

Spiritual Openness: The Question of Questions

As students progress through our system and then move physically away from family to academy or college/university, the process of questioning is not only inevitable but also necessary and desirable.

Someone asked me the other day whether it was OK for La Sierra University to grant degrees to students who still had questions about their faith. Or has Adventist education failed if it doesn't produce graduates who have resolved all doubts in favor of a settled, committed faith?

I think it was Otilie Stafford of Atlantic Union College (South Lancaster, Massachusetts) who wrote that college should unsettle the mind. Questioning has to be an essential part of the university experience. It's part of what a university is all about—to ask, explore, stretch, challenge, and question.

By Dan Smith

While in college, I joined a small group of upper-division theology majors in a seminar by one of the more "provocative" professors.

I had recently returned from the mission field, and was relatively naive about theological controversy. Every Wednesday night, he would throw out unsettling questions about Scripture—How did we know what was directly revealed from God or spoken by Jesus Himself, and what was added by later writers or the early church? How could we resolve the different stories about Peter's denials of Christ? Every Wednesday night, I would slink back to my room, my simplistic faith in Scripture shattered. It would take all week in other theology and ministry classes to rebuild my faith, only to be laid low again during another night of wrestling with difficult evidence. I was terrified: If I couldn't rely on the insignificant details of Scripture to be scrupulously correct, how could I know that John 3:16 or 14:1-3 was accurate? And I wondered how the college could allow such a heretical professor to remain on staff.

But gradually he led us to principles of biblical interpretation and a theology of inspiration that made more sense, that could handle all of the evidence. So when, 10 years later, a variety of controversies hit the church, I had already been prepared and sensitized to the issues. My faith had a safety net. Other pastors left the church—but I stayed. And in hindsight, that professor became my favorite teacher.

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It is one of Christian education's developmental tasks to move students in the direction of what faith development people call "Personalized Faith."¹ As students progress through our system and then move physically away from family to academy or college/university, the process of questioning is not only inevitable but also necessary and desirable. It must be encouraged, even mandated, if they are to move into their professional lives with *owned* beliefs and values as "thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought."²

The Valuegenesis study showed clearly that at least we on the church side of the aisle have not accomplished this very well.

Church Climate—Opinions of Students in Grades 6-12

(Percentage represents "quite true" or "very true")

Most members want to be challenged to think about religious issues and ideas—35 percent

My church challenges my thinking—31 percent

It encourages me to ask questions—28 percent

It expects people to learn and think—40 percent

It is open to new ideas—37 percent³

Valuegenesis showed that the trend deteriorated from sixth to 12th grade:

Most members want to be challenged to think about religious issues and ideas—42 to 31 percent

My church challenges my thinking—49 to 22 percent

It encourages me to ask questions—45 to 23 percent

It expects people to learn and think—56 to 33 percent

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which we hope they will stay connected. But we must not be afraid of the questions. We should have faced them ourselves and worked through them to answers that "work" for us. Truth can and must never be afraid of further inquiry. "Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation."⁵

We can learn from the way science handles new discoveries. The scientific method is immediately applied to try to disprove the new "truth" and to probe for weaknesses in it. This hardens and refines the truth so that it will stand the tests of other researchers. We must let each generation do the same with theological truth.

I pastor in an institutional context that includes kindergarten through university. Obviously, as students mature,

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there must be a gradual transition from being "didactic" to "Socratic." But at every level, we can embrace the value of asking questions. In our university context, I believe that the following represent a Christian school's role in encouraging questioning:

1. **Foster questioning.** Initiate the process. Expect students to ask questions. I try to model this in my preaching by sharing the questions and moral dilemmas that I wrestle with.

2. **Create a context** in which the questions can be asked safely. Help students explore a variety of answers.

3. **Be there** to provide guidance in the search process, and to recommend helpful resources.

4. **Explore options or answers** that have been advocated by the world's religious philosophies, systems, leaders, and inspired documents. Every philosophy or religious system is wrestling with the same metaphysical and ethical issues—only the answers are different.

