

Values Education and

Faith Formation:



A Neat Fit or More?

In a Thursday morning Bible class, the teacher is sharing with his students the story of blind Bartimaeus as part of a unit on “Jesus Christ: The Master Healer.” During the inductive Bible study, the students explore the values that Jesus demonstrates in this story. The teacher is intentional in building a picture of a compassionate Savior.

In a Friday morning chapel, at the end of the program, a student from each class is given an award and affirmed for demonstrating the “School Value of the Week.” This week’s value is *respect*. The school celebrates and affirms the fact that students are learning life values that will build their characters and help them become responsible citizens.

Every week, around the globe, scenarios like the two above play out in Adventist schools. Dedicated teachers and administrators work to instill positive values and teach biblical truths.

Can these areas be combined? This article explores character development and its relationship to faith formation to determine if they are mutually exclusive or inextricably linked.

Values and Character

A study of what constitutes character leads us back to values. Society defines values as ideas or concepts that people, either individually or collectively, perceive to possess such merit or worth that these ideas help determine human attitudes and actions. Thus, values are abstract ideas that manifest themselves in concrete behavior. Some common values or virtues esteemed by all faiths and cultures include: compassion, courage, perseverance, and excellence.¹ A person’s values contribute to what we call *character*. An analysis of Internet quotes about character² reveals the following perceptions:

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1. One's character is judged based on behavior;
 2. Character is developed over time;
 3. Character pertains to making responsible, moral choices;
 4. One's worldview determines the values he or she holds;
- and values, in turn, help build character.

Therefore, the combination of values plus beliefs, moral reasoning, and the behavior they motivate, determines character, which shapes our choices here and stay with us throughout eternity. This then, as a common saying puts it, becomes our "destiny." Since, as Ellen White has written: "What we shall be in heaven is the reflection of what we are now in character and holy service,"³ the development of character and values in Adventist education deserves our close attention.

Values in Society

Although historically, the family has held the primary responsibility for values education, the broader society also has a role in producing good citizens, which lends credence to the idea that "it takes a village to raise a child."⁴ Evidence for this abounds in the folklore of most cultures, where literature and oral traditions extol the virtues and value of a good character. In addition, most faith traditions, including Christianity, promote values or virtues in their holy writings.

The societal view of values education is pragmatic and simple in theory, but complex in practice. Values are the glue that enables otherwise diverse people to embrace shared goals and live together peaceably; therefore, a society without common values is in danger of disintegrating. Values may play out in different ways in different cultures and even among people within a culture,⁵ yet interestingly, the majority of educators believe there is a core of universally held values regardless of a person's culture, religious beliefs, or other differences.⁶

From a secular point of view, the purpose of values education is to develop in young people the knowledge and understandings, skills and attitudes necessary for them to function as responsible citizens both as individuals and as members of society. The emphasis is on behavior or doing the right thing to others in society, and values are seen as something individuals "have," something they choose to adopt for life. Values education is a civic responsibility, jointly shared by families, schools, and society.

A Christian Perspective on "Values Education"

Although values education has long been a distinctive characteristic of Christian schools, during the past two decades, public education systems have also expressed a renewed commitment to promoting and intentionally teaching values. Public schools are stepping into the moral arena and developing curricula, programs, and personnel to guide and guard the moral character of the next generation, and issuing the challenge for teachers to be moral guides.⁷

All schools, public and private, esteem a variety of positive values. Cooperation, respect, compassion, and understanding, for example, are important regardless of the school system or culture. How they are enacted in the public sphere is crucial to the quality of life enjoyed by the members of that society. So if there is some commonality in the values taught in all of the

school systems of the world, what should values education in an Adventist school look like? Is there a justification for teaching values differently (and teaching different values), or can we adopt secular philosophy and practice?

Examination of values from a biblical perspective indicates a case for teaching values in a distinctively Christian manner. Between secular society and Christianity lies an underlying philosophical difference in the belief about the *origin* of values. This difference grows out of a Christian worldview that provides the reason for teaching values, and has implications for how they are taught. This philosophical difference can be explained by the following five statements.

