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## “Proper Education”

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*by G. H. Akers*

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Teaching, deaning, and administering education at various levels have been his life for more than forty years of service to his church and his God. His doctorate in higher education and historical/philosophical foundations was earned at USCLA. Some sixteen years at Andrews University climaxed with his appointment to the first deanship of the School of Education.

Dr. Akers’ lively communicative style brings a refreshing touch to *Adventist Perspectives* as he writes of “Proper Education” and Ellen White’s relationship to it in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The above title may not be all that original. Neither was it in 1872 when Ellen G. White utilized it to launch her distinguished career as a philosopher of Christian education. A perusal of the literature of the times reveals that the expressions “educational reform” and “proper education” seemed to be favorite buzzwords in the press, bandied about freely by editors, politicians, and celebrated speakers on the Chautauqua circuit who found it popular to inveigh against the impracticality of the classical curriculum. The entrenched educational establishment of the day, so resistant to change of any sort, was a special target of writers and speakers.

Clearly, grassroots post-Civil War America was growing impatient with its schools. Elitist education, reserved for the upper class and essentially for cosmetic effect, was definitely under siege as backward-oriented, exhausted, and entirely too static to respond to the needs of the robust new social order. The times called for a more appropriate educational product—trained artisans,

surveyors, architects, engineers, technicians, service professionals, business leaders, and practitioners of every sort. “Can Do” had become the order of the day, and America’s colleges and universities were expected to help substantially in achieving the manifest destiny of an exuberant, expanding young country.

### *A New Voice to Society and Church*

It was in this late nineteenth-century cultural context, with the Great Conversation moving from coast to coast regarding the appropriate training of the young, that Ellen White moved in with her landmark essay “Proper Education.” In it she offered her own prescription for worthy educational goals for society and church and the best methods for their accomplishment. Somewhat restrained in her critique of the educational profession of the day and the application of education to national goals, she focused on the centrality of moral training, particularly the Plan of Salvation in the work of education. Or to put it the other way

around, the centrality of education in the work of the Plan of Salvation. Either way, education had to do with the wholistic, restorative development of the individual in the advancement of the kingdom of God on earth—a parental, pastoral (as well as professional) assignment for teachers.

The generic themes “Righteousness exalteth a nation,” “It’s character that finally counts,” and “Education is for

service and the practical duties of life" pervaded her message to society at large; but it was primarily to the young Adventist Church, its parents, pastors, and teachers, that she directed her inspired advice about training the young. For the students themselves she had much counsel on how they might profit from God's plan of education.

### *Essay as Overture*

The prophetic quality of Mrs. White's utterances on education is probably best seen in this 1872 premier production "Proper Education." It was here that she introduced the special perspectives that for the remainder of her writing ministry occupied her thoughts about schooling. In this piece cluster the cardinal concepts that constitute her contribution to early American educational discourse—counsels to a young nation and church. Here seems to reside the foundational philosophy which she elaborated, reiterated, and applied to evolving Adventist education over the next four decades. A cursory review of her subsequent counsels on education reveals that she strayed very little from the basic thrusts of 1872. It must be said in all fairness that the macrovision she then brought to education was so comprehensive that she probably needed the next forty-one years to define and clarify it.

### *Cosmic Dimension*

Ellen White, with many other voices of the time, called for educational reform. She expressed her critique of the status quo, but in addition did what true prophets of God have done from the dawn of time. She joined the national debate from heaven's point of view, enriching the dialogue with a cosmic dimension. This aspect of her contribution to the educational thought of the time illustrates an important aspect of the prophetic role. It does not operate in a vacuum. Ellen had to communicate with her world for God, against the cultural backdrop of her times, and within the societal sensitivi-

ties and issues on people's minds. All this was legitimate grist for her mill. It has always been so with the Lord's anointed through the ages.

### *A New Construct*

As with her prophetic forebears, Mrs. White gleaned the bits and pieces of her world from wherever they might prove true and useful. She applied contemporary illustration and every legitimate bridge of communication to reflect and interpret the vision of Christian education given her. These building blocks

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went into the distinctive edifice of thought she was erecting. The shallow criticism that recognizes a few borrowed or retouched bricks here or there, and promptly declares the whole piece purloined and therefore morally flawed, misses the mystery of the divine-human interface in the prophetic function. Thus prophets work with utter contemporaneity and relevancy of application. The indisputable fact remains that this faithful messenger took a wheelbarrow of bricks from around her, a generous giftload from heaven, and an armful of her own with which she built a brand new conceptual edifice. The result was a statement of educational mission and modality that yet stands as a marvel of transcendent educational philosophy, replete with universal considerations.

