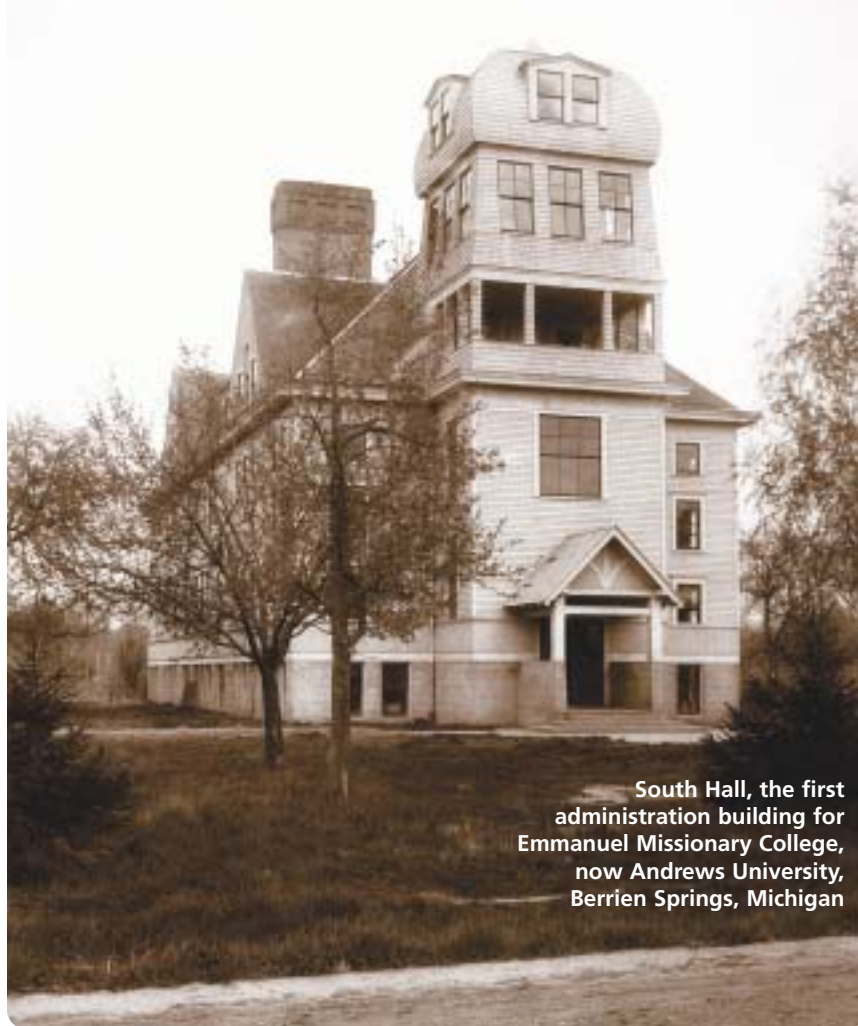




Bible textbook, grades 9-10
(1995)



South Hall, the first
administration building for
Emmanuel Missionary College,
now Andrews University,
Berrien Springs, Michigan

A COMMENTARY ON PURPOSE, PRINCIPLE, AND CHANGE IN ADVENTIST EDUCATION, Part II

In the first installment of this two-part series (Summer 2006 issue), we reflected on the topic of change in Seventh-day Adventist higher education. This second and final article will focus on some underlying principles of Adventist education and how change relates to them.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that their global network of schools and its purposes were the product of divine inspiration. From its 19th-century beginning in Battle Creek, Michigan, denominational education has always had a double-pronged *raison d'être*: to keep young people in the church through redemptive education and to prepare employees for the church. Over time, especially in developing countries, two other purposes evolved. The first

BY FLOYD GREENLEAF

was to use education as an evangelistic tool; second, to participate in social uplift by providing education as a public service, just as the church provides hospitals and clinics that contribute to the physical well-being of their local communities.

