

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**FOSTERING DISCERNMENT AMONG ADVENTIST COLLEGE YOUTH**

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## **FOSTERING DISCERNMENT AMONG ADVENTIST COLLEGE YOUTH**

### **Introduction - of Truth**

“‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer”. Thus wrote Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in his essay "Of Truth". It is an age-old question current in Pilate's day and current today.

The quest for truth has relevance for today's institutions of higher learning, even as it did for the medieval universities of Bacon's time, and all others since. But what is truth in the context of today's colleges? Is it the truth of factual knowledge of all kinds, of technological discoveries, of scientific probings of the vast cosmos of observable phenomena, or is it the ethical search for moral standards as the framework for action, the intellectual investigation of reality or the metaphysical search for what really was, what is or what is to be? To what extent are the colleges and universities of today concerned with the latter or the former? Where are the emphases? In the time frame of four or six college years, to what extent can truth be captured? Or, stays not the student for an answer? Is the hunt for grades, the scramble for answers 'true or false', the choice of the most accurate restatement of the text, contributing to the student's examination or perception or grasp of truth?

And if Pilate sought religious or spiritual truth in his day, in our secular world is the question raised? And, is the answer seriously sought?

### **Truth and the Christian College**

The Christian college presupposes God, His knowledge and His fear and from these man's perception of truth and wisdom. The Christian college seeks to make the Christian world view the basis for its pursuit of truth, the ultimate rationale for the various courses of study, and the determinant of lifestyle and of personal goals and actions.

This is an heritage from earlier times. In the medieval university, "the life and thought of the entire community were penetrated and informed by theological studies." (Holmes, p. 9). Holmes further points out that "American higher education was the

child of religion, and the history both of church denominations and of westward expansion can be traced through the history of America's colleges and universities." Headed by the universities of Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia, the various religious persuasions in America founded a total of 129 colleges and universities before the civil war. "Some of this number have become multiversities or lost their evangelical distinctives." (Holmes, p. 9)

A question of relevance is whether in today's culture of higher education, in their pursuit of 'truth', have most of these colleges dismissed religious based teaching? Is it shown to be unverifiable and therefore unscientific? Has religion been submitted to constant critical review to show its irrelevance? Has such religion as remains become a personal emotional pursuit by the student whether by way of religion courses or religious societies on campus, or through the churches?

The Christian college, Holmes points out, "refuses to compartmentalize religion" (Holmes, p. 9.) Rather, it seeks effectively to integrate Christian faith and learning. A few of these remain. (Holmes, p. 9)

### **The Seventh-day Adventist College**

The Adventist church sees itself as the final "prophetic" church in the long line of Christian prophetic churches. Its gospel is set in the Divine/Hebraic revelation of God's dealing with the sin problem. The church is further concerned with the restoration of "the truth as it is in Jesus". It regards itself as having an urgently immediate mandate to carry forward the great commission that the Lord Jesus gave on His ascension. It is to reach out to the world with the gospel, the achievement of which is a precondition to the end of the age and the establishment of the new heaven and new earth--the true new world order.

Humberto Rasi, Director of the Education Department of the General Conference of SDA, has outlined ten core concepts of the Adventist philosophy of education, five of which are particularly relevant to this paper. These are listed below:

"1. We see the Christian formation of children and youth as part of a co-operative process that involves home/parents, school/teachers and church/religious

leaders. Students learn that they belong to a special people with a history, a mission and a glorious destiny, in which they can play an important role.

2. The Bible constitutes the basis and reference point of school endeavors. The entire curricula and curricular programmes reflect the world view and principles revealed in the scriptures. Teachers and students believe that the same Holy Spirit that inspired the Bible writers will guide those who approach it with a teachable attitude.

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5. The main objective is helping students to develop a solid Christian character to realize their individual worth as God's children, embrace Christian values and learn to make principled choices. This goal is best reached in a context of responsible freedom and redemptive discipline.

