

Adventist Education and the Apocalyptic

Part I

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

This article is adapted from the first part of the keynote presentation for the North American Division's Teachers' Convention held in Nashville, Tennessee, on August 6, 2006. The second part will be published in the next issue of the JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION.

Introduction

Whether we like it or not, whether we recognize it or not, Adventist education in the North American Division faces a crisis. Decade after decade, the percentage of Adventist young people in the denomination's schools has been decreasing. In 1945, the ratio of students in Adventist schools to church membership worldwide was 25 per 100. By 2000 it was 9 per 100, with an increasing number coming from non-Adventist homes.¹

Adventist parents are asking why they should send their children to Adventist schools. And more and more pastors and churches are questioning the importance of giving the largest portion of their local budget to Adventist schooling.

Those are important and valid queries. The answers are equally important. Are Adventist schools all that important? Should we sacrifice to keep them? If so, why? Such questions lie at the foundation of my remarks this evening.

Nobody seemed to want it! Nobody seemed to want Adventist education! The early 1850s had seen attempts at Adventist schooling in Buck's Bridge, New York; and Battle Creek, Michigan. But both had failed dismally. Regarding the Battle Creek experiment, James White penned in the *Review and Herald* in 1861 that "we have had a thorough trial of a school at Battle Creek, under most favorable circumstances, and have given it up, as it failed to meet the expectations of those interested."²

The reason for the lack of interest isn't all that difficult to ascertain. W. H. Ball expressed it nicely in 1862 in a letter to James White: "Is it right and consistent," he wrote, "for us who believe with all our hearts in the immediate coming of the Lord, to seek to give our children an education?"³

There it is. Even 18 years after the 1844 Millerite disappointment, many Adventists believed that sending children to school demonstrated a lack of faith in the soon coming of Jesus. After all, sending children to school implied that they would grow up to use that education. In the eyes of many, therefore, the establishment of Adventist schools was a sign of heresy or apostasy, an act signifying that the Lord delayeth His coming.



Vision

And formal education wasn't the only target for that line of thinking. Back in September 1845, James White publicly condemned an Adventist couple who had announced their marriage. To James, they had "denied their faith" in the Second Advent. Marriage, he wrote, was "a wile of the Devil. The firm brethren in Maine who are waiting for Christ to come have no fellowship with such a move."⁴ That view, he later claimed, was held by "most of our brethren," since "such a step seemed to contemplate years of life in this world."⁵

Such was the early Adventist way of looking at things.

But less than a year after publicly condemning new marriages, James united himself in holy wedlock to young Ellen Gould Harmon in August 1846. Why? Because, explained the new groom, his beloved had no one to accompany and protect her as she traveled to present the message that God had given her.⁶ In short, marriage for the

Whites had been a necessary means to the end of spreading the Adventist message. Their marriage had become crucial for the furtherance of Adventist mission. By uniting in marriage, the Whites took the first step toward the institutionalization of Adventism. If the end was not to come as early as they first expected, they had to take adequate steps to prepare themselves for service in the interim. In this case, marriage was the means, and Adventist mission was the end.

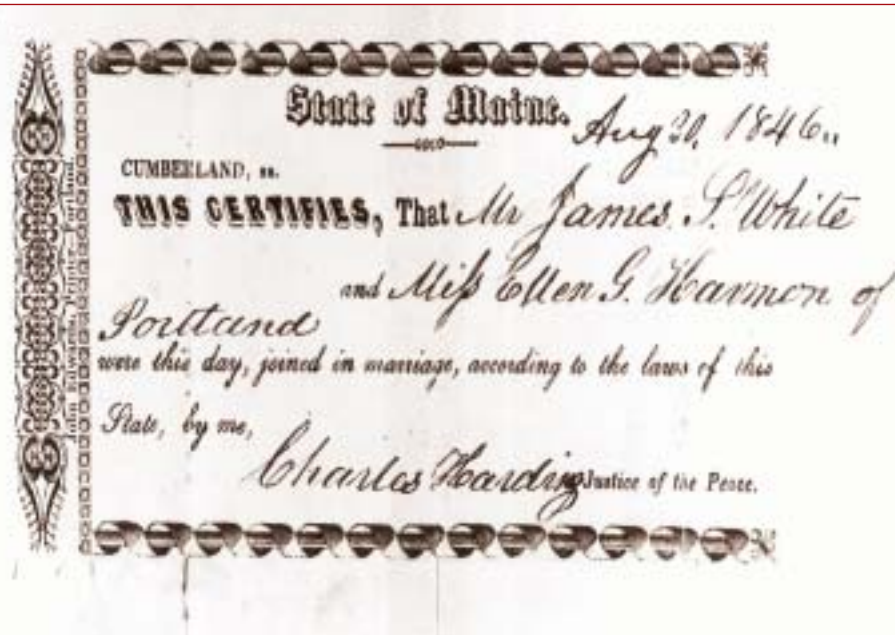
That's clear enough, you may be thinking. So far, so good.

