Age-appropriate Experiences and Rituals



That Help Students Encounter God Part II

The origins of some Christian faith-based rituals or practices can be traced back to Adam and Eve's experiences in the Garden of Eden: a weekly rest day (Genesis 2:2); marriage (Genesis 2:24); and daily communication with God (Genesis 3:8). After sin entered the world and Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden, God instituted another ritual, animal sacrifice (Genesis 4:3-5). This ritual was to symbolize and point to Christ's future death on the Cross. While in the desert school during the Exodus, the Israelites were introduced to the sanctuary (Exodus 25:8) and its rituals pointing to (1) the coming of a Savior to rescue a lost world, and (2) God's care for His chosen people.

Around the time of Christ, the ritual of baptism became important, as it indicated a person's religious membership. Today, this ritual is seen as a public acknowledgement and declaration of a person's choice to be a Christ follower and his or her desire to join God's family of believers (Matthew 28:19). After Christ's death, animal sacrifices became redundant. A new Christian ritual was introduced to commemorate Christ's death on the Cross and humanity's rescue from eternal death. Contemporary Christians refer to this ritual as the communion service (Luke 22:19). Rituals of prayer (Luke 11:2-5); personal reflection (Matthew 14:13); worship (Luke 13:10); Sabbath rest (Luke 4:16); and Bible study (Matthew 28:20) were demonstrated by Jesus when He lived on this earth.

The Reason for Christian Rituals

Christian rituals help 21st-century Christians to maintain and develop their faith and enhance their spiritual lives. Christian rituals are important because they provide a sense of belonging and spiritual identity in the present as well as a sense of connection with the past, and point with confidence to the future. Jennings states: "Rituals are the tools he [God] uses to get us to think and to stimulate conversation with Him."[1]

Sadly, in the 21st century, each of the Christian rituals listed above has a counterfeit, some even within the Christian church community. Students need to know what each ritual represents, why we celebrate each one, and how we should practice them.

Experiencing God Through the Ritual of Prayer

Prayer means different things to different faith and belief groups. Recently "reflective/contemplative/centred prayer practices" are becoming prevalent in some Christian groups.[2] Adventist educators need to carefully examine these new trends and research their origins and purpose. Careful evaluation may uncover ideas inconsistent with Adventist beliefs.

Some people will pray to God in difficult circumstances only to forget about Him until they need a Power to intervene in their lives again.[3] Adventist teachers need to be aware that some students who come to one of our schools may never have experienced or heard a Christian prayer. It is essential that students attending Christian schools are provided with the opportunity to learn about prayer, its power, and its proper ap-

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plication in the Christian life.

Teaching students about Christian prayer and how to pray introduces them to a personal lifeline that connects them to a living and listening God. God is as close as a whispered prayer. Christian prayer is a response, not an obligation. Christians are not required to pray. Prayer is a choice. It is a demonstration of a living and dynamic relationship with God. Christian prayer is about seeking God's will. It is not an instrument for selfishness. "The purpose of prayer is not to get what we want from God. That's magic. The purpose of prayer is that God may get what he wants from us. That's faith."[4]

Prayer can be expressed in different forms (personal or public prayers). All prayers, however, are reliant on a partnership between the Holy Spirit and an individual. Students mature in their understanding of prayer as their faith is nurtured.

