

GOD OF ADVENTURE

**Exploring How God Teaches Through
Adventure and Calls Us
to Do the Same**

GOD OF ADVENTURE
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INTRODUCTION

Adventure has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a child I loved to explore the woods with my friends and to imagine that we were pirates, explorers or agents on top secret spy missions. I would spend countless hours in the woods alone and with others making forts, hiding from the enemy and exploring every ridge, valley and creek.

We would also do many crazy things like explore caves to see if we could find the local black bear or climb cliff faces without ropes or see how high we could climb up a tree. One of our favourite activities was to find tall, thin maple trees in the middle of the forest and shinny up as far as we could until the trees started to bend. Then we'd let go with our feet and safely and slowly be lowered back to the ground as the trees bent. The thicker the tree, the higher we could shinny up, hoping that it wasn't too thick to bend. We would continually push ourselves to see what cool things we could do. As I think back to some of the crazy things I did, I wonder how I ever survived childhood.

As I got older, I was introduced to canoe tripping at Camp Mini-Yo-We, where my parents served as volunteers for nearly 30 years. I loved heading off into the Ontario wilderness not knowing what adventures I would encounter on the way. The more canoe trips I experienced, the more I wanted to experience them again.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a masochist who enjoys the pain that comes from paddling for ten hours a day or portaging a canoe for a couple of kilometres. There was just something about the trips that changed me as things happened inside of me through these experiences. I grew as

GOD OF ADVENTURE



Author leading canoe trip in 1976 – Algonquin Park, Ontario

a person, and my character began to form as I developed physical strength and mental endurance. I also learned valuable social skills, like listening and compromising, as I learned to live in community.

As a young man I had lots of unanswered questions, but I knew life was about more than finding answers. As John Eldredge puts it, I began to understand that “Life is not a problem to be solved; it is an adventure to be lived.”¹

Soon I found myself in the position of not only going on trips but helping to lead them. I wanted others to experience the same benefits I had experienced. I knew that these trips would often be life-changing for the participants, but I really had no clue as to why or how to maximize those experiences until I was later introduced to the traditional theory of adventure learning.

I have now been leading trips for over three decades and have made a lifelong career as the Executive Director of Medeba Adventure Learning Centre in Haliburton, Ontario, Canada. Medeba had always had an adventure slant to its programs since Stu and Jackie Wilson founded it in 1952, but it wasn't until the early 1990s that we began to formally specialize in adventure learning.

For over a decade, Medeba has taken and applied principles from the ever-maturing field of adventure and experiential learning. This application

Introduction

was especially relevant to Medeba's ten-month leadership development program (Proságo), which began in 1994 as a ministry to train young Christian leaders through adventure experiences. As a Christian organization, we were able to apply many adventure principles directly to our programs as we interwove our Christian beliefs into these methods. However, we have long been frustrated by the scarcity of writing on the topic of adventure learning from a Christian perspective. What was needed was not

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simply a reworking of traditional adventure principles into our Christian beliefs but the development of a comprehensive biblical understanding of the role of adventure in the process of life-learning—a “theology of adventure.” This book is an effort to fill that gap.

Another concern that we have had for many years, and especially in the current postmodern culture, is that Christian education in general today has accepted some foundational principles of modernism as being “Christian.” In particular, we are concerned that Christianity's primary (and, in some circles, almost exclusive) method of teaching truth is through proclamation, which usually translates into a lecture style: someone stands in front of a group and proclaims a truth. It is assumed that if people hear the truth, they will respond, and if they do not respond, we just continue to proclaim the truth in more and perhaps different words. Occasionally other methods of teaching such as discussion, role-playing and observation are used, but if they are used at all, they are primarily used with children.

Please don't misread me. I am not saying that proclamation or lecture-style teaching is of no value, but rather that we should expand our methods to include Christian adventure. I also hope that this book will provide a solid foundation for using Christian adventure as a legitimate teaching tool.

The Parable of the Fishermen and the Gardeners

The following parable is representative of our journey and observations. This simple story has a deep message for those who would care to listen.

GOD OF ADVENTURE

The Parable

There once was a village on a small tropical island. The villagers' lifestyle was simple. It provided all they needed to survive because they were accomplished fishermen and gardeners.

As the colony increased in size, it became apparent that the small island on which the village was located did not have sufficient resources to sustain all the people. The village elders met and determined that several families would have to leave to establish a new village on a distant unexplored island.

