

Adventist Educational Essentials

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94 • 95 • 96 • 98

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Why does our church spend millions of dollars each year to support more than 5,000 schools around the world when free public education is readily available? How can such expenses be justified in the light of the other pressing needs of the church and the world it serves?

These questions bring us to the frontier of Adventist educational purpose, or what might be called the “Adventist educational essentials.”

What, we might ask, are those essentials? We find a clue in Ellen White’s suggestions that character “determines destiny” for both this life and the one to come and that “character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings” (*Education*, pp. 109, 225).

Thus, character development is an Adventist educational essential. But there is something even more basic than character building. After all, there are non-Christian and even anti-Christian calls for character development. For example, many humanistic educators have sought to make character development and/or preparation for service to humanity the purpose of education. Altruism and human goodness, however, are not synonymous with Christianity. *Steps to Christ* makes a crucial point when it notes that “the idea that it is necessary only to develop the good that exists in man by nature, is a fatal deception” (pp. 18, 19). Christian approaches to character building of necessity are built upon a different platform than are non-Christian approaches.

Christianity and denominational schools have a much more basic goal, a more radical mission to accomplish before they can ever hope to develop Christian character. That more radical mission is to move young people away from self-sufficiency and confidence in their own goodness and to bring them into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. That mission is central to all we do.

C. B. Eavey makes the point succinctly when he notes that “the foundational aim in Christian education is the bringing of the individual to Christ for salvation. Before a man of God can be perfected, there must be a man of God to perfect; without the new birth there is no man of God.”*

In other words, *true Christian character can be developed only in a born-again Christian*. By equating the primary objective of Christian education—bringing students into a relationship with Christ—with such theological concepts as conversion, new birth, and justification, we see that character development is a secondary aim that is synonymous with sanctification and Christian growth.

Both conversion and character development are absolute essentials in Adventist education, but we must never confuse their order. To put character development ahead of conversion is to espouse a theology of salvation by works, with all its accompanying problems of pride and self-sufficiency. Genuine Christian character development must take place within a saving relationship. Thus, introducing young people to Jesus as Lord and Saviour “should be the teacher’s first effort and his constant aim” (*Education*, p. 30). “[T]he all-

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Continued on page 47

GUEST EDITORIAL

Adventist Educational Essentials

Continued from page 3

important thing should be the conversion of . . . students, that they may have a new heart and life" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 436).

Within the context of the new life experience, character development takes on an importance second to none. But it is at this very point that we again need to beware. Too many educators seemingly equate character development with how people dress, what they eat, or how they spend their spare time. Those may (or may not) be evidence of Christian character development, but they are not character itself. The essence of Christian character is found in what Paul called the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, meekness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-24).

Such virtues are worthy essentials that Adventist schools need to develop in each student. But such virtues must be modeled as well as taught.

Perceptive teachers, however, know how short they fall

of the ideal. Thus, in the Christian context, we teachers have the opportunity to pray with our students for our mutual need of saving and empowering grace. After all, none of us will ever develop Christlike characters without the infilling of God's graciousness. Only when we realize how needy we are will we be in a position to become character educators. We must always remember that character education is more effectively modeled than didactically taught, and that it must always be modeled in the theater of God's grace.

It is only within a grace orientation that Christian character development can take place. In that atmosphere, we can make our rhetoric of educating for loving service to a world in need a reality.—**George R. Knight.**

*C. B. Eavey, "Aims and Objectives of Christian Education," in J. Edward Hakes, ed., *An Introduction to Evangelical Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), p. 64.

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