But, I need to point out, the Sabbatarian Adventists' view of mission in the late 1840s and early 1850s was dismal at best. They still believed that the door of probation had been shut in 1844 and that their only task was to encourage other ex-Millerites and to point out newly discovered Bible truth to that limited population.

The apocalyptic vision not only transformed an anti-mission people into a mission-oriented movement, but it also transformed an anti-educational people into a movement deeply committed to education.



William Miller



Marriage license for James White and Ellen Harmon, 1846

How [did] this profoundly short-sighted handful of people . . . in the next century and a half develop the most far-flung unified mission outreach program and the most extensive unified educational system in the history of Protestantism? Those questions take us to the Book of Revelation and the apocalyptic vision.

To put it bluntly, the earliest Sabbatarian Adventists were not only anti-educational, they were also anti-mission. THEY LACKED VISION.

From that perspective, we need to ask how this profoundly shortsighted handful of people would in the next century and a half develop the most far-flung unified mission outreach program and the most extensive unified educational system in the history of Protestantism. Those questions take us to the Book of Revelation and the apocalyptic vision.

1. The Apocalyptic Imperative

Revelation 10 is an especially important text in our study. The events of that chapter take place between the sixth (9:14) and seventh trumpets (11:15). Since the seventh trumpet sounds at the Second Advent (11:15-17), Revelation 10 reflects upon events that precede the eschaton (10:7).

The focal point of Revelation 10 is a little book that would be opened near the end of time (10:2, 8). The prophet was commanded to take the little book that had been opened (10:8). "Take it, and eat it up;" he was told. "And it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey" (10:9, KJV).⁷

"And," he responded, "I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up;

and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter" (10:10).

The important point to note is that there is only one book in the Old Testament that claims that it would be sealed or shut up until the end of time. "But thou, O Daniel," we read in Daniel 12:4, "shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased" (cf. vs. 9).

Daniel even specifies which part of his book would be sealed up until the end of time. Chapter 8 sets forth four prophetic symbols (vss. 3, 5, 9, 14) and then, after explaining that the prophecy will extend to the time of the end, explains three of them (vss. 20, 21, 23-25). Then in verse 26, Daniel is told that the "vision of the evenings and the mornings" is true but that Daniel needed to "seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence" in the future (RSV).⁸ Verse 26 obviously refers back to Daniel 8:14, which was the only prophetic symbol not explained in the chapter. That verse reads "For two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings" (RSV); "then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

In summary, picking up on Daniel's proclamation that part of his prophecy (specifically the vision of the 2300 days) would be sealed up until the end of time,

the Book of Revelation tells us that when the sealed little book would be opened in the period before the Second Advent, it would be sweet in the mouth but bitter in the belly.

That brief overview takes us to world history; especially the French Revolution of the 1790s. The Western world was astounded by the brutality and anti-Christian aspects of that event. Many concluded that the unprecedented social/political/religious upheaval was the beginning of the end of the world. As a result, many scholars on both sides of the Atlantic were driven to the Bible's prophetic books. In particular, the apocalyptic portions of Daniel were studied as never before as the eyes of many ran "to and fro" through the pages of Daniel and "knowledge" of his prophecies was "increased" (Daniel 12:4).

The period from the mid-1790s through the 1840s saw an unprecedented explosion of books related to biblical prophecy and events related to the Second Advent and the millennium.⁹

Daniel 12:4 was being fulfilled. And in the process, many scholars sought to unlock Daniel's time prophecies. Scores of writers from a wide variety of backgrounds concluded that the 2300 days of Daniel would be fulfilled sometime between 1843 and 1847. Their point of difference was not the time of the fulfillment but the event to take place at that time.¹⁰ William Miller was in good company.

Believing that the sanctuary was the Earth and that its cleansing would be by fire, Miller had concluded from Daniel 8:14 that Christ would come about the year 1843. His heart was filled with boundless joy at the prospect. And in an article in 1841, he set forth a time line proclaiming that the little book of Revelation 10 had been opened and the end was near.¹¹ The unlocking of Daniel's prophecies was truly sweet in the mouth.

