How to Make Sabbath School Yours

I was never very outgoing or gregarious as a young child. I used books as a barrier to shield me from the inquisitive approaches of my peers, silently dreading the pressure of sustained conversation. As a result, one of the most vivid memories of my preadolescence is the day I first received a phone call from a classmate of the opposite sex. I stared at my mother in disbelief as she identified the caller and held the phone out expectantly. Eyes wide, I swallowed and held the receiver to my ear. “Yes?” I ventured. There was silence for several seconds as I tried desperately to anticipate the inquiry. Was I too young for a serious commitment?

Finally a timid voice asked, “What page is due tomorrow in spelling?” Relieved at the question’s simplicity, I quickly responded and finished the exchange, hanging up the phone in exhausted triumph.

As I learned at an early age, it is often difficult to initiate dialogue, but the exchange of ideas that conversation makes possible is the foundation of not only the richest human experience but also, more specifically, one of the most rewarding aspects of religious life. Sabbath School is certainly not the only forum in which spiritual or theological conversation can occur, but it is perhaps the most easily accessible. Sabbath School is specifically meant to initiate essential dialogue about our beliefs and responsibilities as followers of Christ.

Unfortunately, as a young adult I often found it far too easy to retreat into my adolescent introversion and sleep through the discussion, slipping into a pew just as the 11:00 service began. While I viewed the worship hour as required attendance, Sabbath School became more and more optional and eventually, in my mind, unnecessary.

However, as I looked more closely at the life of Jesus here on earth I discovered that a central focus of His ministry was to broaden and deepen the dialogue about God’s character. The Incarnation allowed human beings to engage God in face-to-face conversation. Christ placed infinite importance on dialogue that wrestled thoughtfully with contemporary social and spiritual ideas. In fact His life here on earth was book-ended by vital conversation. The 12-year-old Jesus initiated His public ministry by engaging the dumbfounded Pharisees in an extended question-and-answer period. And when the resurrected Christ returned one final time to see His disciples, it was not worship He desired most, but conversation over a fish dinner on the beach.

Whether it was with the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, the rich young ruler, or Nicodemus, Christ’s ministry often revolved around meaningful conversation. In fact, He risked the anger and disapproval of the local leaders to speak with even those who were not, at that time and in that place, allowed a voice. It was, in fact, Christ’s penchant for radical dialogue with the most socially unacceptable voices of His day that led, in part, to His eventual arrest and execution.

As I began to see Christ as a revolutionary initiator of dialogue, I also began to see the true importance of Sabbath School. As proclaimed followers of the greatest conversationalist in history, it is our responsibility to become actively involved in deepening and broadening the discussion for our generation. Sabbath School is one of the most accessible and important forums in which we, as Adventist young adults, can join the exchange.

I have been able to experience Sabbath School from the pew and the pulpit, as both participant and leader. As an attendee I grew lethargic and disinterested, going sporadically out of a mere sense of obligation. Becoming engaged in Sabbath School leadership, however, forced me to consider more carefully why Christ was so clearly invested in dialogue. I discovered that conversation is essential for the building of community and relationships. It is also a powerful teaching tool, as those ideas that we engage with are most often the ones we remember best. And most important, dialogue engenders growth. Discussion with others serves to surface and reexamine ideas in
such a way that prevents stagnation and moves both thoughts and actions forward.

I recently visited a special joint exhibit of artistic works by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. These two men met early in the twentieth century and for the rest of their lives influenced each other’s work tremendously, pushing each other to new levels of innovation and creation. The exhibit brochure states that “works are presented in the form of a conversation across time.” The exchange of ideas can clearly be seen in many of these great artists’ most famous and celebrated pieces.

As it did for Matisse and Picasso, group dialogue serves to challenge and enrich individual product and experience. It is no wonder, then, that Christ placed such value on thoughtful exchange. Jesus says, “‘Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them’” (Matt. 28:20, NKJV). We are called by Christ’s example to value dialogue and the forums in which it occurs. Sabbath School, then, is a vital part of the Christian religious experience.

During the past few years I have had the privilege of leading out in a variety of Sabbath Schools. Perhaps the most rewarding experience has been the most recent. I spent two quarters of this past academic year working as a student missionary at the Italian Theological Seminary, the Adventist junior college in Florence, Italy. One of my responsibilities was to lead a Sabbath School for the English-speaking students. The group took dialogue so seriously that Sabbath School often ran more than three hours in length. Organized group Bible study spilled into the week as students gathered in each other’s rooms to read and question together.

The success of the Sabbath School was the result of a choice each member made to value thoughtful dialogue fundamentally. On a practical level, that meant the discussion was carefully focused on a specific and challenging topic. However, within the chosen subject matter no question was off limits, and each opinion was taken seriously. People were willing to risk the certainty of their beliefs in order to learn and grow, and no one person was allowed to dominate the conversation.

When we take the challenge of Scripture seriously and make it our mission to value and invest in dialogue, tremendous growth and exciting community can result. It is easy for me to suggest the obvious: that we each merely attend, or ask to teach, Sabbath School. However, I am interested in the more fundamental challenge of valuing meaningful conversation, because without that basic conviction we are liable to become disinterested or bored. Because of Christ’s example, it is necessary that we become personally invested in ensuring that Sabbath School is consistently challenging and enriching.

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