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Education for What? Thoughts on the  
Purpose and Identity of Adventist Education

"Nothing can be more important in a free society than the clear statement of goals for education."<sup>1</sup> So wrote Millicent McIntosh in the first sentence of her booklet *Education for What?*

*The Crucial Role of Education*

"Education for What?" is directly related to the question of "Why Have Adventist Schools?" And certainly we as Adventist educators can and should paraphrase Dr. McIntosh to read "nothing can be more important in an *Adventist* society than the clear statement of goals for education."<sup>2</sup>

Ellen White would certainly agree with that statement. In *Counsels to Teachers* she wrote that "by a misconception of the true nature and object of education, many have been led into serious and even fatal errors." And here she means fatal not merely for this earth but eternally fatal. Ellen White goes on to note that "such a mistake is made when the regulation of the heart or the establishment of principles is neglected in the effort to secure intellectual culture, or when eternal interests

are overlooked in the eager desire for temporal advantage."<sup>3</sup>

Again, she wrote, "the necessity of establishing Christian schools is urged upon me very strongly. In the schools of to-day many things are taught that are a hindrance rather than a blessing. Schools are needed where the word of God is made the basis of education. Satan is the great enemy of God, and it is his constant aim to lead souls away from their allegiance to the King of heaven. He would have minds so trained that men and women will exert their influence on the side of error and moral corruption, instead of using their talents in the service of God. His object is effectually gained, when by perverting their ideas of education, he succeeds in enlisting parents and teachers on his side; for a wrong education often starts the mind on the road to infidelity."<sup>4</sup>

From Ellen White's perspective, Dr. McIntosh was absolutely correct when she highlighted the fact that nothing is more important "than the clear statement of goals for education." Secularists around the world down through history have also been in agreement. As a result, George S. Counts has written that "to shape educational policy is to guard the path that leads from the present to the future. . . . Throughout the centuries since special educational agencies were first established, the strategic position of the school has been appreciated by kings, emperors, and popes, by rebels, reformers, and prophets. Hence, among those opposing forces found in all complex societies, a

struggle for the control of the school is always evident. Every group or sect endeavors to pass on to its own children and to the children of others that culture which it happens to esteem; and every privileged class seeks to perpetuate its favored position in society by means of education."<sup>5</sup>

In another connection, Counts observed in discussing the challenge of Soviet education, that the failure of revolutions has been a record of the failure to bring education into the service of the revolutionary cause. Revolutionary bodies will possess no more permanence, he pointed out, than the small bands of idealists who conceived them if the children of the next generation cannot be persuaded to leave the footsteps of their parents. As a result, the history of the Soviets, Germany's Nazi Party, and other successful revolutionary movements has demonstrated that one of the first measures taken by revolutionary governments is to place all educational agencies under the direct control of the state and to give the schools a central hand in building the new society.<sup>6</sup>

The same might also be said of the heirs of democratic revolutions or even of religious movements. Thus we find the rise of vernacular education as an integral part of the Lutheran Reformation. After all, individuals needed to be able to read the all-important Bible for themselves if they were to maintain their faith independent of an influential priesthood. In a similar vein, one of the first moves of the Puritans after their

arrival in the wilderness of North America was to found Harvard College in 1636. They realized that their mission was doomed without both civil and religious leaders educated in biblical principles.

Early Adventists were inspired by similar insights. Thus it was no accident that Ellen White framed her educational thought within the context of the great controversy struggle between Christ and Satan and their respective principles. The greatest of all the world's culture wars is for the minds and hearts of the coming generations. And the epicenter of the struggle is for the control of schooling; control of the institution that has so much to do with shaping minds and hearts, goals and aspirations, values and direction.

And at this point I should note that biblical Christianity is in a very real sense a revolutionary movement. But, as such, it is not out to control the kingdoms of this world but to put an end to the current confusion and usher in the fullness of Christ's Kingdom at His Second Advent. In that sense Christianity in general and Adventism in particular is a revolutionary force of the first order.<sup>7</sup> Thus the importance of a clear understanding of the goals of Adventist education; of the questions of "Why Have Adventist Schools?" and "Education for What?" That thought leads us to the discussion of the aims and goals of Adventist education, the identity of Adventist education.

