



ALL
Thy Children
Shall Be
Taught
of the
Lord...

BY G. H. BAKERS

**“And all thy children
shall be taught of the
Lord; and great shall be
the peace of thy
children”
(Isaiah 54:13).**

This verse announces that Christian education for all our children is a divine mandate. As such, it constitutes a mission statement of enormous import to God, and cannot be ignored, except at horrendous generational loss. Any church that cannot save its own young people has little to say about saving the world.

Is this ideal too utopian, or did the Lord really intend such universal religious training for the young? I believe that He is still yearning to supply divinely inspired creativity to our leaders to make this ideal a reality in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, for us, this is still unfinished business.

The Faith Crisis

God wants to present one grand, final spectacle to the world as He displays the superiority of His way. I believe that the Christian training of our youth will form an integral part of His plan. Our faith crisis lies in deciding whether Christian education will be merely a religio-commercial enterprise open only to those who can afford it (ecclesiastical elitism!), or whether it is a God-given spiritual birthright that should be accessible to all our children during their formative years. The answer seems self-evident: It is an imperative, not merely an option.

We Still Believe: First Things First

Indeed, providing for the spiritual nurture of our children through Christian education is a *fundamental belief of Adventism*, a life-style doctrine that

has played a central role in the history and ethos of our movement. We still believe that the gospel commission must begin at the family circle and then proceed to “Jerusalem, . . . Judea, . . . and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

Could it be, with all our “thinking big” and dreaming of conquering the world for Christ, that we are in danger of inverting God’s priorities? Are we neglecting the little circle around our kitchen tables and in our own congregations—one of the most critical unreached people groups on our horizon? We need to go back to the basics. Evangelism begins at home,

then in the congregational family and in the little Christian school next door. Think what our Global Mission statistics would look like if we just saved our own youth. Talk about “projections”; that chart quickly becomes exponential and boggles the imagination.

God’s Plan

One doesn’t have to search deeply in Adventist history to see that from the very beginning of our movement, Christian education has been a central commitment.

We were hardly dry behind the ears as a new religion when we set about to translate the doctrine of Christian education into action, establishing schools along with churches, and thereby launching one of the most ambitious and distinctive worldwide religious education systems of modern times. How God has blessed! For our pioneers, Christian education for the church’s children and youth was indisputably part of the plan of God. The world has marveled ever since that such a small church could accomplish so much in the field of education. The story behind that headline is the deeply held belief that our chil-

dren should sit at the feet of God-fearing teachers, and through Bible-based study and inspiring association acquire a God-centered life view and sense of mission.

Christian Education—A “Fundamental Belief” of Adventism?

For Adventist moms and dads—and co-sponsoring aunts and uncles and grandparents the world over—Christian education has ever been deemed indispensably precious and worthy of the most strenuous sacrifice by the entire family, at whatever cost. Indeed, Christian education has been considered so fundamental at the grass-roots level in Adventism that it is a life-style doctrine of our people. It’s what philosophers and psychologists refer to as a “control belief.” No, you won’t find it as No. 28 in the recent landmark volume delineating the cardinal beliefs of our church, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe. . . a Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Review & Herald, 1988), although I wish it were—it certainly qualifies. (Who knows—maybe in the next revision?) Not all “doctrines” are exclusively theological. The editors of this apology for the faith acknowledged this by devoting a whole section to *the distinctives of the Adventist life-style*—an important aspect of our church’s “fundamental” beliefs.

Take healthful living, for instance: It received six pages in our doctrines book. Tucked away in that section, there is one lone line for Christian education. No one would debate, I’m sure, the centrality of our health emphasis to Adventist life-style. Nor would they complain about the extensive space devoted to modesty, home and family life, tithing, or stewardship. Indeed, these are fundamental doctrines of Adventism. *But so is the Christian*

education of our children!

