Teaching a Theology of the Center Versus A Theology of the Edges

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BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

I have a document in my files listing "Fourty [sic] One Biblical Reasons Why Men Should Grow Beards." One of the most fascinating reasons is that, according to Matthew 10:30, God has numbered all the hairs on our head. Who, the argument runs, could be so arrogant as to cut off what God cared enough to count? Another argument is that God created men with beards, and it is therefore sinful to efface the image of God by shaving. Further, a man shall not wear that which pertains to a woman (Deuteronomy 22:5), and women have bare faces. Along the same line, the article points out that the effeminate shall not enter the kingdom of heaven (see 1 Corinthians 6:9). The manuscript's clincher argument is that "Christ our example wore a beard."

Other individual Adventists have gotten so carried away with the topic that they have equated shaving with having the mark of the beast in the last days. "Shaving," wrote one advocate of abstinence in a document entitled "Year 1940: Another Call for the Remnant Church," "is one of the gods of this world today. . . . When you shave you are not worshipping God, but the devil. He has tried to change the Fourth Commandment; now he is trying to change the First Commandment. . . . When you try to improve upon God's handiwork, by shaving, you make a sorry mess of it, and you will have to answer for it in the near future."

James White tried to put a lid on the religious fascination with shaving in Adventism as early as 1857 by saying that "we must beg to be excused from taking any interest in the question, or discussing its merits or demerits in the *Review*, as we cannot look upon it as a Bible question. . . . We design to be neutral [on the subject of beards]; and neutrality, now-a-days, is silence."[1]

But winning an argument with those having a burden in any sector of the theology of the edges borders on the impossible. One saint, for example, later argued that White had hardly been silent on the topic of beards. Since he sported one of the bushiest beards in Adventism, the assertion went, he had obviously voted against shaving.

Two Ways of Doing Theology

How, we might ask, could James White contend that shaving wasn't a Bible topic? After all, didn't those with a burden for the subject have some forceful Bible texts and a logical framework in which to argue those passages? The point underlying White's contention had nothing to do with their texts or their logic but with the fact that the anti-shaving Adventists were not dealing with something that was central to the biblical message.

Ellen White held the same opinion. Her son wrote that "when brethren have come to her, expressing their great burden over this matter [of shaving], she has said that it would be much better for them to exercise their time and mental power in dealing with more vital questions."[2] Indeed, the Adventist beard-mongers

weren't short on texts of a sort or a certain type of logic. Rather, they fell short on centrality, on having a vital topic. They were focusing on a theology of the edges. Many educators, unfortunately, have fallen into the same pit.

Adventist history, like that of other denominations, is littered with the remains of those who focused on a theology of the edges. People can read the Bible, Ellen White, and other authors in at least two ways. One is to look for their central themes; the other is to search for whatever is new and different. The first approach leads to what can be called a theology of the center, while the second produces a theology of the edges.

For years, I followed the second path in my reading of religious materials. Without thinking through the consequences, I began to make collections of Bible verses and Ellen White quotations that seemed

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Picture Removed

out of the ordinary. In the process, I discovered "new light" that no one else was emphasizing. My method led me to gather up the more extreme statements on the "new and different" topics I was interested in, remove them from their contexts, and form my own "authoritative" compilations. After I felt confident about my discoveries, it became my mission to teach others the importance of my "advanced light."

Unfortunately, that method of study too often creates a theology that even God can't recognize. It leads to distortions and emphases not found in the original inspired writings. By such a method, we make our arguments appear to be God's arguments; we make God fit into our agenda rather than perceiving and teaching what He thinks is important. Too many teachers are caught up in such hobby-horse approaches.

Emphasizing What Is Central and Vital

Ellen White's book *Education* helped me move away from my theology-of-the-edges approach. "The Bible," she wrote, "is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its *grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy [between good and evil], and of the work of redemption.* He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found."[3]

A similar passage defines the central theme of Scripture even more precisely. *"The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan*, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God." "Viewed in the light" of the "grand central thought" of the Bible, "every topic has a new significance."[4]

These important passages set the stage for healthy instruction in the theological realm. *The overall curriculum and its various components should be aimed at helping students understand the big picture, the grand central themes of the Bible.*

Discovering the Centrality of the Center

The importance of focusing on the central issues of the Christian/Adventist faith was brought forcefully to my mind some years ago when I was holding public lectures. In the midst of the second week, a perceptive woman told me she wasn't going to come the next night because she didn't like my topic—I was going to tell her what she shouldn't do. Personally, I thought my topic was right on. After all, with a title like "Why I Don't Eat Rats, Snakes, and Snails," how could I go wrong? Humbling myself, I told her that if she came the next evening, she would conclude that it was the best lecture yet.

With a promise like that, I was driven to think through what I really hoped to accomplish. In retrospect, I am everlastingly grateful to that insightful woman. She *forced* me to think through my presentation and my goals; she *forced* me to find the center.