Aspect #1 of Adventist  
Educational Identity--the General

Certainly one aim of Adventist education is the development of young people intellectually, socially, and professionally. Ellen White, for one, was clear on those goals. As a result, she wrote in 1891 that "it is right that you should feel that you must climb to the highest round of the educational ladder. Philosophy and history are important studies."<sup>8</sup>

And in the face of misunderstandings of her counsel on "speedy preparation," Ellen White penned that "no movement should be made to lower the standard of education in our school at Battle Creek. The students should tax the mental powers; every faculty should reach the highest possible development."<sup>9</sup> And regarding Battle Creek College as an institution she urged the school to "reach a higher standard of intellectual and moral culture than any other institution of the kind in our land."<sup>10</sup> She had no doubt on the importance of "the highest culture of the mind" and the fact that ignorance was not a Christian virtue.<sup>11</sup>

Similar statements can be found in Ellen White's writings on the necessity of preparing students for the world of work. And she did not merely mean work with a person's hands as they prepared for careers in agriculture or the trades. To the contrary, she urged the upgrading of Adventist education to prepare individuals for the professions. Thus she recommended

that the education to be given at the fledgling institution at Loma Linda should be of "the highest order" and that the youth studying there were to be given "a medical education that will enable them to pass the examinations required by law."<sup>12</sup> That meant that Adventist colleges and secondary schools must also aim at preparing students to meet the legal standards.<sup>13</sup> And what she noted about the medical field extends to the other professions.

There is not the slightest doubt that Ellen White held that Adventist schools should prepare young people to succeed in this earthly life by developing them mentally, socially, physically, and vocationally. Those areas of education are an essential part of the identity of Seventh-day Adventist schooling.

But if we only accomplish those goals, there is really no need for Adventist schools. After all, those are the aims of the public schools and they often do an excellent job of preparing people academically, socially, physically, and vocationally. If those are the only goals we achieve or even aim at as Seventh-day Adventist educators we might as well save our money and put it to a better use. That conclusion brings us to the second aspect of Adventist educational identity.

#### Aspect #2 of Adventist Educational Identity--the Spiritual

The book *Education* in its first chapter sets forth what is in many ways the heart of Adventist education. In the first

paragraph we read that "our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range." Such is true when we as Adventist educators aim only or primarily at the tasks that form the goals of secular or public education.

"There is," we read on, "need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the persual 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."<sup>14</sup>

There are several key words in that paragraph. The first centers on "true" education. True education is that education that transcends the goals of secular education. True education is that education that has a "higher aim" than merely preparing people to be good and productive citizens of Chile, Korea, Germany, Nigeria, or the United States.

The second key word is "whole," a word she uses with two dimensions. First, Adventist education must emphasize the "whole" or entire period of human existence. Thus it is not merely focused on helping students learn how to earn a living or on becoming cultured by the standards of the present world. Those aims may be worthy and important, but they are not

sufficient. The realm of eternity and preparation for it must also come under the purview of any Adventist education worthy of church support. On the other hand, some pious but misdirected individuals might be tempted to make heaven the focus of education while neglecting the present realm and preparation for the world of work and participation in human society. Ellen White asserted that neither extreme is correct. Rather, preparation for both the earthly and the eternal worlds must be included in Adventist education and placed in proper relationship to each other. The book *Fundamentals of Christian Education* catches that balance when it highlights the fact that while students should aim at the "highest round of the educational ladder" intellectually, "unless the knowledge of science is a steppingstone to the attainment of the highest purpose, it is worthless. The education that does not furnish knowledge as enduring as eternity, is of no purpose."<sup>15</sup>

The second aspect of wholeness in the book *Education's* opening paragraph is the imperative to develop the entire person. Secular education leaves out the spiritual aspect. But Adventist education must aim at developing all aspects of human beings, including the spiritual as well as the intellectual, the physical, the social, and the vocational. In short, the goal of Adventist education is to develop whole persons for the whole period of existence open to them in both this world and the world to come. In that sense it transcends the possibilities of

secular education, as well as many forms of Christian education, and, unfortunately, even some so-called Adventist education.

One other key word in *Education's* opening paragraph is *service* ("the joy of service in this world and . . . the higher joy of wider service in the world to come"). It should be noted that the centrality of service is not only featured in the book's first page, but also on the last, which points out: "In our life here, earthly, sin-restricted though it is, the greatest joy and the highest education are in service. And in the future state, untrammelled by the limitations of sinful humanity, it is in service that our greatest joy and our highest education will be found."<sup>16</sup>

That emphasis on service should come as no surprise to any reader of the Bible. Jesus more than once told His disciples that the very essence of Christian character was love for and service to others. Such characteristics, of course, are not natural human traits. "Normal" people are more concerned with their own needs and being served than they are in a life of service to others. The Christian alternative outlook and set of values does not come about naturally. Rather, the Bible speaks of it as a transformation of the mind and heart (Romans 12:2). And Paul appeals to us to let Christ's mind be our mind, pointing out that even though Christ was God, He came as a servant (Philippians 2:5-7).

