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The Aims of Adventist Education: A Historical Perspective

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Why Operate Adventist Schools?

That is a good question, but one that was seen as irreverent and irrelevant by the earliest Adventists. After all, wasn't Jesus going to come soon? And if so, why educate Adventist children for a world that would end before they grew up? In fact, didn't sending children to school indicate a lack of faith in Christ's soon coming?

This mentality led W. H. Ball in 1862 to ask if it was "right and consistent for us who believe with all our hearts in the immediate coming of the Lord, to seek to give our children an education?"¹ Note that this question was being asked 18 years *after* the Millerite disappointment. The anti-education "bug" had firmly implanted itself in the Adventist mentality.

James White's reply is of interest, since he argued that "the fact that Christ is very soon coming is no reason why the mind should not be improved. A well-disciplined and informed mind can best receive and cherish the sublime truths of the Second Advent."² His wife, Ellen G. White, agreed. Ten years later, she wrote that "ignorance will not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently."³

Early Adventists Grapple With the Issue

By 1872, however, the Whites were not the only Adventists interested in formal education. Twenty-eight years had passed since the Millerite disappointment, and nine years since the formal organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The church was growing and needed ministers. The former Millerites were aging, so the church needed to train future leaders. Furthermore, by the early 1870s, the denomination was earnestly considering its responsibility for foreign missions.

With those concerns in mind, the General Conference created the School Committee, which reported in May 1872 that "there are persons all through our ranks, who have come to years of maturity, who have convictions that they ought to do something to directly forward the glorious and important cause in which we are engaged. To this end, they want immediately *to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the teaching of the Bible in reference to those great truths which pertain to this time.*" The committee also noted that these people needed general instruction so they could more effectively speak and write. As a result, the denomination established a school in Battle Creek to prepare church workers "to wield those

weapons for the advancement of the cause."⁴

Unquestionably, the denomination's early leadership intended that the Battle Creek School would train people to preach the gospel. Ellen White agreed with this aim. "We need a school," she wrote in "Proper Education" (1872), "where those who are just entering the ministry may be taught at least the common branches of education, and where they may also learn more perfectly the truths of God's word for this time."⁵

But Mrs. White's vision for the goals of Adventist education was broader than that of other church leaders. Thus, in her 1872 article, she also dealt with the importance of education, the distinction between education and training, discipline as self-control, the need for a practical/useful education, and the importance of balancing the mental and spiritual aspects of education with the physical.⁶ In short, while she agreed with the worker-

training goals of the church leaders, she also introduced themes that foreshadowed a much broader education. During the next 30 years, her writings fleshed out the implications of those aims.

Meanwhile, by 1873, James White and other denominational leaders realized the inadequacy of their school. White wrote that "there is no branch of this work that suffers so much at the present time as the proper education of men and women to proclaim the third angel's message." While, he noted, "we have no time to give students a thorough course of education," the church needs to prepare "young men and women . . . to become printers, editors, and teachers." In addition, they should be taught the "living languages" (rather than the dead classical ones), since we have

"a message . . . that is to be proclaimed before many nations and tongues and people." James White took pains to point out that such education should not cover a long period of time, since time was short.⁷

In April 1873, J. N. Andrews expressed the consensus of church leadership in his editorial in the *Review and Herald*: "the calls that come from every quarter, from men speaking other languages, must be answered by us. We cannot do this in our present circumstances. But we can do it if the Lord bless our effort in the establishment of our proposed school. We have delayed this effort too long."⁸

In 1874, the denomination sent its first official missionary—J. N. Andrews—to a foreign land *and* opened up its first collegiate institution—Battle Creek College. Those events are inextricably connected. After all, the foremost purpose of the denomination's early educational enterprise was to train its members to spread the third angel's message. So, it is fitting

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that Adventism's first institution of higher learning would eventually be renamed Andrews University in honor of Adventism's first official missionary.

But all was not well at Battle Creek College in the late 1870s. The founders' goals were not being met. There was no required Bible course, no practical or missionary training, and no physical/mental balance in the curriculum, which was largely dominated by the Greek and Latin classics and teacher training for public institutions. The school's catalogs even went so far as to advertise that "there is nothing in the regular courses of study, or in the rules and practice of discipline, that is in the least denominational or sectarian. The biblical lectures are before a class of only those who attend them from choice." "The managers of this College have no disposition to urge upon students sectarian views, or to give such views any prominence in their school work."⁹

Midcourse Reflections on the Aims of Adventist Education

For various reasons, things went from bad to worse at Battle Creek College between 1874 and 1881. Finally, the unimaginable happened—the college closed for a year, with no sure promise of reopening. During that time, Ellen White issued several powerful testimonies on Christian education in an attempt to get Adventist education back on track. "If a worldly influence is to bear sway in our school," she penned in December 1881, "then sell it out to worldlings and let them take the entire control; and those who have invested their means in that institution will establish another school, to be conducted, not upon the plan of popular schools, nor according to the desires of principal and teachers, but upon the plan which God has specified."¹⁰

