MISSIOLOGICAL ROOTS

Battle Creek College

OF ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ONGOING TENSION BETWEEN

ADVENTIST MISSION AND ACADEMIC VISION

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

t was no accident that the establishment of Adventism's first college and the sending of its first official foreign missionary took place in the same year (1874). After all, the founders of the college had been quite clear in stating their goals. For them, the college was seen as a necessary institution for the training of missionaries for both the homeland and overseas.

Born in Tension

Thus, J. N. Andrews could write in 1873 that "the calls that come from every quarter, from men speaking other languages, must be answered by us. We cannot do this in

The birth of Seventh-day Adventist higher education [was] filled with tension between the missiological/theological goals of the ecclesiastical leaders who founded it and the academics who operated it. Both had something valuable to contribute.





our present circumstances. But we can do it if the Lord bless our effort in the establishment of our proposed school. . . . Men of other nationalities desire to be instructed concerning" the Second Advent.¹

In a similar vein, General Conference president George I. Butler noted just before the opening of

the college that the denomination would soon need hundreds of its members educated for mission service.² There was absolutely no doubt in the minds of the founders of Battle Creek College that their educational institution was to have a missiological focus.

But then there were the teachers. Even more basic yet was the question of where the budding denomination could even find faculty. Fortunately, they had at least one university graduate in their midst. Sidney Brownsberger had graduated from the classical-studies program of the University of Michigan in 1869 and would be awarded an M.A. by the same institution in 1875.³ Given the needs of the church and Brownsberger's education and dedication to Adventism, he was the obvious choice to head up the new college.

There was only one drawback to his appointment. While he excelled in academics, Brownsberger had next to no understand-

ing of how to implement the goals of the founders. At a meeting of the board, the new president confessed that he did "not know anything about the conducting of such a school." Apparently no one else did either, so W. C. White (Brownberger's roommate at the time) recalled, "it was agreed that the work of the school should be organized on the ordinary lines" and that adjustments be made later.⁴

The young educational leader did what he knew best. The school that he developed in the mid-1870s had as its curricular core a traditional liberal arts prep school and a collegiate course focusing on Latin, Greek, and the "heathen classics" even though most of the students were not qualified to enter that elite track.

Bible study and religion found scant





place in the school's offerings. In fact, there were no regular religion courses, let alone required ones. While it's true that Uriah Smith hobbled over on his one real leg to provide some dusty elective lectures on Bible prophecy, it appears that he didn't have a large number of takers.

The college catalogues advertised that "there is nothing in the courses of study, or in the rules and

practice of discipline, that is in the least denominational or sectarian. The biblical lectures are before a class of only those who attend them from choice."⁵ Again, "the managers of this College have no disposition to urge upon students sectarian views, or to give such views any prominence in their school work."⁶

uch was the birth of Seventhday Adventist higher education. It was a birth filled with tension between the missiological/theological goals of the ecclesiastical leaders who founded it and the academics who operated it. Both had something valuable to contribute.

To put it bluntly, *Adventist higher education was born in tension*. That tension did not end with the beginnings of the system. We still have it today. I will argue in the balance of this article that the tension is not only an ongoing reality but one of crucial necessity. Without it, Adventist higher education would drift toward one or the other of two unhealthy extremes.

Bible College or Liberal Arts Institution?

Those thoughts bring us to the next major round of events in the tension between Adventist mission and academic vision. Brownsberger resigned in 1881 and was replaced by Alexander McLearn, who arrived at Battle Creek with the advantage of having an exalted Doctor of Divinity degree but the disadvantage of either not being an Adventist or of being a recent convert. Brownsberger may not have understood the needs of a genuinely Adventist education, but McLearn didn't even understand Adventism. He

may have been an excellent academic, but under his leadership, things went from bad to worse. The institution closed for the 1882-1883 school year with no certainty that it would reopen.

It is into the mess of the McLearn leadership that Ellen White waded with a testimony entitled "Our College," a paper read in College Hall in December 1881 before the ecclesiastical and educational leaders of the denomination.

