

A Response to Teaching Biblical Spirituality at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University

The teaching of courses in spiritual formation in Adventist universities and colleges has become a matter of much debate in the last few years. Recently, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and Andrews University have been under scrutiny for offering courses in spiritual formation to their students.

With the dissemination of New Age and Eastern spirituality in popular books, the media, and websites, Christians of all denominations have become aware of the dangers of these “new” approaches to communion with the divine. Seventh-day Adventists are naturally concerned about this new trend because authentic Christian spirituality has been one of our core values since our beginning as a denomination 160 years ago. During her lifetime, Ellen White frequently spoke about the need for reading and meditating on the Word of God, prayer, and fasting. She admonished that we should “cultivate a love for spirituality and true godliness” (2T 315). She also stated, “The revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs” (1SM 121). For over a century we have advocated and promoted through conferences and publications the subjects of personal Bible study, prayer, devotional life, Sabbath keeping, fasting, faith nurture, and many other approaches to spiritual growth and sanctification. And, today, our church is again placing an emphasis on revival and reformation, spirituality and discipleship. The genuine and authentic lives we live will impact the world for Christ.

In 2005, the General Conference session voted to add a new fundamental belief titled “Growing in Christ.” This fundamental belief highlights the needs for spiritual growth. The last part of this statement reads, “In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience.”

Given the world in which we live, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary believes that the responsible thing to do is to teach its students and pastors about Christian spirituality. Our courses enunciate clear biblical, theological and Adventist principles. We are diligent to select good academic books on this subject and the choice of books we adopt for our classes does not mean we accept all of these authors’ points of view. Yet we believe one goal of graduate education is to impart the skill of discernment and we desire to teach our students to be deep thinkers and not mere reflectors of other people’s thoughts. By God’s grace, we intend to be faithful to our mission as we equip our students to become good mentors and ministers of our faith and heritage and as they assist church members to deepen their journey with God.

There are some who accuse the Seminary of teaching contemplative and emergent types of spirituality because we have called our courses by the name of "Spiritual Formation". We do not teach such approaches to spiritual development. In academic circles the expression spiritual formation is a synonym for spiritual growth toward godly maturity, or the process of Christian discipleship and sanctification. It is unfair and false to state that spiritual formation is evil because it is associated with the writings of Church Fathers, some strands of more recent Roman Catholic thoughts, and some devotional practices of other religions. The intent of spiritual formation is to teach students what Scripture says about living a genuine life of commitment to God, to be open to the convictions of the Holy Spirit, to be regenerated in Christ. Spiritual formation is an academic term used to describe courses or subjects that deal with spiritual development and faith nurture. By using this term we are saying that we offer biblically-based classes that focus on the spiritual lives of our students. And shouldn't we do more, not less, of this kind of faith nurture? Yet, to avoid any further confusion, we have decided to change the name of our courses to refer instead to biblical spirituality. We hope this will help alleviate some genuine concerns people have had.

Please join us to pray for the spiritual growth of our students in our Adventist institutions.

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