Adventist Education and Reform

Seventh-day Adventists entered the marketplace of education with the conviction that they had an obligation to

From its 19th-century beginning in Battle Creek, Michigan, denominational education has always had a double-pronged *raison d'être*: to keep young people in the church through redemptive education and to prepare employees for the church.

change things. “We are reformers,” Ellen White wrote in 1872 when she published her essay, “Proper Education,” which one could call the Magna Carta of Adventist education.¹

Change was already in the air. Even as Ellen White wrote, thoughtful people were scrutinizing many aspects of education. Her vision for schooling also diverged from the norm because, above all else, it

was to point students to the Cross by providing them with a better understanding of Heaven’s plan to restore fallen human beings to their original Edenic state and inspire them to accept God’s saving grace. Making education redemptive provided a spiritual rationale for the changes that Adventists sought to implement and, given their belief in the soon return of Jesus, it supplied an urgency for reform. This philosophical and theological emphasis made Adventist education distinctive in the reform milieu of the 19th century.

Adventists did not immediately develop a systematic view of education. However, from the outset, the driving force in denominational schools derived from the original purposes of Adventist education: to provide redemptive education and to prepare church workers. As Adventism spread around the world, many church leaders were con-



W. W. Prescott, biblical scholar and first secretary of the General Conference Education Department, was a great promoter of the Bible-centered curriculum.

vinced that by implementing the two original purposes of denominational education, they could make their schools an invaluable evangelistic resource. This would, in effect, both help to perpetuate the church and enable it to accomplish its mission. Thus, the purposes evolved into something akin to a theology of education and constituted a measuring device

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The Emmanuel Missionary College faculty, spring 1911.

Seventh-day Adventists entered the marketplace of education with the conviction that they had an obligation to change things.

to determine whether through the years the changes occurring in the schools were consistent with denominational expectations. Seen against this background, there is small wonder that modifications in the church's education program have always aroused debate.

Adventist education has always had its critics. If we are to believe the present generation of naysayers, Adventist schools no longer fulfill the original intentions of their founders. The critics allege that under the rubric of progress, Adventist educators have blurred or ignored the "blueprint" by capitulating to "worldly pressure" flowing from modernization and secularism. From the vantage point of the critics, denominational schools have lost their purpose and become merely another option—and an expensive one—for Adventist families.

Such sweeping indictments require us to examine more closely some of the changes that have spawned criticism. For the most part, critics are not lamenting the inevitable trends of modernization such as automobiles replacing horses and buggies, or computers supplanting typewriters—instead, they are concerned about changes in the substance of Adventist education.

While the reform that Adventists sought to incorporate into their first schools had a theological flavor, it does not follow that everything the church's early teachers did represented an eternal principle. It would be more accurate to say that Adventist educators have endlessly experimented to find feasible applications of the original principles of church-sponsored schools as they understood them. Sometimes they have hit the target, sometimes not.

The Ideal of a Bible-Centered Curriculum

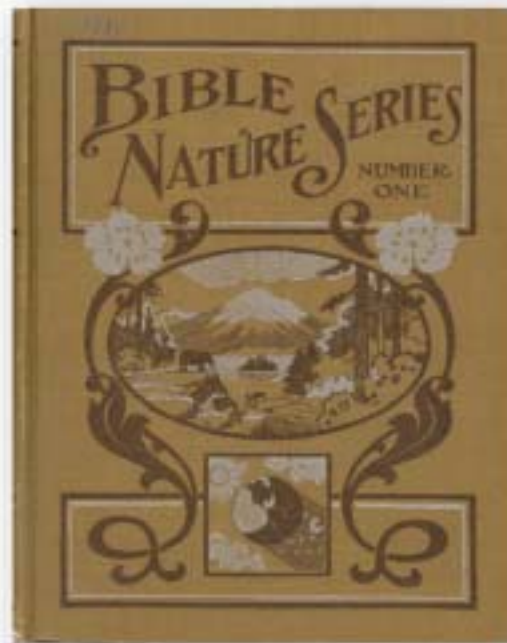
The most pertinent example was the dictum that the Bible was to be central. *More than any other characteristic, this curricular principle was intended to be the foundational and universal mark of Adventist education.* Tracing the evolution of this idea in

church-sponsored education reveals much about how Adventists have debated their way through disparate issues, among them (1) establishing education in illiterate or even uncivilized societies, (2) coping with changes in global demography and the transformation from rural to urban life, (3) designing a program of education to meet the dominant role of professionalism in contemporary life, (4) staying abreast of the complexities and needs of a world church, and (5) relating to external regulation of education.