"There is," she stated emphatically, "danger that our college will be turned away from its original design. . . . For one or two years past, there has been an effort to mold our school after other colleges. . . . To give students a knowledge of books *merely* is not the purpose of the institution. Such education can be obtained at any college in the land. . . . If a worldly influence is to bear sway in our school, then sell it out to worldlings and let them take the entire control; and those who have invested their means in that institution will establish another school, to be conducted, not upon the plan of popular schools, nor according to the desires of principal and teachers, but upon the plan which God has specified."8

Ellen White's rousing thrust left no one in doubt about the disaster of having put "the moral and religious influences . . . in the background." She called in no uncertain terms for the centrality of the Bible and its worldview.

With such a raft of pronouncements, one might surmise that she desired for Adventists to develop a Bible college or a Bible institute. Such a call, had it been implemented, would have eliminated the tension between mission and academic vision and set Adventism's higher schools on a certain course toward one extreme of a bipolar dynamic.

But such was not Ellen White's vision. In her second sentence, she plainly stated that "God's purpose has been made known, that our people should have an opportunity to study the sciences and at the same time to learn the requirements of His word." By sciences, she meant what we call the arts and sciences. The overall thrust of her remarks was that the denomination's young people should not "merely" study books, but do so in the context of the biblical worldview.¹⁰

It is of the utmost importance to recog-

nize that Ellen White at that crucial juncture of our history steered the denomination away from the Bible college model of higher education and toward what we could call a Christian liberal arts approach.

She also supported the liberal arts orientation later in the 1880s in the curricular struggles of recently founded South Lancaster Academy. There S. N. Haskell, the conference president and board chair, sought to steer the institution toward a Bible college design against the wishes

of Principal Charles Ramsey, who argued for a broader perspective. Once again, Ellen White sympathized with the broader perspective, even though she feared Ramsey didn't understand the proper balance between academic and religious knowledge. And he didn't. An early casualty of the struggle between academic vision and Adventist mission, he departed the denomi-

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nation in 1888 for further study at Har-





Teachers and students of the Washington Foreign Mission Seminary (Takoma Park, Maryland), sometime between 1905 and 1913.

The remarkable outcome of that controversy is that Ellen White opted for a precarious balance in higher education rather than a more comfortable polar extreme. With that stand, she helped position the denomination's system of higher education for ongoing tension, but she also helped ensure its relevance in the professional marketplace of the 20th and 21st centuries. Without

that positioning, Adventist higher education would have been pushed toward

> increasing irrelevance, except perhaps for the training of clergy, in the increasingly rigorous professional atmosphere of the first half of the 20th century.

From One Extreme to the Other

The third round in the tension-filled struggle between Adventist mission and academic vision was stimulated by events related to the momentous 1888 General Conference session at Minneapolis. Those meetings, with their emphasis on Christ's

righteousness and the need for more intensive Bible study by the denomination's clergy, 12 led to a series of field schools for ministers in the late 1880s and early

hose meetings, in turn, led W. W. Prescott, who was simultaneously president of Battle Creek College, Union College, and Walla Walla College, and head of the Seventh-day Adventist Educational Association in the early 1890s, to call a similar convention for Adventism's educators at Harbor Springs, Michigan, during July and August 1891. This produced a major turning point in the development of Adventist higher education. W. C. White described the meetings in terms of spiritual revival, stressing the emphasis on spontaneous personal testimonies. He noted that each day began with A. T. Jones' expositions of the Book of Romans. Ellen White also spoke on such topics as the necessity of a personal relationship with Christ, the need for a spiritual revival among the educators attending the convention, and the centrality of the Christian message to education.13

Prescott asserted at the 1893 General Conference session that Harbor Springs had marked the turning point in Adventist education.14 Before Harbor Springs, the teaching of Bible had held a minor place in Adventist education. But the convention

adopted a recommendation calling for four years of Bible study for students in Adventist colleges.¹⁵ The convention also recommended the teaching of history from the perspective of the biblical worldview.

The Christocentric revival in the church's theology had led to spiritual revival in its educational program accompanied by a clearer vision of its purpose. As a direct result, noted Prescott, "during the last two years there has been more growth in the educational work than in the seventeen years preceding that time."16 Much had been accomplished by early 1893, but much remained to be done.

