



THE GREAT COMMISSION

and the Educational Imperative

Christianity is primarily a mission movement. And the Seventh-day Adventist Church exists for only one reason: Mission, especially end-time mission as Planet Earth moves toward the long-awaited eschaton. When Adventism loses its mission-to-the-world orientation, it has lost its only reason for existence.

The Great Commissions

When we think of mission, Matthew 28:18 to 20 generally comes to mind: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (RSV).¹

But the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is only one of at least five mission commissions in the New Testament.

- A second is in Acts 1:8: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”
- A third mission imperative is implied in Matthew 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.”
- The fourth commission is found following the bitter experience of the opening of the little book of Daniel in Revelation 10:11: “Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings” (KJV).
- And the fifth is found in Revelation 14:6: “Then I saw another angel

flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people.”

There are several interesting things about these five gospel commissions. The first is that they imply education and teaching, a fact made explicit in Matthew 28 with its command to “teach” all things that Christ had commanded.

A second thing to note is that the first three of those commissions have been undertaken by the Christian Church in general. But the last two in Revelation 10 and 14 have been sounded only by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has put the preaching of the end-time apocalyptic package and the three angels’ messages at the very center of its identity. In other words, Adventism has never viewed itself as merely another de-

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nomination, but as a called-out movement of prophecy with a unique message to teach to the ends of the earth. That understanding has pushed Adventism around the world, making it the most widespread unified Protestant body in the history of Christianity.

The Adventist Journey From Anti-mission and Anti-education

Modern Adventism views (or should view) its massive educational system as a major arm of its missiological endeavor. But that wasn't always so. In fact, early Adventists were both anti-mission and anti-education.

The earliest Seventh-day Adventists firmly believed that they had no mission to the world. As they saw it, the door of probation had been shut in October 1844, and future mission was impossible. Their only task was to comfort one another and seek to wake up backslidden Millerites until the soon-expected end came.²

Only very gradually did they give up their Shut Door to mission theology in the early 1850s. Slowly, very slowly, they began to understand that they had a wider mission. But even as late as 1859, Uriah Smith put forth the idea that since the United States was composed of people from around the world, the message of the three angels to every nation could be accomplished if one person from each country as found in the United States heard the message. Thus, he wrote, it needed to be preached to one German, one Australian, one African, and so on.³ Even 20 years after the Millerite disappointment, the idea of world mission had not registered in the minds of our early leaders to any significant degree.

The same can be said about Adventist education. Most believed that there was no need for it. It was that mentality that led W. H. Ball in 1862 to ask if it is "right and consistent for us who believe with all our hearts in the immediate coming of the Lord, to seek to give our children an education?"⁴ Note that that question was being asked 18 years after the Millerite disappointment. The anti-edu-

cation "bug" had firmly implanted itself in the Adventist mentality.

James White's reply is of interest, since he argued in answering Ball that "the fact that Christ is very soon coming is no reason why the mind should not be improved. A well-disciplined and informed mind can best receive and cherish the sublime truths of the Second Advent." His wife was of the same opinion.⁵

Early Adventists were both anti-mission and anti-education. That would change in the early 1870s, nearly 30 years after the Millerite disappointment. By 1872, the church was not only growing, but also needed ministers. Those who had come into the church from Millerism were aging, and the church needed to think seriously about training future leadership. Beyond that, by the early 1870s the church was earnestly considering its responsibility toward foreign missions.