Figure 1 lists commonly asked

Figure 1: Questions and Answers About Prayer

Question	Answer
What is Christian prayer?	Christian prayer is talking to your best friend, Jesus, and sharing your concerns, secrets, worries, and joys just the way you do with your earthly friends. Jesus knows all about you, and He only wants what is best for you. You can always depend on Him, talk to Him, and expect that He will be listening.
Why do Christians pray?	Christians pray because they like to communicate with God, their best friend. God asks His children to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17),[5] as He wants to communicate with them all day every day, anywhere, and anytime.
How do Christians pray?	The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. His model prayer is recorded in Matthew 6:9 to 13. This prayer includes seven petitions. Many times, people assume an attitude of prayer when they pray to God. It may mean closed eyes, kneeling, bowed head, and folded hands. It is one way that humans show reverence and acknowledge God's greatness and goodness when they are talking to the God of the universe.
Where do Christians pray?	A Christian can pray anywhere. Some examples include privately at home, in the classroom, in a group setting, privately in the forest, silently on the bus, or collectively in a church service.
When do Christians pray?	Christians pray whenever they want to. There is no need for a church setting to pray. It can be a breathed prayer of desperation on the road, a prayer of gratitude for a sensational sunset, or a formal, carefully prepared prayer in a church setting.
What happens when Christians pray?	Several things happen when Christians pray: (a) it changes their thinking; (b) it gives God permission to act in their lives; and (c) their prayer can make a difference in the life of someone else.
What do Christians say when they pray?	Private prayer is about personal things near and dear to us. Corporate prayer is more involved with the needs of the community (local and world).
How does God answer prayer?	God answers prayer by many and various means. God has often surprised people in the way He has answered their prayers. There are many stories of great people throughout history, like George Müller, a minister who relied entirely on God each day to provide for his needs.
Why does God not always answer a Christian's prayer?	God always answers prayer, but it may not be the answer that the person requested. There are three answers to prayer: *Yes, No,* and *Wait Awhile.* God is the best parent Christians can have. He only gives His children what is for their best good. We may not understand why He says *No* or *Wait Awhile* until we get to heaven. God is not an errand boy fulfilling everyone's wishes. That would create chaos. He is God. He sees the whole picture. We only see a small portion of life's jigsaw puzzle, but we can have implicit trust that God has everything in His hand. God is never caught off guard.[6]
Can the devil read my lips as I pray?	The great cosmic conflict is being fought over who obtains control of a person's mind. Individuals have the power to choose and decide who is going to guide their thought patterns. God waits to be invited into each person's life (Revelation 3:20). Some believe that the devil can read faces and behavior but cannot read minds, and that he can influence a person's choices. If God is not invited to inhabit a person's mind, then the devil will harass him or her and try to influence that person's choices until he eventually weakens the person's resolve and takes control of his or her mind. God can read minds but will not go against any person's choice. God tries to persuade each person to let Him come into his or her life but will always respect a person's choice.

questions about prayer, with some suggested responses.

Experiencing God Though the Ritual of a Personal Quiet Time

Most belief- and faith-based traditions encourage personal quiet time for spiritual reflection and meditation. In the 21st century, Adventist educators need to be aware of the many counterfeit spiritual-reflection programs being promoted in some educational institutions. Often these programs involve repeating a special word or *mantra* (an idea taken from Eastern philosophies) to aid students in achieving relaxation of the body and the emptying of the mind.[7] Consequently, it is becoming increasingly necessary for Adventist teachers to inform their students about the origins of Eastern relaxation methods and practices. One relaxation method being promoted involves the meditation practice of emptying the mind. This practice can expose students to supernatural forces and powers that can cause harm and create confusion.

In contrast to the meditation practice of emptying the mind with the objective of looking inward for peace and spiritual renewal, the Christian meditation practice engages in a conscious filling of his or her mind with Scripture with the objective of connecting with God. It is during those quiet times when the body is still, extraneous distractions are absent, and the mind is alert that God speaks through His Word, the Bible. Developing a personal devotional quiet time is one way that students can experience God on a daily basis for the rest of their lives.[8] The following suggestions offer strategies that may encourage constructive personal quiet time engagement:

- From the ages of 2 to 3 years, students can look at Bible storybooks or play with quiet toys for about five minutes.
- Three- to-5-year-olds are given five minutes where they can listen to an audio Bible story through headphones, use play dough or quiet toys, or look at Bible storybooks. A copy of a young person's version of the Bible can also be included for the children to browse through.
- At school, 6- to-9-year-olds can have a quiet time of five to 10 minutes they can use to respond after reading a portion of the Bible silently. Some examples of how they can respond include: (a) creating something from play dough, (b) writing a song, (c) drawing a picture, (d) writing a prayer, (f) completing a Bible puzzle, or (e) writing a poem.
- Ten- to-17-year-olds can be encouraged to engage in personal, reflective, Bible study habits by using the example outlined below (Figure 2). The activity, a simple journaling technique adapted from *My Quiet Time*,[9] can be adjusted for any age group and will help students to establish a personal devotional time. The only requirements are access to a Bible and the ability to read independently. The students are given one or more specific passages related to the Scripture lessons for that week. They are encouraged to follow the guide taught in class, and then complete the activity at home. Several times a week, small-group sharing is encouraged in an affirming atmosphere. As the student's faith matures, more sophisticated methods and programs can be implemented.