The families who chose to establish a new village gathered all they needed to survive, including a wisdom book of their culture's accumulated knowledge of their ability to provide food—primarily through gardening and fishing. They set off on their adventure in boats and settled on a distant island.

Over the generations the new culture gravitated to fishing as their primary technique, because fish were in such great abundance. They continued to gather some produce from the land, but as time went by, the gardens that they originally set up were mostly overgrown by the jungle.

The culture became very skilled at fishing, and oral tradition was augmented by some written books on how to fish more effectively. However, not everyone in the village was completely satisfied; the culture in general didn't receive enough nourishment from their fish diet, and few gathered wild fruits and vegetables. As a result, some began to experiment with gardening on their own. Others liked this new emphasis on gardening but wondered if there might be more effective ways of gardening.

Then one day an elder of the village, while conversing with one of these people, recalled a conversation that he had with his grandfather many years before. He remembered his grandfather had told him that when they first came to the island, the families brought a wisdom book of their culture's accumulated knowledge of their ability to provide food, but he had no idea where this book would be or even if it had been lost. After making further inquiries the man discovered this book wrapped in an old cloth in the corner of the tribal council room.

Although most paid little attention to this discovery (especially the fishermen), a few were eager to explore the book further to see what knowledge it contained. Inside they discovered detailed explanations of

Introduction

how to be successful at gardening and fishing. The conclusions they reached were:

1. Gardening was a legitimate career option (as opposed to what some fishermen were saying), but the thought of pursuing it further was scary.
2. Many methods of gardening and fishing were explained in the book, which convinced them that no one way was always best.
3. Because of the ideas explained in the book, some of their current culture's commonly accepted principles of gardening didn't make sense.

Several people tried to adopt these ideas and through struggling, experimenting and making mistakes gradually began to experience great success in gardening. Their desire was not only to be successful themselves but also to share their success with others. They wanted others to see the benefits of gardening too.

Parable Applications

1. Just as the culture on the new island adopted fishing as its primary way to supply food, our Christian culture has adopted proclaiming or lecturing as its primary method of teaching people.
2. Just as fishing had value for the island community, so proclaiming has value as a teaching tool.
3. Just as gardening is a legitimate food source for the people of the island, so experience through adventure has value as a teaching tool.
4. Just as the new culture rediscovered principles of gardening and fishing in their wisdom book, Christians today need to rediscover adventure teaching principles in the Bible and adopt them into their overall matrix of teaching truth.

Definition of Christian Adventure

Before proceeding further, it is important to establish a working definition of Christian adventure, but let's first look at the word *adventure* itself. The word adventure is derived from the Latin *adventura*, literally meaning "to come" or something about to happen. Over time this word came to mean a hazard, a risk or taking a chance.² It is clear that it refers to an unknown event about to happen in the future that could result in a loss.

Well-known adventure-based educator Simon Priest offers this definition of traditional adventure programming: "Adventure programming

GOD OF ADVENTURE

is the deliberate use of adventurous experiences to create learning in individuals or groups, that results in change for society and communities.”³ He goes on to say that “adventurous experiences are activities with uncertain outcomes (due to the presence of situational risks) which necessitate people applying their personal competence to meet the chal-

Christian adventure is a Bible-based strategy that leaders use to design and guide controlled risk experiences where people are encouraged to say yes to God.

lenge and resolve the uncertainty.”⁴

What then is Christian adventure? At Medeba we have developed the following definition: Christian adven-

ture is a Bible-based strategy that leaders use to design and guide controlled risk experiences where people are encouraged to say “yes” to God.

The meaning behind our definition of Christian or biblical adventure is broken down as follows:

1. **Bible-based strategy:** The principles in this book provide a detailed description of what we mean by a Bible-based strategy. Christian adventure as a teaching tool is not something that we contrived or invented on our own, but it is one strategy for transformation used by God and by God’s chosen leaders.
2. **Leaders:** Christian adventure takes place within the context of leadership. In a Christian adventure context, God will always be one of those leaders. He is the ultimate leader upon which all Christian leaders must depend. An experience may also include human leaders in addition to God, but it never involves human leaders alone. This is one key difference between Christian and traditional adventure theories.
3. **Design and guide:** It must be person or group appropriate. The leader is actively involved through initial preparation and ongoing guiding. Both questions and statements can be used, and a tension exists between letting things happen and stepping in to guide.
4. **Controlled risk experiences:** All adventure experiences must include risk to a certain degree. From a human perspective, our goal is to maximize the perception of risk while minimizing the actual risk. We have no illusions of wanting to play God. Risk means that there is a real potential for actual loss of some sort.

