



*For Primary, Juniors,
Teens, and Youth*

1. Background on Religious Education

One of the missing elements in our culture today is what I call “the Grand Narrative.” While our world is becoming more and more busy and information-packed, the story of humanity and of God—the story that defines people—is fading. Eugene Peterson comments:

“We live in a world impoverished of story. Words in our culture are a form of currency used mostly to provide information. By the time we have completed our assigned years in the classroom, we have far more information than we will ever be able to put to use. . . . There is no discovery, no relationship, no personal attentiveness in them [words]. For that we need story and storytellers.”¹

Throughout the centuries God has used stories to foster His relationship with people. God reminded Israel of their role as His children through stories. A story narrated by the prophet Nathan led David to yield his life to God with unwavering fidelity. God clarified His commitment to His children through the story of Hosea and Gomer. In Scripture God is the great storyteller of “the Grand Narrative.”

At the heart of God’s course description for passing on the faith to His children is a challenge to find ways to constantly keep that faith before them:

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

This text displays the ultimate goals of religious education:

1. “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.” Children can intuitively sense someone who is genuine. It is no surprise that those who are effective teachers will inspire children with their sincere expression. Somehow, the greatness and goodness of God is in the heart of the teacher. The teacher tells the stories with passion and conviction. Such stories leap to life most easily for children when they are already alive in the heart of the storyteller.

The first goal for teachers using this study guide should be to deepen their own understanding and experience. Inevitably, “who we are” will teach as much as, if not more than, anything we say. This study seeks to transfer more than information—it is driven by the notion that the heart of the teacher (parent, fellow student, pastor, leader) motivates the student to strive to understand God’s Word.

2. “Impress them on your children.” At one time, parents served as the major source of knowledge about God. While others in the communities were helpful, Mom and Dad were the primary teachers. Today the family often relies on the local church, church school teachers, and others to help engage young people in a committed relationship to God. Whether the teacher is a family member, a pastor, a teacher, neighbor, or a dedicated young person in the church, the task is the same: Impress the truth of God on young people. Teaching (Impress) in this context is more than doling out dry data. Studying, memorizing, serving, creating, and sharing are all part of the learning journey. Many young people know what happens to the body when a person dies. They recognize that Saturday is the Sabbath of the Bible. And they understand that Jesus will come in the clouds literally, personally, and visibly. But something is still missing. The word “impress” carries a sense of impact and permanence that goes beyond passing on a list of facts. Real education is built on the idea that we share honestly and openly in a growing relationship.

3. “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” The key focus of the third goal is that we grow spiritually as we live in the cycle of daily routine. Because of our hectic pace of life, it is crucial to learn to integrate the discovery of God’s love and goodness. In ancient times children spent all day with their parents, who could tell them stories, share experiences, and teach songs as they worked, played, and lived. Today, school, lessons, and sports divide the day. Our fractured lives call for teaching structured in such a way that it becomes part of the everyday experience.

4. “Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.” Children are inherently

creative. When it comes to religious education, what we hear someone else say has only a minimal lasting effect on our minds and hearts. But when young people create and construct the lessons of the Christian life, the impact is everlasting. We call it active learning. As young people learn by doing and creating, shaping and refining, they move beyond a completed lesson to a new way of living. In short, they make it real by living it.

5. “Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” Learning is most effective when we can fix the lessons into our memories with symbols, stories, and significant markers that in one look, one glance, one thought, connect the mind and the heart to a moment when God’s power and presence were real to us. This is the purpose of rituals and reminders. The more we remember the things we have done, the deeper we sense the power of our learning. We especially tend to remember what we write. The process of writing things down crystallizes and clarifies important experiences.

Children usually choose baptism when they are young. As they grow, their experience of faith changes. Their concrete understanding of the facts about God and His Word shifts to abstract “wonderings” that search for links to their daily lives. We need to understand that at the point of conversion and baptism their education is only beginning. Young people will ask questions about their faith—count on it. Such questions come in many forms, both verbal and behavioral. God knows the way we develop, and in Deuteronomy 6 He gives parents and teachers one of the greatest answers to the challenges of teaching

spiritual truths to kids:

“In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?’ tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers’ ” (verses 20-23).