Experiencing God Through the Ritual of Bible Study

God speaks through His Word, the Bible, to guide, instruct, convict, and give victory in each person's life. There are many varied methods of studying the Bible that can assist Christians to grow in their faith, but there is no one best method of Bible study. Different approaches will appeal to different people.[10]

Adventist educators experienced in their own personal Bible study techniques and methods can capably share their passion and expertise with their students. *My Quiet Time* Reflection Journal (see Figure 2) can be linked effectively with any Bible study approach.[11]

Experiencing God Through the Ritual of Worship

A Christian's life is a testament to the fact that experiencing God involves worshiping Him in everything that he or she does and says throughout each day. Reynolds

Figure 2: *My Quiet Time* Reflection Journal

Step 1	**Pray**	Ask God to: • help you to understand the passage you are going to read. • help you to learn something about Him from the reading.
Step 2	**Read and Reflect**	Read and reflect on the selected passage from the Bible. • I think this passage is saying _____. • I think this passage means _____. • I have learned this about God: _____. • I think God is telling me _____.
Step 3	**Write**	• I still do not understand _____. • I would like to share this with others: _____. • My favorite verse today is _____.
Step 4	**Pray**	Today I will _____.

points out that worship provides an insight into who Christians are and why they are here.[12] It unleashes for them the power, through God's grace, to become more than they are. Worship for the Christian is not relegated to certain times or special occasions. However, Christian history has shown that to maintain and assist this daily, vital connection of experiencing God, Christians need to adopt various structured forms of worship. The following list includes some of these structured forms that may be used at home, at school, and at church.

At home:

- Private worship, which involves daily personal devotional time spent in Bible study and prayer.
- Family worship, which involves the entire family at regular times each day, in reading the Bible, praying, and singing faith-based songs.

At school:

- Classroom worship, which involves a devotional time conducted by the teacher(s) in each classroom at the commencement of each school day. It sets the tone for the day as the Spirit of God is invited to be present in the classroom through Bible reading, prayer, and singing. When students are given the opportunity to prepare and conduct this short devotional time, it can be a valuable learning experience for them. They can be encouraged, individually and as a group, to choose the topic and music as well as to pray.
- School worship, which involves the entire school, usually once a week, worshiping together in a combined program. It is mainly organized by the chaplain, local minister, teachers, or school administrators. This is a valuable learning experience for students, if they are encouraged to participate in the music and prayer, and occasionally to present the spiritual talk for the day.
- Special worship week, which involves the entire school or specific age groups in the school. A specific week is chosen to promote a specified spiritual emphasis. It is conducted at the same time every day and may involve a specific theme or a guest speaker.

At church:

- Corporate worship, which involves the faith-based community regularly meeting to worship as a community. We want our students to experience God at church, since the church is a place where the family of God comes to meet together and share and worship together.

Experiencing God Through a Sabbath Rest Ritual

For Adventists, the ritual of a "seventh-day or Sabbath rest" reminds us that God created our world in six days. On the seventh day, He created a holy rest day for His children, a special celebratory time away from daily routines and agendas (Genesis 2:2, 3). He planned that for 24 hours, once a week, humans would celebrate God's involvement in their lives, recharge their spiritual batteries, re-establish their dependence on Him, and interact with their Christian family.

For students and teachers in Adventist boarding schools, the observance of the Sabbath rest ritual (Hebrews 4:9) has the following added benefits: It provides them with 24 hours of guilt-free "scholastic rest"; it frees them so they can spend time in worship and community; it offers them the time and space to enjoy God's other book, nature; it provides the opportunity for them to commence the new school week spiritually refreshed and academically rested; it demonstrates that in six days, they can accomplish what most people achieve in seven days; and it reminds them that they belong to an extended, worldwide family of believers.

Experiencing God Through the Ritual of Baptism

The ritual of baptism, as demonstrated in Matthew 28:19, is observed throughout Christendom. In Adventism, the ritual of baptism by immersion celebrates a person's acceptance of Jesus as his or her personal Saviour. "Baptism does not mean you no longer need a Saviour; rather, it is recognizing that you have one."[13] Witnessed by family and friends, this shared, public ritual is a reminder that the church family is responsible for the support, mentoring, and nurture of the candidate as he or she develops a mature faith.[14]

John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River when He was an adult (Matthew 3:1-17; Luke 3:21). Adventists believe it is best for students to wait for the experience of baptism until they are old enough to understand the meaning of the ritual. A conscious decision to accept Jesus as one's personal Savior is not age-specific but essential before any student considers participating in the ritual of baptism. Regardless of the student's age, each request for baptism needs to be treated sensitively and genuinely.

