



Adventist Education and the Apocalyptic

Part II

Preliminary Remarks

The article that follows is Part II of the keynote address presented at the North American Division's Teachers' Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, on August 6, 2006. In Part I (see the April/May 2007 issue), we examined the all-importance of the apocalyptic vision of Revelation 10-14 to the rise of Adventism, its mission consciousness, and the genesis and development of its educational system, concluding that "Adventist education is important only if it is truly Adventist." Part II begins with the truth that being Adventist is not enough if the denomination's schools are to fulfill their mission.

3. Apocalyptic Vision Is Not Enough

Having made the point about the importance of apocalyptic vision in Adventist education, I must hasten to add that apocalyptic vision is not enough. Providing young people with the distinctive truths of Adventism falls short of what must be accomplished in Adventist schools. After all, I once met an Adventist who was meaner than the devil. Believe it or not, I even knew a vegan teacher who was meaner than the devil. Her Adventism wasn't all she needed. It hadn't made her like Jesus.

That thought brings us back to the 1890s and a second strand of Adventist educational history during that crucial decade in the development of the church's educational system.

One of the dominating factors for Adventism in the 1890s was the spiritual revival that had been stimulated by A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner at the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis. Those men and Ellen White, recognizing the spiritual needs of the church, emphasized as never before in the denomination's history the centrality of salvation through faith in Jesus and the importance of acting like Him. That theme would have a major impact on the development and expansion of Adventist education. The turning point among the denomination's educators took place at Harbor Springs, Michigan, in July and August 1891. The educational con-

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Vision

[Ellen White's writings about the Avondale experience], along with the publication of *Christian Education* in 1893 and *Special Testimonies on Education* in 1897, provided guidelines for the Christian development of existing Adventist schools and generated a pervasive atmosphere of awareness among Adventist leaders and members regarding the importance of an education that was informed not only by apocalyptic vision but also by the redemptive role of Adventist schooling.

vention held during those weeks was a time of spiritual revival. Ellen White spoke on such topics as the necessity of a personal relationship with Christ, the need for spiritual renewal, and the centrality of the Christian message to education.¹

She sailed for Australia three months after the close of the Harbor Springs educational institute, taking with her a heightened awareness of the possibilities of Christian education and of the implications of the gospel for education. While in Australia, she would have an unequaled opportunity to influence the development of the Avondale School for Christian Workers along the lines of the principles enunciated at Harbor Springs, this time in an environment free from the conservative educators in the United States who were having a difficult time committing themselves wholeheartedly to the Harbor Springs ideal. Avondale, with its emphasis on the spiritual and its service orientation, would develop into a model school under the direction of its reforming founders.²

Out of the Avondale experience, which should be viewed as an extension of Minneapolis and Harbor Springs, flowed a constant



stream of letters and articles on Christian education from the pen of Ellen White. Those writings, along with the publication of *Christian Education* in 1893 and *Special Testimonies on Education* in 1897, provided guidelines for the Christian development of existing Adventist schools and generated a pervasive atmosphere of awareness among Adventist leaders and members regarding the importance of an education that was informed not only by apocalyptic vision but also by the redemptive role of Adventist schooling. Those dual emphases fueled a sharply increased demand for an education that

higher aim. True education means more than the pursual 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.”³

That is an inspiring statement, but Ellen White gets more specific on the book’s second page, when she high-

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was pervasively Christian but distinctively Adventist. Thus, between 1888 and 1900, the Christocentric dynamic added its weight to the growing consciousness of apocalyptic mission to transform the Adventist attitude toward the importance and the very meaning of education. The result was explosive growth.

4. The Ministry of Teaching

Perhaps the most important contribution of the dynamic 1890s to Adventist education was the ideas that flowed from those years into Ellen White’s book *Education*. From its very first paragraph, it frames Adventist education in galactic, Great Controversy terminology. “Our ideas of education,” we read in the volume’s opening paragraph, “take too narrow and too low a range. There is need of a broader scope, a

lights the fact that if we really want to understand what education is all about, we need to understand human nature—especially God’s ideal for humanity, His purpose in creating people, the disturbing effects of sin, and God’s plan for restoring the human race through the process of education.”⁴

It is in that passage that she put her finger on the problem that renders all forms of secular or humanistic education insufficient. The issue of issues in education, she pointed out, is sin. “Through sin,” we read, “the divine likeness was marred, and well-nigh obliterated. Man’s physical powers were weakened, his mental capacity was lessened, his spiritual vision dimmed. He had become subject to death.”⁵

The Challenge of Challenges

Here is the problem of problems in the human condition, the challenge of challenges for Christian educators. It is the reality of twisted, sinful humanity that makes all forms of life-adjustment education fall short, all species of education for self-realization less than adequate. It does no good to improve people’s skills or self-image if they are essentially selfish and self-centered or if they get proud or arrogant concerning the good in their lives. It is the reality of sin that must form the foundation of our thinking as Christian educators. The fact of sin is the reality that cries out for a Christian approach to education.