If the first page in the book *Education* makes room for

Adventist education in the pedagogical world by adding in "the spiritual" and preparing for the "whole" period of human existence, it is the book's second page that begins to move beyond generalities and to focus on what she meant by those ideas.

Specifically, Ellen White points out that if educators really want to understand the primary purpose of education they need to understand four things. As she puts it, "In order to understand what is comprehended in the work of education, we need to consider both [1] the nature of man and [2] the purpose of God in creating him. We need to consider also [3] the change in man's condition through the coming in of a knowledge of evil, and [4] God's plan for still fulfilling His glorious purpose in the education of the human race."<sup>17</sup>

She fleshes out the core of her philosophy of education by refining those four points in the next few paragraphs. First, in reflecting upon human nature, she emphasizes that Adam was created in the image of God--physically, mentally, and spiritually. Second, she highlights the purpose of God in creating human beings as one of their constant growth so that they would ever "more fully reflect the glory of the Creator." To that end, God endowed human beings with capacities that were capable of almost infinite development.

"But," thirdly, she notes in discussing the entrance of sin, "by disobedience this was forfeited. Through sin the divine

likeness was marred, and well-nigh obliterated. Man's physical powers were weakened, his mental capacity was lessened, his spiritual vision dimmed."

While those three points are foundational to Ellen White's philosophy of education, it is her fourth and last point that is absolutely crucial and that fully expresses the primary purpose of education. She writes that, in spite of its rebellion and Fall, "the race was not left without hope. By infinite love and mercy the plan of salvation had been devised, and a life of probation was granted. 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."<sup>18</sup>

Ellen White returns to that theme in the fourth chapter of *Education*, where she describes each person's life as the scene of a microcosmic great controversy between good and evil, and every human being as having not only "a desire for goodness" but also a "bent to evil." Building upon her earlier insight that God's image is not totally obliterated in fallen humanity, she notes that every human being "receives some ray of divine light. Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness, exists in every heart. But against these principles there is struggling an antagonistic power." As

the heritage of the Edenic Fall there is within each person's nature an evil force which "unaided, he cannot resist. To withstand this force, to attain that ideal which in his inmost soul he accepts as alone worthy, he can find help in but one power. That power is Christ. Co-operation with that power is man's greatest need. In all educational effort should not this co-operation be the highest aim?"<sup>19</sup>

On the next page, she develops this point a bit more, writing that "in the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, 'other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus.' . . . 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. The teacher who accepts this aim is in truth a co-worker with Christ, a laborer together with God."<sup>20</sup> Although she had no formal training as a philosopher, Ellen White hit the pivot point of educational philosophy when she placed the human problem of sin at the very center of the educational enterprise.

The redemptive role of education has many implications for the Adventist school. Not only must the school introduce its students to Jesus, but also it must endeavor to get them to follow Him in their daily lives as they interact with others in their community.

The redemptive role of Adventist education also transforms the role of the teacher from one who transmits information and skills to one who is essentially a minister or pastor to his or her students. From a Christian perspective, it is of interest that the New Testament does not differentiate between the roles of pastors and teachers. Rather, it pictures them as a unified calling. Thus in Ephesians 4:11 Paul writes that "some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (RSV). The apostle in that passage uses a Greek construction that indicates that the same person holds the combined office of pastor and teacher. It is true that in today's job market the role of pastor has been separated from that of teacher, but it is a fact that every pastor must be "an apt teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2, RSV) and every teacher is a pastor to his or her students as they minister to them day after day in the classroom. That conclusion, it should be noted, has massive implications for Adventist educational administrators as they select new teachers in the hiring process. Suddenly we realize that academic qualifications are not the only ones that are important. In fact, academic qualifications must take second place to the spiritual aspects of a teachers' life if Adventist schools are to accomplish their most important purpose. After all, if we are successful in cramming students' heads full of knowledge and preparing them for the world of work, but fail in giving them a genuine opportunity to accept Christ and walk with

Him we have not failed partially but totally.

Teaching young people is not only a pastoral function but also one of the most effective forms of ministry, since it reaches the entire population while at its most impressionable age. Reformer Martin Luther recognized that fact when he wrote that "if I had to give up preaching and my other duties, there is no office I would rather have than that of school-teacher. For I know that next to the [pastoral] ministry it is the most useful, greatest, and best; and I am not sure which of the two is to be preferred. For it is hard to make old dogs docile and old rogues pious, yet that is what the ministry works at, and must work at, in great part, in vain; but young trees . . . are more easily bent and trained. Therefore let it be considered one of the highest virtues on earth faithfully to train the children of others, which duty but very few parents attend to themselves."<sup>21</sup> The clearest and fullest integration of the gift of teacher-pastor appeared in the ministry of Christ. One of the terms by which people most addressed Him was "Master." The actual meaning of the Greek word is "Teacher."