Some young people choose to graduate from Adventist schools without being baptized. It is interesting to consider, however, how many of these students might have been baptized if a significant adult had suggested it to them. Both before and after baptism, students need a mentor to help them mature in their Christian faith. Adventist schools and churches are well situated to provide this mentoring, but it needs to be intentional, relevant, and appropriate; and mentors need to be chosen with care and screened.

Experiencing God Through the Ritual of Marriage

For some people living in the 21st century, the marriage ritual is seen as unnecessary and outdated. Contemporary media trivializes and belittles the institution of marriage. This ritual was created by God for a man and a woman (Genesis 2:23, 24) to live in a monogamous relationship. Sadly, this is no longer the expected norm, even in some Christian circles.

Adventists often choose to be married in churches because they

want God to bless their home and family. Adventists believe that families are the foundation of the Christian community, and therefore view the ritual of marriage as an important aspect of their belief system. Adventist educators can help students understand that God regards the ritual of marriage so highly that He has used it as an illustration to explain His relationship with His family of believers, the church (Revelation 19:7, 9).

Experiencing God Through the Ritual of Communion

The ritual of communion can be likened to a special meal. This is not like a snack in church, but a special meal Jesus ate with His disciples just before He died. As Jesus' followers, we still eat this special meal to remember and celebrate His love and sacrifice for us[15] as we look toward the hope of His soon return (1 Corinthians 11:23-29). It reminds Christians that, in Christ, their lives are pure, and their sins are no more. An important aspect of the Adventist communion ritual, the foot-washing ceremony, reminds us that we are all equal in God's eyes and that we need to serve others in love, just as Jesus did. Adventist educators want their students to be able to understand the implications of this ritual in their daily lives.

Closing Thoughts

Growing in Christ and experiencing God are enhanced when students actively engage in Christian rituals. As students mature, they will question previously accepted beliefs as they take greater responsibility for their own faith, and this questioning should be welcomed as a learning opportunity. Experiencing God through Christian rituals can have a life-transforming impact on children and young adults as they grow in their relationships with others. Christian teachers are privileged to have the opportunity to introduce, model, and nurture students through living a Christian lifestyle.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Stephen Chavez, "The Prayer of Last Resort," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 71:2 (December 2008/January 2009): 18-21: http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae20 0871021804.pdf.

4. Alan Reynolds, *Reading the Bible for the Love of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003), 93.

5.1 Thessalonians 5:17. Unless stated otherwise, all Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the *New International Version* (NIV) Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

6. The song, "Trust His Heart," written by Eddie Carswell and Babbie Mason, express this sentiment through music. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = vh65w LVbaww.

7. See http://www.innerhealthstudio.com/spiritual-meditation.html for information on non-Christian meditation.

8. See Chapter 3 in Barbara J. Fisher's *Developing a Faith-based Education: A Teachers' Manual,* for a further discussion on learning in solitude. See https://dbpublishing.net.au/dbporders.html.

9. Child Evangelism Fellowship, *Children's Resource Bible. New King James Version*, 1, 159.

10. See Donna Habenicht and Larry Burton. *Teaching the Faith: An Essential Guide for Building Faith-shaped Kids* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2004), pages 29 and 30.

11. For an example of the Inductive Bible Study Approach, see: Volcano Adventure Team, *My Volcano Adventure: Discovering the Bible's Power* (Fort Collins, Colo.: Through the Bible Publishers, 2004), 52.

12. Reynolds, *Reading the Bible for the Love of God,* 101.

13. Seth J. Pierce, *What We Believe: Seventh-day Adventists Believe for Teens* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2007), 95.

14. For current research on *Before and Beyond Baptism* see http://www.adventistarchives.org/summit-on-nurture-and-retention.

15. For more ideas about communion for children see https://children.adventistchurch.com/wpcontent/uploads/sites/14/2017/03/Communion-Just-for-Kids.pdf.