From Harbor Springs, Ellen White went to Australia, where she gave much thought to education. Her recommendations led Prescott to attempt even more far-reaching curricular reforms at Battle Creek College in late 1893. In particular, the reforms would displace the dominance of the classics in the curriculum and uplift its Christian aspects.¹⁷

As might be expected, certain elements among the faculty objected, especially, Prescott (a Dartmouth graduate himself) pointed out, those who had "obtained their education in other colleges, conducted after the worldly plan."18 A month later. Prescott described the meeting at which the faculty were told that the college board had decided to move forward with the reforms: "Prof. Hartwell made a worse spectacle of himself than I

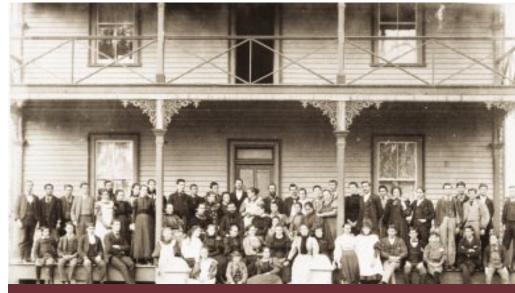


have ever known him to do before," publicly stating that "the college is dead," "liberal education is dead." "religious liberty is dead "19

On the other hand, Prescott noted happily that the students had reacted positively. But this response did not come without a struggle. Wilmott Poole, for example, wrote to his parents that many of the classical scholars were all broken up

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lowing the lead of the recently organized Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, American Protestants were spearheading in the 1890s a move for "the evangelization of the world in this generation," which brought about the greatest expansion of missions in American history.²³ The foremost educational outcome of that mission thrust was the



Early photo of teachers and students at Avondale College (Cooranbong, Australia), which opened in 1897.

about the decision but had declared their resignation to the will of God.20

Prescott planned to test the new curricular approach at Battle Creek and then, using his position as leader of the Educational Association and two other colleges, urge its adoption by other Adventist institutions.21

"I believe," Prescott wrote to the General Conference president, "this move will mark the beginning of such changes in our general school work, as will make it much more efficient in preparing those who wish to go out to spread the truth "22

On that point he hit a live issue. Fol-

rise of the missionary college and Bible institute movement among American evangelicals.24

dventism would follow the lead of the evangelicals. The 1890s proved to be its most dynamic

decade in the expansion of its missions and its educational system.²⁵ And it is probably no accident that within a few years, Adventism would begin to call many of its collegiate institutions missionary colleges, giving them names like Emmanuel Missionary College, Washington Missionary College, and the College

of Medical Evangelists

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Prescott-driven curricular reform era was Ellen White's moderate counsel. The extremists could easily have urged the schools away from the academic classical extreme toward its polar opposite (as some would in 1897 and thereafter).

General Conference President O. A. Olsen,

who was visiting Australia during the reform initiative, questioned Ellen White about the traditional curriculum. He reported to Prescott that she had said that the light that she had on the topic was that they should not ignore "the regular lines of education, but that they should make the Bible paramount [sic]." Her advice to students: "Climb just as high as you please in educational lines, if it be only balanced by the highest wisdom that men can attain from the word of God."²⁶

he set forth Moses, Daniel, and Paul, who had had both higher education and religious understanding, as examples to be emulated. One reason that "Paul was such a power" was that "he had knowledge that could match" that of the "greatest scholars" combined with a knowledge of Christ.²⁷

As in the 1880s, Ellen White was at the forefront, calling for an education that ensured a balance between Adventist mission and academic vision. But, as we shall see, not all of her readers understood that nuanced balance.

The momentum from Harbor Springs and its aftermath continued through the 1890s in the founding of the Avondale School for Christian Workers in Australia under the guidance of Ellen White and other reformers. ²⁸ The Avondale experience was a major shift away from the domination of the classics found in most American institutions and toward Adventist mission.



And a mighty shift it was. Ellen White spoke in no uncertain terms of Avondale establishing a pattern for other schools to follow.²⁹ But this necessary course correction could be taken to extremes.

And so it was by Edward Alexander Sutherland, Percy T. Magan, and the other radicals who took over Battle Creek College in the late 1890s. They totally eradicated the

classics, developed a curriculum that

was nearly all religion, advocated the Bible as the only textbook, plowed up the school's playing field for the planting of potatoes, developed a wide variety of mission activities, and stopped offering academic degrees. By 1901, when Battle Creek College moved to Berrien Springs for even more radical reforms, the school was teetering off the right edge of the Bible college/mission insti-

tute extreme of North American higher education.³⁰ This did eradicate the tension for a while. Adventist mission had become everything and the academic vision nothing.