### *The Mystery of the Divine-Human Modality*

Unfortunate it is that several generations of Adventists have based their

model of modern inspiration on the false notion that this saint of God sat supinely by at Sunnyside in Australia or Elmshaven in California, waiting for the angel to dictate. Not so; she did her part—her homework. No matter how the vision for Christian education came to her (even the apostle Paul could not say for sure how he visited heaven, yet he knew he had been taken there), Ellen White knew that she had received some strong, more-than-human impressions—that she "saw" God's plan for something better in education. We have no evidence that she had some single supernatural encounter, such as a dream or vision, with respect to education.<sup>1</sup>

The plan apparently unfolded to her under the Spirit's steady tutelage over the thirty silent years, 1842-72. It awaited the issues and problems of a ripe time, perhaps for optimum impact. That prime time came in 1872 when she put her pen to paper to discuss formal education, laying out in thirty incisive pages her reaction to the educational abuses and fads of the day and offering her version of something better. As we will attempt to show later in this discussion, God did indeed provide her with sublime alternatives to the current conventional wisdom in education. The essay bears the insignia of divine illumination, in terms of the overarching educational principles it enunciates.

### *Sister Ellen's Sources*

Let us disabuse our minds then of a long-standing legend regarding Ellen White that says she received her heavenly instruction direct by supernatural dream/vision transmission ("how else can the extraordinary insights she conveyed be adequately explained?" goes the rationale). We now know that Ellen White was probably one of the best-read thought leaders of her day, and that out of the wealth of her reading and reflection she spoke and wrote, receiving meanwhile the Holy Spirit's special illumination that indited her

words with compelling unction and moral authority—the gift of prophecy at work in the modern church. Her frequent admonitions to students and workers—to read and study on their own and become the sharp instruments in the hand of God that they were intended to be—were obviously born out of her own experience. We have the witness of the collection in her personal library of more than eight hundred well-marked books that attest to the credibility of her counsel, not to speak of the numerous clippings and scrapbooks that helped propel her pen.

While it may be oral history from Battle Creek, or even “EGW folklore,” yet it is commonly known that Mrs. White requested the editorial staff of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* to pass on to her the no-longer-needed, recent, outdated papers and weeklies to which they subscribed in the office—publications which kept them abreast of the times as journalists and which, as her broad range of knowledge and writings attests, she voraciously absorbed. Our prophetess was quite well-educated. In the grandest tradition of her era, she was self-educated. When she asserted that wrestling with great matters of duty and destiny in the Word of God carried with it a Spirit-blessed, mind-stretching capability without rival, a special potential for making ordinary people brilliant beyond their kin, she probably had a firsthand knowledge of its application, even if too modest for personal reference.

### **Unfinished Business**

Two critical challenges, however, still confront us with respect to an optimum utilization of the writings of Mrs. White in Adventist culture and Christian education:

(1) *A working hermeneutic.* Foundational to her continuing validation as a credible prophet to this Advent people is the necessity for the church to develop a viable and generally accepted hermeneutic on her writings. This involves a sound and consistent system

of interpretation in the quest for meaning. For many this is at present considerably murky and uncertain. This makes advocacy positions built solely on Ellen White pronouncements incessantly controversial and divisive, polarizing deeply committed Christian brethren and sisters, and fracturing the unity of the family of God. It is therefore a matter of considerable significance, for it drives right to the heart of our identity as a special people, deserving our best time and attention.

