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# FAITH FOR NON- DUMMIES

**T**hanks to clever marketing, I've bought several best-sellers written "for dummies." The first was *Volkswagen Repair for Dummies*, followed by *WordPerfect for Dummies*. Their simplified explanations of complicated processes have helped many people master the intricacies of the modern world.

Would this work for religion? I think not. In fact, I'd like to propose a book entitled *Faith for Non-Dummies*, because instead of needing to be "dumbed down," the life of faith needs to be "smarted up." We and our students need a greater appreciation of its complexities, depths, and mysteries.

Some years ago, I spoke to an Adventist college theology forum about preaching. I stressed the importance of spiritual preparation, prayer, and meditation. I urged the students to study, to engage in research using appropriate tools to unpack the text, and to read a great deal in books that would help them understand the Bible and the modern world.

"You also need to develop your imaginations and creative capacities," said I, and recommended art, music, literature, and poetry as worthy pursuits. Near the end of my discussion, a student in the front row raised his hand to disagree. Said he, "Your approach to sermon preparation leaves little or no room for the work of the Holy Spirit. I believe that for the Spirit to work, it's necessary to be completely open. You should pray that God will give you the sermon on Friday night or

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even Sabbath morning—just when you need it."

I respectfully disagreed, not a little surprised at his arrogance. How could he assume that the Spirit would be more effective if He had nothing to work with?

The young man's comment reminded me of a story: A young pastor preparing to preach his first sermon to a new congregation received a phone call informing him that his bishop would attend to introduce

him. The sermon ran over at least 15 minutes. Afterward, on the steps of the church, the young man asked the bishop what he thought of the sermon. Seeking to be diplomatic, the bishop said that he thought it was fairly well done. "Well," said the young preacher, "the first 15 minutes of that sermon was all mine. I prepared it carefully, but then, the Holy Spirit took over. The rest of it was His."

The bishop's eyes narrowed for a moment, and then he said: "If that's true, the part of the sermon that *you* prepared was considerably better than the part the Holy Spirit prepared."

Jesus spent three years full-time, day and night, preparing His disciples for ministry. His teaching consisted largely of profound parables with many layers of meaning. These had a powerful impact on His listeners' thoughts, feelings, and wills. People recognized themselves and their behavior in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, the Ungrateful Servant, or the Prodigal Son. Christ did not come up with these stories by accident. He was a keen observer of human

**By James J. Londis**

nature and of current events, and He spent many hours in prayer and study of the Scriptures.

Faith is often defined as trust based on evidence and experience. As a consequence, it seems clear that faith cannot be simple, even if one should, paradoxically, covet a simple faith. *It is the difference between a simple faith and the faith of a simpleton*; the difference between confidently holding on to God through the joy and the suffering of human life or being pushed from one thing to another because one's faith, like the foolish man's, is built on sand.

*"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."* As the text indicates, it's possible to *wrongly* divide the word of truth. You can be a worker in God's cause who is (or should be) ashamed because you failed to study sufficiently.

**I** fear for the faith of the young theology student. What will happen when someone offers a well-reasoned challenge to his comfortable assumptions? He was avoiding one of the special benefits offered by Christian education: an environment where students may safely encounter challenges to faith. Here, the arguments not only *for* but also *against* the reality of God should be examined.

### Avoiding Simplistic Bible Teaching

To avoid a simplistic approach to truth, the teaching of religion in Seventh-day Adventist schools must force students to probe the biblical text and examine all relevant materials deeply enough to "rightly divide the word of truth." They need the right to question what they are told is Truth and to engage in a free and open discussion of biblical passages and doctrinal teaching. They also need to gain an understanding of church and secular history and an appreciation of the culture in which the biblical writers worked. Otherwise, they will end up with a manmade dogma, not the sound doctrine and gripping experience that produce an impregnable faith.

When I was teaching college religion classes, some of my colleagues questioned the wisdom of examining different points of view in a philosophy of religion class. I felt then (and even more strongly today) that it was my God-given task to ensure that students critically examined their faith with a thoughtful believer before they encountered the threats of agnosticism and unbelief that exist in a secular academic environment.

I also recall parents expressing concern about the topics discussed

in some of my religion classes, accusing me of bringing them up. But it was their children who were asking those questions, not I. In a Modern American Religions class, I invited two young Mormon missionaries to present their views. One of our students asked them why they believed so passionately in the Book of Mormon, giving it equal or greater authority than the Bible. The missionaries' response was heartfelt: "I know what the Book of Mormon has meant in my life. It has deepened my knowledge of God's will and made me a more spiritually discerning person."



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My students were shocked. After the missionaries departed, they said to me: “Dr. Londis, the reasons they gave for believing in the Book of Mormon are the very same ones we give for believing in the Bible!” How glad I was they could explore their questions in an environment where I could help them find better, deeper reasons for faith in God’s Word.

**T**hat same class traveled to the Christian Science Center in Boston to experience a worship service and to meet with a representative who would explain the church’s theology and answer their questions. Before we made that trip, I pointed out that Christian Science is as non-emotional a religion as has ever been developed in American culture. For them, the “mind” is the ultimate reality, not matter or body or feeling. For that reason, Christian Science could not survive or grow without proof that mind is ultimate. It derives that “proof” or “evidence” from its celebrated “healings” in which people who think they are sick or injured may be healed simply by realizing that evil and suffering do not actually exist; they are illusions. When people testify in their mid-week meetings that they overcame illness and injury by exercising faith in the reality of mind, this ensures the continuity of the faith.

