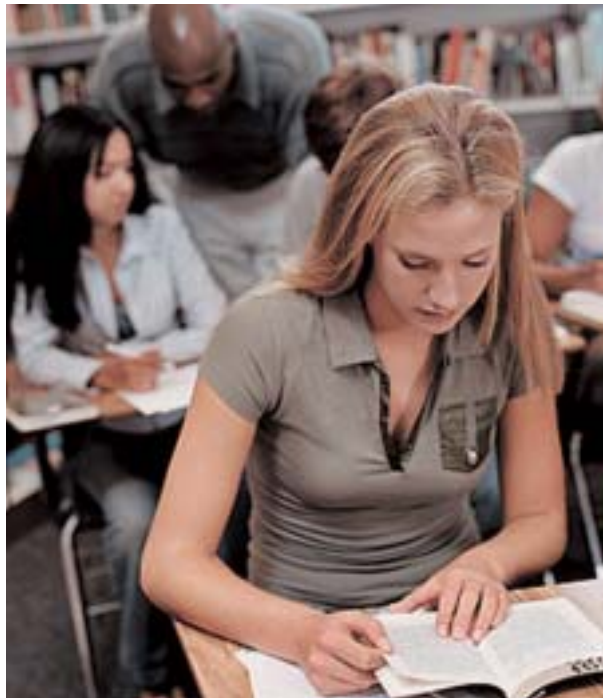


THE QUEST FOR INTEGRITY: FACING THE KEY CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM



It is no secret that the Adventist educational system is confronted with numerous challenges. How to build a qualified, committed corpus of Adventist teachers remains a major concern.¹ Many Adventist schools, particularly in the Western world, have difficulty in recruiting enough students and are spending a considerable amount of money collectively chasing mostly the same students. Funding remains a never-ending nightmare for many administrators. And the greatest challenge of the church's educational institutions around the world is to maintain a clear Adventist identity in what is being taught and in everyday life on campus.

In the midst of all these challenges, which have faced us quite some time, another, all-encompassing issue calls for our urgent attention. In the past few decades, the world has gradually moved from modernity to postmodernity. This has affected the Seventh-day Adventist Church in general, but probably even more so its educational system. It has

Although we must always maintain that faith has rational content, truth also has another dimension, which is at least as important.

changed both teachers and students. Even though there are several ways to describe the increasing diversity of the Adventist Church, I have concluded that the difference between modern and postmodern Adventism is the most basic divide that the church faces today.²

This article will not attempt to describe the basic ideas of postmodernity, as most readers are well aware of the main issues. There is sufficient literature

for those who want to find a more detailed description of this phenomenon,³ which has aptly been labeled as a worldview that says no worldview exists!

There is considerable diversity of opinion as to how and when postmodernity started, where it will yet go, and, in particular, when and where it will end. Some argue that we are currently, with the recent death of postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, entering the era of *post-postmodernity*! Yet, few will deny that there has been a gargantuan change in the way people—and in particular young people—

look at the world and at themselves. Most college-age men and women belong

BY REINDER BRUINSMA



to the ever-growing segment of society that denies the existence of Truth and rejects the great meta-narratives of the past, which offered an all-encompassing explanation for human existence. The words of author Brad Cecil, who has written numerous publications about Christianity and postmodernity, may be more accurate than many want to acknowledge: “Postmodernity is the most significant cultural shift we have seen in the last 500 years. It’s not a generational issue exclusive to Gen-X or Millennials. In fact, it’s fast becoming the adopted epistemology of adults. Everyone in ministry—not just youth and young adult pastors—will have to wrestle with this phenomenon.”⁴

Facing the 21st-Century Student

“There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”⁵ These words of Alan Bloom in his bestselling analysis of recent changes in American thinking are even more true today than when they were written almost two decades ago. They undoubtedly also apply to many students in Adventist schools. Absolute Truth has become a plurality of “truths,” i.e., personal preferences and opinions. Anti-foundationalism is the common thread woven into the fabric of all postmodern thinking. The conviction that there are some absolute Truths, which can serve as a foundation on which to build an edifice of further truths, has all but disappeared. Many evangelicals (including

some Adventists) prefer to think of “truth” as fragile threads, which in themselves offer no indisputable truth, but together form a “web” of justifiable beliefs.⁶

Like many of their teachers, Adventist students are somewhere along the continuum between modernity and postmodernity, but in many cases they have progressed farther than their professors. Many have accepted the conclusion that the great stories of the past, which provided a solid point of reference for answering questions about the world and about life, have lost their value. Many students, including ones from Adventist homes, have lost their trust in organized religion and in the meta-narrative of Christianity. They come with their doubts and uncertainties, and wonder whether their teachers and fellow students have any answers to the questions they are asking. When my 19-year-old son studied at one of the Adventist colleges in North America, he was required to take certain religion courses. I will never forget his comments: “I must take this class that I am not at all interested in. I want to know whether God really exists. But that is not what they [the teachers] want to talk about!”