Back to Balance

But tensions in higher education have a difficult time staying dead for very long. That brings us to the fourth round of the tension, with the entrance of Frederick Griggs, who chaired the General Conference Department of Education from 1904-1910 and 1915-1918. Griggs was a moderate who agreed with Sutherland and Magan on the goals of Adventist education but who decried their onesided means of achieving it.³¹ Griggs' motto was that "to be educators we must

be educated, and to be educated we must study."³² In 1907 he noted that Adventism had "a dearth of well-educated men and women—those who can edit our papers, man our training-schools and our intermediate schools, who can present the message to the most highly educated classes of the world."³³

Griggs saw a balanced education as an investment in which educational attainment dramatically increased an individual's worth. ³⁴ Quality education for Griggs, of course, included service to God and others.

During Griggs tenure, academic vision achieved a renaissance. It is no accident that the first Adventists to earn Ph.D.'s, B. G. Wilkinson from George Washington University in 1908 and M. E. Olsen

from the University of Michigan in 1909, did so in the Griggs era of educational leader-ship.³⁵

But even Griggs worried about achieving a balance between academic vision and Adventist mission. In his keynote address to the 1910 General Conference educational convention, he noted that "the pendulum has been swinging, is swinging. But now we must seriously ask ourselves

if there is not danger of its swinging too far, and of again measuring our work and of setting our standards by those of the

Griggs was a moderate voice in Adventist education in the early 20th century. During his tenure, academic vision had been recovered and the granting of academic degrees in such places as Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) restored. But the extremists were still on the loose. In 1915, for example, Sutherland wrote in his *Studies in Christian Education* that the granting of academic degrees would eventually be nothing less than "a seal or a mark of the beast." In the late 1910s, reactionary forces gained the upper hand, unseating Griggs and exiling him to Berrien Springs, where his



presidency marked EMC's "golden age."38 Meanwhile, the reactionary Warren E. Howell, as secretary of the General Conference educational department, gave his commanding voice to the denomination's schools and colleges during the explosive 1920s 39

The Innate Tension in Professionalizing

In the early 1920s, Adventism saw a new round of attacks on the academic vision. Those with Ph.D.'s, such as M. E. Olsen, came under suspicion and even at times lost their jobs. That is one reason Olsen found time to write the first substantial history of Adventism—Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists (1925).

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During those years, even working toward an M.A. degree was frowned upon. H. A. Morrison, president of Union College, raised the ire of leaders supporting Howell's policies when he encouraged some of his teachers to earn Master's degrees. As a result, when M. L. Andreasen requested permission to study at the University of Nebraska, Morrison responded: "I can't give you permission to go, but you may go without my permission, with the understanding that you quit when it is found out."40

the General Conference opposed the accreditation of Adventist institutions. They were more than happy to use Ellen White quotations to push their point. Two of their favorites were "let us determine that we will not be tied by so much as a thread to the educational policies of those who do not discern the voice of God and who will not hearken to His commandments"41 and "there is constant danger among our people that those

who engage in labor in our schools and

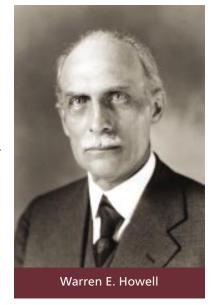
eedless to say, Howell and those of like mind at

sanitariums will entertain the idea that they must get in line with the world, study the things which the world studies, and become familiar with the things that the world becomes familiar with. This is one of the greatest mistakes that could be made."42

The accreditation struggle would dominate Adventist higher education for 20 vears, but the hard fact was careers were changing and, with

them, professional education. Such areas as teaching, nursing, and medicine were by the 1920s requiring professional certifications undreamed of in the 1890s. The new shape of professionalism would increasingly challenge Adventism. The denomination's educational and ecclesiastical leaders would once again be forced to examine the tension between academic vision and Adventist mission.