In the beginning, no one knew what a biblically central curriculum looked like, so it is not surprising that Adventist teachers and educational administrators immediately raised questions and disagreed among themselves about how to implement this foundational principle. The following list illustrates some of the approaches they took:

1. *The Bible is to be the only textbook in Adventist schools.*
2. *The Bible does not have to be the only textbook, but every subject must contain some content taken from the Bible.*
3. *The curriculum will be biblical if it derives from Seventh-day Adventist experience.* For example, problems in elementary arithmetic are to incorporate facts such as information from colporteurs' sales reports and data about offerings in local churches.
4. *The curriculum will be biblical if teachers use denominationally produced materials.*
5. *The Bible does not need to be the sole textbook, but it should be the inspirational source for all teaching materials.*
6. *The curricula in public schools will become biblically centered and acceptable for church schools if teachers add Bible study to them.*
7. *The Bible will be at the center if teachers demonstrate biblical principles in their teaching techniques and personal relationships with students.*

Teachers struggled with all seven of these ideas and more. In some cases, several of the approaches were combined in the same classroom. If those early educators were still alive, they would probably find consolation in knowing that today's teachers still grapple with the same issue. The experience of 130 years teaches us that although a Bible-centered curriculum may be the single most identifying mark of Adventist schools, it has defied ultimate definition. In a world that changes at breakneck speed, experience has also taught us that if we expect teachers to improve their understanding and



practice of this foundational principle, change itself must become a corollary principle.

One of the major developments in the long process of establishing a Bible-centered curriculum has been to devote less space to doctrinal study in religion textbooks for elementary and secondary grades, while allotting more time to the application of biblical principles to life situations.²

One reason for this trend has been a progressively stronger conviction that a Christian experience—the cliché that describes what Bible classes are supposed to produce—is not an automatic outcome of being well versed in church doctrines and able to quote proof texts prolifically. Understanding the basis for doctrinal positions and memorizing supporting Bible texts are no less important to Adventist life than formerly, but curriculum designers have also begun to emphasize the social relevancy of Scripture. Teaching students to apply scriptural principles and to develop a biblically based set of ethics pertinent to human relationships and Christian life in a modern, high-tech society has become a more significant classroom objective as well as a means to develop student interest in and knowledge about Scripture.

The format of the Bible itself suggests this approach.

Scripture was not written like a catechism but more like an anthology of different styles of literature, much of it stories describing how people lived and related to one another. Much of what Christians believe is extrapolated from these narratives. The most notable examples are the accounts of

Adventists did not immediately develop a systematic view of education.

the ancient patriarchs and the four Gospel records of Christ's ministry. It is a natural question to ask: Since the Bible was written that way, should we not teach it that way as well? This approach has not eliminated doctrinal study, but it does change the classroom approach to biblical understanding.

Not everyone agrees that this change is good. Critics have charged that Bible study in Adventist schools is no longer central because traditional denominational beliefs have declined in importance; and as a consequence, students turn out to be scriptural illiterates.

Another issue is how to adapt a biblically central curriculum to all levels of instruction and to diverse students. At both elementary and secondary levels, students typically



Since their inception, Adventist schools have offered a variety of courses that attempt to integrate faith and academics. Shown above is an 1890 health and temperance class at Battle Creek College.

take one Bible class a year. School administrators usually see to it that Bible classes and religious activities play a prominent role in the school schedule.

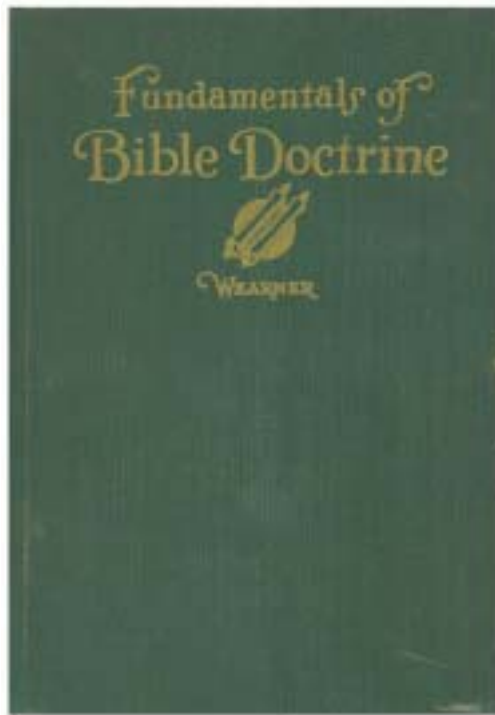
At the postsecondary level, Bible classes often become one of many curricular components, which allows students to select an appealing class that fits into their schedules. To illustrate, most Adventist colleges in the United States require students to take fractionally less than a tenth of their total coursework in Bible, irrespective of their degree. Typically, these courses are included in the basic requirements of general education. In simple terms, this means students take about one Bible class per year, but because classes last for only a semester or a quarter, it also means that students may spend about half their time in college without enrolling in a Bible class. However light this emphasis on Bible courses may appear, the Bible component is usually the largest single block of classes students take outside their major and minor concentrations.