Today, many Adventist students—even more so than their parents—live fragmented lives. They tend to be open toward the spiritual dimension of life, but wonder how religion fits into the various aspects of their existence. One thing is clear, however: They are often very suspicious of or-

ganized, institutional religion. Moreover, a great many of them find Christianity's assertion of exclusivity extremely difficult to swallow, let alone the claim that the Adventist version of Christianity is the one and only true approach to faith in God.

As if this is not enough of a challenge for educators who seek to communicate the Adventist Christian faith, they must also face the tendency of many of their students to seek security in insulation from the dissatisfactions and dis-

Picture Removed

appointments of the real world. These students often avoid human contact, chatting online, surfing the Internet; playing computer games, and using iPods and ever smaller and more ingenious mobile phones. They maintain a certain disengagement from life that keeps people and even life at a safe distance.⁷

So, are Adventist educators facing an impossible challenge? How can they hope to reach postmodern students without selling out their principles? For sure, their starting point is a lot different from that of their colleagues a generation or so ago. "It is no longer enough for preachers [and teachers] to offer people moral instruction and biblical stories. Now people need to be taught how to think and view the world 'Christianly.'"⁸ While this is not easy, it offers tremendous possibilities. Says Dan Kimball, one of the pastors of the Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California: "Postmodernity may be the greatest thing that's ever happened to youth ministry. The youth landscape is becoming much as it was for Paul in Acts 17, and the potential for evangelism is incredible. We have the holy privilege of reintroducing Jesus and the Christian faith to ears and hearts that have never heard the real thing before."⁹

Those of us who have really tried will testify that it is possible to communicate with postmodern Adventist youth. Of course, you must have something to say, and express it in words they can understand. What you tell them does not carry weight simply because you are older or because you are the teacher. Postmodern young people will first think: Why should I listen to what this person has to say? But there is a good chance they will listen if you do not pretend to have all the answers. However, they will disconnect as soon as they feel they are not being taken seriously. They may be interested in your story if it rings true and honest, and if you are willing to listen to their stories and to reserve judgment even when you do not like what you hear. You have a good chance to earn their respect and get a further hearing if you admit that you yourself do not know all the answers, that there may be gray areas where judgment may have to be suspended. But postmodern young people demand that you be honest about your own struggles and doubts.

Truth Is Relational

Within the confines of this short article, it is impossible to deal at length with all the implications of the almost ubiquitous presence of postmodern thinking on Adventist campuses. I have chosen four areas of concern, which would all merit a more extensive treatment. The brief outline that follows may nonetheless be helpful.

First, there is the problem of truth. Thinking Adventists, and thinking Adventist teachers in particular, will have to struggle with this issue. How do we retain the idea of Truth? There may be less truth than many of us have believed in the past. The presumption that one possesses the final truth often leads to arrogance, intolerance, or worse. (There is, by the way, an immense difference between *believing in absolutes* and *having some absolute belief about everything*.) But this does not mean that our faith is devoid of all certainty. It may not be a certainty that can be rationally defended; it may, at least in part, be based in other forms of knowing. Reading a few books about this topic is not only for those who happen to enjoy reading philosophy in their spare time. It is essential for those who sense a calling to communicate the Christian faith in a postmodern context.

A closer look at the postmodern concept of truth reveals that it is not primarily propositional in nature. Although we must always maintain that faith has rational content, truth also has another dimension, which is at least as important. Truth is primarily *relational*. This postmodern emphasis is a much-needed correction of the traditional Adventist emphasis on doctrinal truth to the detriment of the much more comprehensive biblical notion of Truth.¹⁰ Doctrine is needed as a kind of grammar to help structure the way we talk about faith, but a relationship with God must precede our

theologizing. Leading students into a living and growing relationship with the Lord, therefore, takes priority over methods and programs that seek to indoctrinate them with propositional truth. The “grand story” Adventist teachers want to convey is not the facts of Adventist history and doctrine, but the meta-narrative of Jesus Christ. Everything else must come later—sometimes much later. Jimmy Long, a campus minister with long experience, comments:

“The key question for X’ers today is: ‘Is it real?’, not ‘Is it true?’ Their lives are more likely to be changed through the heart than through the mind. They need to see the incarnation of the gospel in people’s lives more than to hear the proclamation of the gospel through our words. Do we have places where seekers can see the gospel in action? Do we invite them into our community? They need to experience the love of Jesus more than they need to be informed that Jesus is love.”¹¹

If we are ready to proceed on this basis, we must be aware of two other important facts. If the teacher insists upon beginning from the authority of God’s Word, rather than from the experience of the listener, many students will not make a meaningful connection.¹² Also, we must remember that postmodern people proceed by a process of picking and choosing. The theologians and administrators of the Adventist Church may have determined that there are 28 “fundamental beliefs,” but even if postmodern young people have accepted the validity of doctrinal statements, they are unlikely to accept the entire list because the church says so, or because a teacher or pastor, credible though he or she may be, happens to insist that all these points are important. These young people will (at least initially) select those items from the list that feel good and seem relevant.

