

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND SCHOLARSHIP

Definition and Scope

Christian scholarship is the faithful and responsible use of our talents and skills in systematic investigation of God's self-revelation, his creation, and expressions of human creativity, for the good of the church and humanity.

Scholarship works on the theoretical and applied levels. It involves the dimensions of discovery, integration, application, teaching and dissemination. ¹ As such, Christian scholarship expands and deepens understanding of knowledge and the way knowledge impacts living in God's world. It explains the world and adds new knowledge, helping enlighten where there is confusion or contradiction. It raises new questions, which provide impetus for new discoveries. It identifies problems and moves towards their resolution. It is creative, seeking to engage the imagination in developing and responding to artistic works, as well as initiating new avenues of exploration.

Scholars approach their work analytically, strategically and/or empathetically. Analytic scholarship focuses on ideas, disassembling and reassembling some aspect of reality. This requires an inevitable distance between the scholar and the subject of study. The strategic approach focuses on action, looking at the world in order to change it, to solve problems. Where the empathetic approach is used, the scholar seeks to understand and explore human experience and creativity from within. These approaches are rarely exclusive, often operating together and complementing each other. ²

Historical Perspective on Christian and Adventist Scholarship

Scholarship has a strong tradition in the Christian Church. The apostle Paul, through the depth and cohesiveness of his theological thought, gave the Christian Church an excellent example of how faith and scholarly thought enrich each other. With many others from different faith perspectives, Augustine, Erasmus, Luther, Tyndale, and Wesley all recognized the importance of scholarship to exploration of truth. Protestantism was rooted in biblical study, and gained impetus by the Renaissance emphasis on returning to original sources. Throughout history, spiritual revivals have occurred at times of quests for fresh understanding of truth. Intellectual pursuit and scholarship in the Christian Church have primarily focused on theological thought; however, this is not to the exclusion of valuing scholarship that more widely explores the created world and the Creator's gifts.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church itself emerged from a quest for truth—a scholarly enterprise—and the early years were characterized by dialogue, and scholarly discourse. The church sought to first define and then refine doctrine through, for example, the Sabbath conferences that commenced in the 1840s. The post-1863 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* engaged comfortably with original sources, using Greek and Hebrew to explore present truth. The typical approach was disciplined, logical, and biblical. Scholarly endeavors did not stop with theology. Interest soon expanded into the health sciences—the application of discovery to quality of life. It is not surprising that Adventists were soon recognized for their focus on health foods (Kellogg), the development of the largest press in Michigan and for the establishment of institutions of higher education.

Similar to the wider Christian community, Adventist pioneers saw intellectual development as a responsibility of believers. The Seventh-day Adventist Church of the 21st century owes its theology, its large and growing educational system, and its wide involvement in health and medical work to an inheritance that saw scholarship, faith commitment and mission as inseparable responsibilities for committed seekers of God's will.

Assumptions of Christian Scholarship

The importance of scholarship to the Christian is based on assumptions that arise from the biblical view of the nature of God, the nature and purpose of humankind and the nature and value of knowledge.

The nature of God: God is the creator and sustainer of the universe and life, who reveals himself to humanity and seeks to be known by his created beings. God himself has ultimate knowledge (Isa 55: 8, 9) and desires knowledge, an expression of his character, for humanity (Ps 19:1). He intends for humanity to reach for the highest possible standards of excellence in this world, and enjoy a future of continued growth of knowledge in the next.

The nature and purpose of humankind: Original creation was very good, but the world that humans experience is no longer perfect; we are required to make choices for good or evil. Nevertheless, the world remains intelligible to the human mind, if in more limited form, and guided by God, humans can arrive at truth. When the human mind is brought into contact with the mind of God, the human mind is inevitably expanded and developed. This development will mirror God's image in humankind; it will continue to be a defining relationship between humanity and the creator through eternity.

The nature and value of knowledge: Due to our living in a fallen world, all knowledge is not in itself morally good, or complete. However, living in faith and expansion of the mind are not in opposition to each other—indeed they support and enrich each other, and there will always be more valuable knowledge to attain. Within the context of a Christian life, knowledge becomes meaningful when the mind is transformed through the experience of faith (Rom 12:2) and an individual is open to the leading of the Holy Spirit who God promises will guide His followers “into all truth” (Jn 16:13). Ultimate knowledge is a saving knowledge of God (Jn 17:3).

The Responsibility to Engage in Scholarship

The assumptions that lie behind scholarship make it a vital part of the Adventist Christian experience. Scholarship, the natural extension of a thoughtful life, helps us be more fully human. This is a reason for scholarship in itself. The joy of learning and discovery in a climate of freedom, and responding to the God-given quest for truth are not only positive motivators for engaging in intellectual discovery, they are a responsibility for believing Christians.

There is another reason for Adventists to engage in scholarship. At its best, scholarship keeps truth fresh, pushing the frontiers of knowledge. Scholarship analyzes and strengthens what is already partially understood, looks for interrelations between and within areas of knowledge, and searches for new patterns of thought and knowledge that will increase understanding. Thus, scholarship also becomes a means of enriching and expanding the perspectives of the church and the way the church communicates and

relates its messages. In all it does, Christian scholarship seeks to explain and make attractive the beauty that exists in God. For Adventist scholars, distinctive doctrines such as creation, eschatology and the mortality of humankind will be reflected in their world view and will provide a unique context to their intellectual pursuits. The meta-narrative of the great controversy and the holistic approach to life espoused by the Seventh-day Adventist Church will inevitably inform their approaches to scholarship. In this way, scholarship helps articulate doctrine and the Adventist world-view in understandable and relevant ways.