God’s leading and blessing, His discipline and supernatural power, all find their perfect medium in the story. Be assured, though—the *Bible* is more than “just a bunch of stories.” The wonderful narratives of Scripture provide direct instruction, truthful sayings, and statements about people, life, and God’s unfailing love for people.

Ultimately, the Bible is a story about God and people, and we find our faith in the living God by weaving our own stories into the fabric of the continuum of God’s Word.

Against the backdrop of this “Great Story,” the goal of *ChristWise* is to grow young people firmly into an experience with Christ that demonstrates a commitment to His church and a certainty of God’s purpose for their life here on earth and in the world to come.

1. Eugene Peterson, *Stories of Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 8.

2. Philosophy of *ChristWise*

What response do we give children when they ask to get baptized? How do we approach the task of preparing them to walk fully in the grace of God's Son? What resources do we use to make sure that young people are ready for baptism? How can we be sure that they really understand what they are doing? What all do they need to know before their baptism? What's the best age? How long should they wait? The joy of the child's decision can fade as we hesitate to jump in too soon or do not respond quickly enough to a fleeting window of opportunity. Many young people maintain that "they didn't know what they were doing" when they were baptized as a child. Others recall wanting to be baptized, asking to be baptized, but ultimately losing interest when no one paid any attention.

Clearly, we need a thoughtful approach for relating to, preparing, and developing the youth of our church. The very core of this study is the hope that each person who uses this model will become united with Jesus confidently and permanently.

ChristWise is a journey in which young people prepare for baptism by starting and ending with the person of Christ. "What about 'the truth,' the whole truth?" many ask. The truth (the myriad of doctrinal teachings) is incomplete if Christ is not present and central to each idea. The idea is not a new one to Adventist education:

- "Christ's favorite theme was the paternal tenderness and abundant grace of God; He dwelt much upon the holiness of His character and His law; He presented Himself to the people as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Let these be the themes of Christ's ministers. Present *the truth as it is in Jesus*. Make plain the requirements of the law and the gospel. Tell the people of Christ's life of self-denial and sacrifice; of His humiliation and death; of His resurrection and ascension; of His intercession for them in the courts of God; of His promise, 'I will come again, and receive you unto myself' (John 14:3)."¹
- "If we teach the truth as it is in Jesus, religion will not be regarded as drudgery, but as a delight. Let the teachers bring sunshine, gratitude, and hearts full

of tenderness and Christlike compassion, into their work, and leaven the hearts of their scholars with the spirit of unselfish love; for this is the spirit that pervades heaven."²

- "The love of the truth as it is in Jesus means the love of all that is comprised in the truth Christ taught. Let our teachers strive to follow His example, to cherish His spirit of tender sympathy. Let none leave the love of Christ out of their labors, but let each ask himself the questions, Is my life a consistent life? Am I guided by the Holy Spirit? It is the privilege of every teacher to reveal the power of a pure, consistent, Christ-loving workman. The spiritual-minded teacher will never have an uncertain religion. If he truly loves the service of Christ, he will have spiritual discernment and spiritual life."³
- "The Truth as It Is in Jesus.—Teach the simple lessons given by Christ. Tell the story of His life of self-denial and sacrifice, His humiliation and death, His resurrection and ascension, His intercession for sinners in the courts above. In every congregation there are souls upon whom the Spirit of the Lord is moving. Help them to understand what is truth; break the bread of life to them; call their attention to vital questions."⁴
- "The truth as it is in Jesus can be experienced, but never explained. Its height and breadth and depth pass our knowledge. We may task our imagination to the utmost, and then we shall see only dimly the outlines of a love that is unexplainable, that is as high as heaven, but that stooped to the earth to stamp the image of God on all mankind."⁵

This study guide seeks to present opportunities for young people to discover every "truth as it is in Jesus." John, the disciple of Jesus, would agree: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

The major features of this study all emphasize a journey toward Christ-centered truth. It is:

Built on stories. The most effective way to teach children how to follow Christ is through stories.