That is exactly the point being made in *Education*’s next few pages. We read again: “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.”⁶

Again, “in the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one To aid the student in



Early photo of Avondale College in Australia.

comprehending [God's] 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."⁷

Most people seem to miss the full import of those words. But in essence, they lift the teacher's role beyond the humdrum of teaching spelling or math and place it in the line of gospel ministry. I would suggest that the *primary function of a Christian teacher is that of an agent of salvation in the great controversy between Christ and Satan—good and evil—that takes place in both the world at large and in the lives of every individual student.*⁸

To state it plainly, the function of a Christian teacher is to lead young people into a transforming, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. It is in the context of that relationship that such secondary functions as character development, the formation of a Christian mind, and education for social responsibility and work must of necessity take place. It is crucial to realize that all of those secondary goals can take place in a non-Christian school. Thus, when Christian educators aim only at the goals that fall within the realm of all education, they have failed before they begin. *When Christian educators neglect emphasizing the redemptive role of their schools, they make their schools both unimportant and unnecessary.*

The Adventist educator has one other unique contribution to make above and beyond that of other Christian educators. That is, everything that takes place in an Adventist school must not only be contexted or integrated within the framework of sin and salvation, but also within the structure of the apocalyptic vision that climaxes biblical history and has made Adventism a vibrant movement. *Without that apocalyptic vision, Adventist education might (or might not) be Christian, but it most certainly isn't Adventist. And it certainly has no essential reason to exist.*

As Adventist educators, we need to renew our vision. We must move beyond Christian education as just another job to the place where we see it as a calling that deals with the most important issues in both an individual's life and in the history of humanity.

5. Moving Into the Future

As we move into this important convention and through it to the rest of our teaching career, there are three important facts that we need to keep in mind.

The Strategic Importance of Schooling and Teaching

The first is the strategic importance of schooling and teaching. George S. Counts caught the strategic importance of schooling when he wrote 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 by means of education.”⁹

Likewise, observed Counts in discussing the challenges of Soviet education, the failure of revolutions has been a record of their inability to bring education into the service of the revolutionary cause. Revolutionary movements will

possess no more permanence 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. Therefore, as borne out by the history of the Soviets, the National Socialists, and other revolutionaries, to ensure the continuation of the movement, all educational agencies must be brought under the direct control of the state and schools given a central role in building the new society.¹⁰

Counts’ insights are equally applicable to religious institutions. Education is a crucial function in

any society because all youth must pass through some type of educational experience before they are ready to take over the society’s responsible positions. It is a truism that the future of any social group is determined by its current youth. It is also true that the direction that the youth will carry that society will, to a large extent, be determined by their education.

With those thoughts in mind, I would like to suggest that the health of Adventism is to a significant degree in the hands of its schools and to the philosophy of those who have given their lives to the ministry of Adventist education.

The Need to Keep Our Goals in View

If the first fact that we as teachers need to keep in mind is the strategic importance of schooling and teaching, the second is for us to constantly keep our goals in view. We noted earlier the two non-negotiable goals of a viable Adventist educational system. The first is the problem of sin and the student’s need of a relationship with Jesus Christ. The second is maintaining the apocalyptic vision that has given Adventism its direction, meaning, and dynamic

power. It is that apocalyptic vision that has made us a people. In the long run, the apocalyptic vision is the only thing that will keep us a living, dynamic, meaningful church. *The greatest threat to Adventism today is the loss of its apocalyptic vision. When the vision is gone, so will be the meaning of Adventism.* It will have metamorphosed from being a living movement into a dead monument. And in the process, Adventist education will be a casualty. After all, you can learn what it takes to be a good Christian in the schools of other denominations. Adventist education was born in the matrix of an apocalyptic vision, and when that vision is gone, so will be any genuine need for Adventist education.

Thus, the second thing I want you to remember is the goal and purpose of Adventist education.

Maintaining Courage and Sanity

The third and final thing I would like you to remember as I conclude this message is the importance of maintaining courage and sanity in the day-to-day business of dealing with what often appear to be unresponsive students. Any educator who isn’t threatened with discouragement from time to time doesn’t have his or her head screwed on tight.

Most of us believe in what we are doing. Beyond that, we love children and want the best for them. Yet they often appear to reject our words, our persons, and our sincere and earnest efforts to minister to their needs.

Over the years, I have many times come within a hair’s breadth of quitting the teaching profession and doing “something useful” with my life. But then, I came to grips with myself and realized that it is not the short-term results that count but those of the long term.

Let me illustrate. The illustration comes from my pastoral ministry, but the same dynamics are true for the classroom ministry.