Statement 1: *Positive values have their origins in the character of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God.*

All levels of society worldwide embrace some positive values, such as loyalty, courage, patience, compassion, trustworthiness, and integrity. While humanists posit that these values "arise in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence,"⁸ Christians hold God to be the origin and grounding of universally held values. They are attributes of His character, the essence of who He is, and are expressions of the principle that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, NLT).⁹ In essence, love is the overarching value that initiates all other values.

Statement 2: *Therefore, teaching values means teaching about God's character. It is introducing students to the God of love.*

As teachers share positive values with their students, they reveal to them glimpses of God's character. Imagine that students are encased in a brick cube, in total darkness. The darkness represents their knowledge about God. Now imagine that outside the cube is brilliant light. This light represents God. Every time someone explains, models, or teaches a particular value, it is as if he or she is punching a brick out of the cube to let in a little light. These "value holes" enable students to catch glimpses of God's character and attributes. As they become familiar with His character, they begin to understand more about who He is, and the light and warmth of His love begin to permeate their lives.

Statement 3: *Jesus Christ Is the Embodiment of Divinity . . . God on Earth.*

Taking the argument one step further, we refer to John 1:18, which says, "No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is Himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us." Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, and therefore by learning about the embodiment of love through His life and sacrifice, students are learning about God and His great love for them.

Statement 4: *Therefore, by learning about God through Jesus, students will desire to enter into a loving relationship with Jesus.*

From the beginning of His earthly ministry to His dying moments on the cross, Jesus revealed the values that make up God's character. Jesus, who opened His heart to children, who brought hope back into the lives of the blind, lame, and disabled, who stood up for the outcasts of society and listened to the troubled of heart without condemnation, is easy to love. As students continue to learn about God through the life of Jesus, they are drawn by His compassion and tenderness; His strong sense of justice; His patience, understanding, and forgiveness;

and begin to build a relationship with Him that reconciles or makes them “at-one” with God.¹⁰

Statement 5: *As students build a relationship with Jesus, He will transform their lives through the influence of the Holy Spirit.*

While the Christian teacher plays a role in teaching values and leading students into the embrace of God’s love, the Holy Spirit takes the primary role in convicting and empowering students to adopt God’s values and incorporate them into their lives. It has often been claimed that values are meaningful only when they translate into actions. From a Christian perspective, values become evident in a life of service and giving to others. Teachers alone cannot hope to make a difference in the attitudes and actions of their students, but helping young people acquire a true understanding of God and His loving grace will transform their lives through the influence of the Holy Spirit. This is what enables the internalization of values and the building of character.

In this progression, it is important for students to have a clear and true picture of God’s character, rather than one that has been distorted by lies that portray Him as judgmental and punitive. The emphasis is on being right with God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, rather than doing right; thus, values are something we *become* rather than something we *have*. This process of building godly character through values education brings us to a new definition for values education: helping children to know God and to build a loving relationship with Jesus. This definition builds a case for a strong nexus between character development and faith formation. By contrast, if values are understood and taught from a humanistic viewpoint, we run the risk of demoting values to a set of culturally accepted mores that could be used selfishly or to the detriment of others.

The Practicalities of Values Education

At a time when the corporate world and media increasingly promote self-centeredness and greed, and some of the traditional structures of society are crumbling faster than textbooks are printed, Adventist educators are faced with the question, What can teachers do to encourage students to embrace God’s values? Because values grow out of an individual’s or organization’s worldview or belief base, presenting a biblically accurate picture of God is the key element. However, some strategies

will enhance this endeavor and increase its effectiveness.

Several experts agree that there are at least three important elements involved in teaching values. These correspond nicely to the traditional “head, hand, and heart” definition of Adventist education. The first is *head knowledge*, or “values literacy,” which helps students grasp the meaning of values. The second is *heart knowledge*, which inspires social awareness in students. The third is *hand knowledge*, which provides experiential opportunities to enact values in ways that contribute to the school or wider community.¹¹ Adding a biblical worldview to the head-heart-hands components of teaching values completes the picture, providing a reference point for the existence of values, a reason to adopt them, the will to desire them, and the power to internalize them (see Galatians 5:22).