In the context of hermeneutics, we may note that it was probably only a diplomatic opener for a witnessing encounter that prompted Philip to inquire of the Ethiopian, “How readest thou?” But it is a critical question for us to address today in the Adventist community of scholars before the most meaningful dialogue can take place regarding Ellen White. We need to determine whether the message under review is contemporary or eternal—

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whether the messenger was speaking to God’s people for a particular time and circumstance or whether all pronouncements apply to all times and circumstances. (And that, as I understand it, is fairly close to the very essence of hermeneutics.) This determination does not constitute a down-sizing of Ellen White’s authority and influence as an acknowledged prophet among us, or another subtle demythologization move against the founding mother of Adventist Christian education. Rather it is a responsible act of pastoral leadership to help our people understand what was timeless in her

writings in terms of transcendent principles in Christian education; what was worthy to be set unequivocally and permanently in the inspired diadem of our spiritual legacy as a people; and what was obviously beamed to a local time and circumstance, with all the constraints inherent in such temporary situations.

Since we are many centuries removed historically and culturally from the scene, scholars have the long perspective from which to form a Biblical hermeneutic. But we are familiarly and emotionally still very close to this modern prophetess, and that circumstance in itself makes it a delicate assignment for anyone to assess objectively her role in a wider historical frame of reference. Despite prospective perils to the courageous, however, the challenge remains. To postpone the project further is to place at risk a whole generation of mainstream Adventist youth who sincerely seek an appropriate and practical hermeneutic for the serious study of Ellen White.

The chief beneficiaries to such a clarification might be the modern, Christian, educational pioneers among us who desperately need a viable interpretive matrix, lest they slide into an increasing irrelevancy to the twentieth-century world and, through ultra-literalism, unintentionally shortchange a genuine elite of conscientious Adventist youth who trust them for reality guidance. Imperative to any such noble enterprise is a clear-headed notion as to what is central to the inspired mission and what is peripheral.

(2) *An in-depth analysis of Mrs. White’s educational counsels.* The urgent need also exists for our professional scholars and lay students of the prophetess to undertake a serious, systematic synthesis of her writings on education. The world of academe awaits an impressive introduction to Ellen White—a philosophical, pedagogical, and socio-psychological synthesis worthy of the claims we make for her and worthy of the substance and magnitude of her prophetic insights in education. This is

indicated, and long overdue, in order for modern educators to seriously assess her as one of the cardinal contributors to the American (and world) legacy of educational philosophy.

The philosophical synthesis of which we speak is almost identical to the theological task that earlier confronted the Biblical scholar, like systematizing and

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analyzing the writings of the Apostle Paul which—while often not formally attired and offered as straightforward theological propositions—yet contain within those pastoral letters of admonition rich theological insights for modern ministry. These have been distilled and systematized and now constitute the undisputed foundation of much theology. Similarly, to identify the conceptual pillars of Ellen White’s educational thought, and to organize the large residue of expression contained in her many letters, speeches, and essays generated over four decades of writing, constitutes an enormous scholarly challenge.

### *Graduate Yearning*

Especially grateful for such an accomplishment would be the undergrads in Adventist teacher training programs and graduate students in instructional theory and educational leadership in Adventist colleges and universities. These coming leaders in Adventist education need a towering

historical figure around whom they can unapologetically marshal their own emerging educational philosophy and theory of professional practice. They yearn for a commanding, guiding mentor from their own heritage, a thinker on a par with the classical giants of the profession routinely assigned in the survey of conventional wisdom in education. We have such a luminary in the person of Ellen White. But her educational writings stand in need of scholarly distillation and packaging, thus to be more conveniently accessed and seriously studied as prime resources that organize and guide Adventist educational mission.

### *More Than Memory Gems*

We cannot overstate the urgent need for this primary intellectual frame of reference in the Foundations of Education courses in professional programs in Adventist education—particularly at the undergraduate level where basic teacher preparation is undertaken. Too long have we presented Ellen White to these young college students from a devotional or subcultural, orthodoxical slant—and more often than not, taken the beguiling literary-appreciation trip. This instructional modality usually takes on the form of an adorative, superficial reciting and memorizing of the highly quotable literary gems in her writings. Inspiring as this exercise is, it often neglects the grand underlying and unifying themes that distinguish her comprehensive philosophical, psychological, and theological insights and her unique, substantive contribution to educational theory. Such classroom pursuit falls woefully short of sound pedagogical practice, and we need to remedy that.