The responsibilities of a Christian and the objectives of scholarship also intersect on another very practical level: human need. Through their research, Adventist scholars can make God's world more understandable and improve human life in the present. This can be by contributing to the beauty of the world, or through investigations that bring health, healing and improvement to human society. By this means scholarship becomes an avenue of service, a way of immediately responding to the challenges of a fallen world.

Attitudes and Approaches to Scholarship

Whether or not scholarship meets its own intrinsic ideals is largely dependent on the attitudes of scholars and the way they approach their work.

To be successful in study and its application, Adventist scholars first need to be inquisitive, open to exploring the world through their innate gift of curiosity. God invites this attitude of inquiry. Christian scholarship should never be less rigorous because it is Christian. An Adventist engaged in scholarship should seek excellence and be persistent in delving into issues, even those that appear to be irresolvable. Since more knowledge is always attainable, scholars should be innovative, looking for new methodologies, new solutions.

Yet this attitude of inquiry should be partnered with humility, the recognition that in an imperfect world our human discoveries will remain tentative and incomplete. God's wisdom is not complete in any one individual and only by openness, a willingness to collaborate and an attitude of teachability can scholars advance truth. Adventist scholars need to truly appreciate the views of others, and be willing to modify their own views as participants in the community of Adventist scholars.

An Adventist scholar will approach peers with a spirit of generosity and respect, mirroring the generosity with which God approaches us. Such an attitude will be seen in a willingness to listen and honestly consider the views of others and an approach to learning and scholarly endeavors that assumes the value of all individuals and of the created world.

Scholarship will take place in the Seventh-day Adventist Church for many good reasons. However, it is understood that church entities may prioritize resources for scholarly work that advances the church's mission. This will not mean work that is solely theological; it does mean that scholars should consider how their work might serve not just their personal interests, but also those of the wider faith community. It also means that scholarly work should not rely on approaches that are incompatible with the premises and doctrines of the church. This would affect the way that scholars, for example, use the environment and respect the rights of individuals.

Responsible research is partly a matter of being ethical in the process of researching and developing conclusions. This includes adhering to appropriate legal requirements and protocols, and showing the highest level of academic integrity. In the context of Christian scholarship it also means careful consideration of how and where material and ideas will be disseminated. Scholars will recognize the influence of their work on the wider community and will be responsible not only to fellow scholars, but to the church and its mission, and to God.

Therefore, while the Adventist scholar should be given broad freedom to explore ideas and not feel restricted in using God-given talents, the church should expect that a scholar will show sensitivity and restraint when introducing ideas or concepts that may be divisive to the church. Before communicating such ideas in a public forum, the scholar should first share the ideas with a small group of peers, then carefully publish within the scholarly community. Depending on the area of research, discussion with institutional and church administrators may prove valuable. If these consultations confirm that the results of the research will not be destructive for wider dissemination, then the scholar should feel free to present the ideas publicly, including presentation of the material to students in a classroom setting. Care should also be exercised when projects are undertaken in collaboration with individuals who have views opposed to those of the church in order to avoid negative impact on the church's reputation.

Risks and Benefits

Unquestionably there are risks of encouraging scholarship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For the individual, it can lead to a preponderance of time being spent on research, which may detract from other vital projects. Individuals can become side-tracked and lose sight of the bigger picture and their research can lead them to uncomfortable questions, or worse, to arrogance and an unwillingness to listen to the communities that they serve.

Institutions also run risks in encouraging scholarship. If not approached with careful focus, it can be expensive in time and money, and result in limited value to the institution and its mission. Similarly, without careful planning, resources can be allocated without a clear strategy for meeting institutional goals.

There are risks to the church also. In particular, scholarship can open up discussions that are potentially divisive and destructive, with issues becoming important in themselves while the needs of the church are forgotten. Nevertheless, the benefits to all groups are immense. The individual receives the benefit of new or enriched knowledge, including the opportunity for a deepened understanding of God. Where research involves students, they also benefit from close work with faculty members and the synergy of team endeavors.

The institution inevitably benefits practically. Its reputation can be raised; there is the potential for enhanced faculty interaction and fulfillment. Senior researchers will gain satisfaction from mentoring younger Christian scholars. More than that, an institution that is actively engaged in scholarship, especially scholarship that links to institutional mission, will itself be energized. In these ways, scholarship and research become a vital part of Seventh-day Adventist education.

Finally, there are benefits to the church. Good scholarship can only enrich the church and its message. It increases conviction and shows the application of doctrine to

the life of all believers. It raises the level of thinking and discovery in the church, which gives its members the knowledge and skills to articulate more effectively the message of the church and its relevance to society. It provides vibrancy and energy. The church will be empowered by thinking, exploring and creative members who are focused on advancing the Christian mission.

This document was developed by a committee composed of Joe Galusha, Andrea Luxton, John McVay, and Humberto Rasi, at the request of the planners for the International Conference on Faith and Science held in Denver, Colorado in August 2004. The document was presented and discussed during the conference. The text includes the suggestions made and is provided here for further study and reflection.

1 Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).

2 Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).