6. Teachers and students recognize that all truth is God's truth and every field of study can broaden and deepen their understanding of truth as revealed in Jesus, the Bible and nature. The curriculum favors interdisciplinary and practical learning.

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8. Students are motivated toward informed independent and responsible thought. Instead of letting themselves be molded by the surrounding culture, they learn to approach it with critical discernment from God's perspective to choose the true, the good and the beautiful."

The general goals of higher education are also relevant:-

"1. To educate young men and women for a useful life in the context of biblical, Christian faith.

2. To train Adventist lay leaders and denominational workers who will devote their talents to accomplish the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. To strengthen the Christian commitment of Adventist youth and to attract non-Adventist young men and women to Christ and to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

4. To exert an uplifting influence on society in ever-widening circles through the service, research, and publications of Adventist educators and graduates.

5. To cooperate with the Church in discovering new truths, conducting studies, developing strategies, and providing Christian answers to the issues raised by contemporary society.”

The crucial question for Adventist educators is whether these goals are being achieved among Adventist College youth? To what extent are the youth motivated ‘toward independent and responsible thought’? To what extent are they approaching ‘the surrounding culture with critical discernment from God’s perspective, to choose the true, the good and the beautiful?’ To what extent are they examining truth for their own ‘understanding of it as revealed in Jesus and nature?’

### **Relevant Definitions – Discernment; knowledge; truth; good; evil; faith.**

An examination of the meaning of the key words used in this essay is useful. Webster’s Third New International Dictionary provides the following meanings of the verb **discern**: 1. (a) to make out with the eyes as something obscure or distant; detect; descry. (b) to detect or discover with other senses than vision. 2. (a) To sense; to come to know; or recognize mentally, especially something that is hidden or obscure. 3. (a) distinguish (b) to recognize or identify as separate and distinct; differentiate; discriminate (e.g. right from wrong- the false from the genuine;) to see or understand the difference, make distinction (as between good and evil). The definition of the noun **discernment** adds readiness and accuracy in discriminating; keenness of insight.’

**Knowledge** - The fact or condition of knowing something with a considerable degree of familiarity gained through experience of, or contact or association with the individual or thing so known; the fact or condition of possessing within mental grasp through instruction, study, research or experience one or more truths, facts, principles or other objects of perception.

**Truth** - Among the denotations are the following bearing on the topic. Something that is true or held to be true; the body of things, events and facts that make up the universe; actual existence; a fundamental or spiritual reality conceived as being partly or wholly transcendent of perceived actuality and experience; a judgement,

proposition statement or idea that accords with facts or reality, is logically or intuitively necessary, or follows by sound reasoning from established or necessary truth.

The dictionary, in amplification, points to coherence theory; correspondence theory, empirical, formal and metaphysical truth, normative truth pragmatism and semantic conception.

**Good** - having a favorable or auspicious character; prosperous; beneficial; conforming to a certain ideal or standard of morality or virtue; wholly commendable; virtuous; pure; something that comes up to expectations or requirements.

**Evil** - Beyond the limits of accepted conduct; not good morally; wicked; sinful arising from actual or imputed bad character; causing or intending to cause harm; baneful; harmful; pernicious. Also the fact of suffering and wickedness; the totality of undesirable; harmful; wicked acts and experiences.

**Faith** - The act or state of wholeheartedly and steadfastly believing in the existence, power and benevolence of a supreme being, of having confidence in his providential care and of being loyal to His will as revealed or believed in: belief and trust in and loyalty to God; firm or unquestioning belief in; something for which there is no proof; belief; trust.

It should be noted that discernment has a wide variety of connotations--from the ability to discriminate between propositions which are false or true to fact, to the creative intuition which pushes forward the frontiers of knowledge or accomplishment. In this essay, the intended meaning is mainly to distinguish between the genuine and false or flawed in the physical, material or spiritual worlds.

### **The Purpose of the Paper**

This essay looks at the attitudes of SDA college-age youth in the light of the avowed goals of SDA education that is, the objective pursuit of knowledge and truth and the church's claims to having a body of religious truth which may be objectively and rationally examined.

