Motivating the Reluctant Bible Student

By Beverly A. MacLaughlin

Lost in her private world of reflection, Miss Morse turned the pages of the photograph album. She had taken pictures and prepared a section for each of her 12 years of teaching. Every page was filled with its own private collection of never-to-be-forgotten memories—of Frank, Carol, and so many others.

Frank was a thirteen-year-old seventh-grader. He had been in the same church school, with the same teacher, since he started school. God had blessed Frank with a quick, clear, organized intelligence that allowed him to breeze through his studies. He rarely had to take work home with him. In his younger years, he listened to the three complete sets of “The Bible in Living Sound.” He had taught himself how to read when he was only three years old, and had read a wide assortment of Christian literature before he entered school.

Enrollment in the first grade gave him an even greater opportunity to grow in his knowledge of Jesus. Although Frank loved his Lord, he was getting bored with the material in his Bible class.

Carol, an outgoing, lovely little lass, was terribly perplexed about her relationship with Christ. As she thought back a few years to her experience of living in one foster home after another, Carol couldn’t help wondering why she had to be born to an overly strict father, a mother who had gone to live with someone else, and why she hadn’t even been given the chance to know her grandparents, who might have reflected God’s love for her. She was beginning to believe that God was not a personal, loving Father for her after all.

Miss Morse felt strongly that she should be a reflection of God’s love for her students, and that she should motivate them to dedicate their lives to Him. But what was the best way to do this?

A favorite reference book was propped between two onyx bookends on her desk, and Miss Morse instinctively reached for it. She thumbed through the pages to see what it had to say about her dilemma. “Motivation is that which sustains, intensifies, and directs a person’s goal-seeking behavior.” One part of the statement especially seemed to stand out—“a person.” Motivation was directly related to individual behavior and was different for each person.

Four Areas of Motivation

Miss Morse continued to read about motivation. She was reminded that it involved four achievement-oriented behavior concepts: arousal, expectancy, incentive, and discipline. Her pencil started digging into her hand as she filled a yellow pad with notes pertaining to arousal. Her first inclination was to inject her students with a transfusion of excitement that would give them a real “charge.” Then she discovered that an intermediate level of arousal is most appropriate for classroom learning. Reading further, she discovered that extremes of arousal actually interfere with learning and are not conducive to providing a motive to learn. She laughed inwardly to think that she had actually been tempted to compete with Big Bird and Cookie Monster in teaching techniques. Then she realized why Miss Spaulding, a teacher she remembered fondly, had been so successful in daily guiding and instructing her students toward a closer walk with Jesus.

Miss Spaulding had been consistently fair, understanding, and encouraging to each of her students. She made a point of knowing each student personally and visited each one at home. While these visits were important to her students, they also brought her an inner joy as parents and students expressed their appreciation for her personal interest. All of this was part of arousal.

Miss Morse made a memo to herself to be sure to plan personal

(To page 39)
Evaluating Bible Classes
(Continued from page 37)

A single letter grade is fraught with great risks. The assignment of a grade at the end of a course certainly suggests product- rather than process-oriented education. Dangers in this method include the fostering of unhealthy competition and the student’s perceiving the letter grade as the teacher’s assessment of his spiritual condition or commitment. Sometimes teachers inadvertently penalize students for poor attitude when in fact this attitude could be symptomatic of a lack of conversion. If teachers succumb to this misjudgment, they may actually be judging the Holy Spirit’s efforts in the student’s life, since conversion is His work.

Clearly, a descriptive method of indicating pupil progress, based on objectives and reflecting the multifaceted nature of spiritual development would be preferable to the designation of a single letter grade, and would minimize the inherent risks in assigning grades. If institutional regulations, parental expectations, and other factors seem to demand a grade, then the Bible teacher needs to clearly articulate what that grade represents, or else provide supplementary information of a descriptive nature in order to give a more comprehensive picture of student growth and development.

The Bible Class—
Its Discipling Function

A study of Jesus’ teaching practices as portrayed in the Scriptures clearly demonstrates that although formal education is vital, informal nurturing experiences may sometimes have a more lasting effect on the minds of students. Jesus taught by precept, yet His example certainly had an even greater impact. Much of His teaching was accomplished through socialization. As the disciples associated closely with Jesus and came under the influence of His modeling, they became changed men.

The Bible class today should demonstrate a similar disciplining function, with the teacher seeking to develop a rapport with his students. He should not hesitate because such closeness may expose imperfections in his own character. The Bible teacher should not be expected to model perfection. On the contrary, both student and teacher should model for each other the process of restoration!