The sizable influx of non-Adventist students in many of our colleges also presents a curricular challenge—how to design Bible classes that enroll students who are lifelong Adventists along with those who are from non-Adventist or even non-Christian backgrounds.

To maintain an ambiance that supports a biblically central curriculum at the postsecondary level also poses unique problems. Increasingly, colleges and universities, both public and sectarian, must cater to a diverse student body that includes working adults with families, those taking part or all of their classes online, and traditional students (18-24 years of age) who are enrolled only part time. Students in graduate schools, who may appear on campus only for evening classes or special appointments, are also part of this mix. Because all of these students must fit their education into an already busy life, they shop around for a school that will accommodate their schedules. These challenges make it difficult or next to impossible for Adventist schools to schedule worship and chapels for all students.

Evaluating Change in the Bible-Centered Curriculum

In considering these issues, we must remind ourselves



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that, trite as it may seem, we are mixing facts and opinions and must distinguish between them. It is a fact that from the outset, the founders of Adventist education regarded a biblically central curriculum as the foundational principle of Adventist education, but it is a perception and a judgment to categorize a given approach to the principle as either adequate or inadequate.

Therefore, because we are dealing with opinions, expecting to achieve unanimity about how to implement a principle is unrealistic. Due to the variety of perceptions about any given topic, Adventist educators have followed Solomon's advice in Proverbs 15:22—"Without counsel purposes are disappointed; but in the multitude of counselors they are established" (KJV)—and prayerfully sought consensus before choosing a course of action rather than presuming that everything they did was based on undebatable policies. Curriculum thus undergoes constant review in order to update applications of principles and generate new approaches that will maintain the key identifying marks of Adventist education.

Both clients and practitioners of Adventist education must always keep in mind that the principles of education, which Adventists believe to be

divinely inspired, never specified a certain ratio of Bible classes to other courses. The principle is that Bible study is to be central, but Ellen White and other early leaders left the details for educators and administrators to develop.

As we seek to assess whether Bible study is accomplishing its purpose and is still central, it is important to ask several basic questions: First, do Bible classes open the way for the convicting influence of the Holy Spirit? Also, do these classes teach students to test their opinions and spiritual beliefs with Scripture in order to reach biblically based conclusions? Finally, does Adventist education encourage students to cultivate a maturing sense of personal responsibility for their convictions and actions that will continue with them after they leave the classroom?

In an effort to maintain the centrality of biblical studies, integrate faith and learning, and create a philosophical worldview compatible with Scripture, some colleges have

experimented with interdisciplinary classes. Examples include studies in religion and science, and courses in comparative religions, archeology, and literature. Rather than a theologian, the instructor may be a scientist trained in geology, biology, or physics, or someone from the field of literature or philosophy. A religion teacher may team teach a course with a professor from another academic discipline.

These classes are not exclusively “Bible” in the same sense as those focusing on the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation or the life and teachings of Jesus, but they demonstrate how biblical beliefs infuse other areas of learning. They are invaluable tools to introduce students to the breadth of Christianity and can contribute as much to biblical understanding as the study of eschatology or the Gos-



At La Sierra University in Riverside, California (left to right), Fritz Guy, a theologian; Gary Bradley, a biology professor; and Adeny Schmidt, professor of biology and coordinator of service learning, co-teach an interdisciplinary class called *Scientific Thinking and Religious Belief*, which seeks to integrate faith and science.

pels. Students may opt for credit in either religion or the field of the department offering the class.

Curriculum frameworks that require Bible study at all levels of instruction are only administrative tools to help educators maintain the principle of centrality. Their success rests on several factors. Experience has shown that a Bible-centered curriculum is as much, if not more, an attitude than a defined amount of time spent in a class. How well curriculum planners and school administrators fulfill the principle depends more on their own personal commitment and their spiritual breadth and sensitivities than on curricular arithmetic.

