
- b. *Call*. Years 1-2. Students would be led to understand and respond to God’s call in their lives. Examining world and community needs, seeing God in Scripture, engaging in service, and reflecting on that service could be part of how this is done.
- c. *Commitment*. Years 2-3. Students would be led to make a commitment to

- discipleship, service, and mission and would engage actively in that mission.
- d. *Competence*. Years 3-4. Students would be taught through internships and classes how to competently serve in their disciplines and in their local communities. Competence would include knowledge, skills, values, and emotional maturity.
 - e. *Commission*. The achievement of the first four items would result in the commission being realized. Students would become effective disciplers of others and leaders in their local communities fulfilling the biblical mandate.
 - f.

5. *Develop a discipleship approach to all classes*

An integrated approach to discipleship would see this as a byproduct of all classes on the campus. Different General Education classes would offer unique aspects of helping students become disciples, giving them the aspects of the discipleship process as outlined in above.

6. *Change the way religion credits are offered*

Some of the religion credits can be offered as cohort classes, such as Christian Spirituality or Life and Teachings of Jesus. These classes could even be offered by other departments who co-teach them with religion professors.

7. *Offer internships*

Experiential learning and hands-on mentoring in effective discipleship would be best done through internships where professors can be involved in teaching and modeling their discipline.

8. *Implement service learning*

Since discipleship is developed through engagement in a community, the service learning proposals could be adjusted to provide a way for more effective mentoring and community involvement to take place. Also, a missional aspect of service needs to be developed so that it is part of the big picture of how a student relates to both their discipline and their faith.

9. *Engage students in faith communities*

Students should learn how to actively engage in both the mission and the worship of their local church. There should be small groups where dialog and reflection can take place. Professors should be more involved in the practical aspects of students' lives and there should be a way for spirituality to be related to heart issues that students face. Students should leave Southern with the spiritual wisdom, emotional health, maturity and sense of love and compassion that should characterize every disciple of Christ.

Conclusion

It is time to reinvent Adventist education. I believe that discipleship is the best way to do this. We need to bring back missional community into education. We need teachers who are consecrated and commissioned and who can engage students in the higher, broader ways of true Adventist education. We need to keep as our focus the training of the person rather than the equipping of the product. Our goal should be to make disciples of all nations.

Appendix A: The Learning Process

As an example of how to integrate theory and experience from within a classroom setting and to approach both theory and experience from a biblical worldview, I have developed a four-stage process of teaching. I am indebted to the work of both Thomas Groome (1980) and Don Browning (1991), who first stimulated my thinking in this area. The diagram below gives

the three areas to be examined and the four-step process of examining those areas.

In the first stage, we engage in *praxis* – reflective questions about how we understand and practice our Christianity. We thus begin in the present with student experiences, which is the area with which they can most naturally relate. This is a time when we look at our current paradigms and how we understand them.

Our next stage is to move from the present to the past, and especially our spiritual past. We try to formulate questions that we can then ask of the Bible and our religious tradition – our *story*. But we also move from the past back to the present. In essence, we are trying to apply the Bible to our everyday lives. We examine what the Bible and other historically important texts have to say about the topic we are discussing. We do hands-on Bible study in the classroom and use group dialogue or a PowerPoint presentation to discuss the relevant points. We move from the text (the story) back to our praxis, as we look for ways to be true to that story in our everyday lives.

In the third phase, we look to the future and ask how we should live – the *vision* of what God is calling us to become. I allow students to engage in describing what could change if we actually lived in harmony with our biblical story. This is largely an idealistic stage, describing a different alternate reality.

In the final stage, we ask how this vision can be practically lived out. We move from the future back into the present. And we use our experience in the present to critique both our understandings of the vision as well as our understanding of the Bible. But ultimately, it is the Bible that challenges our practices and gives us an alternative vision for the future.

A practical example would be as follows: The issue might be a Christian’s relationship to sexuality. In the class we will begin by looking at some of the contemporary issues in sexuality. Students have an opportunity to explore how their own sexual identity and views of sex have developed and to raise the questions that they have about sexuality. This may result in a discussion about masturbation, internet pornography addictions, sex before marriage, homosexuality, etc. We also discuss the practical implications of our current worldviews.

We then take these questions to the Bible and other Christian writings (including the writings of Ellen White) and look at the historical answers that have been given. We attempt to understand how these authoritative traditions should shape our views of sexuality and we also investigate God’s purposes in making us sexual. This often results in an idealized vision of sexuality, but also inspires students to see an alternative reality than the one prescribed to them by contemporary society.

In the next phase, we then try to give this vision “feet” and to look at practical applications. Dealing with the practical challenges of sexuality helps us to balance our ideals of sexual holiness against the realities of our sexuality in a sinful world. We deal with the “how to” in this phase, as students deal with the pragmatic challenges of this alternate worldview.

