

# Using the Bible to Stimulate Critical Thinking

BY PAUL N. HAWKS

**E**ducators today are calling for students to learn critical thinking skills. This topic, though perhaps lost sight of over the years, is hardly new.

The most widely acclaimed thinker in Judeo-Christian thought declared that reverence for the Lord is the first step to obtaining wisdom—that is, the ability to think critically (Proverbs 9:10). The one who, more than any other, influenced the development of Adventist educational thought declared, "There is nothing more calculated to strengthen the intellect than the study of the Scriptures."<sup>1</sup>

Scripture applications must be

made with care, however. A superficial approach can create a subtle resistance to the basic message and significance of God's Word. Teachers who use the Bible without making it relevant to the subject matter of the class may naively violate the spirit of the third commandment by taking the Lord's name in vain—using His Word too casually (Exodus 20:7).

The use of the Bible in education should increase admiration and respect for God's Word. It should never generate resistance or produce apathy toward it!

How can the Scriptures be used so as to stimulate interest, generate respect for God's Word, and teach

students how to think? As a starter, I will suggest five ways to use the Bible to expand students' intellectual capacity in a wide variety of subjects.

## **Promote Open-Mindedness by Studying the True Source of Knowledge**

False confidence often leads one to stubbornly hold onto preconceived notions, even in the light of contrary evidence. A lack of confidence, on the other hand, may promote impulsiveness or crippling indecisiveness. The study of the Scriptures can provide a balanced picture of self-worth and humility before God, safeguarding against hasty conclusions and opening

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the mind to broader perspectives.

At the beginning of a course of study, explore with students those sources that provide the most reliable information and perspectives on the subject. You might peruse various Scriptures such as Proverbs 3:5-7 or Psalm 119:130. Ask your students what it means to "lean not on your own understanding," or to not "be wise in your own eyes."<sup>2</sup> Examine the implications of the statement, "The entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." Students will be delighted to probe the significance of passages such as Psalm 119:99: "I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes."

The Bible provides a significant breakthrough in the development of the human intellect. Acknowledging our human limitations, we can seek to know God as One who is eager to give us a broader picture of truth. This should both assist in the selection of learning resources and prevent many incorrect conclusions based on narrow human observations.

## **Expand Students' Perspective Through Exposure to Universal Issues**

The study of Scripture in relation to the arts and sciences can direct one's

focus to the grandest, noblest themes open to human contemplation. Investigation of the "great controversy" over the character of God provides the universal backdrop against which all learning may be evaluated and given meaning or purpose. The capacity to discriminate between truth and error, the ability to determine that which is central, as opposed to what is peripheral, and the ability to make value judgments all depend on one's ability to accurately assess the purpose and meaning of life.

The study of the Bible lifts one above the abyss of existential futility and provides an eternal purpose that goes beyond humanity and its own imagination. Ask your students to study the first chapters of Genesis to discover that human beings were created in the image of God, and that they were also given the opportunity to reflect the character of God and to cooperate with Him in the intelligent management of His creation. The study of Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25), the gospel commission (Matthew 28), and the three angels' messages (Revelation 14), should promote challenging discussion of the ultimate relevance of each course in the curriculum.

Nearly every course of study includes inherent ethical concerns. If you teach English or speech or other language skills, challenge your students to consider the ethics of what they say and how they say it. Ask them what Jesus meant when He said, "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). Encourage your students to explore the significance of Matthew 5:37 where Jesus says, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." Ask them to think about what this says about brevity, simplicity, and accuracy.

In the study of science and mathematics, the laws of cause and effect receive a great deal of emphasis. Let your students grapple with Galatians 6:7: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."

Go beyond a mere discussion of action and reaction, stimulus and response, or cause and effect in the natural world. Challenge the students to consider the natural cause-and-effect reasoning that underlies the moral laws of God, how reaping what one sows is the basis for ethical decision-making.

Ask students how information generated through science and mathematics can be put to practical and

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ethical use in light of the universal purposes of God (see 1 Corinthians 10:31).