Picture Removed

Generations of Christians have believed that divine truth is found in the Bible. Adventist teachers concur. But the reality is that most of their students, even those coming from

Most college-age men and women belong to the ever-growing segment of society that denies the existence of Truth and rejects the great meta-narratives of the past, which offered an all-encompassing explanation for human existence.

solid Adventist homes—and even many freshmen theology students—are biblically illiterate. It is essential to encourage them to *read* (rather than *study*!) the Bible for themselves, in a translation that helps to make the Word accessible. It is wrong and counterproductive to organize their Bible reading in such a way that it is primarily aimed at finding proof texts for Adventist doctrines. Let them read the stories of the Bible and allow them to draw their own conclusions, even if their interpretation may at times appear to be flawed. There will, hopefully, come a time for dialogue, once students discover the Bible as a very special book that speaks to them in a way no other book does.

Spirituality, Yes; Church, No

In Western Europe (where I presently live), talking about religion is no longer taboo. Just a decade or so ago, you *did not* tell others about your faith. In fact, discussing one’s sex life was more acceptable than discussing one’s religion. Postmodern people—all over the world—are more open to spirituality than the previous generation. But, at the same time, they are deeply suspicious of institutions—including the church. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, alas, does not fare any better in their opinion than other denominations.

Unfortunately, this aversion (or at best, indifference) toward organized religion is understandable. The dark side of Christianity is too obvious to ignore. Too many things in the distant and recent past have been “baptized” as “Christian” despite the fact that they were totally foreign to the nature of its Founder. Too many representatives of the Christian Church have behaved in ways that were repulsive rather than inspiring. And, unfortunately, it is not difficult to find things in any church that belie its beliefs and ideals.

This poses a major dilemma for Adventist educational institutions, for they are part and parcel of the institutional church. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that spiritual activities not be

conceived and presented as duties imposed by the school (as an extension of the church), but as a sincere effort to respond to the expressed needs of the students. Of course, it is extremely difficult to ensure that appropriate rules be maintained and that a reasonable amount of discipline is maintained, without being “institutional.” However, students are perceptive enough to see whether the spiritual side of school life is a piece of baggage that the school staff members routinely carry along through the academic year, or whether there is an intentional and sustained effort to truly

Absolute Truth has become a plurality of “truths,” i.e., personal preferences and opinions.

listen to the spiritual concerns of the students and to respond in loving and creative ways. Students will also perceive immediately whether the faculty simply impose religious activities on the students, or are also themselves genuinely and enthusiastically involved in the religious life of the school.

This is not to say that the institutional church is unimportant. However, true community, where people care for one another, is the essence of “doing church.” The core meaning of the church is not embedded in traditions, doctrines, and policies. These do have their place, but they will follow at some later stage after people have concluded that the church is a community where they belong.

Stewards

Postmodern people do not believe in the modern myth of constant progress. They have ample evidence that scientific discoveries do not always improve society or enhance one’s chances for a longer and happier life. The generation approaching adulthood no longer believes, as their parents did, that they will be better off than the previous generation, and that their children will do better than they. On the contrary, they see a world that is increasingly divided between rich and poor, and they cannot fail to notice that a small percentage of the world’s population is recklessly consuming the Earth’s resources. They are worried about the enormous environmental problems they see around the globe and are angry about the way commercial interests tend to prevail over air and water quality, threatening the survival of plants and animals. They want a more equitable

distribution of wealth. Postmodern people are sympathetic to the biblical notion of stewardship, but more often than not they are disappointed by the ways in which many Christians model this virtue.

Seventh-day Adventists talk a lot about stewardship. Many young people who have grown up in the church, however, wonder about the deep chasm between what many Adventists say and do in this regard. They find it difficult to comprehend that many organizations and institutions that promote stewardship as one of their “fundamental beliefs” do not recycle waste, devise proactive policies to minimize the use of energy, or install alternative energy sources in their buildings. They regard with disdain the fact that the Adventist concept of stewardship, in practice, tends to be narrowed down to a few dietary practices, abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, and a 10 percent denominational levy on the income of church members.

We would do a great injustice to claim that this picture is universally accurate. But there can be little doubt that it is true in far too many cases, and that this is also what many students see in the institutional milieu in which Adventism presents itself to them. If there is an area in which the true ethos of Adventism touches the ideas of postmodernism, it is here. Adventist educators ought to focus on this far more aggressively.