The complex nature of values education has far-reaching implications for educators. As already indicated, moral education means more than getting students to recognize various positive values; it also involves inspiring them so that they prize and live the values. Knowledge and understanding by themselves are insufficient to change lives. If they were adequate for achieving this task, we could teach values education through workbook mode and expect satisfying results. However, there are two further areas of consideration in regard to teaching values. First, the adoption of values is by definition a choice; and thus, adults’ values cannot be forced upon children. God, in His love, does not compel our allegiance to Him. Although it is possible to enforce value-

related behavior, teachers cannot coerce students to truly embrace and apply values in their lives, long term. To try and do so is both ineffective and contrary to God’s law of love. Therefore, values should be taught sensitively, openly, and from a biblical belief base while allowing time for questioning, discussion, and reflection.

Second, values should be taught in conjunction with thinking skills. Children need to develop strategies for discerning when and how to exhibit their values through appropriate behavior. Thinking expert Edward De Bono cautions: “The purpose of thinking is to enable us to deliver and enjoy our values. Values without thinking are highly dangerous and have been responsible for the wars, pogroms, persecutions and appalling behaviour of the past. Thinking without values is pointless—thinking then has no purpose.”¹² Take the value of honesty,



which includes truthfulness. If someone asks us a question to which a truthful answer results in a breach of confidence or will hurt another person in some way, should we still be truthful in our answer? Higher-order questions, such as, “Why is this value important in this situation?” “If we choose to display this value, what else should we consider?” are important in helping children learn the appropriate application of values in their everyday life.

Even presuming that Adventist educators can provide the context, information, and inspiration for teaching positive values, if school-taught values are overlaid with conflicting family, media, or society values, this can cause values schizophrenia. The same is true if students have a distorted understanding of God’s character.

There is no set formula for teaching values, but unless a value is held by the majority of people in an organization, the mere act of stating it verbally or in writing will not embed the value in people’s consciousness and behavior.¹³ Once the teaching staff understand the origin of values and subscribe to using values to help students develop an understanding of God’s character, some practical strategies can be used to ensure that the school operates in harmony with God’s pattern of love.

Here is an A B C D E approach to teaching values that out-

lines five broad principles and incorporates the worldview, head, hand, and heart elements for teaching values.

A. Atmosphere. Create value-filled classrooms and a school climate that promote godly values through teacher modeling, focusing on the character of God and intentional use of slogans and posters as visual reminders.

B. Belief and affirmation. Use affirmation statements for exposure and reflection that present values as attributes of God’s character, such as “*Because God is love and gives freely to us, we use the gifts and talents He has given to the best of our ability. In everything we do, we give our best.*” If affirming with awards, call them “Glimpses of God” or a similar name to place the focus on God’s character, rather than only on the students’ behavior.

C. Curriculum. Embed values across the curriculum. Values will have greater significance when woven into all elements of the daily program and integrated into life learning.¹⁴

D. Definition and description. Explain the meaning and application of each value. Because most values are quite complex and abstract concepts that take time to attain, teachers may assume a knowledge base in students that does not exist. Instruction should include biblical, historical, and contemporary examples along with discussion, moral dilemmas, either/or



Table 1: What the A B C D E Approach to the Teaching of Discernment Might Look Like in Two Different Class Settings Over One Week

HOW DISCERNMENT SHOWS US GOD’S CHARACTER – TEACHER UNDERSTANDING

God is all-wise and all-knowing because He can see the end from the beginning. In His love, God gave us the power of choice as His ultimate gift. We have the freedom to accept or reject Him.