Apparent Failure Does Not Mean Ultimate Failure

My big discovery was that apparent failure and ultimate failure are not the same thing. The occasion was my first evangelistic series. It took place in Corsicana, Texas, then a town of 26,000 people with an Adventist church of 12 members. And of those 12, nearly all were in their 70s, and only one was male. I was 26 at the time. Now, I have nothing against females. After all, my mother is one. And I have nothing against old people. But I desperately desired to have young Adventists of both sexes in my meetings to serve as contact points for my hoped-for converts.

To my joy, there was a young Adventist man attending the local community college. I visited him in his dormitory room, prayed with him, and pled with him to attend my meetings. He never did. I failed.

In fact, by that time I had managed to fail at quite a few things. The result: I eventually turned in my ministerial credentials and decided to give up Adventism and Christianity.

A couple of years later, I was driving across north-central Texas and detoured off the interstate to buy something for my wife at the grocery store in Keene, the home of



Southwestern Adventist University. As I was going through the front door, I was stopped by a young man.

“Aren’t you George Knight?” he queried.

I admitted to that fact.

“Do you remember me?” he shot back.

Now at that point I usually try to fake it, but I was so discouraged that I just told him the truth.

“You visited me in my dorm room in Corsicana,” he responded. “That visit was the turning point in my life. I am now studying to be a Seventh-day Adventist minister.”

I didn’t tell him what I was doing.

You see, I had been successful and didn’t know it. I had planted seeds that had germinated underground where I couldn’t see them.

My problem was (and still is) that I not only wanted to plant, but also to water and harvest those seeds all in a short space of time. I can’t tolerate failure or even delay that appears to be failure. I want immediate success.

Results Seen Only in Eternity

What I had to learn is that even though one may plant, it is others who water, and still others who harvest. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is quietly working in hearts at each stage of their development. We never know the good that we as teachers have done for many of our students. The true results of the work of a dedicated teacher will only be clearly seen in the future.

One of the most meaningful promises in Ellen White’s writings is on that very topic. Speaking of the resurrection morning, she notes in the book *Education* that the angel who watched over us in life will then inform us on the “history of divine interposition” in our individual life as we worked for others.

“All the perplexities of life’s experience will then be made plain. Where to us have appeared only confusion and disappointment, broken purposes and thwarted plans, will be seen a grand, overruling, victorious purpose, a divine harmony.

“There all who have wrought with unselfish spirit will behold the fruit of their labors. . . . Something of this we see here. But how little of the result of the world’s noblest work is in this life manifest to the doer! How many toil unselfishly and unweariedly for those who pass beyond their reach and knowledge! Parents and teachers lie down in their last sleep, their lifework seeming to have been wrought in vain; they know not that their faithfulness has unsealed springs of blessing that can never cease to flow; only by faith they see the children they have trained become a benediction and an inspiration to their fellow men, and the influence repeat itself a thousandfold. Many a worker sends out into the world messages of strength and hope and courage, words that carry blessing to hearts in every land; but of the results he, toiling in loneliness and obscurity, knows little. So gifts are bestowed, burdens are borne, labor is done. Men sow the seed from which, above their graves, others reap blessed harvests. They plant trees, that others

may eat the fruit. They are content here to know that they have set in motion agencies for good. In the hereafter the action and reaction of all these will be seen.”¹¹

What a promise! It’s one that we as teachers need to remember.

Our responsibility is not to worry about ultimate victory but to do our part today. I remember more than 30 years back when I was just beginning as a young professor at Andrews University. As a rosy-eyed young educational philosopher with revolutionary views, it had been my hope to get the whole place reformed and straightened out in short order. But the reformation wasn’t progressing as rapidly as I had hoped. In fact, not much changed since my arrival. I was ready to resign and do “something useful.”

But by that time, I had learned a few things about apparent “failure.” I finally went to God on my knees and committed myself to staying “in the teaching ministry” if He would just let me touch one person a year with His gospel of truth, and love, and hope; with His message of apocalyptic vision.

He has kept His end of the bargain. In fact, in some years I have been able to touch more than one through God’s grace.

Only on resurrection morning will those of us who have been in the ministry of teaching have a full realization of the results of our work. May God keep each of us until that day. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For the most complete account of the Harbor Springs meetings, see Craig S. Willis, “Harbor Springs Institute of 1891: A Turning Point in Our Educational Conceptions,” Seminar Paper, Andrews University, 1979.
2. See Milton Raymond Hook, “The Avondale School and Adventist Educational Goals, 1894-1900,” Ed.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1978; idem, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora* (Cooranbong, N.S.W., Australia: Avondale Academic Press, 1998).
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
8. I have treated the ministry of teaching in relation to the goals of education more fully in George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*, 4th ed. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2006), pp. 204-17.
9. J. Crosby Chapman and George S. Counts, *Principles of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), pp. 601, 602.
10. George S. Counts, *The Soviet Challenge to America* (New York: John Day Co., 1931), pp. 66, 67.
11. White, *Education*, pp. 305, 306.

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