It was with those concerns in mind that the General Conference established the School Committee. The committee reported in May 1872 that "there are persons all through our ranks, who have come to years of maturity, who have convictions that they ought to do something to directly forward the glorious and important cause in which we are engaged. To this end, they want immediately to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the teaching of the Bible in reference to those great truths which pertain to this time." At the same time, the committee noted, those people needed instruction in general knowledge so that they would be more effective in speaking and writing. As a result, the denomination was establishing a school in Battle Creek so that church members could be "prepared to wield those weapons for the advancement of the cause."⁶

There was no doubt in the minds of the denomination's leadership in 1872 that the purpose of the school they were establishing was to train people to spread the gospel. Ellen White, writing her first major state-

ment on education ("Proper Education") for the new school, was in full harmony with that aim. "We need a school," she penned, "where those who are just entering the ministry may be taught at least the common branches of education, and where they may also learn more perfectly the truths of God's word for this time."⁷

Meanwhile, by 1873 James White and other denominational leaders were realizing that the 1872 school was inadequate and that "there is no branch of this work that suffers so much at the present time as the proper education of men and women to proclaim the third angel's message." He noted that the church needed to prepare "young men and women . . . to become printers, editors, and teachers." In addition, they needed to be taught the "living languages" (rather than the dead classical languages), since we have "a message . . . that is to be proclaimed before many nations and tongues and peoples."⁸

By early 1873, the recognition that the denomination needed to send men and women overseas also was becoming intense. Thus, in April 1873, John Nevins Andrews could editorialize in the *Review and Herald* that "the calls that come from every quarter, from men speaking other languages, must be answered by us. We cannot do this in our present circumstances. But we can do it if the Lord bless our effort in the establishment of our proposed school. We have delayed this effort too long."⁹

The year 1874 witnessed a major shift in Adventist history. In that year the denomination sent its first official missionary—J. N. Andrews—to a foreign land and opened its first collegiate institution—Battle Creek College. Those two events must not be seen as two separate events, but as one. After all, the foremost purpose of the denomination's early educational enterprise was to train men and women to spread the three angels' messages.

The year 1874 with both its sending of Adventism's first foreign mis-

sionary and the opening of its first college indicate the close tie between mission and education. The strength of that unity would be reinforced in the 1890s. That decade would witness two parallel explosions in the dynamics of the development of Adventism. The first related to mission and the second to education. And, as in the 1870s, the two moved together.

It is important to realize from the outset that the mission enthusiasm of the 1890s was not restricted to the Adventist Church. Sydney Ahlstrom, a leading student of American church history, has noted that “the closing two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the climactic phase of the foreign missions movement in American Protestantism.”¹⁰ One of the main stimulants of that interest was the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, which grew out of an appeal by Dwight L. Moody in 1886 for college students to devote their lives to mission service. One hundred took their stand. That number increased to 2,200 in 1887, and within a few years, many thousands of evangelical Protestant young people had pledged their lives to mission service. Their Matthew 24:14-inspired motto was: “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”¹¹

The foremost educational result of that mission thrust was the rise of the missionary college and Bible institute movement among American evangelicals. The aim of those schools was to prepare large numbers of workers in a short period of time to staff mission outposts both at home and overseas. The schools focused on providing practical training and Bible knowledge.¹²

Events within the Seventh-day Adventist Church paralleled both the mission explosion of evangelical Protestantism and its educational extension. Signs of new life in Adventist missions began to surface in the mid-1880s. In 1886, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists*—a book that did much to promote a missionary spirit among Adventists—

was published in Basel, Switzerland. *Historical Sketches* was the first book on foreign missions published by the denomination. It was followed in 1889 by S. N. Haskell’s two-year itinerary around the world, during which he surveyed the possibilities for opening mission work in various places. By 1890, the stage was set for what Richard Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf have called the era of “Mission Advance” in the Adventist denomination.¹³

In 1880, Adventists had only eight missions with five evangelistic workers outside the United States. In 1890, they still had only eight missions, even though the number of workers had risen to 56. By 1900, however, the number of missions had risen to 42, and the number of evangelistic mission workers to 481. The last decade of the 19th century initiated an accelerating trend that remained unabated throughout the first 30 years of the 20th century. By 1930, the church was supporting 8,479 evangelistic workers outside of North America, representing 270 missions.¹⁴

That outreach had transformed the very nature of Adventism.

