

**Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists**

"Follow the boy to school"

**The Role of a Christian Teacher Today -
from a Historic Perspective**

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The teacher's task of education is essential in any advanced society. Education is meant to guide humanity to a safer and more productive future, to cultivate the mind and build an awareness that will safeguard and benefit the earth and its inhabitants. As adventists we are familiar with the statement by E.G. White that says we should educate the whole human being. Another statement from the same author suggests 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."¹

These words clearly inform our task and outline our responsibility.

Thus we understand that if we are not only teachers, but Christian teachers there should be a clear focus on our role. As Christian human beings we should continually evaluate our contribution to society. We also should ask ourselves honest questions to find new directions and access new experience in our lives.

In this essay I would like to discuss the role and character of a Christian teacher with a particular focus on the servant motif.

My intention is to articulate clearly the function of a Christian teacher and

¹ Ellen G. White: *Education*, p. 52 (Pacific Press Publishing Assisiation, 1952).

to clarify the opportunities presented as we relate professionally with our students. As workers in a social pedagogic situation we need to stress the spiritual world view and our reasons for choosing christianity. It is my conviction that the primary aim of our profession is to reach the students with the truth of God.

A historic view is presented firstly to enlighten and give some background. Secondly the teacher's role is compared to Christ's chosen position as a servant, while he was on earth teaching and preaching. Our challenge given to us from Jesus is also underlined through the Great Commission (Matt 28). This is followed by a discussion of some skills required of Christian teachers.

Although the primary application of this paper is to teachers on the academy level, since that is my function, the principles discussed may be applied to other levels of Christian education as well.

A Historic View

The word pedagogue that is usually the formal word for "teacher" comes from Latin. It's original form is *ped-a-gog*, which means "follow the boy to school".

Through all times education has been influenced by the ideas of great characters and by the general opinion in society. Goals and methods have changed through times and obviously school as an institution in a society has to be reformed from time to time. Therefore we do not find an explicit standard for goals, methods or role models for teachers; but the teacher has always been regarded as an important part in the education and training of young people.

In Norway in the year 1994 we have to face what is called The Reform of 1994 - an educational reform. This reform describes the "new" student and the "new" teacher - and gives us a new opportunity to focus on and evaluate ourselves as teachers. The reform is elaborated on humanistic ideas, and reveals

what kind of society we as Norwegians live in.

Already from Antiquity we have had pedagogic ideals in the western culture. Socrates and Plato are the founders of our pedagogic ideology. They argued on educational problems and elaborated methods in their work. E.g., Plato's understanding of what an idea is has influenced all systematic reasoning in the western culture - as well as art, literature and philosophy. Plato's ideas about soul and body (as two different parts), the immortality of the soul, and the partly good nature in humans have had great impact on Christian philosophy in our culture. The ancient philosophers had a clearly non-biblical view on life and argued systematically for it. Both Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and Plotin among others were of great significance. And when we learn that the church fathers like Augustine and Aquinas accepted these old philosophers and their ideas, we have to ask ourselves if they also influence us as Christian teachers today.

After the fall of the Roman Empire (500 A.D.) Christian philosophy and religion were spread, and we learn that education in Europe came more in focus than earlier. The new ideal of education was that a human being should be taught in ethics and religion. As a tool for this education the students had to learn to read and write. The train of ideas in this educational system was brought from the centuries before Christ, both from the Romans and the Greeks.

We know that there were different schools for young people, and that it was primary the central part of Europe that was involved. The Knight schools, the Latin schools and different academies for teachers were some of the new schools. When we study their function and curriculum we learn that they were ruled by the Catholic Church. The students had to learn the subjects/curriculum by heart, and memorising was highly regarded. The methods were effective, and the schools had great reputation. The role of the teacher was to give information about curriculum and to evaluate the students' ability to memorize. By this method the Church took control over the free thought and independent reasoning. Both content and methods in this education were influenced from ancient culture

and tradition.

After the Reformation the Latin school developed into related schools. Melancton and Sturm were two protestants who established schools that should serve the Reformed Church. We also know that the Jesuit schools were founded by the Catholic Church.

What about the Reformation? Didn't it contribute to weaken the Catholic trend in education?