But here is an astounding fact. I am afraid poor old Miller read Bible prophecy the same way most of us do. He got excited about the parts he understood and skipped over the rest. He had no doubt that the opening of the prophecies of the little book

had been as sweet as honey, but he seemed to have neglected the emphasis that the end result would be bitterness in the belly (Revelation 10:10). And bitter it was. Millerite Adventism was shattered by the October 1844 disappointment. There was weeping and bitterness on every hand in its wake.

The point that must be made at this juncture is that we serve a God who knows the end from the beginning.

- He knew about the sealing of the 2300-day prophecy.
- He knew about its unsealing at the end of time.
- He knew the sweetness of the anticipation.
- And He knew the bitterness of the disappointment.

But He knew something more. The most important verse in Revelation 10 is number 11: After the bitter experience "he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before [or 'to'] many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings."

In other words, out of the shattered remnants of disappointed Millerism would come a worldwide mission. That thought brings us to an ex-Millerite by the name of Joseph Bates.¹² By 1846, he and others had reinterpreted Daniel 8:14 in terms of the cleansing of the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary by the blood of Jesus. Bates was also deeply into the Book of Revelation in his desire to unlock an understanding of what message must be preached to "many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings" between the bitter disappointment and the Second Advent.

That quest took Bates to Revelation 11, especially verse 19, where he read that "the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament." It was not lost on Bates that verse 19 sets forth a second apartment vision of the heavenly sanctuary. Up to that point in the Apocalypse, the action had been in the first apartment. But from 11:19

Early Millerite visual aid: "A Chronological Chart of the Visions of Daniel & John."



Both the birth and the development of Seventh-day Adventist education were stimulated by the explosive fuel of apocalyptic mission.

Out of the shattered remnants of disappointed Millerism would come a world-wide mission.



Joseph Bates

on, it shifts to the second. That shift lined up with Bates' new understanding of what happened in Daniel 8:14.

But more important, Bates knew what was in the ark of Revelation 11:19. And the contents, he soon discovered, became the climax of Revelation 12, which traces the history of the church from the birth of the Christ child up to the end of time, when the dragon becomes angry with the woman and goes off "to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God" (vs. 17). The obvious conclusion from that verse, Bates quickly saw, is that God would have an end-time people who keep His commandments, and that the keeping of those commandments would be a major point of conflict at the end of time according to Bible prophecy.

It didn't take Bates long to see that Revelation 12:17 was the key to unlock the rest of the Apocalypse, with chapter 13 featuring the last-day dragon power, chapter 14 highlighting the last-day woman or church, and the balance of the book outlining the great controversy conflict that would culminate in the heavenly kingdom.

Bates was particularly attracted to the three messages of the angels of Revelation 14. Those messages, he noted, would be the last given before Christ came in the clouds of heaven (vss. 14-20).

In verse 6, he read about "another angel" who would "fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people." That phrase should sound familiar. We saw it in Revelation 10:11, where the disappointed ones were to preach again to all the world. Here in Revelation 14, Bates concluded, is the identity of that prophetic message. The mission commission of Revelation 14:6 is an echo of 10:11. But in Revelation 14, the description of what must be preached to all the world is spelled out.

Bates saw another echo in Revelation 14:12, which proclaims "here is the patience of the saints:

here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus." In line with Revelation 12:17, Bates noted that keeping God's commandments would be an issue just before Christ returned. And he was a bit more than excited when he read verse 7, which highlights one of those commandments in particular: "Worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." Bates easily recognized that that passage referred directly to the Sabbath commandment of the Decalogue. Bates now had the answer to what message must be preached to all the earth after the bitter disappointment (Revelation 10:10, 11), the message that needed to be preached to every nation before the coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven (14:6-20). He soon shared his prophetic understanding with James and Ellen White. From their collaboration would eventually come the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The point that must be made at this juncture is 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. I would suggest that the importance of Daniel 8:14 is not so much related to personal salvation as it is an anchor point in missiological history.

It is Adventism's understanding of being a prophetic people that led generations of its young people to give their lives in obscure mission fields and that led older church members to sacrifice not only their children but also their financial means to fulfill the prophetic imperative.