The final phase is generally one that takes place outside of the classroom. Students return in later weeks and share their struggles with living out the Christian vision in their lives. We discuss what could be done differently and they share their journeys and reflections. The class also has periodic reviews where we try to put the pieces of the big picture together. The full picture of this four stage process is given below.

Christian Religious Education Process using Browning and Groome

<u>Stage One</u>	<u>Stage Two</u>	<u>Stage Three</u>	<u>Stage Four</u>
<i>Descriptive</i>	<i>Historical</i>	<i>Systematic</i>	<i>Critical</i>
<i>Praxis to Story</i>	<i>Story to Praxis</i>	<i>Vision to Praxis</i>	<i>Praxis to Vision</i>
Analysis of paradigm and worldview	Theological ethical inquiry	Comparative analysis leading to vision	Critical reflective process - feedback
<i>Horizon analysis</i>	<i>Theological analysis</i>	<i>Vision analysis</i>	<i>Dialectical analysis</i>
1. Students understand their history and identity	1. Students investigate the Bible and other historically	1. Students critique their current sociological reality	1. Students attempt to live out the Biblical vision as

and how their worldviews developed.	important traditions and texts.	using newfound theological analysis.	identified in stage three.
2. Students analyze and critique their worldviews.	2. Students are helped to develop answers to the questions that were raised in stage one.	2. Students analyze how current realities critique the theological answers they have developed.	2. As they live it out, students raise new questions which help to redefine the vision and its practice.
3. Students describe contemporary practices and raise questions about those practices.	3. Class engages in critical analysis of the responses that have been developed.	3. Students develop creative possibilities for how to practically live out the vision.	3. Students continuously engage in critical reflection on renewed praxis.
4. Students formulate questions that they would like to ask of the Christian texts.	4. Class engages in creative possibilities for answering the questions based on their understandings.	4. Students develop a pragmatic theological direction (hermeneutic arising from and applied to the situation).	

This model is constructed, as mentioned earlier, on the work on Don Browning and Thomas Groome. Each of them has a dialectical approach to education that brings out the experiential and chronological components of living out one's faith.

Theoretical Foundations of Model

Don Browning is one of the most significant North American theologians in the debate over the nature of practical theology. His work shows two main concerns: the application of hermeneutics to theological disciplines, and the relation of church praxis to society.

Browning builds on the work of David Tracy, who in turn revises concepts from the work of Paul Tillich. Tillich believed that theology is a correlation of existential questions that emerge from cultural experience and answers from the Christian message (Tillich, 1951, p. 36). Tracy envisions theology, therefore, "as a mutually critical dialogue between interpretations of the Christian message and interpretations of contemporary cultural experiences and practices" (1975, p. 46).

Christian theology thus becomes a critical dialogue between the implicit questions and explicit answers of contemporary cultural experiences and practices. According to Tracy, the Christian theologian must in principle have this critical conversation with "all other answers," from wherever they come. Tracy explains, "Practical theology is the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian faith with the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation" (Tracy, 1983, p. 76).

Browning develops Tracy's approach, but criticizes him for beginning with a fundamental theology concerned primarily with cognitive and theological verification. He suggests what he calls *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1991). This theology comprises three movements, the third of which is basically a synthesis and development of the first two. Using terms from the theological disciplines which are common to us, but employing them in

radically new ways, Browning describes a revised critical correlational theology (1991, p. 46) which allows for a critical theory of praxis.

The three movements Browning outlines are descriptive, historical and systematic theology. Each of these is a process in developing a critical and theological understanding of the nature of church practices.

Descriptive Theology

Browning describes the aim of descriptive theology as being to describe the contemporary theory-laden practices that give rise to practical questions that generate all theological reflection. Browning uses a philosophical concept derived from Gadamer to describe this kind of theology.

To some extent, this first movement is horizon analysis: it attempts to analyse the horizon of cultural and religious meanings that surround our religious and secular practices. To describe these practices and their surrounding meanings is itself a multidimensional hermeneutic enterprise or dialogue (1991, p. 47).

This movement of theology, according to Browning, begins a process of dialogue between the theoretical world of the scholar and the practical world of the Christian community. The scholar helps the community to better understand the meanings that guide its actions, while the scholar is forced to grapple with new questions arising from the actions of the community. Browning's concern is to show how theology needs to be hermeneutically oriented and thus fundamentally linked with community praxis. He outlines the hermeneutical task as follows:

The researcher brings his or her pre-understanding into the dialogue with the actions, meanings, and pre-understandings of the subjects. Social-systemic, material, and psychological determinants are traced and explained as well as possible, but they are placed within the larger set of meanings that give them direction in the scheme of human action.... Practical theology describes practices in order to discern the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our action and provoke the questions that animate our practical thinking (1991, p. 47, 48).