What Belongs in “Historic Adventism”

Is it extravagant to classify this commitment to our children as part of “historic Adventism” (a popular buzzword in our church nowadays)? I think not. It is enshrined in the priorities of our people. The record on that is unassailable. Kudos go to the Adventist Theological Seminary, which now promotes Christian education in the curriculum for the training of our clergy. But it’s time to get back to including Christian education as an Adventist imperative in the instruction

of all new church members as well. In terms of genuine “family-life education,” this is fundamental!

Camp Meeting Encounters

I wish I had a transcript of all the earnest conversations I’ve had through the years with deeply concerned Christian parents, usually occurring after education rallies at camp meetings or special Education Day church services. These folk are plugged into a reality that deserves to be shared by other Adventist parents. The themes have always been rather constant, but lately the intensity has increased. They tell me:

“So many public schools are becoming violent, dangerous places—no

longer a safe haven for our child. I can’t tell you how thankful we are for the safe atmosphere at our Adventist school!”

We do have behavior problems at Adventist schools (We’re not in heaven yet!)—but most are still relatively innocuous, like roughhousing, running and making noise in the hallways, mouthing off in class, or testing the faculty will on the dress code. These are the disciplinary concerns of the teachers who keep a watchful, parental eye over the youth in their charge. Standard operating procedure in Adventist schools does not yet include the daily “shake-down” or locker inspection for guns and knives, and a youngster can still go to the rest room without fear of being mugged or sexually harassed. Adventist teachers aren’t being attacked for giving homework or asserting classroom control; nor are police regularly assigned to patrol the halls. . . .

Campus Culture

“We’re so concerned about the slouchy “low life” and libidinous moral climate of the secular school that our child attends. Sodom II media culture, with its own set of group-enforced values, exalts fallen peer heroes and heroines who have become far more influential with our child than we are. This is undermining and demolishing everything true and noble we’ve tried to instill in our home. Flippancy and contempt for authority seem to be the order of the day. Conservative Christian kids in a secular school are put under terrific peer pressure to conform. It is taking its toll on our child, Pastor, and it’s tearing us apart!”

I try to explain to these dear parents about the pervasive, devastating impact of “the hidden curriculum” in a secular school—what’s really being

taught by the campus culture—and encourage them to make a covenant with God by sacrifice and stepping out in faith to put their children where God wants them. I urge them to take full advantage of the modern “cities of refuge,” which the Lord in His goodness has provided for our children and youth. Our youngsters don’t belong in environments that wear down their religious devotion and put them at spiritual risk.

I also remind these parents that our schools are the Lord’s gift to struggling moms and dads, most of whom gladly welcome the help of child-rearing partners—consecrated Christian teachers.

“Don’t Just Tell Me; Let Me See”

Benign protective custody, consistent spiritual modeling, redemptive discipline, and steady mature counsels to youth rarely appear in school catalogues, but they constitute the very essence of the Christian school’s curriculum. Don’t ever underestimate the impact of a teacher! These youngsters are hero-worshippers by nature, and the influence of godly teachers on their emerging characters is incalculable.

“Cities of Refuge” for Our Youth

Ellen White understood well the reason for the power of Christian education—the supernatural energies of Heaven. Especially cogent are her references to our schools being set up by the Lord to serve as barriers against the wide-spreading corruption of the world. If ever there were a time when this is true, and *needed*, it is now!

I well remember one educational rally in particular; it almost sent me home to put an ice pack on my head, so confrontive and penetrating was one earnest father. He came right up, didn’t waste any time on the niceties

of an introduction, pointed his finger at me, and demanded, “Preacher, I got here too late for your meeting, but I have two questions to ask you: Why should I send my girl to your school? What kind of a place is it, anyway?”

The first concern I think I handled adequately—at least, my answer seemed to satisfy him. But that second question sent me reeling into introspection: Should I answer him in the “is” (what’s really going on there), or the “ought” (what I *hoped* was happening there—what *should* be)? We got through the encounter genially, I think, but I have since reflected soberly about those two questions, hop-

ing that the next time I get cornered I’ll be better prepared for the inquisition.