It is that vision that has made Adventism a dynamic, worldwide movement. When that vision is lost, Adventism will become merely another somewhat 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 as they enter the 21st century.*

2. The Apocalyptic Imperative and Adventist Education

The apocalyptic vision not only transformed an anti-mission people into a mission-oriented movement, but it also transformed an anti-educational people into a movement deeply committed to education. Those transformations took time, but it is no

accident that the Seventh-day Adventists sent their first overseas missionary and founded their first college the same year (1874). With their new consciousness of worldwide mission responsibility, the denomination's leaders felt the need for educated talent to take its message to the various language groups of the world. It not only needed preachers but also editors, writers, and others who could lead out in spreading the message of Revelation 14.¹³

It cannot be overly emphasized that it was the needs of apocalyptic mission to every nation and people and tongue that fueled the rise of Adventist education in the early 1870s. That would also be true of the virtual explosion in Adventist education in the 1890s. The statistics are informative. The denomination in 1880 had three schools. That number had increased to 20 in 1890. But by the year 1900, it had 246. And the growth didn't stop. By 1910, there were 680 Adventist schools throughout the world, and 2,178 in 1930.¹⁴

What is of interest is that the growth in Adventist mission shows exactly the same growth curve as that for education. The year 1880 found eight missions outside of North

America with five evangelistic workers. Ten years later, there were still eight missions with some 56 workers. But by 1900, the number of missions had risen to 42 and the number of evangelistic mission workers to 481. Once again, we are looking at a growth curve that goes nearly straight up beginning in the 1890s. The year 1930 found the denomination with 270 missions being operated by 8,479 evangelistic workers outside of North America.¹⁵

Both the birth and the development of Seventh-day Adventist education were stimulated by the explosive fuel of apocalyptic mission. That mission consciousness in higher education in the early 20th century sponsored such names as Southern Missionary College, Emmanuel Missionary College, and the College of Medical Evangelists. The function of Adventist higher education was to self-consciously educate servants of Christ to witness to God's last-day truth whether they were employed by the church or worked for some other entity. And what was important in North America was of importance for the rest of the world. Thus Adventist secondary schools and colleges were developed around the world to train workers who could help sound the apocalyptic message of Revelation 14.

We need to recognize that the health of Adventist education was directly tied to a self-conscious realization of apocalyptic mission. And that wasn't true only for the secondary and tertiary levels. Adventist elementary education finds its genesis in the mission experience of the 1890s. During Ellen White's Australian years, she came across the fact that school attendance "down under" was required for all children. As a result, she wrote to her son in May 1897, noting that "in this country parents are compelled to send their children to school. Therefore in localities where there is a church, schools should be established, if there are no more than six children to attend."¹⁶

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It is no accident that the Seventh-day Adventists sent their first overseas missionary (J.N. Andrews, depicted above with his children in a statue at Andrews University) and founded their first college the same year (1874).



James and Ellen White



Built in 1924, Lynn Wood Hall was for many years the administration building for Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University) in Collegedale, Tennessee; it now serves as a heritage museum.

If it was important for older students to be prepared to spread Adventism's apocalyptic vision to the ends of the earth, it was equally important that elementary-age children be instructed in that vision from their earliest years in school.

That counsel struck a responsive chord around the Adventist world. Between 1895 and 1900, the number of Adventist elementary schools zipped up from 18 to 220. If it

was important for older students to be prepared to spread Adventism's apocalyptic vision to the ends of the earth, it was equally important that elementary-age children be instructed in that vision from their earliest years in school. Adventist parents and churches were willing to sacrifice to establish an educational system that made a genuine difference in the world and in the church.

In short, Adventist education was born in the matrix of a vision of apocalyptic mission, and it has been healthiest when the meaning of the Adventist message and mission is at the forefront of its consciousness. However, when those facts are lost sight of or downplayed, it is not surprising to find increasing numbers of Adventist parents concluding that sending their children to the local Baptist school or the community Christian school is a valid option. And so it is. 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

This article forms the first part of a presentation that will be concluded in the next issue of the JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION. Thus far, we have examined the apocalyptic imperative that inspired the rise of Adventism and the all-important relationship between that imperative and the rise and continuing health of Adventist education.

In the final article, we will note that the apocalyptic vision is not all that is needed to keep Adventist education healthy, examine the ministry of teaching, and explore important issues that teachers need to keep in mind as we move into the future. ✍



George R. Knight served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for 40 years as a pastor, elementary and secondary teacher, school administrator, and Professor of the Philosophy of Education and Adventist History at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He is the author of 30 books, and writes from Rogue River, Oregon.

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6. James and Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, pp. 126, 228.
7. All Bible quotes in this article are taken from the King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.
8. Bible texts credited to RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
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