### *Pervasive Themes, 1872*

Ellen White begins her epochal essay “Proper Education” with the centerpiece consideration, *the personhood of*

*the teacher*, a theme to which she returns repeatedly in this work and her subsequent writings. At the center of her educational paradigm is the teacher as model. Not merely as subject-matter specialist, nor able disciplinarian, nor even versatile, creative provocateur—although these virtues for acceptable performance in the teaching-learning arena are extolled. But soaring above all other considerations is this powerful, over-arching ideal: the influence of a noble, exemplary, Spirit-filled life—lived as parent, pastor, and priest at close range before impressionable children and youth.

For her the incalculable liberating power of love, sincerely and authentically shared, is the organizing principle of the school, freeing students to become all that they can be. Long before Marshall McLuhan popularized the slogan “The Medium Is the Message,” Ellen White had that straight. Moreover, she exalted the teaching profession to the level of ministry. The essay fairly pulsates with this brand of robust idealism. It is a leitmotif that reverberates even with stronger resonance throughout her writing career. The general news media these days and the professional literature decry the loss of idealism in the institutionalized school—value-teaching, modeling, and old-fashioned inspiration. Schools of education in some of the most prestigious universities in the land are driving now to restore this priceless commodity to teacher training and staff development. Faculty in-service seminars are stressing it with increasing fervor.

From 1872 onward, Ellen White reminded teachers that they are in the inspiration business as much as or more than in the information business. The modern education profession is awakening to the sober realization that a good deal of the precious golden oil has leaked out of its chalice. Teacher training programs everywhere are scrambling to recapture and enshrine this central, organizing principle of the profession. It is a pearl of great price to be

handled with reverence and care. The world is rediscovering what we have had for so long.

Growing out of the principle of the magnetic, irresistible classroom influence of a committed, caring teacher is a companion ideal regarding discipline. In this essay Ellen White uses this critical topic as a springboard for all related pedagogical/psychological insights and methods, for she recognized that punishment and discipline are poles apart. The former seeks to control through inflicted pain (to the recipient and vicariously to the schoolroom "grandstand" as a form of coercion and terrorization that can easily be taken over by the "enemy" in a moment of injured adult pride or insecure authority) while the latter is an earthly reenactment and demonstration of God's way of blending justice and mercy, longsuffering and control. Redemptive discipline, as opposed to punitive discipline, was a favorite theme with Ellen White. She underscored the lesson in this essay, and many times later, that discipline literally means making disciples. It is God's favorite methodology to use our mistakes and failings as springboards to self-understanding and self-conquest.

The family unit is under siege all over the world, and special efforts are being made by churches and municipal agencies to assist parents to a proper understanding of this crucial aspect of child-rearing and also of dealing with the adolescent. Since discipline and classroom control are demanding more and more of a teacher's time these days—as the ills of the world are being brought onto campus each day—teachers are being given special training in proactive discipline (treating children in terms of their need, not in terms of teachers' reactions). Ellen White elevated the whole issue above mere people-control to portray it as a marvelous opportunity to answer the most profound theological question of all time "What is God like?" Nothing surely says more about the character of God and His representatives on earth than

the way parents, teachers, and pastors deal with those who have broken the house rules. It is a bottom-line statement about Christianity at the deepest level. Ellen White was on the leading edge of psychological/managerial theory in the counsels she gave to parents and teachers almost a century and a quarter ago. The insights and ideals that she reveals in this first essay (and additionally in the one special chapter of the book *Education* devoted to the subject)<sup>2</sup> discloses how far ahead of the behavioral sciences she was in her day, and is still.

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At a time when the educational process was heavily teacher- and textbook-oriented—and servile obeisance to academic authorities was strongly established in the educational milieu—Mrs. White extolled the virtues of vigorous, independent thought and encouraged students to challenge all presuppositions and assertions, especially those that hinted at skepticism of God's creatorship and sovereignty. Her concept of a school did not admit mass-production methods. It was a place where young, active minds could stretch and be stretched and begin the great conversation even in the little one-room school. Modern education is still straining to achieve that worthy ideal, and so are we in our school system; but we got our marching orders on it long before it became a buzzword in the profession.