The spiritual and redemptive aspect of Adventist educational identity will also make a major impact on the school's curriculum; especially in terms of the centrality of the Bible and its worldview. According to Ellen White, "the science of redemption is the science of all sciences," and the Bible is "the Book of books."<sup>22</sup> Only an understanding of that

"science" and that "Book" makes everything else meaningful in the fullest sense. Viewed in the light of "the grand central thought" of the Bible, Ellen White points out, "every topic has a new significance."<sup>23</sup> Every student, she noted in another connection, should gain a knowledge of the Bible's "grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found."<sup>24</sup>

In such passages as those cited above, Ellen White not only highlights the all-important place of the Bible in the Adventist curriculum, but also sets the stage for what we have come to think of as the integration of faith and learning--a topic that has seen massive emphasis in Adventism in the last three decades through the efforts of George Akers and Humberto Rasi.

We could go on and on about the implications of the redemptive or spiritual aspect for Adventist educational identity, but, to put it briefly, the implications of the spiritual must shape and reshape every part of the school

program, including our practice of the so-called extra-curricular and social parts of the school program.

But, for the sake of argument, let us say that a particular Adventist school did provide the highest intellectual and vocational education, that it did introduce young people to Jesus as Lord and Savior, that it did place the Bible at the center of education, that it did integrate every academic field and every school activity into the biblical world view. Still, I would argue, it has fallen short if that is all it has accomplished. After all, those are functions that every evangelical Christian school should be accomplishing. And if we only manage to accomplish what other Christian schools are already doing then there is no pressing justification for duplicating their activities in yet one more Christian school.

That conclusion brings me to the third aspect of Adventist educational identity.

### Aspect #3 of Adventist Educational Identity--the Apocalyptic

The third aspect of Adventist educational identity relates to its grasp of the denomination's apocalyptic understanding and the implications of that understanding for worldwide mission and the Second Advent. Here we need to remember that Seventh-day Adventism has never seen itself as merely another denomination. Rather, from its very inception it has viewed itself as a movement of prophecy with a mission to all the world.

That apocalyptic/missiological understanding is based on certain passages in the heart of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. Especially important in that understanding are

- Revelation 10 with its portrayal of the bitter disappointment after the book of Daniel had been unsealed. Particularly important in Revelation 10 is verse 11, with its prediction that the disappointed ones would preach a message of prophecy again to "many peoples and nations and tongues and kings" (RSV).
- Revelation 11:19 with its portrayal of the opening of the Most Holy Place at the end of time and the revealing of the ark of the covenant.
- Revelation 12:17 with its exposition of the contents of the ark of the covenant to the world at the end of time, and especially the fact that God would have a commandment keeping people at the end of earth's history.
- And especially Revelation 14:6-12, with its highlighting of the preaching of the three angels immediately preceding the Second Advent in verses 14-20. Here the early Adventists found a worldwide commission to preach a special message "to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (RSV). Included in that message were admonitions regarding the presentation of the full gospel message, the time

of the judgment, the need to worship the Creator-God of the Sabbath, and once again the fact that at the end of time God would have a people who keep all His commandments.

Revelation 14 with its command to preach its message to the entire world has become central to Adventist self-understanding. Early Seventh-day Adventists began to think of themselves as the people preaching the three angels' messages. And rightly so. Of the five great gospel commissions in the New Testament, the ones in Matthew 28:19, 20; Matthew 24:14; and Acts 1:8 have been accepted by the church in general. But the ones in Revelation 10:11 and 14:6 have been largely neglected by all but Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventism's unique task became to preach God's end-time apocalyptic message to all the world. That understanding has led generations of Adventist young people to give their lives in obscure mission fields and has prompted older church members to sacrifice not only the nearness of their children but also their financial means to fulfill the prophetic imperative in the Apocalypse of John.

Adventism at its best and healthiest has linked its apocalyptic mission with education.<sup>25</sup> It is no accident that the establishment of its first college and the sending of its first official foreign missionary both took place in 1874. And it is no accident that the needs of the apocalyptic mission to every

nation and people and tongue that fueled the rise of Adventist education in the 1870s also led to the virtual explosion in the denomination's schooling in the 1890s. The statistics are informative. While the denomination had 2 schools in 1880, and 16 in 1890, it rapidly expanded to 245 in 1900, 844 in 1910, and 2,178 by 1930.

