



Scott R. Ward

A Three-story Approach to Teaching Scripture

Children are not born Christian. Nor are they born Seventh-day Adventists. They must be led to Jesus individually and personally. Discipleship doesn't happen by simply being in a Christian environment—there must be a very intentional process for every child. Teaching children only about doctrine does not make them Christian or Adventist, either—it can give them a wonderful picture of who God is, but it cannot replace a personal relationship with Jesus. In my experience, it is only when the beautiful gospel story of who Jesus is and what He has done is presented to the children and young adults in our schools and classrooms that they will be open to giving their lives to Jesus. Then, embracing the lovely truths our denomination holds dear will nurture that relationship into the fullest life that can be had both now and in eternity.

The Importance of Story

In my 31 years of ministry experience, running student colporteur programs, children's ministries, youth ministries, young-adult ministries, and yes, even teaching at the seminary, I have found that most of the young people I have encountered within Adventism seem to understand the doctrines of our church better than they understand the gospel. I once even served under a senior pastor who said, "The gospel? The gospel is for other Christians to teach—we have the truth. We will teach the truth!"

But the truth is that worldview forms from the earliest moments of a child's life. These significant developments need to happen at each stage of life, at home and at school, for children to build a strong foundation

for the correct doctrine to stand upon so that they can develop a healthy personal relationship with Jesus. This perspective is why we must begin leading our children to God from birth—the teaching of the great *Shema*¹—the foundation of Jewish scripture. We must teach them at home and away from home, when we lie down and when we rise, and as we are going along the way. And the best way to teach our students—educating them in the ways of the Lord—is to follow the tradition of Jesus and other great teachers who taught with stories.

Examples in Scripture

In establishing a biblical narrative approach for educating young people from their earliest years, we can learn much from the apostle John, who wrote:

"We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy" (1 John 1:1-4, NLT).²

This Scripture passage is John's personal testimony. It helps to explain why he wrote his gospel stories the way he did. It perhaps even helps us understand why he would later use vivid imagery to describe in great

detail the movie-like narratives given to him in vision on the Isle of Patmos and recorded in the Book of Revelation. John desired through his writings to communicate the story of Jesus and how believers' lives can become a part of that story.

One of the most transparent and valuable narratives I have used in this approach to Scripture is in John 1:35 to 39—the calling of the first disciples. I have preached this passage at weddings, every baptismal class I've taught, countless sermons, and the seminary classroom. My job as a seminary professor is to teach my students how to reach children by partnering with church schools. To do that, I must set the example of using narrative if I expect them to do the same because I understand that they will more likely do more of what I “do” than of what I “say.” So, this passage is the one I always share when discussing how to disciple children in the tradition of the great *Shema*:

“The following day John was again standing with two of his disciples. As Jesus walked by, John looked at him and declared, ‘Look! There is the Lamb of God!’ When John’s two disciples heard this, they followed Jesus.

“Jesus looked around and saw them following. ‘What do you want?’ he asked them. “They replied, ‘Rabbi’ (which means ‘Teacher’), ‘where are you staying?’

“‘Come and see,’ he said. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon when they went with him to the place where he was staying, and they remained with him the rest of the day” (John 1:35-39).

The invitation is to come and see. It is to come and live. It is to come and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, learning His ways and following His example. It seems interesting to me that much of Scripture and almost all the teachings of Jesus are in narrative form that actually “show” us how to live. Yet, the majority of what has been taught in many Adventist classrooms and from many Adventist pulpits historically has tended to be more doctrinal in nature, tending more to weaving a variety of Scriptures together to form teachings rather than teaching through stories. Thankfully, this is changing in some places, especially with the Encounter Bible Curriculum.³ However, we still have a long way to go, so setting forth this approach to Scripture

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throughout all subjects and in the hidden curriculum of our schools is very important.

How We Lost Our Way

Have you ever thought about the stories of the deep, passionate love that the Millerite founders of our denomination had for Jesus? Think about what kind of passion it must have taken to sell all your earthly possessions because you are so excited to have the opportunity to be with Jesus. Imagine what it would take to give up all you have worked for your entire life. What were their devotional lives like? What habits lit such passion? I think we have a general idea that they were passionate, but I want to understand more fully “how” they fueled this enthusiasm and kept it alive. We must remember that this fervor was already in place during the great religious awakening in America in the mid-1800s when the Millerite movement took place.

This great passion for Jesus led to the discovery of our denomination’s doctrinal truths—not the other way around. I have a hard time believing all those sacrifices were made out of religious duty—it’s much more likely they were made out of passionate love for Jesus, just like the New Testament apostles who turned the world upside down because of their profound, loving experiences with Jesus and their subsequent on-fire relationships with Him.