The problem wasn't acute in the early



1920s, when schools sending students to the College of Medical Evangelists needed only junior college accreditation, which could readily be acquired. But by 1928, it was evident that they would have to be accredited as senior colleges. That requirement proved troublesome for many reasons, but the central threat was that college teachers would need graduate degrees that could be earned only

at "pagan" institutions. Some feared the entire system would be corrupted by professors who brought their ideas back into Adventism's colleges.

Solving the problem became a major item on the Adventist agenda. In 1928, the GC Annual Council established the Board of Regents as a denominational accrediting association. The church hoped that the regional accrediting bodies would accept the Board of Regents' accreditation, thereby enabling Adventist colleges to avoid "contamination."

This proved to be wishful thinking. Some educational leaders had known this



Fountain (which doubles as a baptismal font) at University of Eastern Africa, Baraton (Eldoret, Kenya).

Howell and those of like mind at the General Conference opposed the accreditation of Adventist institutions.

earlier extremes and was dean and would later become president of the College of Medical Evangelists, as well as several of the college presidents. They had statements from Ellen White that logically led to nothing but accreditation even though she warned of the dangers involved. The basis for their stand went back to 1910 when the denomination had to decide what type of medical education to offer at Loma Linda, and church leaders had placed the matter before Ellen White.43

She replied unequivocally that the school must "provide that which is es-

sionals to serve the modern world. Without Ellen White's clear counsel. Adventist colleges would probably not have offered training adequate for professionals in the 20th century.

ut those alternatives were

not always immediately apparent to those facing the accreditation controversy. One of Magan's first converts was E. A. Sutherland, the antidegree champion of the 1890s and Magan's colleague in the radical reforms at Battle Creek and Madison colleges. As early as 1923, Sutherland, convinced by Magan of the seriousness of the problem, began quietly sending some of his teachers to recognized institutions for advanced degrees,

standards of professional education.46 Sutherland's maneuvers did not be-

so that Madison could meet the rising

the worldly influence and dictation is a tremendous disappointment."48 By 1931, when Sutherland came out

in the open on the topic, the problem had become well recognized. In fact, the 1931 Autumn Council voted to allow Adventist colleges to secure regional accreditation. But despite this authorization, many church leaders continued to oppose the idea. William G. White noted that "the 1931 Council decision did not solve the problem, but was only the opening salvo of a five-year war of words as the pros and cons of regional accreditation were debated by church administrators and educators."49

A major setback for the accreditation forces came in October 1935 when W. H. Branson delivered the report of the Survey Commission on Accreditation to the GC Autumn Council. Branson closed his report by noting that "we are ready to admit that in our action of four years ago we went too far."50 As a result of his speech and the ensuing discussion, the delegates decided to minimize the danger by accrediting only two senior colleges. However, the 1936 General Conference session reversed that decision. By 1945, all six of the North American senior colleges at the center of the controversy had obtained accreditation.51

But the denomination was still faced with the problem of educating faculty so as to preserve the primacy of Adventist mission. "Let's train our own" had been the earliest line of thought. Thus in the early 20th century, a few Master's degrees were offered by Pacific Union College, Union College, and Emmanuel Missionary College. 52 But that approach soon dissipated. More permanent in nature was the Advanced Bible School (ABS), inaugurated at Pacific Union College in 1934. It was hoped that this institution could offer advanced degrees to Bible teachers and thus preserve the Adventist perspective for that crucial group of the faculty. The ABS would eventually evolve into the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.53

The Advanced Bible School, of course. didn't solve the educational needs of most faculty. As a result, boards sought mature, experienced, "safe" faculty who could be sent to non-Adventist institutions for advanced study, hoping that the



Good Samaritan statues at Loma Linda University (Loma Linda, California).

sential to qualify our youth who desire to be physicians."44 In addition, Mrs. White indicated that Adventist colleges must offer a preparatory education that brought students to the necessary "point of literary and scientific training" to "meet the entrance requirements specified by state laws."45

Those statements would eventually provide the support for Adventist colleges' preparing a broad range of profescome public until 1931,47 but when they did, there was quite a reaction. For example, Otto J. Graf, one of the presidents who followed Sutherland at Emmanuel Missionary College, sounded a note of anguish and surprise. "Now my brother," he wrote, "years ago we looked upon you and your school as bulwarks against things worldly, and now to find you leading out in this matter of subjecting ou[r] school system unnecessarily to

impact on that select group would be minimal. And up through the late 1950s, that plan seemed to be working fairly well.