Introduction

5. **People:** Could include either an individual or a group.
6. **Encouraged to say “yes” to God:** Saying “yes” to God is defined here in the broadest of ways. Any decision that makes a step toward learning and applying truth about self, others and God is a “yes” statement toward God. Evangelism and discipleship involves a series of saying many small “yes” statements to God. (For example, “Yes, Lord, I know You are real. Yes, Lord, I want You in control of my temper. Yes, Lord, I trust You to give me the strength to handle this day.”) Every decision a person makes that honours God is considered a “yes” decision. In order to lead someone to another “yes” decision for God, the leader often creates and maximizes windows of opportunity. A person’s life can be viewed as a continuum of saying “yes” to God. Figure 1 represents this continuum.

Figure 1

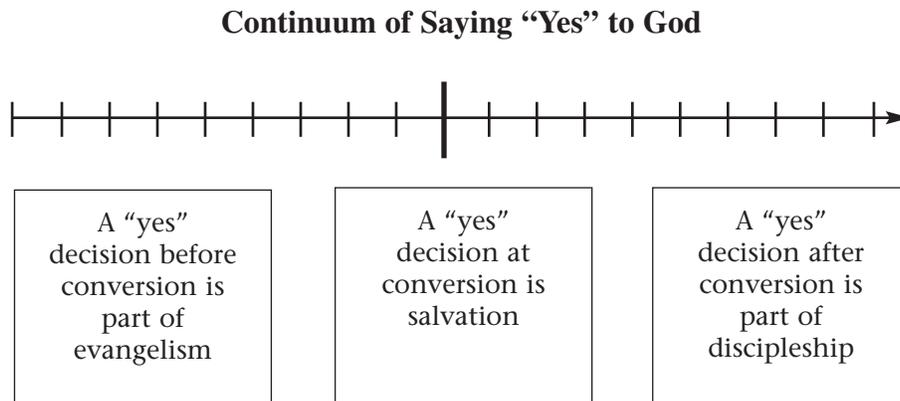


Table 1 describes the use of adventure terms throughout this book.

Table 1

Term	Meaning
“Christian adventure”	Refers to the concept as defined.
“Christian adventure experiences”	Refers to the context of where Christian adventure takes place.

GOD OF ADVENTURE

“Christian adventure learning”	Is synonymous with “Christian adventure,” placing an emphasis on the learning process.
“Christian adventure programming”	Is synonymous with “Christian adventure” but by placing an emphasis on programming it generally refers to more formalized programs run by organizations.
“Christian adventure leader”	Refers to Christ-followers who lead Christian adventure experiences.
“Biblical adventure”	Can be used interchangeably with “Christian adventure” but puts more of an emphasis on the source of the strategy.
“Adventure learning” or “Traditional adventure leaning”	Refers to the strategy of adventure learning that is not intentionally based upon the Bible.
“Experiential learning”	Refers to any learning that is primarily based on experiences. All adventure learning is experiential.

Research for the Book

One of my first leadership experiences at Medeba was in 1976 when I led a ten-day canoe trip for young people in a program called Northward Bound. We had carefully plotted out a route that began in the northwest corner of Algonquin Park, a world-renowned canoeing destination in Ontario. The route wound its way through the park, exiting at the south end through Haliburton County, right back to Medeba’s beach on Grass Lake.

Introduction

Today we run a similar trip on an annual basis in Medeba's Leader-In-Training (LIT) program, but back then the route was not well-established. Close to our destination, after extensive searching, we realized that we were lost, as we could not find a water passage or a portage trail to continue our journey. It was one of the few times that I had to call for an emergency pickup. Once back at camp we looked more closely at our map and found out that it was based on data from 1927. No wonder we couldn't find our way!

When I feel lost in life I turn to God's map for my life, the Bible. It never goes out of date and always contains timeless principles to direct my journey. So, in my desire to develop a theology of adventure, I knew that the only way to do this was to research what the Bible had to say on the topic of adventure. My personal opinions are irrelevant on their own.

It should be stated right from the start that I believe that the Bible is God's revealed word to mankind and, as such, is the authority for truth. Through it God has made Himself known to mankind in such a way that we can begin to understand our purpose and place in life. Interwoven in narrative, prophecy and poetry, deep truths are explained in Scripture.