The core problem I see with the current approach often taken to leading young people to Christ is that although we have faithfully kept the great truths discovered during our denominations founding, we have somehow forgotten the passionate, on-fire gospel context that made the discovery of these truths possible. This is why we have a hard time sharing the gospel—even with our own children—because we are focused on holding up the pillars of truth rather than holding up Jesus, who *is* “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Did you notice that the “way” comes before the truth? And the way I read it—*way and life*—both strongly refer to relationship theology and discipleship.

I love the doctrines of our church that we refer to as “the Truth”—they are critically important because they paint the most beautiful and compelling picture of who God is and why we should love Him—but if we fail to put the overwhelming emphasis on Jesus Himself, the

truth becomes irrelevant to the people we are trying to reach—including children in our schools. I see this as a significant challenge to our churches and schools today—to put the gospel foundation back under the truth, so it can stand firm and stand tall again.

How to Find Our Way

How do we put the gospel foundation back in place? The proper hermeneutic, for me, is a narrative, gospel-based hermeneutic, that is, *relationship theology*—the story of God’s love—which lays a strong foundation for discipleship. Interestingly, it seems that Ellen White set this example herself by writing on the life of Christ and telling the stories of His ministry more than she wrote on any other topic.⁴ Additionally, her best-selling series, *Conflict of the Ages*, tells story after story showing how God’s story can mingle with human stories in the greatest story ever told—the story of redemption.

So, as we continue to look at stories, we must remember that discipleship needs to happen according to the *Shema* found in Deuteronomy 6—every day, all day long, as children are learning about their world. If we teach them the ways of God and share the stories of His love, that will win their minds and prevail. But, on the other hand, if we fail to teach the children enrolled in Adventist schools the stories of God daily, then the stories the world is telling—through smartphones, computers, and movies, and in other innumerable ways and means—will take precedence. In society today, where in many families, both parents have to work, it is more important than ever that church leaders and educational administrators work together to advocate and support putting our children in places where they can be discipled daily by loving Adventist Christians who are teaching from a gospel

worldview as a foundation for life and truth. This is the only way we can hope to keep our kids with us in this world and in the world to come.

It is essential to clearly understand that every environment that children are in attempts to disciple them—there are no neutral environments in the world. Businesses want to disciple us into materialism, atheists want to disciple us into godlessness, Hollywood wants to disciple us into hedonism, and so on. Especially in a capitalistic society, everyone seems to be

Suggested Additional Readings

Articles

Barry Hill and Phil Fitzsimmons, “What Five Students of the *Encounter* Adventist Bible Curriculum Taught Us About Their Spirituality,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 83:3 (2021): 4-9: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae202183030406.pdf>.

Barbara J. Fisher, “Age-appropriate Experiences and Rituals That Help Students Encounter God, Part I,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:1 (January–March 2020): 12-17: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae202082011206.pdf>.

_____, “Age-appropriate Experiences and Rituals That Help Students Encounter God, Part II,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:2 (April–June 2020): 4-8: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae202082020405.pdf>.

_____, “The Four H Teaching Strategy—An Interactive, Multisensory Approach to Teaching Bible,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 78:5 (Summer 2016): 16-26: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201678051611.pdf>.

_____, “Bible Stories in the Classroom: The Why and the How,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 77:1 (October/November 2014): 24-31: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201477012408.pdf>.

Beverly Christian, “Values Education and Faith Formation—A Neat Fit or More?” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 77:1 (October/November 2014): 16-21: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201477011606.pdf>.

Glynis Bradfield et al., “Together Growing Fruitful Disciples Framework,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 74:5 (Summer 2012): 19-23: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201274051905.pdf>.

_____, “The Growing Disciples Inventory—Assessing the Spiritual Development Goals of Christian Education,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 74:5 (Summer 2012): 24-29: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201274052406.pdf>.

Books

Barbara Fisher, *Developing a Faith-based Education: A Teacher’s Manual* (Sydney, Australia: David Barlow Publishing, 2010).

Donna J. Habernicht and Larry Burton, *Teaching the Faith: An Essential Guide for Buioing Faith-shaped Kids* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2004).

Resources

Encounter Adventist Curriculum—Bible <https://encounter.adventisteducation.org/index.html>.

wanting to sell us whatever it is that they are producing to increase their bottom line by trying to tell us stories about how happy we will be if we buy into their philosophy of life. If our young people cannot see how the story of Scripture fits into the story they are living daily, they will have great difficulty seeing the importance and relevance of being Christian. The competing stories the world is telling will most likely prevail.

With this in mind, the narrative is the primary hermeneutic I'm focusing on concerning working with young people. Jens Brockmeier and Hanna Meretoja agree with this hermeneutic when they say, "we propose viewing narrative as a hermeneutic practice in itself, a practice of meaning-making. This practice—or perhaps better, this plethora of practices—is of crucial significance for complex processes of interpretation that underlie, for instance, our ideas of self and identity."⁵ This is especially important to remember, considering that finding one's identity is one of the primary tasks that young people face, and our goal is to help them find this identity in Christ within the Adventist Christian community of believers.