Protestantism had its possibility to establish and work through an educational system. Luther was an educator and used energy and time to develop a Christian philosophy of education. He wrote for example letters to German citizens and encouraged them to work for the children and their education. He warned them about the fact that they possibly would not have the truth for ever - and underlined that the children in the future should become the leaders of the country. Luther regarded education as a means to serve the country and the Church.

Furthermore, he had clear opinions about how to change the established methods in the schools. He would have different courses, books and methods, and the teachers' personalities were regarded as important for the educational situation.

Melancton, Luther's co-operator, founded in Wittenberg a school based on these new Christian principles - and succeeded. For forty years the Protestants followed their own way of education and it gave enormous results. The Papacy lost its footprints because the schools had had an immense effect carrying forward the gospel - and thus we understand the important part teachers played in this situation.

The new ideas could have been developed and given fruits abundantly in Europe, but the inheritors did not keep and care for the new born victory. They were not leaders who were willing to be responsible for the possibilities in education, and educators in other parts of the world took over, as in America.

Why then did the Protestants lose their victory?

The Protestants lost their simple way of education. They lost confidence in themselves because they saw the world. They wanted to give the Christian doctrine a scientific form and forgot revelation as basis. Their educational system was replaced by the scholasticism of the Middle Ages.

One of the consequences was the teachers' attitude against the students.

Says Painter:

"The principle of authority, exacting a blind submission of the pupil, prevailed in the schools of every grade. The young were regarded not as tender plants to be carefully nurtured and developed, but as untamed animals to be repressed and broken." ²

The Protestant schools leaned upon the Catholic schools but it was the Catholic Jesuit schools that became famous and popular. Why did they?

The Jesuits had a well-organized and successful education of teachers. The teacher was competent and practical and this appealed to people. The results were good and their methods (memorising) were effective. It was a kind of mechanic style in their teaching, the pupils were released of thinking for themselves - the pupils were dependent on their teachers and *their* thinking and *their* ideas. These teachers were also devoted to their work, they were responsible and hard working. This gave results, and these schools have spread and had influence all over the world. The methods became more important than the work of cultivating the mind of understanding high moral values - where God is centre of all understanding. The teachers were masters, they decided and ruled over their students' minds.

The question for us is if we as Christians are influenced negatively by tradition - and if we are willing and able to educate a Christian world view or

² Painter: **History of Education**, p. 155; quoted in A.E. Sutherland: **Living Fountains or Broken Cisterns**, p. 93 (College Place, Washington, 1975).

philosophy. The answer will tell us if we will succeed in relation to our Christian goal and God's purpose.

Biblical Examples

It is in the Old Testament that we find the first examples of wise educators. Moses possessed a high degree of intellectual culture, having been educated in the best Egyptian schools. Despite this, however, he was willing to serve God and his people in a humble way. Solomon too, was an educated man with a finely crafted knowledge of the customs and manner of thought of his people. We know of his wisdom when he had to judge between the two mothers. We also know that he had architectural skills. He too, though, despite his great knowledge, wanted to serve his people. Solomon's life was successful because his faith was rooted in God and the instruction given to him from heaven. Daniel provides a third example. From where did he obtain that conviction by which he encouraged his friends not to give in to the demands of an alien culture? He was willing to die rather than to worship false gods. Daniel had surely been in the world, he had been educated in Babylon, his identity was bound up with the source of holistic life. Although he was given special gifts such as the ability to interpret dreams, it is for his strong character that he is largely noted.

Jesus Christ was the greatest teacher the world has ever known. Of his teaching it is said: "The common people heard him gladly" (Mark 12, 37). His words comforted, strengthened, and blessed all people he met. His methods were unique. His illustrations were taken from daily life, and although they were simple, they had a deep meaning. He always used a simple language, and he was never sophisticated in his teaching. His friendliness was for everyone, not only for his chosen disciples. The aim of his ministry was to reveal God, "and made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7).

Another great teacher in the New Testament is Paul. He was educated in

Tarsus and became a well known rabbi. After his conversion God led him so that he could use his skills in discussions with non-Christian people. He knew their philosophies and could argue in language they understood. Although he had these skills he was content to serve as a minister for Christ, using his knowledge for the salvation for others.