Historical Theology

Browning asks this fundamental question: "What do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history really imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible?" (1991, p. 49).

The questions formulated in a description of the faith community's practices are now brought to the normative texts. This kind of theology is called "historical" because it refers to the two normative "texts" of Christian communities: Scripture and tradition. Both of these are historical in nature. However, Browning hints at the dual nature of tradition when he relates its social and theological aspects. The very nature of historical study brings us back to the hermeneutical dimension in which the interpretive evaluation of the normative "texts" has implications for our practices.

Systematic Theology

Seen from the perspective of Gadamer's hermeneutics, this movement is the fusion of horizons between the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of normative Christian texts.

Browning sums up the nature of this final movement by stating that the systematic character of this movement "comes from its effort to investigate general themes of the gospel that respond to the general questions that characterize situations of the present" (1991, p. 51). It is at this stage that Browning relies on Tracy's critical correlational theory. Praxis and theory are interlinked in order to generate critical reflection and purposeful change. Praxis, for Browning, is connected with a community's meaning-laden practices, while theory relates to the normative value of Christian traditions.

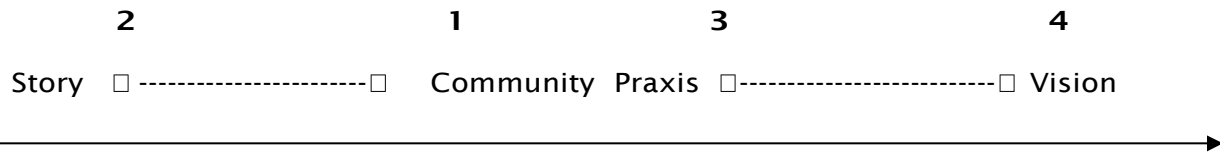
The value of Browning's approach is that it demonstrates how a

hermeneutical understanding can be applied to practical theology. He also shows the need for practical theology to be fundamentally linked to the community praxis and theology which it hopes to critique. Finally, he outlines an approach which enables sociological understandings to be used from within the domain of practical theology.

Present Dialectical Hermeneutics (Thomas Groome)

Groome, on the other hand, sees a four-part process (present dialectical hermeneutics) as one that would enable critique and vision.

Groome’s Theological Analysis



Orientation to Future

Groome defines his shared praxis approach as “a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith” (Groome 1980, p. 184). He explains that “shared praxis takes place in a situation of group dialogue. Shared in the dialogue is an articulation of critical reflection upon one’s present active engagement in the world as a Christian. That present engagement is in fact the embodiment of one’s own story and vision, and critical reflection upon it takes place in light of the Christian communities’ Story and the response which that Story invites.... The *telos* or end of it all is further Christian praxis that is faithful to the Story and creative of its Vision” (Groome, 1980, p. 184).

Story to Praxis

Story is a source of critique for the present (story to present). It affirms, makes us aware of shortcomings, and calls us to live more faithfully.

Praxis to Story

We bring our present praxis to the story, bringing consciousness, insights, and needs to the appropriation of the Story—what does the present praxis do to and ask of the Story?

Vision to Praxis

Vision functions as a measure of our present praxis. We can discern what to affirm in our present historical praxis. The Vision of the Kingdom enables us to discern the limitations in our present praxis that are not of the Kingdom, and calls us to a Christian praxis that will be more creative of the Kingdom and more faithful to God’s invitation. Groome states: “I intend the metaphor *Vision* to be a comprehensive representation of the lived response which the Christian Story invites and of the promise God makes in that Story.... By Vision, then, I mean the Kingdom of God, God’s vision for creation” (1980, p. 193).

Praxis to Vision

Vision, for Groome, is an open future being shaped in part by present praxis. However, he adds that our knowing of it is possible only as we shape it.

Groome’s approach has similar aspects to Browning’s in that he, too, is looking for links between theory, praxis, church and society. Thus, his methodology has the same dialectical feel as Browning’s. However, Groome deals with the important aspect of “vision” as a critical corrective to theology. Vision

implies an almost extra-theoretical element in which the student moves beyond history to eschatological fulfilment.

Comparison of Groome and Browning

Groome and Browning are significant in that they deal with many of the dilemmas pointed out in our earlier discussion: (a) the need to be cognizant of the interrelation between church and society, (b) awareness of the cultural-linguistic nature of religious society, (c) faithfulness to the Christian proclamation of the event of the Word of God, (d) theology as a form of critical renewal for the Christian church, and (e) theology that arises from and is based in the community of faith.

Browning gives an interdisciplinary approach to practical theology which incorporates not only the different theological disciplines, but also suggests ways for practical theology to relate to other scientific disciplines. Groome gives us two additions: he outlines a way for a *group* to participate in praxis renewal, and he also relates the importance of *vision* as an eschatological reference point for critical renewal.

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