The next evening, I focused on the central theme of the Bible—God loves us. Within that context, I noted that because He loves us, He wants us to be happy. And, I pointed out, we are happiest when we feel good, when we are healthy. Therefore, God wants us to take care of our bodies and our minds; not as some negative restriction but as a positive blessing of inestimable value.

In presenting that lecture, I not only taught the center, but I also helped my audience relate it to their everyday lives. As a teacher, I have sought to accomplish the same goals. I want my students to see the big picture. I also want them to see how the more peripheral topics relate to those of absolute centrality. In the process, I desire them to see that hobby-horse topics all too often don't tie in with the main themes and concerns of the Bible.

Teachers in Adventist schools must help their students discover the great central themes of their faith. Those themes orient themselves around two quite related emphases. The first is the great biblical truths

that Adventists share with other Christians. These include the love of God, the problem of sin, God's plan for saving people through Jesus Christ, the importance of having a personal relationship with God, the centrality of the Bible, the importance of practical Christianity, and the development of Christian character.

Teachers must help their students understand that Adventism and its doctrines have no value outside of the larger Christian package that the denomination shares with other Christians. Within that context, however, the central biblical truths that make Adventism unique take on a great deal of importance. In the context of the plan of salvation, such Adventist distinctives as the premillennial Second Advent, the heavenly ministry of Jesus, the seventh-day Sabbath, God's continuing guidance of His people through the gift of prophecy, and the missiological implications of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14 define what it means to be an Adventist Christian.

What Does This Mean for Classroom Teaching?

What relevance, you may be wondering, does this have for my daily teaching? For one thing, it means taking the opposite approach from some of the Bible workbooks with which I began my teaching career in the late 1960s. Those workbooks, for one reason or another, all too often missed the central issues. I still remember correcting answers that dealt with such "crucial" information as the name of the mother of Moses's father-in-law or the number of people who were killed in a certain battle. To put it bluntly, far too many of the questions centered on the lowest possible rung on the taxonomy of knowledge—the memorization and regurgitation of facts.

While esoteric facts may have their place, our primary task as Christian teachers is to impart theological and biblical knowledge in a way that helps our students see the big picture. We must help them understand how that picture affected the lives and choices of biblical characters, as well as how that same picture and the principles imbedded in it continue to affect our lives today.

Bible stories and parables offer a delightful way to introduce these ideas. Take, for example, the story of the loving Father in Luke 15. As I work with my students, I ask them to read the story in several versions,

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or, better yet, divide up and *act out* the three parables and the all-important introduction in the chapter's first two verses. Then we discuss the main lessons they have gleaned from the story. I often use leading questions. Why, for example, does rejoicing appear in each of the three parables? Why does the chapter begin and end with grumbling? What does the chapter teach us about such topics as human lostness, repentance, and the love of God? Why does the story's lesson seem to be backwards? That is, why does the wicked younger boy get a party rather than the older one who stayed at home and acted the part of a good son?

And, of course, I wouldn't want to avoid the all-important but frustrating conclusion. Why is it that the parable has no ending? Why doesn't it tell us what the older son decided? Here is an invitation to apply the parable to our day. The reason the story lacks a conclusion is that it isn't over yet. Many of us are that older son standing face to face with the Father. We are confronted with the same choices as the "good" boy.

Through the imaginative use of such Bible passages, we can help young people not only become involved in Scripture (especially if they act out the passage with the proper facial, bodily, and verbal expressions), but also learn the lessons that Jesus so much wanted to teach His disciples—and us.

Another approach that I have used in helping young people discover the great themes of the Bible is to have them study a passage and summarize its main point in two or three sentences. They may not all come up with the same "main point," but their written answers provide ideas for a discussion in which the class can begin to collectively deal with the meaning of the passage.

The first chapter of Matthew is a good candidate for this technique. In their responses, some students will get lost in the genealogy, others will be fascinated with the 3 x 14 generations, and still others will focus on the virgin birth. But some will undoubtedly focus on verse 21, which states that Jesus came to save His people from their sins. With some thought and skill, the teacher can lead students to see how all the other parts of the chapter lead up to the claim of verse 21 and how the rest of Matthew flows out of it. After all, that verse is not only the central one in Matthew 1, but also the theme for Matthew's entire Gospel. In fact, it is a theme that runs from Genesis 3:15 through the end of the Book of Revelation.

Teaching theological information, as I noted in the previous issue of the JOURNAL, is only a part of the teaching of religion. Without a personal experience with Christ, the information is essentially useless. However, within this context, the information forms the basis for a Christian's walk with God.

But, as I have pointed out in this article, we need to emphasize the knowledge that is central to the biblical text. Our students need to understand the great central themes of the Bible. Then they will be able to evaluate the importance and usefulness of other bits and pieces of knowledge that they find in scripture. To help our students become balanced followers of Jesus, we must help them embrace a theology of the center and use that perspective to evaluate the importance and validity of those topics on the edges. ✐

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