Freedom was a cherished topic with Ellen White, and freedom to think and freedom to act were so central to the Great Controversy issue that she saw

this as one of the inalienable rights of children and youth. Thus they could better understand how God reverences this special freedom that He has extended to His creative beings. Mrs. White realized the uniqueness of the individual and the special skill that Christian teachers should possess in calling it forth and encouraging its development. So the whole notion of personal accountability before God—in terms of one's talents and opportunities—was a theme that Ellen White expected the educational process to reinforce and idealize. Much of the literature of today speaks to this issue.

In speaking of nurturing the gifted student, Ellen White had a special insight. Gifted students, under the doctrine of noblesse oblige, would best develop their talents by tutoring and coaching younger students. She saw the classroom as a laboratory for the congregational life in the family of God so that children, at their earliest, most impressionable age, could begin to experience caring concern for other members in God's family. Students did not have to go off campus to learn how to do "missionary work." The classroom was a place that utilized every opportunity for learning compassionate service. In this same connection, the superiority of cooperation over competition was highlighted; and the alien concept "Who is the greatest?" was not to find root in the seedbed of Christian education. The omnipresent question was to be, "How can I best serve?"

The sociologists of the last three decades have studied the campus and classroom scenes, especially the subcultural heroes and heroines, the prevailing mores, and social pecking orders. As a result, the concerted counsel that comes from them is to break schools down into even smaller units and endeavor to reconstruct the family spirit and atmosphere as much as possible. Likewise, let the older students mentor and parent the younger ones. It helps in their development, and it cultures a more benevolent and humane climate in which young lives can develop natu-

rally. Ellen White did not use the sociological nomenclature that is elaborated in volumes of scholastic tomes, but that scenario was clearly in her mind when she described the learning environment of an ideal Christian school.

Balance of the physical, mental, and spiritual activities was an absolute imperative in the Ellen White model, and recognition that education is more than a "head trip." The heart and hand were to be equally involved, and where possible the balancing digressions from mental exertion were to be significant activity that was truly recreative and regenerative. To meet the current demand for practical application of book knowledge to answer part of the developmental needs of children and youth, Ellen White would posit gainful employment—creative, self-fulfilling labor. She would see it as a noble variation from strenuous mental effort. In fact, at a time when white-collar elitism was at floodtide, she exalted useful labor and practical engagement to a new level of importance in the educative process.

Among the major themes that preoccupied her thought and writing was that of Christian character development—that the school on earth is a preparation for the school of the hereafter. Distinct from extant educational philosophy is the idea that earthly study and growth move on to eternity and that, through the grace of God, building character fit for admission to eternity is the big business of life. It is a cooperative effort between home, school, and student. This special dimension of faith-nurture is stressed throughout the Ellen White writings which indicate that teaching and learning should take place in the context of a special sensitivity to the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Accordingly Ellen White lifted up the Bible as a great source of spiritual enlightenment that should illuminate all subject matter. Conversely, the study of subject matter should illustrate Biblical principles. This integration of faith and learning was to be the ligature of Christian education and the special expertise of a Christian teacher.

There is a constant reminder in the professional literature today that the wholeness of learning and life has been badly fractured, and that there is no unifying ultimate reality that gives them structure and meaning. Ellen White saw also, a long time ago, that learning does not float free. It has to be anchored in something in order to have relevance now and in the future, and she pointed to God as answer to that dilemma.

### *From Casual to Casualty*

Our survival as a people of educational destiny rides perpetually on a correct understanding of "Proper Education." About this we can never allow ourselves to become casual. The Seventh-day Adventist school system does not derive its ideology and mission statement from Comenius, Pestalozzi, Horace Mann, or John Dewey. We declare with grateful, God-honoring, justifiable pride that we get it from Ellen White, a relatively unknown but prodigious author of the nineteenth century, our inspired prophetess. A dénouement yet to come in its fullness is the general recognition of Mrs. White as a profound educational theorist who ranged with consummate skill across the whole landscape of educational endeavor: education in the home, the school, the congregation, and the social order at large—whose revealed thought about the proper training of the young has spawned, in less than one hundred twenty years, the world's largest Protestant parochial school system.

### *Reason to Believe*

Our special legacy of this inspired vision in education has stood well the test of time, and we as a people have good cause, unapologetically, to stay with it. It will see us through to the school above.

## *Selected Readings*

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arthur L. White, *The Progressive Years, 1872-1876*, 6 vols. (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1986) II: 372-84.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942) 287-97.