The Christian Teacher

Concerning teachers Ellen G. White writes:

"Let every teacher who accepts the responsibility of educating the youth, examine himself, and study critically from cause to effect. Has the truth of God taken possession of my soul? Has the wisdom which comes from Jesus Christ, which is pure, peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy been brought into my character? While I stand in the responsible position of an educator, do I cherish the principle which suggests that "the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace"? The truth may not simply be practised when we just like it, binding on us at all times and in all places." ³

This is in contrast to the attitude of superiority engendered in some teachers because of their intellectual superiority. This attitude gives rise to a traditional "master" role rather than a "servant" mentality. Indeed, if such superiority is felt, the teacher's superior knowledge in his subject area may work against the educational process. This should never be the case for the Christian teacher. This does not mean that a Christian teacher should not be skilful in his subject or responsible and willing to set limits when needed, but the way it is done should be according to God's character. A Christian pedagogic view always relays upon spiritual understanding and action. De Jung states:

³ Ellen G. White: *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 266 (Southern Publishing Association, 1923).

"Faculty members at a church related college ought not to hide behind their specialities; they cannot fulfil their obligation to students simply imparting information and developing skills, but rather by interacting as total persons with the total person of the student." ⁴

George Akers states ⁵ that teachers are a kind of ministers. He mentions five levels where these ministers can work:

- a) professional teachers
- b) personal interest in the student
- c) pastoral work
- d) prophetic work
- e) prayer for students.

Do we use these opportunities to foster good relationships between teachers and students in our schools? If not, we have lost one of our qualities as Christian educators. The most adept technically skilful integration will fall flat without a genuinely caring teacher. As far as I can understand the teacher's identity must continually be guided by the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what we see in Jesus, our professional role model. In the account of the last supper we see his character as he serves his disciples (John 13). Paul writes in Phil 2:7: "... but emptied himself taking form of a servant ...". Servant of what? For God's revelation and character - using his skills of teaching in a simple way.

What consequences follow from our belief regarding our task? We have to acknowledge that our task is a call because it is given to us by the Lord. In Matt 28 we learn about the Christian's Great Commission, and this is a particular challenge for teachers. Jesus himself says: "Go and teach!" What shall we teach?

⁴ De Jung: **Reclaiming a Mission**, 135; quoted in Niels-Erik Andreassen: "The Christian College Teacher". **The Journal of Adventist Education**, p. 12, April/May 1994.

⁵ George H. Akers: "Ministry of Teaching." **Christ in Classroom, Vol. 8**, p. 39-40 (Institute for Christian Teaching, 1993).

"All things that I have taught you". Here we clearly differ from the western culture tradition of education. The Christian teacher's most important goal is to reach the student with God's idea.

That this is the fundamental task and challenge should be clear. Consequently we should have a clearer focus on our educational goals than we find in secular schools. This suggestion is based upon the fact that we have a broader base for our task. Our interaction with culture, for example, will be different to that of non-Christians. Culture is often seen as something to explore, enjoy and criticise. As Christian teachers we have a challenge to serve, enjoy and contribute. I do not say that only Christians contribute in society, but I want to focus on the challenge delivered by Scripture: "Go and teach them all things I have taught you".

There are also other aspects of the servant model for teaching. Most teachers have experienced in one way or another the lack of certain skills or abilities. Skills of different kinds are the tools by which a teacher can reach the goal. When I consider the Great Commission I do this because it is our reason to claim to be Christian educators. We also can go back to the mandate of creation to enforce this statement.

God has planned his people to be stewards of his creation. Because we are created in his image (Gen 1:26,27) we are obliged to educate ourselves to be models for our students.

Horace Alexander writes:

"Viewing the Bible as simply illustrating some modern theories and methods of education is not sufficient. Nor do we fully appreciate its educational value when we see it as offering only philosophy and general principles of education".⁶

⁶ Horace Alexander: "A Teacher like God." *Christ in Classroom*, Vol. 8, p. 41 (Institute for Christian Teaching, 1993).

Beyond these, we can let God help us become better teachers if we study the teaching experiences recorded in His Word. This gives a new dimension to a familiar passage: "All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching the truth and giving instruction so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped" (2 Tim 3:16,17).

Should we than only teach Bible classes? No, our professional technical skills are necessary in society, but our Christian philosophy should be the foundation for our teaching and methods.

The crucial question is: Are we different from the secular teacher. The secular teacher puts the human and his mind in the centre and looks upon the Bible just as a kind of wisdom - not The Wisdom. Ethics, when taught, is viewed from a humanistic angle, which would lead to chaos because human ideas about ethics are the basis for secular philosophy. This makes a difference compared to Christian philosophy, where God is The Authority.