Integrity

All of the above are closely related to the key issue of this discussion: Those who want to minister to the postmodern generation must radiate integrity. Postmodern people are instantly turned off by hypocrisy. They do not expect the people who teach them to be faultless, but they want them to be real. They refuse to accept major discrepancies between what their teachers say and demand as representatives of their employing institution, and what they say and do in



their private lives. If a school institutes rigid policies regarding movies that can be shown during social evenings, if it strictly enforces rules about the kind of drinks that can be served in the cafeteria or obtained via the campus coin machines, and other lifestyle issues—these policies must be more than a traditional policy or principle that must be preserved at all costs. They must be also be practiced by the majority of the staff members. If the teachers are not prepared to model the kind of life they demand from the students, there is no justification for expecting it from them. Nothing more thoroughly undermines the respect of students for their teachers and other church members than does a chasm between their words and their deeds.

When I visit the offices of our church in various places, I can find numerous locations in the buildings where I can get a cup of coffee or can of Coca-Cola, while the official rules, of course, allow for no such thing. When I tell my (postmodern) grown-up children about this, they do not laugh. They get angry because they dislike this discrepancy between official theory and actual practice, which they have noticed again and again as we have moved between various countries in the service of the church. Many members of the “older generation” do not appreciate how important it is for postmodern people to deal with the “real thing.”

For the Adventist educator who desires to draw students toward Christ and to guide them closer to the community of His disciples, deeds will always speak louder than words. Ellen G. White, the pioneer of Adventist education *par excellence*, emphasized this over and over again. “A true, lovable Christian is the most powerful argument that can be advanced in favor of Bible truth. Such a man is Christ’s representative. His life is the most convincing evidence that can be borne to the power of divine grace.”¹³ “No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.”¹⁴

It is significant for Seventh-day Adventist educators that Ellen White repeatedly pointed to the need for total integrity. The following citation from *Testimonies*, volume 3, is just one of a vast range of her statements about integrity: “Energy, moral integrity, and strong purpose for the right are qualities that cannot be supplied with any amount of gold. Men possessing these qualifications will have influence everywhere. Their lives will be more powerful than lofty eloquence. God calls for men of heart, men of mind, men of moral integrity, whom He can make the depositories of His truth, and who will correctly represent its sacred principles in their daily life.”¹⁵

In closing, I take the liberty of slightly adapting a powerful statement made by Jimmy Long, whom I quoted earlier: “Our [approach in Adventist education] needs to be relational, expressing genuine concern and love for others; it ought to be [driven by] friendship. . . . We need to become

a true counter-culture community that radically lives out the life and teachings of Christ and the apostles in our own. Our [ministry] will be effective in postmodern culture only as we live lives of transparent honesty, integrity, and purity. We must be willing to declare the unchanging, normative story of God’s redemptive work in Christ through our own individual and corporate stories, and demonstrate by our lives the truth of the words we speak.”¹⁶

Young postmoderns will grow in their Christian lives more by observing how other Christians live than by listening to what they say. In the end, attracting them to Adventism is all about building meaningful relationships and modeling a life that convinces not by its perfection but by its caring service and utter sincerity. ✍



Reinder Bruinsma is the President of the Netherlands Union of Seventh-day Adventists in Huis ter Heide, Netherlands. He earned a Ph.D. in theology from the University of London and is a regular guest lecturer at Newbold College, England. Dr. Bruinsma is the author of some 15 books (in Dutch and English) and numerous popular and scholarly articles. His e-mail address is rbruinsma@adventist.nl.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This was highlighted in the recent Report of the Commission on Higher Education, which was presented to the General Conference Annual Council (October 14, 2005). One of its findings was that in 1990 non-Adventist faculty amounted to just 4 percent of the total teaching staff, while by 2000 this had risen to 16 percent, and by 2010 it is expected to be at least 28 percent.
2. See Reinder Bruinsma, “Modern Versus Postmodern: the Ultimate Divide?” *Ministry* (June 2005), pp. 16-21.
3. A very readable and highly informative book remains: Gene Edward Veith, Jr.: *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994).
4. Quoted in Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), p. 11.
5. Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), p. 25.
6. See, in particular, Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism. How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg, Penna.: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 85-109; and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 192-198.
7. Dale R. Stoffer, “Anabaptist Evangelism in a Postmodern World”—http://www.newlifeministries.nlm.org/online/aec98_stoffer.htm.
8. Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2001), p. 16.
9. Quoted in Tony Jones, op cit., p. 43.
10. Cf. the words of Christ, He did not say: I have the Truth, but said: I am the Truth (John 14:6).
11. Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 210.
12. Johnston, op cit., p. 74.
13. Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace* (1973), p. 263.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
15. _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 3, p. 38.
16. Jimmy Long, op cit., p. 79.