The training, life, and personality of the teacher is also a major factor. Academically prepared teachers, dedicated to



College missionary band at Emmanuel Missionary College, 1936

Christ, are a powerful witness and model for students. By their very presence, they can transform courses that are not inherently religious, such as a class in differential calculus, into a part of the spiritual journey that Adventist education intends for its students.

It is also worth remembering that the original pronouncements about Adventist education called for Bible study to be central, *not exclusive*. The two are not the same. Early teachers who wished to make the Bible the sole textbook in Adventist schools discovered that truth after extensive and discouraging sweat and toil. The original principles of Adventist education never dictated that teachers should ignore what were then known as the “branches of learning.” As originally conceived, Adventist schools were to teach as many skills and dispense as much knowledge as secular schools. But they were to do all of this in an environment where the Bible was central and where the aim of education was redemptive.

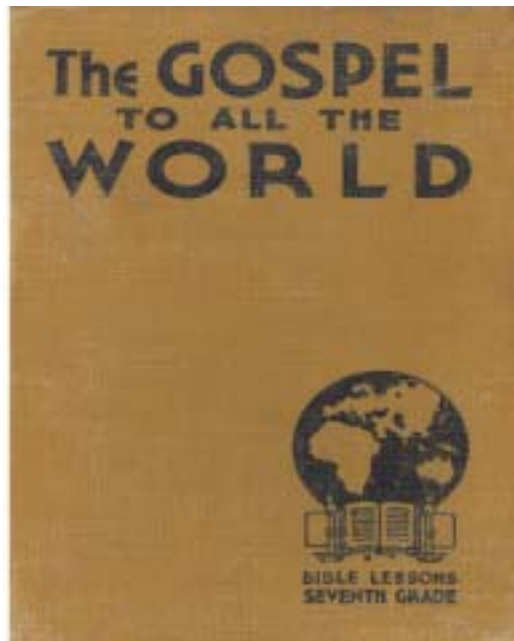
International Influences

It is also important to bear in mind that Adventist education originated in the United States, where it became a paradigm of sorts for the world church. Adventist educators in other countries often faced questions peculiar to their societies, which required them to adapt precedents established in the United States.

For example, in the United States, curriculum has always been more or less open-ended, so American educators have had greater liberty to experiment with class content than their counterparts in other countries. Although American students face evaluative testing at all levels, they do not have to enroll in a government-prescribed course of study that prepares them for specific examinations.

Such is not the case in many parts of the world. Adventist education has faced major problems in countries where external examinations determine a student's future. In these locations, curriculum is deliberately designed to prepare students for examinations that mark the end of specific phases of their education. For obvious reasons, teachers tend to teach to the tests, which leaves little time for them to intro-

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duce additional material. It becomes problematical even to incorporate a biblical component, never mind make it central, since the area will not appear on the government-mandated exams, and hence is not critical to the students' future employment.

Because Adventist educators believe that a Bible-centered curriculum is critical to students' spiritual life and future, they have been forced to decide whether to (1) regard external examinations as irrelevant and focus on preparing church employees for whom testing is unnecessary, or (2) also serve students who will be employed outside the denomination but still want the blessings of a preparatory education in an Adventist setting. This problem had no counterpart in the American paradigm, but Adventist educators found ways to include Bible study in their curricula without sacrificing scholarship and thus upheld the denominational principle of a Bible-centered curriculum.³

The issue of external examinations underscores the fact that Adventist education has not evolved in a vacuum.

Social and political climates have always had an influence on Adventist schools. Denominational leaders have always recognized the right of governments to regulate the nature and content of education for both children and professionals and to

require schools to produce what their advertisements claim. Adventist leaders have sought to operate institutions of learning at all levels within parameters established by local governments. The first of this two-part series revealed that conformity by Adventist education to both governmental and voluntary regulation has helped to ensure credibility in the preparation of professionals.

However, public policy sometimes threatens the identity of Adventist schools by requiring unacceptable compromises. Governments in developing countries have often viewed Adventist education as only a humanitarian enterprise. Many times, public officials who were unacquainted with the redemptive purpose of Adventist education offered financial support to denominational schools as part of their

plan for social uplift and modernization. Inadvertently, denominational education became part of the nation-building process.

This condition posed new challenges relating to the propriety of government aid to sectarian education and how to preserve an Adventist identity while accepting financial help. Inevitably, the church's educators have had to adapt the original principles of Adventist education in order to achieve their ultimate purpose in this socio-political climate. Controversial relationships have sometimes evolved between denominational schools and governments, some of which persist to the present, especially in younger nations where nation-building issues are paramount.