As Christian teachers we have to stress some important questions: Who am I, and is there an absolute authority? These are fundamental questions that will have crucial impact on our teaching.

It is important to our service that we have a thorough grasp of the technical, pedagogical and academic skills of our profession. We will then be equipped to guide actively our students' learning adventure. We should be masters of our profession.

The Special Needs for a Christian Teacher

How can we be qualified? I have chosen three areas that I regard as highly valuable for a Christian teacher in educational work:

- a) skills of communication
- b) knowledge of philosophy
- c) spiritual maturity.

In the following I will comment on these qualities.

Communication

In our working situation we are communicating to our students our technical skills. There is a proverb for teachers: "Communication, the key to successful teaching." To say it simple, communication is the bridge between human beings. It is the only way we can convey ideas to others, and receive back from them. If we expect to have a good relationship with other people it is necessary to communicate with clarity. It seems that this is not a gift that all of us have. It is in many ways like an art, but it can be learned.

Being a good communicator is an essential advantage dealing with students. This has to do with meeting of minds. It will have influence on the relationship between all humans involved and also on the atmosphere in the classroom. The awareness of the process and its possibilities for good and bad gives an insight that is of great value when working as a teacher. We should remember it is through our minds God can reach us. Communication of high quality promotes the understanding of God's revelation and the practical and spiritual consequences of it.

We all know how the atmosphere makes difference in a classroom situation. Think on Jesus when he met the woman at the well - he talked to her about her sins, but communicated in a way that was unique, without losing goals out of sight. The way we say things is of essential value when it comes to the effect of what is said.

The words and our body language are important for our relationship to others. What we send through ourselves will be received and understood both by the intellect and feelings of those involved. Our eyes and limbs reveal much of our message to other people. Eye contact, a warm smile, open posture and willingness to listen will prepare ways and bridge the gap between people.

What is our goal? To come in contact with our students - to get them to

listen to God's idea!

Says Thomas Gordon:

"When a human is able to feel and get another human to convince him that he accepts him, then he also has a possibility to guide the other." ⁷

We know that children and youngsters not always communicate clearly, so we need to be aware of their way of expressing themselves. This is difficult without being sensitive and open to other humans. Our relationship with others can be of great significance if we respect and are interested in them. Many adults convey themselves because they don't find themselves comfortable in a situation that demands openness and an honest answer.

This is a challenge to teachers. We are often confronted (or should be) with students in our work situation. It demands willingness and energy to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom, but it pays back - we have a greater opportunity to motivate the students both for the subject and for God's ideas if we have good relationship with them.

Anyway, we should be an example for Christ - Christlike. Christ saw possibilities in everyone - which gave hope. He met people with trust - which created confidence. He used psychologic skill - which revealed understanding. He was humble because he was a servant. Although he was a great teacher he did never make show of his great ability.

Knowledge of Philosophy

Since we regard the teacher as a worker with God we can say that he interacts with the moral issues facing students. Therefore we can conclude that teaching should include a strong moral dimension. To this end a Christian teacher should be familiar with the subject of philosophy.

⁷ Gordon, Thomas: **Bli bedre foreldre**, p. 28 (Dreyer, Oslo 1977).

What kind of philosophy, would be an expected question. The Spirit of Prophecy warns us against studying the philosophy of this world. Saying so Ellen G. White means that we should not *lean* on the world. When teaching Christian philosophy we need to understand the secular way of thinking, to be informed about secular ideas of ethics. Thus we can meet the needs of our students - to compare God's truth and the truth of the world, to unveil the falseness of the world, to lift up the truth of our Lord. The right questions, the good questions that will stimulate the minds of the youngsters, are worth gold and will by the help of the Holy Spirit bear fruit.

"A Christian teacher who evokes questions regarding faith in the student's mind [...] is duty bound to help that student resolve these questions and reach greater spiritual maturity in that process." ⁸

What kind of questions do we often get?

As far as I have experienced it is often questions about why this world's philosophy won't be up to the standard.

The teacher's knowledge of philosophy is a tool to guide the students to ask the appropriate questions leading to a greater understanding of life. Philosophy is a way of understanding what we can rely upon as truth. Many have been reluctant to teach philosophy, being satisfied with a technically correct and honest education. If teachers are going to fulfil their role as servants for God they need to know how to meet the greater needs of their students.