Stories mean different things to kids at different stages of development. With young people who are junior age (9–12), the facts contained in the stories make them meaningful. As young people grow into their early adolescence stage (13–15), the characters in the story become the highlight for them. They are trying to figure out “who they are,” and identification with other people helps this process. Youth (16–18 and up) tend to wonder what the meaning of the story might be in light of their own experience. The stories of Christ’s life are the perfect way to shape young hearts and minds.

Furthermore, when students connect their stories to the experiences of Christ, it deepens the certainty of their faith more than if they were to simply recall “the old story.” Curriculum for faith development must be narrative-driven.

Christ-centered. The Bible is clear about focusing on Christ first and foremost as we teach: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39, 40). Everything in the Bible seeks to draw our attention to Christ. The book of Revelation describes itself as the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1). Hebrews adds: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Hebrews 1:1, 2). Ellen White writes that Christ is the center of knowledge—“the truth as it is in Jesus.” The bottom line is that every doctrine (the state of the dead, the Sabbath, the sanctuary) is meaningless without Christ. The study of these doctrines as they appear in the daily life of Jesus adds color and meaning to those beliefs that Adventists have embraced for years.

Doctrinally integrated. The Seventh-day Adventist Church holds a cluster of twenty-eight major teachings that it considers to be foundational. Rooted in Scripture, they are wonderful descriptions of God and His love for people. But if these teachings are presented separately, one by one, it is difficult to see the big story, the story of God and you. The beautiful truths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church need to be understood in the context of the story of Jesus. Looking at the doctrines individually is like staring at a painting with

your nose an inch away. It is hard to see the big picture because you can see only one small part at a time. But examining the life of Christ is like stepping back and viewing the whole picture at once. While you can focus on the different colors, the special parts of the picture, it all makes sense only when you can see those details as they are in Christ.

- You will see the *great controversy* in the temptations of Jesus.
- You will see *the Trinity* at the baptism of Jesus.
- You will see *the law of God* written out, not on blocks of stone, but by the hand of Jesus on the hearts and lives of people.
- You will see *the Sabbath* as Jesus kept it, and how we might experience the joy of that rest.
- You will hear Jesus make promises about the *Second Coming*, at which He will end the old story and start a new one.
- You will see *a remnant*, a group of people who are faithful to Jesus when others turn away.
- You will see a young girl come back to life again, and view the smile on Jesus’ face as He talks about *the resurrection*.
- You will break bread with Jesus and the disciples and sense the renewal that comes at *the Lord’s Supper*.
- You will hear the sound of the Temple curtain torn in two in *the sanctuary* when Jesus turns ritual into reality.
- As the disciples go out to use their *spiritual gifts*, you will be wondering what God is calling you to do.
- When you see a widow give all she has to God, you too will experience the joy of *Christian stewardship*.
- As Jesus uses clay to restore blind eyes, you will remember that at *Creation* He originated those eyes. You will hear Jesus say that He was around before Abraham, even before the world began. While that may be hard to fathom, again and again He will demonstrate in His life that He is the Creator and Re-creator of our lives.
- You will see people racing to the riverside, eager to start a brand-new life with God in *baptism*.
- You will be surprised as the failures of Jesus’ most devoted friends reveal the true *nature of humanity*.
- When Jesus speaks of the way *marriage and family* used to be, you will open your eyes to God’s incredible plan for people in this world.
- You will notice that when Jesus talks about *Christian*

behavior, His expectations are so great that you will have to trust Him for help to be what He wants you to be.

- When Jesus talks about *the church*, you won't see buildings, but people living and loving the way He did.
- When Jesus reminds the church leaders about the way they treated the prophets of old, you will learn to listen to the *gift of prophecy* that we still have today.
- When Jesus quotes from the *Holy Scriptures*, will you see another rule-book or will you see the story about God and you?