Since a stated objective of the church's education is the integration of faith and learning-- ("...the work of education and redemption are one..." (White, Education p. 30 )--acceptance of the faith may be regarded as a measure of the level and effectiveness of discernment among these youth. This is also considered.

Finally, the essay discusses certain processes affecting discernment among college students, and makes some recommendations to educators and college administrators aimed at heightening the discernment of students.

### **A Profile of Seventh-day Adventist College Youth**

Adventist leaders have been concerned about whether the goals of Christian education as envisioned by the church are being achieved, at least as far as human perceptions will allow. Through survey studies, the church has tried to assess success in this endeavor.

'Faced with declining school enrolments, the increasing exposure of young people to popular culture and mounting fear that the bond of young people to Adventism was loosening, the church undertook a research and planning study focussing on faith, values and the commitment of Adventist Youth Grades 6-12. This study has become known as the Valuegenesis Study. (Benson and Donahue, 1990).

Some of the deficiencies in the education system which were cited as in need of investigation were 'inconsistencies in values, a variety of standards, different approaches to discipline and the seeming failure to draw students to Christ and the Christian way.' Youth were said to be bothered by what they perceived as hypocrisy among adults and by the legalistic approaches to discipline and rules in the schools. Institutional decisions seemed to them to violate personal freedom and there was an apparent lack of kindness and love in the church itself. (Risk & Promise, NAD 1990, p. 9).

One of the key goals of education resulting from the study was-- "To enable Seventh-day Adventist students to internalize the essential elements of Biblical faith resulting in a world view that informs their personal value system, shapes their basic lifestyle, and results in a commitment to Christ and the mission of the Adventist church." (Risk & Promise, NAD 1990, p. 12).

In a study by V. Bailey Gillespie, SDA researcher, which involved a scientific sample of 1000 college age students across the North-American Division, the researcher was led to the conclusion that College students show high denominational loyalty, but this is not reflected in greater satisfaction with the church as a whole.

In answer to the question 'When you are 40 years old do you think you will be active in the Adventist Church?', the answers for sophomores and seniors combined were:

(i) excellent chance	42%
(ii) good chance	39%
(iii) fair chance	13%
(iv) small chance	5%
(v) no chance	1%
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	100%

When asked if being active in the Adventist Church was one of their goals the answers were:

Not important	14.1%
Somewhat important	15.6%
Quite important	37.5%
Extremely important	32.8% } 70.3
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	100%

When asked how satisfied they were with their denomination, the combined sophomores/seniors answer of 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' was 70%. This was the same as for North American Division high school seniors.

NAD College students were found to be more active in Bible reading and faith sharing than high school seniors.

It was also reported that in every area of Adventist orthodoxy including 'works' spirituality college students were more likely to express opinions consistent with the Adventist heritage than NAD high school students. They are however, no more satisfied with the enforcement of Adventist standards. (Gillespie - faxed monograph, 1996).



To educators outside of the NAD these findings will be cause for considerable concern when it is borne in mind that some 80% or more of students in these schools are from Adventist homes. What would a similar study show in schools where the percentage of Adventists to non-Adventists could be as low as 51%?

### **Growth of Faith - Moral Development**

It is useful at this point to consider briefly certain psychological propositions on moral development. Kohlberg (1964) as quoted by M. Matlin 1992, ( pp. 346-347) has proposed six stages of moral development paralleling somewhat Piaget's stages of a person's physical development. These are:

1. Reasoning based on avoiding punishment.
2. Reasoning based on self interest.
3. Reasoning based on pleasing others.
4. Reasoning based on upholding law.
5. Reasoning based on personal standards in the context of what's best for society.
6. Reasoning based on personal standards even if the standards conflict with the law.

These bear reflection in examining the development of moral discernment and decision-making. However, if judgement at stage six is not conditioned by God's standards or the Holy Spirit's revelation then it cannot be regarded as the Christian's best position.

### **Faith - a Life Profile**

For purposes of considering the concept of faith development, Humberto Rasi's derived categorization of the growth stages of faith over a lifetime is relevant. "The outline is that of an imaginary child who is born in a Christian home and goes through college. The stages are:

<u>Stages</u>	<u>Age</u>
Borrowed faith	(0 - 6)
Reflected faith	(7 - 12)
Personalized faith	(13 - 16)

Internalized faith	(17 - 22)
Re-ordered faith	(22 - 35)
Reflective faith	(35 - 50)
Resolute faith	(50 - )

The first four stages are of particular interest to this discussion.

Teachers seeking to foster discernment will also find useful readings on the development of faith. Major authors not already cited in this paper include James Fowler, the major Protestant writer on contemporary faith studies; V. Bailey Gillespie, SDA researcher and writer on faith development; Peter Benson et al who compiled *The Quicksilver Years: The Hopes and Fears of Young Adolescents*. (Rasi - Monograph, 1996).

### Youth--The Questioning Years

It will be generally agreed that in the late teen years young people question the values, tenets and knowledge that have been inculcated in them or to which they have been exposed in early life. In those years there is the search for a personal identity. Upon entering the college environment, where the methodology of learning becomes more analytical than merely the acquisition of facts, where there is wider exposure to knowledge and the discussion of issues, the concern always arises as to how the Christian student will treat his earlier understood or accepted faith. On the other hand, in regard to those who are nominal Christians or not Christians at all, the question which arises is what should be done? How can they be led to the crucial decision for Christian commitment? And for all, how do we foster discernment in a world where the mind and senses are daily bombarded with information, factual and fictional, appealing at all times not only to the intellect but also to the senses? How do they discern and act on rational bases?

## Discerning Truth--the Processes

### The Bible and Discernment

Young King Solomon, responding to God's question as to his desires in his new role responded, "Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people that I may discern between good and bad, for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" (1 Kings 3:9).

His wish was indeed granted. It is clear that on the matter of discernment the King was inspired. This is amply evidenced by his numerous counsels on wisdom, understanding and knowledge. In fact, knowledge, understanding and wisdom are concepts to be explored by teachers and administrators seeking to increase discernment in students. Certain of Solomon's life experiences, however, show that there was something lacking. This missing element was manifested in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Samuel and Daniel, but best in Jesus' life through His constant communion with his Heavenly Father. This is an avenue of discernment that is open to all teachers.

### Counsels of Ellen G. White

Under the heading 'Understanding' the following quotations of E. G. White from the book Mind, Character and Personality are enlightening as to "teaching". "It is the nicest and most crucial work ever given to mortals to deal with minds. Those who engage in this work should have clear discernment and good powers of discrimination". As the paragraph headings indicate, "It is an exciting task". Different needs are to be understood" "Truth is not to be spoken at all times" Christ calls for tenderness and compassion." On the related topic of perception she writes :

"It is a law both of the intellectual and spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. By beholding evil the antediluvians were corrupted but looking to Jesus we obtain brighter and more distinct views of God and by beholding we become changed..."

We should therefore be selective. "Perception is influenced by physical habits." "Sins dim perception." (White, 1977, Vol. 2 pp. 78, 84, 331, 334.)

### Some Opinions From Jamaica

In a sermon on family life delivered to family life leaders in the churches of East Jamaica Conference. Kenneth G Vaz, Professor Emeritus of the Theology Department of West Indies College, declared that trying to save the youth when they are of college age is “trying to catch the horse when he has already gone through the gate.” Decisions for a Christ-centered life are most often made at an earlier age.” Interviewed subsequently, he cited a study done in Jamaica which showed that decisions for Christ and the church after age 16 were fewer than decisions between ages 12 to 16.

He was firmly of the view that for youth in Adventist homes comprehensive exposure to the teachings and history of the church, wise and reasonable answers to the child’s questions, knowledge of comparative religion and sound Biblical studies were the contributing factors to a firm and lasting commitment to Christ and to the faith. He cited the early training of Moses, Joseph, Samuel and Daniel pointing out that they internalized spiritual values from early and this enabled them to “concretize” choices. The development of the conscience takes place early. It is then that the experience of the transfer of the law from the tables of stone to the heart of flesh, and the development of a personal relationship with the Savior God takes place. This is buttressed by a rationale explanation of doctrine, a study of comparative religious beliefs. The spirit of enquiry should not be stifled.

### The Philosophical Approach

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men and not after Christ,” warned St. Paul in his epistle to the Colossians (Col. 2:8 King James Version): or according to the New International Version “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ: Some Bible students may argue that he was speaking of Jewish sophistry.

His caution has merit. Nevertheless, philosophy concerned with its love of wisdom as originally seen by the Greeks merits our review as a method of analysing knowledge. The principles of logical reasoning, ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, and the philosophy of the various areas of study deserve consideration.

St. Paul himself admonishes-- “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” (I Thess. 5:21.)

In 1989 Arthur Coetzee, in his contribution to the Faith and Learning Seminar reviewed Philosophical Shifts in Concepts of Truth over Twenty Centuries. He was able to show that the refinement in philosophical dialogue pointed up the deficiencies in the perceived supremacy of scientific knowledge. It has become a new challenge therefore for theologians and other college disciplines to re-examine the framework for claims to cognitive authenticity. In the context of all the contending ideologies confronting young people, the role of philosophy as a study course could be crucial.. (Coetzee, CC Vol. 3, p.157-158).

### Discernment and the Media--Perceptual Conditioning

Gregory Rumsey, in the 1989 Volume of the Christ in the Classroom series, discussed the persuasive process of television advertising and proposed Christian guidelines for viewers and professionals. Under the heading “A time for Discernment,” he concluded that “the Christian classroom must be a place where students evaluate knowledge and ideas from the perspective of eternal values.” (Rumsey, CC Vol. 3, pp. 31-37).

In a wide ranging discussion of the subject, “Thinking Christianly in a Media Dominated Society,” Delyse Steyn in a paper prepared for the 1992 Faith and Learning Seminar made the following contributions of relevance to the present paper.

- i. She points out that we are part of the information society (Steyn, CC Vol. 7, p. 270).
- ii. She lists the nine prevailing ideologies, put forward by S.D. Eyre as propounded by the mass media. These are:
  - (a) secularism
  - (b) individualism
  - (c) materialism
  - (d) idealism
  - (e) conformism
  - (f) relativism

- (g) activism
  - (h) hedonism
  - (i) narcissism. (Steyn CC vol. 7 pp. 271, 272).
- iii. She suggests six directional characteristics of the Christian mind. These are:
- (a) the theological mind--the focus of the mind on God while being open
  - (b) the historical mind--contemporary culture is existentialist with a hedonistic, momentary orientation limiting a sense of the past and future.
  - (c) the humanistic mind
  - (d) the truthful mind
  - (e) the ethical mind--a sensitivity to good and evil which is Biblically based .
  - (f) the aesthetic mind. (Steyn CC, vol. 7 p. 282).
- iv. She suggests areas of knowledge that should be covered for the development of a Christian aesthetic and recommends that the student should acquire the following skills and values:

**Skills-**

- (a) Critical thinking
- (b) Discernment of the ideology being espoused
- (c) Evaluation of the meanings of the message
- (d) Judgement of the message in terms of his or her own world view
- (e) Empathy in which there is openness to reality of another and truth...
- (f) Aesthetics- that is an understanding of the techniques of the media.”

**Values--**These should relate to:

- (a) the use of time
- (b) the value of intimacy in the setting of the family
- (c) the value of human dignity.

## **Recommendations**

### **Discernment Through Analytical Methods**

The question of discernment and decision-making leads the writer of this paper to recommend the continued implementation of a curriculum in our colleges that would expose all students, regardless of their particular course of study, to philosophic approaches to thought, to the discipline of research methods in history, in the sciences, to the recognition of the importance of semantics, and of Biblical exegesis. Our colleges provide unique opportunities in the latter regard. In addition, special study should be given to ethics and how other religions or philosophies have based their moral organization of thoughts.

The student should also be made aware of the biological, socio-cultural and psychological influences on thought and decision making and the limitations of these.

In this regard, teachers will find very helpful in classroom pursuits, Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives in the cognitive domain. The major categories are:

Knowledge  
Comprehension  
Application  
Analysis  
Synthesis  
Evaluation

The taxonomy in the affective domain is also relevant. The categorization follows:

Receiving  
Responding  
Valuing  
Organizing  
Characterization by a value or value complex.

In last value level, it is considered that the student “has developed a characteristic ‘lifestyle’” (Gronlund, 1970, pp. 20-22).

### From Practising Educators in Jamaica

Kenneth Vaz and other educators and pastors in Jamaica who were consulted felt that:

1. Honest discussion of issues, even controversial ones, should be given space in all the activities on the campus.
2. The implications for the future personally, of the decisions and actions of today, should be highlighted constantly.
3. The ethical standards outlined in the Bible should be given prominence at all times.
4. Since even good SDA Christians have been known to be attracted to movements prompted by “private interpretations”, the spirit of research for one’s self involving in-depth theological enquiry and comparison with Biblical standards should be encouraged.
5. The presence of non-SDA students with other views should allow for more stimulating and insightful examination of issues.
6. There is need for a re-focussing of our dogmas to emphasize the love and sacrifice of God and our Lord Jesus Christ and to emphasize the blessed hope. Many of our young people, it was felt, are discouraged with the emphasis on works and become bystanders rather than fully committed participants in the religious experience.
7. Christian peer counseling was advocated. It was reported that B. L Archbold, retired President of the Inter-American Division of SDA, who had once served as Dean of Men at West Indies College instituted one to one peer counseling in the men’s dormitory involving strong Christians with undecided youth over varying periods of time. When therefore the week of spiritual emphasis (Week of Prayer) took place the



pastors were able to lead earlier uncommitted students to decisions which had already virtually been made.

### **Others**

The following suggestions derived from personal experience and interviews with other Jamaican administrators and the writings of E G. White are also made:

#### **At Institutional Level**

1. Allow sufficient time for the orientation of College freshmen to the aims and rationale of SDA Christian education.
2. Be sensitive to the real needs of students. Pray for guidance in this regard.
3. Highlight the importance of conscience educated by the Scriptures and guided by the Holy Spirit.
4. Make students aware on matters of perception, and persuasion, e.g.
  - (a) the play-back in the mind
  - (b) the physical conditions affecting perception
  - (c) the effect on the emotions of arousal
  - (d) the relationship between emotion, motivation and motives

#### **In the Classroom**

5. Be accepting, respectful and patient with students asking difficult questions.
6. Consult Christian colleagues in other disciplines on questions related to their disciplines which are difficult to handle.
7. Assign students to explore topics and issues for the quiet time before class. The issues may be interpersonal, local, national or international
8. Allow time for meditation.

9. Give personal examples where appropriate.
10. Fully discuss ethical questions relevant to the subject area being taught.

### **Conclusion**

The Christian teacher faces students with varying personal world views. The aim is to lead the student to examine his position as well as any new knowledge in a rational manner so as to discern truth. Bible based truth ultimately involves discernment between good and evil at the rational (intellectual) and experiential (emotional and decisional) levels. The student is to be led to see that spiritual discernment is superior—surpassing in validity and transcending in time other useful but temporal methods of finding truth.

To enable the teacher to facilitate this journey by the student certain approaches are proposed involving:

- the fostering of analytical thinking as appropriate to the various subject areas and from a general philosophical perspective;
- helping the students to develop a reference framework—a Christian world view;
- helping the student to recognize the cultural and psychological factors that influence decision-making;
- most importantly encouraging the student to develop a personal relationship with God. Ultimately, the highest, most thrilling form of discernment comes when in answer to sincere prayer God reveals Himself and man's eyes are opened in discernment.

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