



Zane Yi

THINKERS OR REFLECTORS?

Young Adult Retention, Philosophy, and Adventist Education

Researchers from the Barna Group recently shared some disturbing results with Seventh-day Adventist leaders in the North American Division, based on a survey of Adventist young adults (18-29) regarding their perceptions of Christianity.¹ A surprising number of them, in some cases double the percentage of young adults from other denominations, held negative views about their own faith: Twenty-eight percent of those surveyed thought Christians were “doubtless”; 47 percent perceived Christianity as being “anti-science”; and 36 percent described the church as “overprotective.” Other words the young people used to refer to Christianity were “shallow” and “repressive.”²

These numbers were both illuminating and alarming for the leaders in attendance because they provided insight into the problem of young adult retention. Given the responses, what should the church do? The presenter made three general suggestions along practical lines. Churches need to foster intergenerational relationships, provide opportunities and platforms for young adults to share their stories, and practice forgiveness and acceptance.

These suggestions are doubtlessly an important part of the solution, but they do not address the substantial intellectual issues underlying these negative views shared by young adults. For example, the view that Christianity is “doubtless” or “anti-scientific” remains a problem even if young adults experience warm, nurturing relationships with others in a local congregation. Young adults must learn how to handle doubt and think about science in relationship to their faith. In other words, they must learn to be “thinkers, not mere reflectors” of others’ thoughts.³

But how does one teach someone to think? Learning *how* to think, rather than just *what* to think, requires practice. This is where educators play such a crucial role. Critical thinking is a skill that moves beyond memorization and regurgitation. In order to gain competency, students must be exposed to the world of ideas and taught to critically engage them. They need to be encouraged to respectfully express agreement and disagreement with others, and to graciously articulate their own views. The academic discipline that focuses on doing this, however, has traditionally been absent in Adventist education. Phi-

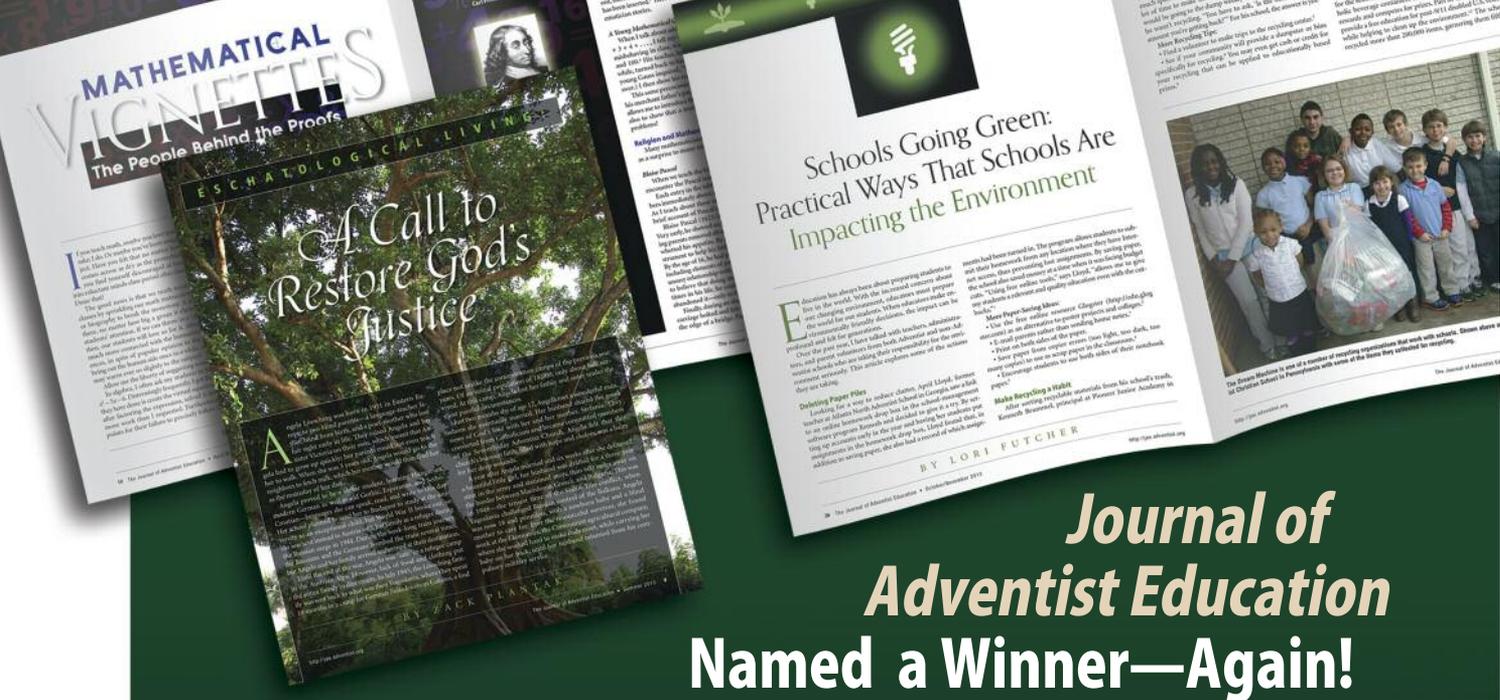
losophy is misunderstood and underappreciated, and courses in it are offered inconsistently.