Other examples of how Adventist education has related to regulation occurred in radical socialist countries during the Cold War. In order to exist, Adventist schools adopted administrative methods and institutional structure that differed from those in democratic countries.

Regulation and differing social conditions rule out the possibility that all Adventist schools can be clones of the American model. Differences in social conditions also help to explain why Adventist graduates from such schools as Solusi (in Zimbabwe) for years entered denominational employ after completing an elementary-level program, but their counterparts from schools in the United States and Europe needed a bachelor's degree. Changes in social and political conditions also explain why Solusi and other similar institutions now offer their own advanced degrees.

Legitimizing Change

When and how to implement change has never been easy. Educators can gain valuable insight about this question by reviewing the Adventist debate over the appropriate age for students to begin formal education, an issue that has reared its head repeatedly.

Early on, Ellen White advocated that children should not enter school until they were 8 or 10 years old.



Alma Baker McKibbin, an Adventist elementary teacher who wrote Bible lessons and later textbooks designed for various grade levels.

Parents should be the first teachers of their children, who should run as "free as lambs," she said. This advice was embraced by Adventists, and in a manner similar to other statements of reform, exerted nearly as much force as a biblical injunction. Sarah Peck, a former secretary for Ellen White and a prominent figure in the preparation of denominational elementary textbooks, told Adventist educators in 1923 that failure to follow this instruction was a departure from the faith.⁴

Strong convictions about this issue have continued, prompting critics to allege that spiritual lapses abound in Adventist education. Church schools enroll students at age 6, and even 5, and some institutions offer preschool training for youngsters as young as age 2 or 3. Local conference school systems have adopted the

identifying mark of "K-12," signifying that kindergartens are an integrated part of denominational education, a trend that critics regard as further evidence of decline.

As early as 1888, however, Ellen White advocated a kindergarten for Adventist children in Oakland, California. Later, the author of the "free as lambs" metaphor encouraged 7- and 8-year-old children to attend an Adventist church school, surprisingly adding that some students were ready for school at age 5.⁵

These apparent contradictions did not open the door for willy-nilly change, but they did offer an opportunity to explore situations when the earlier advice might need to be modified. Some parents were letting their children run in the streets, distorting the advice to allow them to be free as lambs to mean undisciplined freedom. Overlooked was Ellen White's advice that parents should be the first teachers of their children, which pointedly implied that these "little lambs" needed discipline and instruction, even if they were not in school. The advice to enroll students under 8 to 10 years of age was a recognition that they would be better off in school than in a situation where parents had abdicated their responsibility to be the first teachers of their children.

The admission that some chil-



dren were ready for school at age 5 suggests that Ellen White recognized that youngsters developed at different rates and that parents and teachers must take individuality into account when making judgments about their education. It also suggests that external influences have played a major role in the changing advice for Adventist educators.

Kindergartens were an outcome of the growing belief, bolstered by scientific study, that children were individuals in their own right with special age-related needs. This movement strengthened as the 19th century unfolded; it burgeoned in the 20th. In keeping with this mood, Ellen White had taken notice of educational trends as early as 1888 when she advocated a kindergarten for Adventist children. By the mid- to late 20th century, kindergartens had become a recognized phase of early childhood education, and governments were requiring school entry at ever-earlier ages.

When Ellen White encouraged parents to enroll young children in school, which seemed to contradict her previous advice, she was enunciating a major principle undergirding Adventist education from Battle Creek to the present. Ideals are ideals, and they remain so regardless of how promiscuously people violate



Sarah Peck, early elementary textbook developer

them. But social conditions sometimes prevent educators from achieving the ideal, forcing them to settle for something less. Adventist educators have had to do the best that they could within the constraints of socio-economic and political conditions. *This has been true of every change in Adventist education.*

The principle of legitimizing change, based on social conditions, is biblical, as the case of Moses' law of divorce illustrates. When issuing his ordinance, Moses acted under divine inspiration, but Jesus later changed it by adding restrictions. He explained that Moses' law was the best that could be expected at