We should be able to see the difference between to teach in and inform about secular philosophy. Encouraging God's philosophy and educate in it is not in contrast with knowledge about the world we live in. It is useful for the students to know what philosophy is and to accept that science can't prove a philosophy.

⁸ Andreasen, Niels-Erik: "The Christian College Teacher". **The Journal of Adventist Education**, April/May 1994, p. 13.

There is a great difference in accepting parts of worldly philosophy and to understand it. Trusting God's philosophy as it is revealed in the Bible should always be our basis whatever subject we teach.

Students often meet well-known philosophers in their studies - shouldn't they learn how to meet them by understanding their way of thinking?

The biblical truth and philosophy - not only a set of doctrines - should be known to all Christian teachers. We need to know both terms and to have a deep understanding of the biblical truth and philosophy to be able to share God's idea. That is an important part of our role as teachers.

It is true that we must not be like the world, but we should not find ourselves out of touch with the world, not knowing what is going on. The teacher is then also a "mini"-philosopher as the profession demands this.

Spiritual maturity and growth

The personality of the teacher is more important for the task than we normally are willing to admit. We have a great obligation on our shoulders. Says E. G. White about teachers:

"The habits and principles of a teacher should be of even greater importance than his literary qualifications." ⁹

In another place she says:

"To the teacher is committed a most important work -. [...] But it is not enough that the teacher possess natural ability and intellectual culture. These are indispensable, but without a spiritual fitness for the work he is not prepared to engage in it." ¹⁰

⁹ White, Ellen G: **Education**, p. 5 (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952).

¹⁰ White, Ellen G: **Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students**, p. 229 (Southern Publishing Association, 1923).

"In selecting teachers, we should use every precaution, knowing that this is as solemn a matter as the selecting of persons for the ministry." ¹¹

A teacher is a minister and needs to be a Christlike example for his pupils. Parents who send their youngsters to a Christian school, should expect more of the teachers there than those engaged in secular schools. The teachers' interest in their students, their understanding and the atmosphere at a Christian school should be of high quality and attractive. Influencing the pupils for higher goals than those in the world, we can expect the Holy Spirit as our guide and friend.

"As soon as your minds harmonize with the mind of God, you will be brought into touch with an intelligence that will communicate to your lessons that will be of invaluable help in your work of teaching." ¹²

"[...] Love, the basis of true education ..." ¹³

This statement points to the basis for all we do as teachers. The plans made, the work which is done in our schools should all be colored by the love from heaven. The methods we choose, the interest we have in our students and time we spend - all this has one goal: to reveal the love of God.

As teachers we are in need of knowing God. We also have to be in constant contact with God through prayer to fulfill these requirements. One of the modern school reforms in Norway says that we have to look upon the students as individuals. That is how God is dealing with us. Furthermore, we are in need of a happy disposition that will attract the students so we can influence them better with God's love. We also should spend time with our students. They need to share companionship with their teachers to feel they are highly valued.

¹¹ **Ibid., p.474**

¹² **Ibid., p. 184.**

¹³ **Ibid., p. 32.**

Educators are responsible for co-operating with the pupils' homes in painting God and his love and character.

Teachers need solid education to fulfill their task! It is of essential value that a teacher is in contact with the Holy Spirit constantly learning more about the Lord. This is our greatest need. To stick to our task and to function well we have to grasp the truth about the guidance God will give us as we need it. A teacher's obligation can be summarized in the following :

- a) to learn about his role as a Christian teacher
- b) to be willing to devote himself to the Great Commission
- c) to work on his profession to be well skilled in technical areas
- d) to improve on his education in areas that will prepare him to interact with students in the ways expected from a Christian teacher
- e) to be in constant contact with God and have willingness to grow as a human being is meant to.

A Christian teacher is a person who is most willing to work with his students in different ways because his role covers so many aspects. He also needs to recognise that his task is not to be reduced to producing well behaved and responsible adults, which is the goal of secular teaching. The Christian teacher's goal is to lead and teach the students to accept, choose and trust Revelation which provides the faith and values that promote living a happy life. Our task is to declare God's truth as revealed in nature and Scripture.

How can we do this in God's way, teaching the students his principles and not just teach them what the secular schools require? A glimpse of God's character is the most demanding need of the world, and the teacher who acts in his role as servant will reflect that character. This is a role which is given from God and carries the promise: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age".

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