5. **Provide a safety net.** As students begin to question and challenge the religion of their parents or of their previous teachers and pastors, their faith may begin a "free fall." We need to be there to provide a safety net, to suggest core, fundamental, irreducible faith statements; i.e.,

- There is a God;
- He is personal;
- Christ, grace, and spirituality are critical to life, now and eternally;
- Christian community is vital to growth;
- "Don't hurt yourself while you explore."

We should offer certain anchor points that students can hold onto while they go through the somewhat destabilizing process of exploring their faith.

6. **Model and mentor** a reasonable and pragmatic faith. One of the most powerful messages students can receive is that there are bright, thoughtful people on campus who are not only extremely successful, but also seem to have things pretty well figured out in their private, personal, and spiritual lives. Therefore, their views, beliefs, values, and spiritual rituals are worth looking at.

7. **Advocate**, after establishing a climate of openly looking at the most im-

A Frightening Process

My own guess is that having students question is frightening, both for them and for those of us who love them and the God and spiritual community to

portant issues of life, a particular view, which, on an Adventist campus, will of course be Christianity and the best of Adventism. It is essential to our mission that in addition to fostering an atmosphere of inquiry and exploring all the options, we can share and advocate, without embarrassment or apology, what we believe.

Discreetly but passionately, I preached this past Sabbath on Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17). Paul was not afraid to walk the streets of that city, the cultural capital of the world, the philosophical community of the great Greek philosophers. He entered the marketplace unafraid and participated in the debate. He did not put down their gods—but in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance, he passionately advocated belief in the True God, the God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” It is a wonderful model from the ultimate university town of 2,000 years ago, where Paul modeled the virtues of questioning, dialogue, exploring, and discussing the deepest and most critical issues of life, but also unashamedly exalted through personal testimony the God of Creation and the resurrected Christ. Paul promised that this God of the universe is not far from “each one of us.” And then he allowed each listener to decide for himself or herself.

Beyond certain community minimums, we cannot demand that students agree with or practice what we believe in order to graduate, but we must have shared our testimony in the best way possible before they leave. We should always do so carefully, treating sensitively those of other faiths, while leaving room for personal decision and disagreement.

At this point, I want to speak specifically to a college/university setting, but still with relevance to our entire educational system: We are not a Bible college, indoctrinating students into a narrow, prescribed set of doctrines and practices, without exposure to or discussion of alternatives. But neither are we a secular university, exposing them to the world's philosophies, religions, and val-

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ues dispassionately while expressing no personal preferences or convictions. We care deeply about what our students believe. We have an agenda. It is a matter of life and death to us. So we share it with the young people whose lives and futures weigh heavy on our hearts. That's our mission.

Richard John Neuhaus,⁶ at a recent inauguration service for a university president, discussed what a Christian university is and what it is not. He suggested that the ultimate consideration of each board and university administration must be: Does being a Christian university, with Christ as its beginning point, “illumine” the search for truth, or does it “illumine” that search? If we actually believe that Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6 KJV), that His teachings are the truth, and the truth will make us free (John 8:31, 32), then does not starting from Christ illumine all honest search for truth?

Neuhaus observed that Harvard University began with the word *Veritas* surrounded by “Pro Christo et Ecclesia”—for Christ and the church. In the past

century, that legend was reduced to just the one word, *Veritas*.

“For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light” (Psalm 36:9, NIV). Adventist education must maintain a careful balance. It must foster within its graduates a lifetime habit of asking questions, wrestling with evidence that doesn't fit the traditional, easy answers, encouraging “good doubt” that leads to better answers, beliefs, and doctrines that are ever more meaningful and relevant to one's faith; while passing on and advocating the faith that means everything to us.

And so, while we believe that questioning is integral to our mission, as part of a church that has always believed in the importance of free choice and thinking for one's self, we cannot help ourselves—we hope that every graduate from our schools has at least a relationship with God when he or she leaves. We hope that they will celebrate the grace of Jesus Christ, and value and share the best of Adventist beliefs and life-style. We hope that they have come to love being part of a worshipping community—a community that cherishes asking questions. Which, of course, is what the Great Controversy is all about. ✍

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REFERENCES

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2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 17.
3. Roger L. Dudley and V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valleogenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992), p. 169.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
5. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1946), p. 35.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, “The Christian University: Eleven Theses,” *First Things* (January 1996), pp. 20-22.