Three months earlier, she had plainly told her audience that "the Lord never designed that our college should imitate other institutions of learning. The religious element should be the controlling power. If unbelievers choose this influence, it is well; if those who are in darkness choose to come to the light, it is as God would have it. But to relax our vigilance, and let the worldly element take the lead in order to secure students, is contrary to the will of God. *The strength of our college is keeping the religious element in the ascendancy.*"¹¹

Mrs. White had not the slightest doubt that the central purpose of the college was to train church workers. On the other hand, she did not advocate a narrow Bible college or Bible institute curriculum. As she put it in her forceful December 1881 address to the General Conference and educational leadership, "God's purpose has been made known, that our people should have an opportunity to study the sciences and *at the same time* to learn the requirements of His word."¹² Her overall counsel pointed toward a broad-based education in which students stud-

ied the arts and sciences in the context of a biblical worldview. That position was evident in the 1885 struggle at South Lancaster Academy when S. N. Haskell and others sought to narrow the curriculum to the specifically religious.¹³ Over the years, she and other educational leaders guided Adventism to adopt a religiously oriented liberal-arts approach to collegiate study.

Placing Christ at the Center

The real turning point in Adventist education came in the 1890s. Early in the decade, the Harbor Springs educational convention was held in northern Michigan. Just as the General Conference ministerial institutes in the post-1888 period helped pastors to recognize the centrality of Christ and His righteousness to Adventism, so the Harbor Springs convention helped Adventist educators see the centrality of Christ for the denomination's academic curriculum.

Looking back from 1893, the church's educational leader, W. W. Prescott, proclaimed to the General Conference session that Harbor Springs had marked a turning in Adventist education. "While the general purpose up to that time," he claimed, had "been to have a religious element in our schools, yet since that institute, as never before, our work has been *practically* [rather than theoretically] upon that basis, showing itself in courses of study and plans of work as it had not previously."¹⁴

Three months after the Harbor Springs convention, Ellen White sailed for Australia, taking with her a heightened awareness of the possibilities of Christian education and the gospel's implications for education. While in Australia, she would have

an unequalled opportunity to influence the Avondale School for Christian Workers to develop according to the principles enunciated at Harbor Springs.

The Avondale School looms large in Adventist educational history because Ellen White saw it as an "object lesson" or "pattern" for other church educational institutions.¹⁵ Milton Hook, in his extensive study of Avondale's first six years, concluded that the two central goals associated with Avondale were the *conversion and character development of the students and preparing them to be denominational workers.*¹⁶

Paralleling the development of Avondale was Adventism's mission thrust during the 1890s. For the first time, the denomination was sending missionaries to every corner of the globe and establishing educational, medical, and publishing institutions to buttress those missions. The expansion stimulated the rapid development of Adventist education at all levels, as the denomination looked to its schools around the world to supply workers for its rapidly expanding endeavors. By the early 1900s, many of these schools had followed Avondale in incorporating the word *missionary* into their name. (For example, "Washington



Battle Creek College

Missionary College” and “Emmanuel Missionary College.”¹⁷)

Another educational spin-off of Mrs. White’s Australian years was the beginning of the Adventist elementary school system. Because school attendance was required in Australia, she wrote her son, W. C. White, in May 1897: “In this country parents are compelled to send their children to school. Therefore in localities where there is a church, schools should be established, if there are not more than six children to attend.”¹⁸

Her counsels inspired reformers in America, including E. A. Sutherland and Percy T. Magan, who immediately began to push for the rapid development of an Adventist elementary system. Under their leadership and that of Frederick Griggs, providing a Christian education for every Adventist young person became a church goal by 1910.¹⁹

Ellen White’s Mature Thoughts on the Aims of Education

Another outgrowth of Ellen White’s involvement with the early Avondale School was the constant stream of education-related letters and articles from her pen. Those writings, along with the publication of *Christian Education* in 1893 and *Special Testimonies on Education* in 1897 (both compiled by W. W. Prescott) not only helped guide the development of existing Adventist schools, but also made Adventist leaders and members more aware of Christian education.

Ellen White’s 1890s writings on education also prepared the way for the publication of her mature thoughts on the topic in *Education* (1903). In that book more than any other, she addressed the primary goals and aims of education, framing education within the context of the Great Controversy. In masterful strokes, she re-told the Genesis 1-3 story in educational terms, concluding that “to restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of *redemption*. This is the object of education, the great object of life.” Again she penned: “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one. . . . To aid the student in comprehending these principles, and in entering into that relation with Christ which will make them a controlling power in the life, should be the teacher’s first effort and his constant aim.”²⁰

Beyond making conversion the primary aim of Christian education, *Education* was clear that the ultimate aim of Adventist education is *service*. “Our ideas of education,” she penned, “take too narrow and too low a range. . . . True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence

possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. *It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world, and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.*”²¹

Within the framework of the primary aim of education as conversion and the ultimate aim as service to God and other people, Ellen White discussed such intermediate aims as character development, the role of work, and the Christian understanding of historical, literary, scientific, and biblical knowledge. From her perspective, all of those intermediate aims were based upon a conversion experience and were instrumental in preparing young people for service.