In theological terms, the Bible is described as being "revealed" and "inspired" by God. The term *inspired* can be somewhat misleading if



Author biking the Cabot Trail – Nova Scotia

GOD OF ADVENTURE

we think of it in the same way we would describe an artist being inspired to paint a landscape or a musician being inspired to compose a piece of music. Rather, *inspired* literally means “God-breathed.” The apostle Paul explained it this way: “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

God revealed Himself to ordinary people while, at the same time, allowing these individuals to express their own unique writing style. John MacArthur explains it this way: “Inspiration is tied very closely to another term—revelation. Revelation is God’s revealing of Himself and His will. Inspiration is the way in which He did it. To reveal Himself God used human beings who wrote the Old and New Testaments in order to set down in exact and authoritative words the message that God wanted us to receive.”⁵

Obviously not every topic is discussed in the Bible. Rather, universal truths about God and His creation (including man) are clearly explained, and every principle that we need to live rightly before God is revealed in Scripture. Scripture reveals timeless principles that can be applied to life today. One of these principles is that adventure is a legitimate teaching tool that both God and other leaders throughout Scripture have successfully used down through the ages.

In developing this thesis, I could immediately recall some obvious examples of adventure in the Bible, such as David and Goliath, and Daniel in the lion’s den, but I knew that a more thorough, systematic study would be needed to develop a summary of biblical adventure principles.

As a result, I used a combination of my existing knowledge of the Bible and my experiences in life to establish a list of criteria that could be used to research the entire Bible. Biblical examples had to meet each of the criteria in order to be included in the research.

The criteria were,

1. **A leader must set up a task or experience.** It must specifically say through the recorded words of the leader or comments from the book’s author that the leader set it up. God could always be viewed as “leader” because He is sovereign and in control of everything, but these types of examples were not generally included. Some examples of implied leaders were also found. Self-leadership is often implied

Introduction

where a leader seems to just decide to do an adventure; however, these implied examples of self-leadership were also not included since, for a believer, God is present in every decision.

2. **The outcome of the experience must be uncertain.** The essence of adventure is being unsure of the outcome of the experience.
3. **There is risk for the participant.** Risk must involve the potential for real loss. The risk needs to be in actually doing the task or experience (obedience) and not primarily in not doing the task or experience (disobedience). Sometimes the risk is more perceived than actual. When God is leader there is always spiritual risk in disobeying.

Note: The word *risk* is from an Italian word *risco*, which means to dare. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines risk as “the possibility of suffering harm or loss.” The word was first used of sailors and tradesmen in Italy and Spain from the fifteenth century.

The concept of risk first appeared in the Renaissance mercantile world, in which sailors had to take risk, owners wanted to insure their ships and merchandise, and bankers wish to minimize losses. From here the word slowly moved into everyday language, first in the sixteenth century into the Romance languages and only later into the German and English languages, where it soon settled down in the world of gambling and strategic warfare.⁶

4. **The experience must be designed for positive learning.** The motive of the leader is often not specifically stated, so the criterion often used here is the general context.

In the end, I found 105 Bible stories that I believe met these four criteria.

Right from the first chapter of the Bible I was confronted with considering whether God would count as an example of being the leader of an experience. At first this seemed odd, but upon further reflection it seemed quite natural. It only makes sense that the Creator of the universe leads and controls everything within it. Almost half of the examples included God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as the identified leader. In addition, over 30 percent included God as leader with a human leader also involved. This multi-level leadership is addressed in Principle 8.

It should also be noted that most of the examples do not reveal what the leader is thinking in setting up the task or experience. One must try to infer from the context of the story what the leader was hoping to accomplish.

GOD OF ADVENTURE

The ideas summarized in this book clearly form a biblical foundation for adventure as a significant tool to encourage transformation in people. Each chapter includes the following:

1. An introduction explaining a principle of biblical adventure.
2. Research highlights providing a few biblical examples of the adventure principle.
3. Implications to consider in light of the adventure principle.
4. Questions for further reflection.
5. A final section called "Digging Deeper" for those wishing to explore a more extensive list of biblical examples.

Note: The appendix at the end of the book provides a detailed table of all the biblical examples that met the research criteria.

It is my hope that reading and studying these biblical examples and the ideas that come from them will motivate you to apply them to your ministry and your life. As Jesus said in His prayer for His disciples, past and present, "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth*" (John 17:17).

Consider the truth that adventure is God's idea and that the God of the Bible is a God of adventure.