Some of the answers to the “what kind of a place?” query came from parents who had talked with me, giving their own testimony about our school (the “is” as they experienced it, and Christian education in general), and some grew out of my own meditations on the “ought”—what God desires to have happen to young people on our campuses. Some were very explicit and personal answers; others were quite generic. Both kinds inspired me to paint the following picture with a few broad brush

strokes, entitled:

“A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE. . .”

- *Youth are immersed in the Word of God, and are taught the real gospel.* They get a true picture of the character of God as a loving heavenly Father, come to understand the plan of salvation and to personally decide to accept God’s invitation.

- *Young people are privileged to get a cosmic, eternal worldview.* Such a worldview is anchored in Ultimate Reality (the best point of reference—where all of life is headed).

- *The principle of a healthy, balanced life is being modelled and taught* throughout the whole school program—work, worship, study, and play come together harmoniously. This contributes immeasurably to molding adult life-styles.

- *Character development and old-fashioned values are unapologetically pursued*, with emphasis on the personhood of the student. This is in addition to high-quality, relevant formal studies.

- *Young people get “inspired” and accomplish great things for God and humanity*—to bless the world and leave it a better place.

Inspiration and information go hand-in-hand in Christian education as young people see and embrace high ideals.

- *Excellence in all its forms is cherished and affirmed.* In our schools, the ennobling, finer things of life are still extolled before our children. In an age when the entertainment industry has so transmogrified the arts, it’s critical that they be re-enshrined to nourish the human soul.

- *Work is still a good word.* Youth need to learn how to work and to find personal satisfaction and fulfillment in a job well done. In an Adventist school, this is an important part of the curriculum.

- *Respect for law and order matters*, and discipline is maintained in kindness and Christian love. In a soci-

ety that has forgotten that freedom and responsibility go together, this brand of reality education is paramount.

- *Cooperation is emphasized over competition*; selflessness and service are idealized. "Getting ahead in life" takes on a whole new meaning in this context, as does the word *compassion*. Two altogether opposite spiritual kingdoms are represented here, and schools can help our youth to clearly understand this.

- *Small is beautiful*. No more do we hear caricatures of the little one- or two-room school as a primitive, low-quality throwback to 19th-century pioneering days. Large, bureaucratic teaching factories are restructuring their programs, even remodelling their aging school plants, to achieve a nurturing family atmosphere. Some of the most exclusive educational operations in America are boasting of their "educational intimacy." Just think, Adventists have this atmosphere ready-made in our little one-room and two-room school-houses, which constitute approximately 80 percent of our elementary schools in North America! And the small school no longer need feel isolated, since it can contact worldwide resources through electronic means such as CompuServe and the Internet.

- *There is a climate of excellence*. Educational excellence is rather ephemeral, being comprised of a number of critical, interactive components. Much of what is "learned" in school is too global and elusive to be captured by pencil and paper tests. There is far more to the science of true education (after acquisition of the basic reading, writing, and counting skills, of course) than demonstrating mastery of unrelated bits of information. Many curriculum authorities now recognize that this kind of knowledge is quickly outdated, and are searching for ways to discover educa-

tion's "universals" and to integrate them in meaningful ways. Standardized test scores also fail to assess sociological considerations like school climate, which includes excitement about learning, and consistent support for high academic achievement by everyone involved in the school—parents, teachers, and students.

However, if national test results have any comparative reliability, it can be safely reported that SDA schools have consistently scored above average, and deserve to be categorized as "quality

schools."

- *Independent thinking is prized*. Youth are encouraged and taught how to think for themselves, guided by biblical principles. This means combining critical thinking and moral decision making. (Now there's a brand of "excellence" unknown to secular education!) The goal of an educated mind is to be clear-headed and rational. But in a Christian school, youth come to understand that reason always takes its place under divine revelation, wherever the Word of God has spoken.