**Develop Skills of Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation by Relating Scripture to Various Disciplines**

The study of Scripture will stretch students' minds if they are challenged to distinguish between principle and practical application and to discover unity in the great diversity of perspective found in the Bible.

This calls for much more than the mere use of the Bible in teaching. It demands all the major modes of expression, including history, poetry, didactic instruction, and persuasive appeal. This use of Scripture will help students to fulfill the apostle's charge: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). The thoughtful Christian must learn to do more than merely use the Bible to prove a point. He must learn how to correctly han-

dle, interpret, and apply the truths of Scripture.

The student of history can be exposed to the various perspectives of the biblical record, including the narratives of both Old and New Testaments, the laws and organizational structures of Israel as contrasted with the apostolic church, the insights of biblical poetry as it relates to Israel's perceptions of history (e.g., the song of Moses from Exodus 15; or Psalm 105, which portrays the nation's deliverance from Egypt). The historical perspectives of predictive prophecy certainly provide a significant resource for the student interested in God's view of the human story.

A serious use of Scripture must include a systematic attempt to correlate its vastly different modes of expression—evaluating context, the intent of the author, and the relevance of the message to other subjects of study. When thus approached, the Bible provides unending opportunities for developing one's capacity to synthesize abstract and concrete thought.

**Promote Analytical Thinking by Studying Scripture in Skill-development Classes**

For example, in the study of language, students discover that grammar and syntax contain a logic that conveys the intended meaning of written and spoken messages. The analysis of certain scriptural passages for grammatical and/or syntactical structure challenges the student to understand not only the logic of the language, but also the content significance of the passage being examined.

For example, an analysis of John 12:43 reveals a prepositional ambiguity: "For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (KJV). Ask students to explain the ambiguity. Tell them to study a variety of versions along with a Bible commentary. They will discover that the ambiguity exists even in the ancient Greek manuscripts. Does "praise of men" mean "praise to men" or "praise from men"? Does "praise of God" mean "praise to God" or "praise from God"? Ask the students which of the two possible meanings seems most likely in the context provided.<sup>3</sup>

Spend a few minutes discussing the significance of the verse's message for us today. The integration of language study with biblical content can provide mutual reinforcement of both moral and mental education.

**Develop Decision-making Skills by Using the Bible's Appeals for Commitment**

A mere humanistic study of the crit-

ical thought processes often leads a person to question everything and to doubt the meaning or purpose of life. Scripture demands that a Christian be more than a walking encyclopedia or a bionic catalog of the various points of view to make intelligent, well-informed decisions, to "stand for truth."

The end of learning is that we may discover, in freedom and humanity, and with mature discrimination, how to take sides....Every good gift which has come to humanity has come from free people who refused to sit back and play the spectator's part but who eagerly and courageously took sides for man against every evil and wrong and untruth. Truth is not neutral; truth breeds the boldest and bravest of all spirits.<sup>1</sup>

That historic showdown on Mount Carmel found Elijah taking sides: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). The application of this and similar texts (such as Joshua 24:15 and Deuteronomy 30:11-20) can motivate students to carefully evaluate the information gathered for a particular topic, and to make decisions regarding it—not merely decisions about belief, but decisions requiring action and follow-through.

The study of literature should lead to specific decisions regarding one's

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selection of reading material. The study of music should do likewise. Philippians 4:8 could serve as a foundational statement upon which criteria of selection might be developed.

The study of geography and cultural anthropology should challenge the Christian student to make decisions regarding his or her relationship to the people of the world. This study should include a serious consideration of the gospel commission. It should also move students toward taking a stand

on the information they have learned. This is the true development of the Christian mind—to inspire the person to both intelligent thought and action in advancing the kingdom of God.

Eternal benefits can come to both teacher and student if they learn how to use the Scriptures as an integral part of Christian education—not only for its content, but also for its contribution to the highest development of the human intellect. □

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1908), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated. From *His Bible: New International Version*, Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> NIV translators took a position on the ambiguity of this verse, rendering it "praise from men" and "praise from God"—in effect eliminating the alternative meaning.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Bayne, Jr., "God Is the Teacher," in *The Christian Idea of Education*, Edmund Fuller, ed. (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), pp. 264, 265.