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# Adventist Education and Academic Freedom

**A**cademic freedom has to do with the right to teach, research, and publish as part of the educational process. How it is claimed or exercised depends upon who asserts this right. A college professor seeks in academic freedom the right to teach, research, and publish without fear of discipline or constraints imposed by his or her superiors, employers, colleagues, or even students. Students see academic freedom as giving them the right to refute or reject their teachers' positions, even if their actions disrupt the classroom. A university may define academic freedom in terms of its institutional purpose and use its financial or administrative powers to enforce its will. A government or group of constituents may cite the collective good as a reason to impose its will, in order to align the flow of information, teaching, and research with its predetermined criteria or ideology.



**John M. Fowler**

Thus, while the value of academic freedom is widely recognized, the complexities of implementing it have caused a great deal of dispute. How, then, should the Adventist system of education, with its philosophy rooted in its faith claims, view and practice academic freedom?

Adventist education must be foremost in advocating the necessity of academic freedom on its campuses, for at least two reasons: First, because we take seriously the Genesis account of creation that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), we must affirm that this image bestows upon the Christian teacher and student alike the responsibility for intellectual inquiry. God has shared with us part of His creativity, and has given us dominion over the earth. This challenges us, on the one hand, to affirm our rational capacity to its fullest level, and on the other, to probe the secrets of the universe, to explore the frontiers of knowledge without hindrance or limitation. To be human is to think, to question, to search, and to choose.

The image of God concept, however, puts a caveat on our academic quest: We not only share in God's creativity but also behold His wonder and mystery. To accept God as Creator and humans as reflectors of His image bestows upon us the privilege of thought (as well as freedom to pursue that thought). It also demands that we as creatures recognize that our acknowledgement of God, and relationship with Him can be only on the basis of faith.

Thus, the Adventist philosophy of education must recognize the twin pillars of human existence: reason and faith. Both are the Creator's gift to us. Hence, the laboratory of reason and science and the altar of faith cannot be antithetical in the Adventist quest and belief, as some educators make them appear. Where that wall between them appears, Adventist education should know where to stand, for the ultimate home of the Adventist teacher and student alike is the unshakable castle of faith.

There is a second reason why Adventists should be foremost in promoting academic freedom. Although Christianity is founded on faith, it never demands a blind and irrational faith. The divine invitation to human beings to "come. . . and reason" (Isaiah 1:18, KJV) insists that our acknowledgment of God must not be an irrational one. As creatures of faith, we bow before God and marvel at His wonders. As creatures of the intellect, we must probe the unknown and stretch the frontiers of knowledge. To come and reason recognizes that we are neither dumb slaves to a meaningless faith nor purveyors of intellectual arrogance that relegates faith claims to a mythical

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students for the realities of life and develops critical thinking (what used to be called “common sense”). Despite the challenges, it is possible to implement, and will provide tremendous benefits for our students. ✍

*This article has been peer reviewed.*



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world, unworthy of intellectual respect. While the Adventist concept of academic freedom protects the researcher and the philosopher in their search for truth,

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it does not permit them to destroy the other essential human freedom: the freedom to believe. At the conclusion of all search and research, the teacher and the student must return to their ultimate home: faith.

Adventist educators must recognize that clasping the freedom to reason and explore must not lead to a rejection of the worldview of faith that forms the underlying foundation of Adventist education. Once that is acknowledged, academic freedom no longer regards a faith commitment as stifling inquiry but rather welcomes its guidance in achieving humility and responsibility.

Thus, Adventist education’s stand *vis a vis* academic freedom is both a challenge and a reminder. It is a challenge to pursue research and learning with rigor and discipline, but do so responsibly, recognizing that faith is the bedrock of Christian life and existence. To be reminded of that, and to call upon the teacher and the taught, the university and its community, never to abandon or wander away from the rejuvenating embrace of faith is perhaps the most urgent need of Adventist education today.

—John M. Fowler.

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