Note that in the 1890s the statistical curve related to Advent mission shoots straight up. At last the denomination realized that it truly had a message of warning that must go to all the world—to Asia, India, Africa, the nations of South America, and the Islands of the sea—rather than merely the Christianized nations of Europe, Australia, and South Africa.

Mission outreach had a direct effect on the expansion of Seventh-day Adventist schooling. The denomination looked to its schools to supply the ever-increasing number of workers for its rapidly expanding worldwide work, just as the evangelical Protestant expansion of missions had stimulated the Bible institute and missionary college movement to train large numbers of missionaries.

John Harvey Kellogg, who appears to have been the Adventist in closest touch with evangelical educational

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ideas,¹⁵ was probably the first to develop a missionary school within the denomination. His Sanitarium Training School for Medical Missionaries was established in 1889, followed by the American Medical Missionary College in 1895. Meanwhile, the Avondale School for Christian Workers in Australia (1894), the training schools stimulated by Edward Alexander Sutherland and Percy T. Magan, and the Adventist missionary colleges, such as Stanborough Park Missionary College (England), Washington Missionary College, Emmanuel Missionary College, and Southern Missionary College (U.S.A.), soon were dotting the Adventist landscape.

Mission expansion affected Adventist educational expansion in at least two identifiable ways. First, it greatly increased the number of schools and students in North America, since most of the denomination's early workers came from the United States. Second, Adventists began to establish schools around the world so that workers could be trained in their home fields. By 1900, therefore, not only had Adventist educational institutions greatly expanded in number, but the system also had been internationalized.

The magnitude of that whole process was compounded by unprecedented institutional development during the 1890s. Besides churches and schools, Adventists developed hospitals, publishing houses, and eventually (to a lesser extent) health-food factories in the United States and overseas. Thus the schools were called upon to supply ever-larger numbers of institutional employees, in addition to evangelistic workers.

One result of the Adventist mission explosion in the 1890s was a similar dynamic development in Adventist education. As with missions, during the 1890s the educational expansion graph goes straight up. In 1880, the denomination had two schools. By 1890, the number had increased to 16. But by 1900, it was 245. And, as with mission, that dynamic expansion would continue, with more than 600 schools

in 1910 and more than 2,000 by 1930.¹⁶

We need to recognize that, from its inception, 19th-century Adventist education had been inextricably connected with foreign missions. Thus the spread of Adventist education during the 1890s was directly related to the spiritual revival in the denomination's theology in 1888 and to an enlarged vision of the church's mission to the world. It is important to note that those were positive motivators. Negative motivators such as the need to escape from incipient Darwinism and religious skepticism played a minor role. Adventist education at its best stands for something of great importance, rather than representing an escape from the non-Christian world.

With the lessons of the 1870s and 1890s in mind, we can conclude that Adventist education and Adventist mission are two essential parts of the same whole. Adventist education is a dynamic force in a world in need of redemptive healing. *Adventism's educational system is obviously dependent on church support. But the denomination's mission to the world is dependent upon its ability to train the next generation in the ideals and mission goals of Adventism.* Without its educational system, Adventism would flounder and lose its way as the older leaders pass on. *The plain fact is that success in world mission and success in Adventist education go hand in hand. Both are essential. They stand or fall together.*

The Crucial Role of Education in Mission

But the unity of mission and education is not unique to Adventism. George S. Counts helps us see that relationship in its larger historical context. Although he was a thoroughgoing secularist, Counts understood the intimate relationship between the goals of any society and education shaped to meet those goals. Nearly a century ago, he wrote that "to shape educational policy is to guard the path that leads from the present to the future. . . . Throughout the centuries since special educational

agencies were first established, the strategic position of the school has been appreciated by kings, emperors, and popes, by rebels, reformers, and prophets. Hence, among those opposing forces found in all complex societies, a struggle for the control of the school is always evident. Every group or sect endeavors to pass on to its own children and to the children of others that culture which it happens to esteem; and every privileged class seeks to perpetuate its favored position in society by means of education."¹⁷