Mutual modeling of restoration by student and teacher can succeed only if the Bible teacher creates a classroom atmosphere in which students feel free to discuss spiritual problems without fear of being labelled, where each one is free to express doubt and fears and know that he is still accepted, respected, and loved, an atmosphere in which issues relevant to young people’s lives can be aired and guidance provided without the implication that if the students’ spiritual growth had been adequate, they would have had no need of discussing such issues.

Given the life-relatedness of Bible teaching, the inquiring minds of eager students, and the eternal implications of the issues facing our young people, Bible classes should be a joy to teach. And how are the achievements of such classes to be evaluated? Far beyond a grade in a long-forgotten report card, these results are seen in committed lives here on earth and candidates for God’s eternal kingdom.

Motivating the Reluctant Bible Student
(Continued from page 35)

visits in her students’ homes.

Reviewing her notes on arousal, Miss Morse underlined this sentence: An important part of arousal is finding and adapting just the right material to meet the needs of each student. In preparing
an individualized Bible curriculum, Miss Morse wanted to be sure that the materials (1) accurately portrayed the character of God; (2) made the student think; and (3) guided the student in applying the Bible lesson to his or her daily life. She began to research some materials that might be useful in her classroom.

Using Expectancy to Motivate Students

After completing her research on motivation, Miss Morse began to study the next plateau of motivation, expectancy. She read, "Setting purposes for student learning is the expectancy function of the teacher." Teachers use expectancy to motivate students when they explain what the students will be able to accomplish after completing assigned work. But then, with her pencil poised in mid-air, Miss Morse suddenly wondered: Just what objectives do I want my students to accomplish from studying their Bible lessons? What is my ultimate purpose in life for each of my students? Instantly, this quotation came to mind: "True education . . . prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come."

Had she prepared her students for this dual service? She had taught them about God's love for them and had encouraged each one to respond to Christ's invitation to live with Him throughout eternity. But she also needed to provide opportunities for them to openly respond to the heavenly invitation, and to share this invitation with others around them.

In looking over her resource material, Miss Morse found this quotation: "Taking Jesus as their example, young people will discover the purpose of their existence. They are to glorify God by service that blesses others." This certainly fit in with the need for setting purposes for student learning and establishing an expectancy of what the students should be prepared to do, both during their Christian school training and after completing their study.

Offering opportunities for Christian service would also help her students to experience success. Miss Morse moved the Christian Service Curriculum material from the bookshelf to her desk so that she could further study its suggested activities. She felt optimistic that combining these activities with the regular Bible curriculum would help her students understand the real purpose for their Bible class and would prepare them for the reality of living a life of service to God and man.

Motivating Through Incentive

Miss Morse now felt ready to explore the third area of motivation, incentive. In order to provide incentive, she knew that she would have to study the needs of each of her students. Then she would recognize opportunities when she could provide incentives that fit their differing personalities. By understanding Frank's intellectual gifts, she could provide reinforcement by accepting his personal research on a Bible lesson topic and incorporating it into her lesson plans. Incentives for Carol might also include helping her establish a prayer list and keeping a record of her answered prayers. Carol could also receive reinforcement from loving volunteers who participated in the school's Christian service program.

Miss Morse resolved that, with God's help, she would be more alert in providing incentives that met the individual needs of her students.

Motivation and Discipline

Miss Morse was reminded by the reference material she was reading that student behavior in the classroom must be appropriate to the learning situation. (This seemed especially applicable in Bible class, she thought.) She had always thought of discipline as directing and monitoring student behavior in the classroom. However, she was surprised to learn that discipline also concerned recognizing subtle behavior patterns that interfere with learning. Some of the behaviors she learned to watch for included marginal listening, feigning reading, and hurriedly completing assignments without thinking. She listed these discipline problems, with a reminder to try to extinguish these behaviors and reinforce more appropriate behavior.

In summarizing what she had learned about motivation, Miss Morse wrote some notes in shorthand to carry in her purse. Here were her secrets of motivation:

1. Engage each student in work at the appropriate interest and arousal level.
2. Help each student to experience success in Christian service and thereby achieve a purpose for life.
3. Help enhance the students' awareness of their successes, and provide incentives for living Christian lives.
4. Use reinforcement techniques that establish and maintain appropriate classroom behavior.

FOOTNOTES

2 Ibid.

THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION