

Faith and Learning

The Adventist Connection

By Niels-Erik Andreassen

Let's begin with a little quiz. True or false?:

1. More babies are born when the moon is full than on other days.
2. Childless couples who adopt are more likely to have a child of their own after adopting than such couples who do not adopt.
3. Basketball players on a winning streak will likely continue to shoot baskets—the so-called “hot hand”—and several misses in a row are also likely to continue.

Many believe there's something to these statements, with the possible exception of the first! Perhaps we remember instances of winning streaks and stories of childless couples having a child of their own after they had adopted. But in fact, these statements are all false, according to Thomas Gilovich in his book *How We Know What Isn't So*.¹ Our beliefs (based upon memorable anecdotes, selective data, or plain superstition) trick us into thinking there's some truth here, explains Gilovich. He proceeds to present his evidence based upon careful observations of what actually happens in hospitals, fertility clinics, and playing fields. This quiz illustrates how some people allow their beliefs to run ahead of the facts.

For the most part, it matters little if we believe unborn babies are attracted by the full moon, but sometimes convictions—or rather superstitions—can be extremely dangerous. For example, the belief that blood contains a person's soul and must not be transfused to another individual under any circumstances can cost a life. On the other hand, good information devoid of conviction is mostly useless. For example, the knowledge that smoking is dangerous to one's health is useless if kept hidden in research laboratories and not published as a warning to the smoking public.

The main conclusion to be drawn from these illustrations is that conviction and knowledge are somehow related. And this takes us straight to education, particularly Adventist education with its historic connection between faith and learning.

Two types of faith convictions are at work in Christian education. The first establishes a beginning point for education; the second makes education responsible and useful.

Let's consider each in turn.

The Starting Point

Scripture deals repeatedly with the starting point of education—most pointedly in Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

This concept does not imply one should be afraid of God or of knowledge, but rather indicates a starting point for education (also called “knowledge,” “learning,” or “wisdom” in the book of Proverbs). Knowledge, or education, begins somewhere, and we must discover the beginning point. Some will say education starts with a student’s blank mind, which the teacher fills with information and ideas. Others will claim dispassionate, accurate instruction is a good starting point. But Scripture affirms education begins with God.

What exactly does that mean? Historically speaking, Christians have developed many doctrines, frequently disputed the precise formulation of these doctrines, and even changed them from time to time. But three central faith affirmations have remained, and these indicate the beginning point of Christian education. *First*, God is eternal and the creator of heaven and earth. *Second*, Jesus Christ is God incarnate, the Savior of all, the one who died for sinners, and who will come again to restore all things. *Third*, God continually cares for this world through His church and guides our thinking through His Spirit. These convictions form the distinctive beginning of Christian education.

Some may wonder if this starting point restricts the process of education, holding it back, as an anchor keeps a ship safe, yet preventing it from venturing out on the open sea. But let us think for a moment about the alternative to such a clear and fixed beginning point for education.

Human history is approximately 5,000 years old. At the beginning of this so-called historical period people began to write things down. Historians can now examine these records and form an understanding of what happened “back then” and what people were thinking at the time. Earlier periods from which we have information (based on surviving artifacts) are generally considered prehistory. The point is that from the beginning of time, human beings have never stopped learning, and the process of education continues unabated today. There is no evidence human beings ever “knew it all,” and there is no prospect they ever will “know it all.” This is what history reveals.

So where do we begin our learning in this flow of continuing education? What is the starting point of learning? The Christian response is that God the eternal, from everlasting to everlasting, is the starting point. We begin our learning by recognizing Him. In truth there is no other safe and stable beginning point for learning.

When we begin with God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit as our daily guide in life’s decisions, all education takes a new direction. Intellectual arrogance gives way to humility, teachers’ concern for their subject is matched by a concern for their students, and every one pursues truth with the care reserved for working in God’s presence. With this beginning point clearly in view, every class, lecture, discussion, laboratory experiment, textbook, or assignment takes on a new meaning. This is the promise of Christian education.

Making Education Responsible and Useful

Ellen White wrote repeatedly of the need to make education responsible. “Education,” she says, “prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”²

The purpose of education is remarkably simple and straightforward. It is *service*. Wisely, Ellen White did not identify the specifics of that service. For two reasons: *First*, faith-based service is comprehensive, and she did not want anyone or anything to be excluded. *Second*, service opportunities and responsibilities keep expanding in step with the expansion of learning.

For example, recent discoveries in the health sciences have led to new service opportunities in public health, which include anti-smoking plans, prenatal care, nutrition and weight reduction programs. The relatively young behavioral sciences have enabled education in sociology and psychology to offer completely new services in counseling, public policy, and social advocacy. Amazing discoveries in the natural sciences have introduced entire service industries in transportation, medical care, communication, etc.

Because the belief in using what we have learned to benefit others is deeply personal, it can be troubling to realize that the nature of service changes as learning expands. We prefer to think of our convictions as unchanging. But in fact new understanding leads to new convictions, and they open our eyes to new service responsibilities. For example, I read with interest the latest reports about the ideal diet and compared it to similar reports written 25 or even 10 years ago. Our understanding of what and how much we should eat has certainly changes. As education extends our understanding, our convictions sharpen and become refocused. Thus, not only does faith mobilize our learning, sending it into action anew, but learning, in turn, illuminates our faith, making it more perceptive, improving our service to others. As noted earlier, *education prevents our faith from going blind, just as faith makes our education powerful*.

When writing of true education leading to service, Ellen White added that such service is a joy that will expand to the higher joy of wider service in the world to come. This means precisely what it says, namely, that a life of service is joyful. That is the nature of service. Moreover, there is an eternal quality to such joyful service. It goes on and on, and it grows as it goes, until the experience of education joins hands with the experience of redemption and the two become one.³

Some Try to Hide

From time to time teachers and students are troubled by this understanding of Christian education. Some are afraid of having to adjust their convictions as increasing light shines upon them from ongoing learning and discovery. They may try to hide from new knowledge to minimize its challenges to their faith. Others are afraid that any kind of prior faith commitment will stunt their learning opportunities by limiting their freedom to pursue the truth where it leads. They may attempt to suppress faith. At first flush both fears may seem to be supported by incidents in the past. Perhaps some have read of “learned people” who lost their faith, and “faithful people” who refused to learn.

But what has been the ultimate outcome of such misplaced fear, even in celebrated cases as, for example, Galileo the astronomer, or Marx the social scientist? Did learning come to an end because of a restrictive “faith”? Or did faith come to an end because of much new and daring “learning”? Not at all, according to the testimony of history. Think of the recent landing of motorized robots on Mars, demonstrating that astronomical explorations continue with no sign of letting up. Think too of the resurgence of religious beliefs in former Communist countries that systematically suppressed religion for nearly a century. Inevitably, honest learning ultimately broke loose of any artificial restrictions placed upon it, and genuine faith not only survived but prospered, even in the face of great intellectual challenges.

Here lies an important lesson for both faith and learning. It is this: What God has put together (faith and learning) no one can separate—at least not for long. Oh, the cause of God may be set back a little, and learning may slow down for a moment when attempts are made to separate the two. But before long, both reemerge renewed and energized. This is the testimony of both Scripture and history; it is confirmed by recent experiences; and there’s no reason to think that it will be overturned. As a result, learning continues its progression with unprecedented speed, both on the micro and macro levels. Faith convictions are thriving unabated around the world, both within and outside religious organizations, changing human lives and impacting the course of history. No human being can stop this progression of faith and learning in the world, for God, Creator of heaven and earth, who gave us both minds and hearts, still invites us to seek knowledge and to affirm faith at the same time, so as to change the world for the better.

One of my colleagues at Andrews University drew my attention to another sentence from Ellen White’s book on education (which is quoted less frequently, but is equally pregnant with meaning.) “Heaven is a school; its field of study, the universe; its teacher, the Infinite One. A branch of this school was established in Eden; and, the plan of redemption accomplished, education will again be taken up in the Eden school.”⁴

This is a startling assertion. Heaven itself is a school of which our schools are branches, extensions; therefore each Adventist school is intended to become a little heaven on earth. The master teacher is the Infinite One, and the subject of instruction is the universe; therefore, teachers are to represent God on earth, as it were, and there are no limits to the scope of learning.

Finally, education and redemption reinforce each other, such that learning continually calls for faith to grow, while faith replies with an invitation to learn still more. Evidently, this is the eternal connection between faith and learning. It is also the Adventist connection.¹

¹ Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So* (New York, N.Y.: Free press, 1991).

² Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 13

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-16

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.