A Narrative, Gospel-based Hermeneutic

It is very interesting to me that one of the best passages that helps me to keep discipleship in mind throughout the day is found in the Old Testament. But when you think about it—discipling didn't begin with Jesus in the New Testament—did it? It began with Jesus coming to the Garden of Eden to walk and talk with Adam and Eve. During this time, Jesus was teaching Adam and Eve to tend the garden, and He was teaching them all His ways of creating and enhancing the beauty that surrounded them—and also warning them of the potential dangers in their world. Curt Thompson in his book,

Anatomy of the Soul, also brings out this beauty in Scripture when he writes:

"That is why I believe that faithfully telling and listening to our stories is one of the single most important things we can do as followers of Jesus. Storytelling inevitably engages our memories—both the



speaker's and the hearers'—and so opens the door to a different future. The Bible is so powerful in part because it contains the *story* of creation, rebellion, redemption, and recreation, all of which are told in the rich, messy, beautiful, tragic, hopeful tapestry of the lives of God's ancient people."⁶

In my own seminary classroom teaching, I use a three-story approach⁷: First, we must understand the biblical story (for example, David's story if we are studying Psalm 23), then share our own story—that is, how we apply the text to our lives—then send our students out to reflect and find their own story. This is how this passage and the example of my application can help them. Students reflect on how this passage of Scripture can draw them closer to Jesus and have an impact on the way they interact with the world around them. When we do this, it becomes His (Jesus/God's/biblical) story, our own story, and their story. This is perhaps the most important part of my gospel narrative approach to Scripture—we must see our story “within” God's story—and we must understand our story through the lens of God's story, and then share our “God-impacted story” as it intersects with the stories of those we meet.

As a youth pastor, I used the three-story approach to help academy students prepare and deliver worship talks weekly in chapel services. As a seminary professor, I take seminary students into 8th-grade classrooms near the university where I teach, and together we teach the students how to do this. It is an engaging experience for the students. We also work with the school to provide opportunities for the students to share their talks with lower grades. Students have also shared their stories, sometimes two to three at a time for 10 minutes each, as the sermon on education Sabbaths.

The gospel story must be at the center, with discipleship as the process, and a life-changing personal relationship with Jesus as the goal. I believe that keeping these three in mind as we study Scripture and as we soak in it devotionally, will help to keep us on track and give us a true understanding of the purpose and meaning of Scripture. This will help us in leading our children to Jesus and in finding their own identity in Christ.

Conclusion

There is much more to be researched and said on this topic, especially regarding how a narrative approach to Scripture dovetails with developmental psychology and the well-researched ways in which children need to be taught and nurtured spiritually in each phase of life. As we interact with young people, we must remember that as Christian educators, our primary goal is to help them find their place in the story of God. We must show them where they appear and how choosing Jesus can change their lives. Then we must show them where they fit into the community of believers and provide opportunities for them to “live” their stories in mission and outreach opportunities in the world around them. We must play our part by

being ready daily to share how our devotional times with Jesus each day are impacting our lives and decisions at home and in the classroom as we share life as a part of our school and classroom families.⁸ ✍

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Scott R. Ward, DMin, is Assistant Professor of Discipleship and Lifespan Education at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A.). He can be contacted at ward@andrews.edu.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Shema is a daily prayer recited by the Jews throughout history and is taken from the words of Moses found in Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 to 9.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this article are quoted from the *New Living Translation* of the Bible. *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, Copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

3. I recommend taking a detailed look at how the Encounter Bible Curriculum does this at <http://encounter.adventisteducation.org>. Especially see the Spiritual Growth and Lordship models under the Approach tab and the Transformational Planning Framework under the Structure tab.

4. See these books by Ellen White: *Steps to Christ, The Desire of Ages, Christ's Object Lessons, Confrontation*, etc.

5. See Jens Brockmeier and Hanna Meretoja, “Understanding Narrative Hermeneutics,” *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6:2 (Winter 2014): 1-27; the quotation is from page 2.

6. Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul, Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carrollton, Texas: Tyndale Momentum, 2010), 81.

7. As a youth pastor, I used the three-story approach to teach young people to share worship talks. This was started by Steve Case in Northern California. Youth pastors at that time were all trained to use this approach with teens. See <https://yfc.net/about/3story/> for more information.

8. For more on this topic see James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2016) and Kara Powell and Brad M Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2021). This book takes on the three big questions: *Who am I? Where do I fit? What difference can I make?* Children and young adults need support from parents, educators, youth leaders, and other caring individuals who can help guide them to answers. They need to know that they are part of God's great masterpiece.