

## **To Be or Not to Be: Adventist Early Childhood Education**

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Without exception, every time I speak within an Adventist setting for the worship hour, vespers, seminar or classroom, the same question arises from the audience. It usually goes something like this: “Are we ignoring the counsel of Ellen White by encouraging pre-schools and day cares?” Each time I begin to answer I quickly pray for guidance and grace. Recently, though, I decided to actually write down my answer and give it some serious consideration and prayer. If you would care to dialogue with me regarding my answer, I am more than happy to engage in a conversation, by phone or via e-mail. May the Holy Spirit speak to your heart as you read and consider my thoughts on this matter.

### **“Are we ignoring the counsel of Ellen White by encouraging pre-schools?”**

The short answer to this question is “No, there is no opposition in either the Bible or Ellen G. White that would preclude preschool centers from opening and operating within church owned structures.” Having said “No” though, it will take some explaining to help initiate a paradigm shift that recognizes and reveals an understanding of the Western culture in the 21st century and the balanced response that Adventist Christians might pursue.

The traditional Adventist belief is that children should be in the home and cared for by loving and attentive parents. This traditional Adventist belief is in accordance with the Divine family plan and is the most desirable for raising and caring for children. It is also the most effective means of shielding children from many of Satan’s influences and snares.

In fact, empirical research consistently finds that children who stay at home between birth and 8 years of age, cared for and taught by a loving and attentive mother and father, are more successful and balanced in all areas of life than those children who do not have that same environment. Unfortunately, for the vast majority of children, this home life scenario is not an optional reality. Over the past hundred years, the toll of society’s success has been felt due to war and prosperous peace, increased mobility of families, separation of core family units, women’s liberation, excessive children’s “rights”, the response of men who are now missing in many family units, women in the workplace, social welfare, anti-traditional family legislation and taxation burdens, anti-social power pursuits, teen pregnancy, the ideology of promiscuity without responsibility, and over-indulgence in pleasure-seeking behaviors.

All these elements have worked together to disintegrate the family as designed by God. Satan knows that strong families mean strong communities, societies, and cultures. Thus, he has worked tirelessly to destroy it. He knows that if he can destroy the family circle, individuals are more vulnerable and weak, searching for what seems to be right. Just as in the days of Israel, the result is that every man does “that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). In so doing, they fall more easily into temptation and degradation, not realizing King Solomon’s warning that “there is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Proverbs 14:12).

### **Responsibility**

As a church, Adventists have a responsibility to families, to help instruct and lead children in the paths of righteousness (Psalms 23:3). That is why there is Sabbath School, church schools,

Vacation Bible School, Adventurers, Pathfinders. Unfortunately, as a church, Adventists fare no better than others in the statistical analysis of intact family units, divorce, irresponsible parents, and single-parent families.

With parents leaving the family picture, the responsibility of the church family is increased dramatically. The children still need instruction and guidance, even if only one parent has abdicated their God-given duties. Both Adventist and non-Adventist children deserve to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn of His love and care for them.

### **The Abandonment of Parenthood**

The majority of families, whether dual-parent, single-parent, or non-parentally led, are experiencing an abandonment of parental and child-rearing responsibilities. Too many children are being raised by Disney, Nicolodean, the state, and other secular entities and parents are oblivious to the effects upon their children. Unless a sincere desire for better parenting skills motivates them, parents are content to celebrate holidays and birthdays with their children while leaving the development of the child's mind and morals to seemingly harmless secularism. Such carelessness is a sin against children (Genesis 42:22) who are to be trained in the way that they should go (Proverbs 22:6), not left to the mercy of other's instruction. Christ commands His followers to be conscientious in their training of the young and then promises that the children will not depart from it (Deuteronomy 6:3-9; 11:18-20; Proverbs 6:20-23; 7:1-4).

Ellen White wrote that the promise of Proverbs 22:6 is for the diligent parent. "In order for parents to do this work, they must themselves understand the "way" the child should go. It is impossible for parents to give their children proper training unless they first give themselves to God, learning of the Great Teacher lessons of obedience to His will" (White, CP 108.2). "If, in their early childhood, children are perseveringly and patiently trained in the right way, they will not form wrong habits" (White, RH, March 30, 1897, par. 4). "The parents or teachers who give attention to the small actions that are not right help to hinder and avoid the establishment of wrongful habits" (White, CG 201.3); "habits that will be carried with them throughout life" (White, CG 200.1).

Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Erich Fromm, and educators such as Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget all agree with White in that a child's personality and character are formed during the first 5-7 years of life. The habits established during this time have the most influence. Once formed, habits become more and more firmly impressed upon the character. Day by day, characters are formed which place children as well-disciplined soldiers under the "banner of Christ", or as rebels under the "banner of Satan" (White, RH, November 27, 1883 par. 6). Again, White makes the point that "during the first three years of the life of Samuel the prophet, his mother carefully taught him to distinguish between good and evil. By every familiar object surrounding him she sought to lead his thoughts up to the Creator. His early training led him to choose to maintain his Christian integrity. What a reward was Hannah's! And what an encouragement to faithfulness is her example" (White, CG 197.1).

In another example, she writes that "the lessons given Joseph in his youth by Jacob in expressing his firm trust in God and relating to him again and again the precious evidences of His loving-kindness and unceasing care were the very lessons he needed in his exile among an idolatrous people of Egypt. When under the severest trials, he looked to his heavenly Father, whom he had learned to trust. The early impressions made upon his mind garrisoned his heart in the hour of fierce temptation" (White, CG 197.2).

As beautiful and comforting as it is, though, the promise of Proverbs 22:6 coexists as a curse. If the parenting style is careless and indulgent, the child will not depart from these ways either – except through the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

### **Call to Action**

Matthew 19:14 and Luke 18:16 both record Jesus saying “suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not.” In saying this Christ instructs that every child deserves to learn about Him. If this society is going to continue to abandon its child-rearing duties in favor of self’s desires, then someone must be willing to teach the children about God’s love and law of righteousness; someone must be willing to shoulder the responsibility of bringing them to the feet of Jesus Christ.

The individuals who have taken the responsibility for children upon themselves praise God for those few families who are blessed with two God-fearing parents who strive to provide the Biblical model for their family. However, there is a burden for those who have left their family duties to others. When these conscientious individuals look around and see the masses of misled, misguided, mis-educated children, Christ puts a longing desire upon their heart to pick up the seemingly impossible task of caring for and guiding these children to Him.

That is where the desire for Christian child care begins. It is through this medium that the gospel of Jesus Christ is taught and lived in the hope that the children’s parents will hear the call of Christ for repentance and renewal. Through the faithful work of Adventist teachers and administrators with impressionable children, the gospel of Jesus Christ is being taught and lived for those who have been misguided by what seems right in an over-indulgent society. This is the mission of Adventist early childhood education and care centers. Praise God from whom all blessings flow for the opportunity to participate in the great commission of Matthew 28:19, 20.