In another connection, Counts observed, in discussing the challenge of Soviet education in the early 1930s, that the failure of revolutions has been a record of the failure to bring education into the service of the revolutionary cause. Revolutionary bodies will possess no more permanence, he pointed out, than the small bands of idealists who conceived them if the children of the next generation cannot be persuaded to carry the revolution to its logical conclusion. As a result, the history of the Soviets, Germany's Nazi Party, and other successful revolutionary movements has demonstrated that one of the first measures taken by revolutionary governments is to place all educational agencies under the direct control of the state and to give the schools a central hand in building the new society.¹⁸

The same might also be said of the heirs of democratic revolutions or even of religious movements. Thus, we find the rise of vernacular education as an integral part of the Lutheran Reformation. After all, individuals needed to be able to read the all-important Bible for themselves if they were to maintain their faith independent of an influential priesthood. In a similar vein, one of the first moves of the Puritans after their arrival in the wilderness of North America was to found Harvard College in 1636. That was followed in 1642 and 1647 by legislation pointing toward compulsory education at the elementary and secondary levels. The Puritans realized that their mission was doomed without both civil and religious leaders educated in biblical prin-

ciples and a populace that could read their Bibles.

Late 19th-century Adventists were inspired by similar insights. Thus, it was no accident that Ellen White framed her educational thought within the context of the great controversy struggle between Christ and Satan and their respective principles. The greatest of all the world's culture wars is for the minds and hearts of the coming generations. And the epicenter of the struggle is for the control of schooling; control of the institution that has so much to do with shaping minds and hearts, goals and aspirations, values and direction.

And at this point, I should note that biblical Christianity is in a very real sense a revolutionary movement. But, as such, it is not out to control the kingdoms of this world but to put an end to the current confusion and usher in the fullness of Christ's kingdom at His second advent. In that sense, Christianity in general and Adventism in particular are revolutionary forces of the first order.¹⁹ Thus the importance of a clear understanding of the goals of Adventist education.

I trust that you have grasped the point: Education stands at the very center of the Great Controversy. Education stands at the center of the struggle for the future of all missiological movements—whether they be secular ideologies or religious. Hitler understood that fact, as did Stalin, the founders of American democracy, and Roman Catholicism. I trust that we as Adventists can realize that Adventist education is not a mere sideshow in the denomination's mission, just another institutional entity that has to somehow be given a hesitant nod of approval and haltingly funded as the church goes about its important work of winning souls. No!! Education is central to Adventism's mission to the world. It is not an option. It is essential, *the most essential aspect of the church's mission* as it moves out of the past and into the future and to-

ward the Second Advent. To repeat: *Education stands at the very center of the Great Controversy.*

That thought naturally leads to the essentials of that education. But before we go there, we need to see the rest of the Adventist educational mission. We have examined one aspect at some length; namely, the education of future leaders. But there is a second aspect of Adventist education just as crucial. Namely, its evangelistic impact on the developing youth of the church who we hope will give their hearts and minds to Christ and devoted ministry in both the professional sense and as dedicated laypeople.

As the great controversy between Christ and Satan plays out in the macrocosmic world order, there is at the same time a microcosmic struggle that is continually taking place in the battle for the allegiance of the hearts and minds of individual children and youth.

Ellen White caught the importance of that truth when she wrote that "by a misconception of the true nature and object of education, many have been led into serious and even fatal errors." And here she meant fatal not merely for this earth but also eternally fatal. She went on to note that "such a mistake is made when the regulation of the heart or the establishment of principles is neglected in the effort to secure intellectual culture, or when eternal interests are overlooked in the eager desire for temporal advantage."²⁰

Again, she wrote, "the necessity of establishing Christian schools is urged upon me very strongly. In the schools of today, many things are taught that are a hindrance rather than a blessing. Schools are needed where the word of God is made the basis of education. Satan is the great enemy of God, and it is his constant aim to lead souls away from their allegiance to the King of heaven. He would have minds so trained that men and women will exert their influence on the side of error and moral corruption instead of using their talents in the service of God. *His object is effectually gained, when, by perverting their ideas of edu-*

cation, he succeeds in enlisting parents and teachers on his side; for a wrong education often starts the mind on the road to infidelity."²¹

It is no accident that Adventists have developed more than 8,000 elementary and secondary schools around the world. To the contrary, urged by Ellen White, they came to see Adventist education for every Adventist child as an essential in the denomination's mission.