What is important here is that the growth in Adventist mission shows exactly the same growth curve as that for education. The year 1880 found 8 missions outside of North America with 5 evangelistic workers. Ten years later there were still 8 missions with some 56 workers. But by 1900 the number of missions had risen to 42 and the number of workers to 481. As with education, we are looking at a growth curve that goes nearly straight up beginning in the 1890s. The year 1930 found Adventism with 270 missions being operated by 8,479 evangelistic workers outside of North America.

Both the birth and the expansion of Seventh-day Adventist education were stimulated by the explosive fuel of apocalyptic mission as the denomination sought to educate the coming generation of young people not only about that apocalyptic mission but to dedicate their lives to it.

Thus the health of Adventist education has been historically tied to a self-conscious realization of apocalyptic mission. It is the apocalyptic vision that has made Adventism a dynamic, worldwide movement. When that vision is lost Adventism

will become merely another toothless denomination. The losing of the apocalyptic vision and Adventism's place in prophetic history is the greatest threat that Adventism and its educational system face in the twenty-first century.<sup>26</sup>

When that apocalyptic understanding has been lost sight of it is not surprising to find increasing numbers of parents sending their children to other Christian schools or even to public institutions.<sup>27</sup> Adventist education that has lost the apocalyptic vision is no longer truly Adventist. AND ADVENTIST EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT ONLY IF IT IS TRULY ADVENTIST. If it's not, it might be seen as an alternative to other systems of education, but not necessarily an important one, and certainly not one worthy of much financial sacrifice.

### Conclusion

"Education for What?" "Why Have Adventist Schools?" The short answer is that at their best they are unique institutions that fill a special place in the great end-time controversy between Christ and Satan. As such,

- they not only prepare students for life in this world academically, vocationally, and socially;
- they not only introduce young people to Jesus as Lord and Savior and help them understand the Bible and its implications for all knowledge and life;
- but they also inspire the coming generation with an

understanding of God's end-time apocalyptic vision that leads them to dedicate their lives to that vision and the advent of their Lord.

Adventist educational identity and mission are healthy only when all three of those factors are evident and in proper relationship. Neglect one of them and the system and its institutions are less than Adventist education.

#### Notes

1. Millicent Carey McIntosh, *Education for What?* (Stamford, CT: Overbrook Press, 1948), p. 3.

2. For fuller discussions of this topic see George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2006), pp. 169-264; George R. Knight, *Educating for Eternity: An Adventist Philosophy of Education*, forthcoming.

3. Ellen G White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), p. 49.

4. Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923), p. 541.

5. J. Crosby Chapman and George S. Counts, *Principles of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), pp. 601, 602.

6. George S. Counts, *The Soviet Challenge to America* (New York: John Day, 1931), pp. 66, 67.

7. For a fuller discussion of the Adventist school as a revolutionary agent, see George R. Knight, "Redemptive Education

(Part III), *Journal of Adventist Education*, 73 (October/November 2010): 53-55.

8. White, *Fundamentals*, p. 192.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

10. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), vol. 4, p. 425.

11. *Fundamentals*, pp. 47, 316; see also, "The Myth of the Ignorant Christian," in George R. Knight, *Myths in Adventism: An Interpretive Study of Ellen White, Education, and Related Issues* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985, 2009), pp. 113-123.

12. E. G. White, "A Statement Regarding the Training of Physicians," *Pacific Union Recorder*, Feb. 3, 1910, p. 3.

13. White, *Counsels*, pp. 479, 480.

14. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), p. 13.

15. White, *Fundamentals*, p. 192.

16. White, *Education*, p. 309.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 15, 16.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

21. Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School," in *Luther on Education*, by F. V. N. Painter (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1889), p. 264.

22. White, *Education*, p. 126; White, *Counsels*, p. 442.

23. White, *Education*, p. 125.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

25. For a fuller development of this topic, see George R. Knight, "The Dynamics of Educational Expansion: A Lesson from Adventist History," *Journal of Adventist Education*, 52 (April-May 1990): 13-19, 44-45.

26. For treatments of this topic see George R. Knight, "Seventh-day Adventist Education and the Apocalyptic Vision," *Journal of Adventist Education*, 69 (April/May 2007): 4-10; 69 (Summer 2007): pp. 4-9; George R. Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism*, rev. ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009).

27. Shane Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education (and How to Give It a Fighting Chance!)* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009).