This is partially due to a legitimate fear. We want to protect our students from ideas that might be harmful to their developing faith.⁴ But this also leaves them unprepared to deal with the real world when they move beyond the perceived safety of the classroom. Another reason for our underappreciation of philosophy is the advice we have received from Mrs. White, who emphasized exposing students to the Bible and nature and was critical of education focused solely on an exposure to human ideas.⁵ But could it be that these are not mutually exclusive?

In November 2011, an international group of Adventist educators, pastors, and scholars gathered in San Francisco, California, to consider the teaching of philosophy in a Christian, and more specifically, Adventist educational context. In this issue of *THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION*, we are sharing three papers originally presented at the conference. Richard Rice directly addresses some of the common objections to studying philosophy, arguing that such study harmonizes with a holistic vision of Adventist education. He describes ways that the study of philosophy has helped (rather than hindered) him to achieve a better understanding of the Bible. Shawna Vyhmeister shares a model she has developed to help students understand and navigate the relationship between the principles of Scripture, Adventism, and philosophical ideas. Students must learn to see the similarities and differences between the truths found in these different sources and engage in the hard work of synthesizing and integrating these truths. Lastly, Jim Londis proposes a template for teaching an introductory philosophy course to college students. In doing so, he provides a succinct summary of some of the major issues and ideas explored by leading figures of Western philosophy.

Some teachers with limited exposure to philosophy may feel unqualified to teach philosophy or think it should be relegated to postsecondary education. However, critical thinking is a skill that should be acquired much earlier than in college (much like reading and math) and can be learned when modeled by teachers who have dared to go beyond reflecting to thinking carefully and deeply about the issues broached in philosophy.

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Journal of Adventist Education Named a Winner—Again!

We are pleased to announce that *The Journal of Adventist Education* has just won two awards from the Associated Church Press and a Finalist designation from the Association of American Publishers.

From the Associated Church Press: (1) the Award of Excellence for Reporting and Writing: Theme Issue, Section or Series Journal (coordinator Wil Clarke) for the special Math section in the April/May 2013 issue. (2) Honorable Mention for Theological: Theological/Scholarly Article All Media (“Eschatological Living: A Call to Restore God’s Justice” by author Zack Plantak) in the Summer 2013 issue.

Also, the *Journal* has been named a Finalist in the Distinguished Achievement Awards for the article “Schools Going Green: What Schools Are Doing to Save the Environment” by Lori Futcher (October/November 2013 issue) in the category Periodicals; EDITORIAL - Feature Article, Adult.

The *Journal* has won eight Distinguished Achievement Awards, six Finalist classifications, and one Founder’s Award from the American Association of Publishers (formerly the Educational Press Association of America); and two previous Honorable Mention designations from the Associated Church Press.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. On Sunday, November 3, 2013, Clint Jenkins, vice president for research for the Barna Group, presented a report to the delegates of the NAD Year-End Meetings on the Seventh-day Adventist Millennials Study. For slides, handouts, and a summary of the report, see <http://www.adventistyouthministries.org/resources/articles>.

2. A total of 482 Adventist young adults were surveyed. Their responses were compared with those of other Christian millennials. See also *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why It Matters* by David Kinamen and Gabe Lyons (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books,

2007), which analyzes perceptions of Christianity shared by non-Christian young adults.

3. Ellen White’s influential ideal is well known to Adventist educators: “Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought” (*Education* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903], p. 17).

4. William Desmond warns, “Philosophy is a dangerous vocation. There are thoughts that can warp the soul,” “Despoiling the Egyptians—Gently” in *Gazing Through a Prism Darkly: Reflections on Merold Westphal’s Hermeneutical Epistemology*, B. Keith Putt, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 34.

5. Ellen White describes how youth might be trained to be thinkers, writing, “Instead of *confining* their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened for research in nature and revelation” (*Education*, p. 17, italics supplied). The word *confining* indicates a narrow focus, which can be avoided by acquiring a well-rounded education that develops both practical and theoretical skills, plus ensures that students attain a familiarity with both philosophical and biblical ideas.