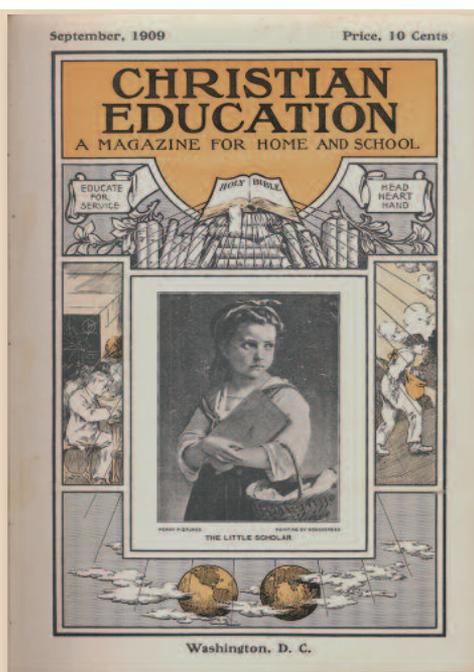
A 20th-Century Refinement

The changing nature of 20th-century education and work led to a major adjustment in the manner of achieving the goals of Adventist education. As time went on, both work and education became more professional. This created tensions in the denomination.

Taking one side of the issue were educators such as E. A. Sutherland, who had led out in abolishing academic degrees at Battle Creek College in the late 1890s. At that time, degrees had not been necessary to enter fields such as medicine, teaching, nursing, ministry, or the world of business or government. In 1899, Sutherland wrote that “the first *degree* was granted by a pope,” and that degrees were the “germs” of the disease that permeated the Protestantism from which the third angel’s message was calling people. By 1915, he was asserting that “any Seventh-day Adventist school that grants degrees, thereby invites State

inspection, and must accept the world’s standard and come into conformity to the worldly system of education.” The time was coming, he claimed, when degrees would be granted directly by the Papacy and would constitute “a seal or the mark of the beast.”²²

But even as Sutherland was making this pronouncement, professionalism and education were being transformed. A case in point was medicine. In 1910, the Flexner Report exposed the dismal state of medical education in the United States and eventually led to the closing of more than half of the nation’s medical schools. Using this report, the American Medical Association (AMA) evaluated Adventism’s fledgling College of Medical Evangelists (Loma Linda, California) in 1911 and gave it the lowest possible rating. The medical school would either have to achieve a higher rating or be closed, since without AMA approval, its graduates could not practice medicine. Achieving a higher rating, however, meant that the schools sending students to CME also had to be accredited by the regional accrediting associations. Thus, the issue of degrees evolved into one of accreditation.²³



Deciding how to relate to these developments divided Adventist leadership. Some believed the church should train Bible instructors at Loma Linda who could also give natural treatments, while others thought the church needed to train fully certified physicians. In their concern, they placed the matter before Ellen White, whose reply was unequivocal. "We must," she claimed, "provide that which is essential to qualify our youth who desire to be physicians, so that they may intelligently fit themselves to be able to stand the examinations required to prove their efficiency as physicians. . . . We are to supply whatever may be required, so that these youth need not be compelled to go to medical schools conducted by men not of our faith."²⁴

She realized that this would also affect Adventist colleges. "Our larger union conference training schools in various parts of the field should be placed in the most favorable position for qualifying our youth to meet the entrance requirements specified by state laws regarding medical students. . . . The youth . . . should be able to secure at our union conference training schools all that is essential for entrance into a medical college. . . . Inasmuch as there are legal requirements making it necessary that medical students shall take a certain preparatory course of study, our colleges should arrange to carry their students to the point of literary and scientific training that is necessary."²⁵

That counsel provided the basis for the eventual accreditation of Adventist colleges. It also meant a continued emphasis on the service function of Adventist education, since by the middle of the 20th century, accredited degrees were needed in a large number of professions. Times had changed, and, fortunately, the church's educational system was in a position to face those changes as it continued to prepare young people for service.

Conclusion

Why operate Adventist schools?

The Adventist pioneers clearly believed their schools were to preach the third angel's message and do the work of the church. According to Ellen White, the *ultimate educational aim* is "service."

But being able to serve implies training in both the intellectual and moral realms. The early believers generally agreed that (1) character development was crucial, that (2) the common branches of study as well as the arts and sciences were important, and that (3) the biblical worldview must provide the matrix in which Christian understanding takes place.

Thus, although early Adventists largely agreed on the ultimate goal of Christian education as service and the instrumental aims as character development and acquiring knowledge from a biblical perspective, it was Ellen White who supplied the church's educators with the *primary aim* of Christian education when she equated true education with *redemption*. In addition, she provided the denomination with the means to fulfill its ultimate aim of service to God and humanity in the modern world when she counseled the church to move in the direction of accredited programs.

The Adventist Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was repeatedly forced to clarify its educational goals. The Adventist Church in the 21st century needs to keep its eyes on those aims as it seeks to serve contemporary society. ☞



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