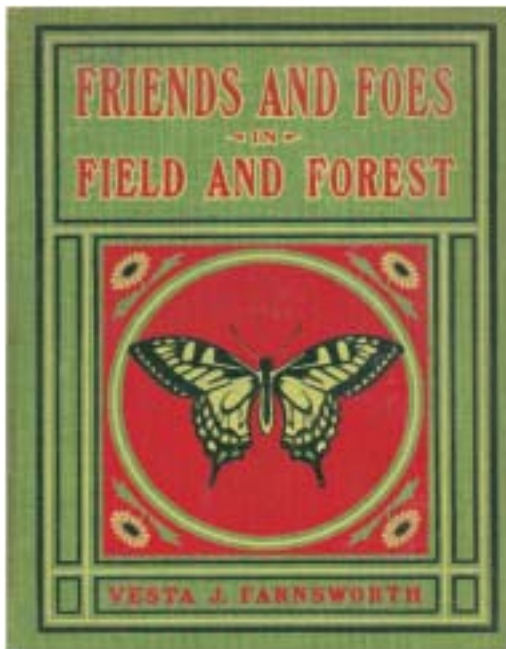
the time because of prevailing moral laxity, a social condition He described as "the hardness of your hearts." Jesus made it clear that neither Moses' provision nor His modification destroyed the original ideal.⁶

Change and Continuity

Adventist education is an imperfect creation with lofty ideals. Its form has undeniably altered since its 19th-century inception. Trial and error accompanied the early years of Adventist schools as teachers sought to implement the principles provided by divine inspiration. Of course, trial and error remain. But today, we have the advantage of historical perspective, which early educators lacked, enabling us to evaluate more effectively whether the changed form of Ad-



As time passed, Adventist schools began to offer classes for younger students. Shown above are elementary students at the Berrien Springs, Michigan, church school in 1933-1934.



ventist education conforms to its *raison d'être*.

Despite the wide variety of challenges Adventist education has faced and the changes wrought on denominational campuses, the overarching principle of a biblically central program of education remains. Education is to *preserve the faith* of the church's young by nurturing them in a loving relationship with Christ, *prepare workers* to proclaim the biblical message of salvation, and *seek to convert unbelievers*. Debate about substantive change pivots on the question of how change will affect these purposes. For example: The church began with the goal of preparing workers, which was later expanded to include educating a competent laity to function in the private sector, both as witnesses for and supporters of the church.

Adventist schools are a statement of Adventism that reaches beyond educating for professional competence, but this function does not require teachers to transform their classes into altar calls. However, it does mean that students should never have reason to doubt that an Adventist campus has a genuine Adventist character. The church's experience in becoming a world movement has taught us that schools become statements of Adventism most effectively when they are compatible with the times and the cultures in which they function. For this reason, Adventists can expect that Argentina's River Plate Adventist University with its historical roots in health education will function differently from India's Spicer Memorial College, and that schools in the 21st century will differ from their 19th-century antecedents.



We can safely say that in part the genius of Adventist education has been to establish schools and develop policies and patterns of instruction that can be adapted to surrounding conditions while continuing to fulfill original purposes. The absence of formulas and other “how to” instruction at the beginning of the movement of Adventist education has forced each successive generation of denominational educators to reinterpret original purposes and principles in order to find applications appropriate to new times and places. This repetitive process has breathed new life into Adventist education. And if the church's education program is to remain alive and fulfill its mission, the process must continue. ✍



Floyd Greenleaf, Ph.D., retired professor of history at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee, is the author of *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Andrews University Press, 1992), and co-author of *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (English edition: Pacific Press, 2000; Spanish edition produced by the Inter-American and South American divisions, 2002). Last year, he completed *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (Pacific Press), on which this series is based.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The full text of “Proper Education” may be read in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 3, pages 131-160. See Floyd Greenleaf, *In Passion for the World* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2005), chapters 1 and 2, for further discussion.
2. See *In Passion for the World*, chapters 1 and 2, for discussion about post-elementary curriculum; chapter 4 for elaboration of elementary education curriculum.
3. Without referencing specific pages in *In Passion for the World* for examples of the question of external examinations, the best illustrations of this issue are found in those passages describing schools in countries that followed British educational traditions.
4. See Sarah E. Peck, “Textbooks for Our Church Schools,” *Proceedings of the Educational and Missionary Volunteer Departments of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in World Convention* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1923), p. 419.
5. My discussion of this issue appears in *In Passion for the World*, pp. 84, 99, 100.
6. See Matthew 19:3-9 for the account of this discussion.