- *Science and religion are in harmony*, and the Genesis account of origins is not under constant attack in the classroom or laboratory. It's a place

where nature is studied as a reflection of God at work, where a human being is not just another animal form, but a very special being, made in the image of God and headed for an eternal reunion with his or her Maker. In our present era of technical pre-eminence, this is a sensitive, influential area, because young people have learned to revere anything labeled "scientific."

- *Young adults are more likely to find a Christian life companion*. We comfortably acknowledge that God is just as busy in that department as He is in the classroom. Schools thus form the basis for training the next generation of Christian families.

- *Young Christians get a glimpse of God's special purpose for their lives and God's agenda for them*. (As one parent put it: "Maybe Hermie won't graduate with honors, but if he discovers his special spiritual gift and finds his personal mission in life in extending God's kingdom on earth, we figure the honors that are really important the Lord will confer in His own time and manner. We can't think of a better environment for this to take place than at our academy. Just think, the whole place is organized around that objective!")

- *Committed Christian youth of other faiths are welcome to attend*. This not only encourages religious tolerance, but also helps teach our own young people to deal with other Christians every day at close range. It has proved to be an excellent way to motivate youth to witness to their peers and escape the "hot-house Christian" syndrome that besets many religious enclaves. We are just beginning to see the results of this type of evangelism in our church, where whole families have come over to Adventism because of the steady influence of one little church school that refused to keep its light under a bushel.

- *Where faculty as well as students are being nurtured*. A school is a peo-

ple place, where teachers are the prime movers, the real “change agents.” All else is scaffolding and props. Many young people, in later years, declare that the entire course of their lives has been dramatically changed as a result of one teacher’s influence.

This is the reason that our church conducts regular staff development retreats and conventions for its teacher corps, putting much emphasis on mission and the crucial role of the teacher. These meetings are times of personal and group reflection and rededication, a determined effort by educators and administrators to ensure that our schools will remain on-track. The new commission for teachers affirms what they truly are: youth evangelists in the highest sense.

In Conclusion

I recall one pair of parents who spoke to me after an education rally. They told me the following about Christian education:

“We became alarmed when we discovered what’s in so many of these secular textbooks today (and what’s being left out!); what values are being lionized and how they’re being used in many public school classrooms to put down church and religion and to isolate and embarrass students who have religious convictions. It’s obvious that they’re out to destroy all moral absolutes. A godless, secular, relativistic, values-free education for our son is certainly not something we want to have to explain to the good Lord in the judgment. For us, it wasn’t a question as to whether we could afford a Christian education for Charlie; when we considered

what was at stake, we quickly concluded that we couldn’t afford not to!”

It’s after such encounters with our rank and file parents around the world that I depart pensive, grateful, and awed—feeling fortunate to have spent most of my life in such a significant, God-ordained work.

I’m also aware that I have been privileged to learn again, from parents, what Christian education is all about—from those who actually own it, who are experiencing it where young lives are being impacted and changed. After all, isn’t that the final measure of a school—what’s happen-

ing to people there?

I am also impressed at how much this church owes to Christian education. It is indeed a unique expression of God’s plan for the restoration of the human race. Christian education is right at the heart of the gospel commission—teaching the ways of God to humanity.

And I am impressed again at the commitment of our corporate church to preserving education as part of our sacred mission. (Some conferences and unions are allocating large portions of their annual operating budget to ensure this blessing for our Christian families and our young people!) This is no coincidence. It is evangelism of the highest sort. Again, any church that cannot save its own young people can never hope to save the world.

Somehow, we must commit ourselves, with God’s blessing, to seeing that *every Adventist child or youth is in one of our schools*. We cannot be content with only some of our young people receiving the benefits of this special blessing! It is our divine mandate to ensure that ALL our children may be taught of the Lord. ☞

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