GRADE 4 CLASSROOM	GRADE 9 ENGLISH CLASS
Atmosphere	
Choose classroom posters and school/class newsletters that promote the value of the week/month. Schedule chapels/worships that feature stories of biblical, historical, or contemporary individuals who made wise choices. Promote the value of decision making for the class/school. Songs can emphasize discernment (“I have decided to follow Jesus” with alternative verse: “I’ll make good choices because I love Him.”)	Because they are dealing with older students, teachers should share their own experiences with discernment and talk through the processes that helped them make their choices. Slogans and posters can also be used, such as “You are what you think.”
Belief and Affirmation	
Across the top of the blackboard write: “God chose me to be His child—I am learning to make wise choices that honor God.” Each day in class worship, explore relevant Bible texts (e.g., Philippians 4:8, 9; 1 Corinthians 3:19) and stories. Pray for discernment and wisdom.	Have a poster or wall display with the words, “God chose my life and gave His Son to die for me—I will honor God in my choices.” OR “In what I read, write, do, and watch, I choose to honor God.”
Curriculum	
During a unit on healthy eating, include opportunities for students to make food choices and to justify the reasons for their choices. Discuss the reasons, and explore the importance of discernment in eating habits.	While discussing fables and folklore in English class, include a culturally appropriate story in which the main character makes a choice. Discuss whether the choice is wise, and how people make wise choices. Then have the students write their own narrative in which the character practices discernment.
Definition and Description	
When discernment is first introduced, spend time explaining the value. This can include describing what discernment sounds like in words and what it looks like in action. Choose a definition that is age appropriate—“Discernment is making wise choices”; “Discernment is involving God in every choice we make”; or “Discernment is being able to recognize and make wise life choices. It involves understanding God’s plan for happy living and making choices that will help us live the lives God intends for us. Discernment recognizes the gift of freedom God gives us and our responsibility to learn to use that gift wisely.”	
Experience	
Students participate in preparing a healthy lunch from local produce and compose and sign a personal “Healthy Eating Manifesto.” Throughout the week, the children, teacher, and others at school affirm discerning behavior choices by placing named Pop-sicle sticks in a tin labelled with the affirmation statement from the Belief and Affirmation section.	Ask students to divide themselves into groups, then have each group choose an activity that involves research, writing, and performing a folklore narrative in a chosen genre. After the activity, assign an individual reflection task in which the students evaluate their choice of group and how well their group worked to achieve its goals.
We will know we are growing in discernment when: • Students who stand up for what they believe are honored by staff and students. • Students and staff take time out to think before acting. • Students and teachers make a habit of praying for wisdom before making important choices.	

choices, ranking, and narratives to increase values literacy.

E. Experience. Facilitate opportunities for students to flex their “character muscles” in real-life situations. This is a continuing process in the classroom that can be reinforced if teachers also devise creative ways of involving their students in school, church, or community projects where they can enact God’s values in their lives.¹⁵

An example of what the A B C D E approach to teaching values may look like in the classroom is provided in the table on page 20.

The Nexus Between Values and Faith Development

Character building does not happen overnight; nor can it simply be written into the curriculum and treated like other subject matter. While intentional and explicit values-education programs are useful, educators must recognize that the internalization of values is not a linear progression, but rather a multifaceted process involving the whole school community and more significantly, God. Character development is not something we do to prepare for heaven; it is something God does for and in us to restore us to His image. Therefore, values education and faith development are connected in a symbiotic relationship and are inextricably linked. Adventist teachers are privileged to be partners in this process of restoration. Their authenticity in living God’s values will be judged by their students and will leave a lasting impression, either positive or negative; but it is God who facilitates change in students’ lives.

Elite athletes often have a cabinet full of trophies. Each trophy tells something about the person who won it. Trophies exist to be displayed; to reflect and declare to the world the wonderful accomplishments of the persons on whom they were bestowed. Every Adventist teacher and student is a trophy of God’s grace, won by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and thus challenged to live out the values of God’s character: “You are . . . God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Even when Adventist schools include values in their mission statements, promote values in their newsletters, and teach values intentionally in their classrooms, a teacher who is a living trophy of God’s grace is the most powerful values statement an Adventist school can make. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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9. All Scripture quotations in this article are quoted from the New Living Translation. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.
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14. The *What If Learning* Website (<http://www.whatiflearning.co.uk/>) has excellent practical suggestions on how to integrate values across the curriculum.
15. For practical examples of how to implement this approach, see Chapter Six in Barbara J. Fisher, *Developing a Faith-based Education: A Teacher’s Manual* (Terrigal, Australia: David Barlow Publishing, 2010).