Meanwhile, the denomination continued to grapple with the ongoing tension between Adventist mission and academic vision, but the dynamics between the



House of Prayer, Spicer Memorial College (Pune, India).

two appeared to be in a state of constructive balance. But then came the 1960s and new challenges to the ongoing tension.

The Challenges of Maturity

The dynamic 1960s saw unprecedented growth in American higher

education as a flood of baby boomers entered its doors.

Adventist higher education faced the same stresses and strains as public education. With a Ph.D. now the expected degree for college teachers, the send-the-old safe-professors-off-for-advanced-study approach collapsed as a wave of young Adventists enrolled in a variety of graduate schools. Nobody knew what the results might be.

By the 1970s and 1980s, Adventist institutions had joined the ranks of respectable colleges and universities, some of them even offering fully accredited doctoral degrees. But the question of achieving balance was still an issue. The denomination's schools of higher education were obviously doing well academically. But what about mission? One wonders, for example, about the significance of a caution I received when addressing the faculty of one Adventist institution to avoid the word "Christian" lest I offend some of the practicing Islamics and Hindus on the faculty. And what are we to think when a department removes the phrase "biblical perspective" from assignments originally formulated to reflect the institution's mission statement, because the non-Christians among the students know little about the Bible?

hat about Adventist mission? This question has repeatedly stimulated actions by General Conference educational leaders. One thinks of Charles Hirsch's attempts



Educators from 16 countries attended the 37th International Faith and Learning Seminar (Institute for Christian Teaching) in February 2008 at Avondale College (Cooranbong, Australia).

to give Adventist history and Ellen White studies a more prominent place in the curriculum (1970s), the massive energies and expenses dedicated to bringing Adventist professors from around the world to participate in the integration of faith and learning conferences initiated by George Akers and Humberto Rasi (1990s through the present), and the International Conference on the Seventhday Adventist Philosophy of Education (2001).

Today, there is little doubt about the success of Adventist higher education in the area of academics. The greater challenge is to maintain the vitality of Adventist mission.

The tension between the two, as we have seen, had existed from the inception of the denomination's tertiary institutions. And while this tension has been and continues to be taxing at times, I believe that it is absolutely necessary for the health of Adventist colleges and universities. Without it, there are only two options: the-dying-of-the-light syndrome⁵⁴ in the absence of a distinctive Adventist emphasis; or a Bible college program that would be inadequate for 21st-century needs. While the tension is always uncomfortable, the alternatives would be disastrous in fulfilling the commission envisioned by James and Ellen White in

the founding of Battle Creek College. *∅*



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- 43. Dores Eugene Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Southern Publ. Assn., 1955), pp. 371-389.
- 44. Ellen G. White, letter reproduced in "A Medical School at Loma Linda," *Review and Herald* (May 19, 1910), p. 18.
- 45. _____, Counsels to Teachers, pp. 479, 480.
 - 46. E. A. Sutherland to O. J. Graf, May 18, 1931.
- 47. [E. A. Sutherland], "Why Should Madison Become a Senior College," *The Madison Survey* (January 7, 1931).
- 48. O. J. Graf to E. A. Sutherland, January 16, 1931. Cf. Clifford G. Howell to E. A. Sutherland, March 18, 1932.
- 49. William G. White, Jr., "Another Look at Those Pioneers of Adventist Accreditation," *Focus* (Winter 1978), p. 11.
- 50. W. H. Branson, "Our Presentation of the Report of the Survey Commission on Education Regarding Accreditation," speech delivered at Fall Council, October 30, 1935.
- 51. For the best and most extensive treatment of the accreditation struggle, see the unpublished book manuscript by William G. White, Jr., entitled "New Times, New Measures, New Men: The Regional Accreditation of Seventh-day Adventist Liberal Arts Colleges, 1922-1945."
- 52. Walter C. Utt, A Mountain, A Pickax, A College (Angwin, Calif.: Alumni Assn. of Pacific Union College, 1968), p. 70; Dick, Union, pp. 179, 180; Vande Vere, Wisdom Seekers, p. 157.
- 53. Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, 2d. rev. ed. (1996), s.v. "Andrews University."
- 54. See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities From Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998).