Such a way of approaching faith cannot be attacked very successfully by pointing to the number of Christian Scientists who are *not* healed, as one can simply assume that they lacked sufficient faith. It all seems so simple.

When we returned from our trip, I told the students that even though “mind” is critically important in Christian Science, there is a *logical*, even fatal, flaw in their theology. But

to grasp it, one needs to think deeply about their argument that “evil and suffering are an illusion.” I pointed out that one of the things that will destroy religious faith is discovering an inherent *contradiction* in one’s theology. A belief system that contradicts itself *cannot be true!* That is the first lesson in elementary logic. The contradiction in Christian Science is this: If one asserts that “evil and suffering are illusions,” *is not the suffering caused by that illusion, and even the illusion itself, an evil?*

By struggling with these concepts, my students were taking their first steps toward a simple “Faith for Non-Dummies.” But their faith was not simplistic.

Scientists and philosophers have long known about “Ockham’s Razor,” named for Sir William of Ockham. It states that the simple, elegant explanation is most often the best one. Despite the complexity of the nature of light, the motions of the planets, or the Human Genome, the simplest hypotheses are the goal of science. The theory of relativity was accepted because it both explained more phenomena and simplified the explanations given by Isaac Newton for the most basic phenomena in nature, including gravity and the so-called space-time continuum. The theory itself is highly sophisticated and complex. Yet, in its own way, it simplifies a great deal.

The court system also tends to make judgments using Ockham’s Razor. Jurors generally believe the most straightforward account of a crime, not the most convoluted and labyrinthine. If the police catch you holding a gun over a shooting victim, they assume that you committed the crime.

Of course, sometimes the simplest scenario is wrong. Someone else may have fired the shot, dropped the gun, and run away. Moments later, you came upon the scene and unthinkingly picked up the gun, just as the authorities arrived. What seems obvious is not *always* “true.”

How, then, do we discriminate between “simple” and “simplistic”? A faith that has not made the arduous journey through complexity is simplistic. It serves only to obscure reality and truth. For example, the bumper sticker “God said it, and I believe it, and that settles it for me” treats God’s revelation as self-explanatory aphorisms, ignoring the fact that the divine message always comes to us in mysterious ways through human beings.

God’s revelation means a variety of things to different believers. It may mean inerrancy, certainty, and a faith that does not struggle with doubt. Or it may be so unclear to others that they feel compelled to ask: What does “God said it” mean? *How* did God say it? What is the *it* that God said? How do we know that the Christian’s “it” is more true than the Muslim’s “it” in the Koran?

When theologian Karl Barth was asked: “How would



you summarize Christian theology?” he replied: “Jesus loves me; this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” This from a 20th century theologian whose multi-volume *Dogmatic Theology* covers thousands of pages with many footnotes. Barth also said that to do theology well, you need to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

The church needs members who love God not only with all their hearts, but also with all their minds. That is why we invest so much in Christian education. The community of faith needs people who know both Scripture and culture (the sciences and humanities) so they can apply the principles of biblical religion to the contemporary world, living out their faith in a way that challenges culture.

This does not mean that a doctoral degree and a brilliant intellect are required to exercise genuine faith. But, just as I do not need to be a lawyer or politician to believe in democ-



ocracy, I need them to help me understand the issues so I can perform my duties as an informed and loyal citizen. Theologians and scholars serve the entire congregation, not by doing their thinking for them, but by helping them do their own clear thinking. “O for a faith that will not shrink,” we sing, “though pressed by many a foe,” not always understanding that such a faith requires not only the muscles of belief but also the sinews of reflection and thought.

Asking questions and studying diligently means one *cares* about the subject, that he or she is giving diligent attention to it. That’s what we mean by having a “passion” for truth. Probing questions do the same thing for faith as physical exercise does for the body. A muscular body and a muscular faith depend equally on lifting heavy weights. Faith involves

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the will and the heart as much as the intellect. But it must engage the mind. The believer needs to understand who God is and what He expects before he or she can respond to God’s call to service. We need a basis for believing that the Bible is God’s revelation to humanity, that its wisdom is accessible through study and prayer and the guidance of the Spirit, and that we must obey it in order to be a disciple.

Being able to distinguish between fuzzy simplicity and the simplicity that clarifies is the goal of education. Christian education adds another critical goal; namely, the development of virtue. Adventist schools should be “laboratories for life,” places where students can experiment, think, and

challenge ideas without the hazards of doing this in real life, where the consequences can be devastating.

Medical students dissect cadavers before they operate on living patients. Law students work on cases in a seminar before they try them in a court of law. Economists in training invest mythical money in the stock market before they invest the real stuff. Ministerial students preach sermons in a classroom before subjecting a congregation to them. And likewise, students should face the tough questions of faith in God and biblical truth in classrooms led by Christian teachers who can help them find responsible answers before they face these dilemmas on their own in the workplace, graduate school, or community.

In summary, we should all seek a simple faith, the kind acquired on the other side of complexity, a faith that probes and questions. A faith that finds, through hard work and study, answers from God’s Word that will sustain us throughout the challenges of the modern world. And we must help our students develop that kind of faith, as well. ✍



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He was a co-founder of the Washington Institute, and served as Vice President for Community Affairs at the New England Memorial Hospital in Stoneham, Massachusetts, and as President of Atlantic Union College in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. This article is based on a Sabbath morning sermon at Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland. The spoken quality has been retained.