Active learning (methods). Jesus was the master teacher, and learning the way He taught is the ultimate teaching goal. The methods He used are simple, yet profoundly powerful. His widely varied teaching strategies include:

1. Parables (stories). Jesus would paint the truth on the canvas of the hearts and minds of people through stories. The lessons buried in the story were life-changing—because at their heart, stories are relational. They have to do with real people, with real problems, with the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Parables and stories also allow learners/listeners to discover the truth on their own. This study will seek to create opportunities for just such discoveries.

2. Thoughtful questions. The questions we ask and the way we formulate them have everything to do with effective learning. For example, a teacher can easily ask, “What does John 3:16 say God did for us?” The answer is just as effortless: “He gave His only Son.” Not only is the response obvious, but arriving at the answer doesn't require the learner to think, feel, or experience anything other than the process of reading the words. But look at the kind of questions Jesus asked:

- “If the salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again?”
- “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't the tax collectors do the same?”
- “Why are you worried about clothing?”
- “Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘Get up and walk?’”
- “Why are you afraid?”
- “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”
- “Who do you think I am?”

- “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry?”
- “What is written in the Law—how does it read to you?”
- “Which of these three proved to be the neighbor?”
- “What do you want Me to do for you?”
- “Who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves?”

The questions Jesus asked don't simply seek to gain the correct response—they pulled the learner into an experience—a struggle. We must seek to ask good questions, ones that make the student think, feel, experience, and respond.

3. Action. When the lawyer discovered what mercy was, Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.” To do it. Try it. Experience it. Live it. Furthermore, He compelled those He touched to talk about their experience as well. He gave the disciples power and authority to cast out demons, heal the sick, and raise the dead—He gave them the gift of experience. Jesus said to Peter, “Drop your nets and come learn what it means to be a fisher of men.” Similarly, He also pointed the man He had healed of a demon toward personal action: “Go and tell everyone in your village how God has had mercy on you.” Part of this journey is doing what Jesus does (example) and what He says to do (instruction). Active learning is simply learning by doing. You can know that forgiveness is important and that God forgives everyone who asks, but you “really know” forgiveness when you experience what it is like to forgive someone who has wronged you. Jesus told the story of the two foundations: “Everyone who hears My words and does them is like the man who built his house on the rock.” What strengthens the faith experience of young people, what provides it with a solid foundation, is the active expression of their faith.

4. Reflection. The reflective portion of every study is also vital. Journaling and reflecting are significant exercises that deepen faith and strengthen our understanding. Some recommended journal promptings appear toward the end of every study and sometimes at the beginning. Many of the writers of religious education curriculum know that the exercise of journaling is helpful, but their curriculum leaves little room for it. The suggestion to young people is obvious: if there is no room, you must not want me to say much. *ChristWise* leaves space for the thoughts and experiences of the learner in each study.

The People Who Teach

ChristWise is designed for pastors, teachers, youth leaders, Sabbath school teachers—for anyone committed to mentoring young people in their walk with Christ. However, my experience is that this study works best when done in pairs. Pairs are more personal than a classroom full of students. Honesty and accountability increase in smaller groups and decrease as groups become larger. High school and college students often are the most effective at leading young people in this study because of the mentoring element that grows out of the experience. High school and college students are usually the first to admit that they don't know it all, which makes the journey more cooperative and less directive. Clearly, young people grow best when they sense they are learning *with* their teachers as well as learning *from* them. Bible studies that are predominantly

question and answer, explanation and quizzing, stating and repeating, tend to fail at really engaging young people to live more fully in a relationship with Christ. *ChristWise* seeks to have those involved share experiences and responses back and forth as they proceed through the studies. It assumes that no matter their age or identity, two people can learn from and with each other.

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1. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2000), 40; emphasis added.
 2. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2002), 107.
 3. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 1943), 362.
 4. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 1973), 188.
 5. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 129