It is significant that the development of Adventist elementary education finds its major turning point in the mission excitement and dynamics of the 1890s during Ellen White's own foreign mission service in Australia. While there, she noted that parents were compelled by law to send their children to school. That situation agitated the issue of elementary education in her mind. She wrote to her son Willie in May 1897 that this subject had "long been neglected" in spite of the fact that "the first seven or ten years of a child's life is the time when lasting impressions for good or evil are made."²² Speaking to the Australian situation, she wrote that "in some countries parents are compelled by law to send their children to school. In these countries, in localities where there is a church, *schools should be established if there are no more than six children to attend. . . .* We are far behind our duty in this important matter. In many places schools should have been in operation years ago."²³ Those were perhaps the most immediately influential words she ever spoke. They almost instantly began to change the Adventist world.

Such men as Edward Alexander Sutherland and Percy T. Magan, the reform leaders who would move Battle Creek College into the country in 1901, took this counsel to heart. They developed a program for training teachers and did much to stimulate both local congregations and promising young people to get involved in elementary education.²⁴ The phenomenal growth of Adventist elementary education

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started immediately. As a result, while the denomination reported 18 schools in 1895, it had 220 five years later.²⁵

By 1900, the place of the local elementary school was firmly established in Adventist congregations. And most of those schools had only one teacher. The church had taken seriously the counsel that it should establish a school if there were only six students.

The 1890s was the decade of advancement in Adventist education. The church had entered the nineties with a handful of schools and a poorly perceived, and even more poorly executed, philosophy of education. The turn of the century found Adventists with a rapidly expanding international system of education at all levels with a sound philosophy that had been experimentally validated. Ellen White had been a key personality in stimulating that accomplishment. By 1900, Seventh-day Adventism was taking both mission to *all* the world and the education of every child seriously. Those two universals were linked. Big ideas of mission and education have

always gone together in Adventism. Education is the engine that has thrust forward the mission. What is most surprising is not that they go together but that it took the church 50 years to finally grasp the need for both world mission and the evangelistic mission of education.

Adventist Educational Essentials

That thought brings us to the three essential goals of Adventist education. The first is to prepare young people to function successfully in this present world. Education for excellence in this life and success in this world is an essential aspect of Adventist education. But if that is all it achieves, it has failed. After all, that is the function of the public or government schools. And they often do an excellent job in accomplishing that goal.

That thought brings us to the second great goal of Adventist education, which Ellen White hinted at in the opening paragraph of her book

Education. “True education,” she wrote, “means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man.”²⁶ In other words, Adventist education is for this earth. But it is more. It is also education for eternity.

That goal comes into sharp focus in *Education*'s first chapter and again its fourth as Ellen White repeatedly set forth education as a “work of redemption” that is to counter the effects of the Genesis Fall. “The teacher’s first effort and his constant aim,” she wrote, “is to help students come into a saving relationship with Christ.”²⁷

With those forceful ideas Ellen White set forth education as evangelism. And with that fact she placed education at the center of the Great Controversy and viewed teachers as God’s agents or ministers in the struggle over the hearts, minds, and souls of the coming generation. Adventist education is not at the edge of the church’s mission to the world, but rather one of its most crucial elements. From Ellen White’s perspective, the redemptive goal of education must shape every aspect of a school’s program, including not only the formal course of studies, but also the so-called extracurricular and social.

But even if a particular Adventist school did provide the highest intellectual and vocational education, did introduce young people to Jesus as Lord and Savior, and did place the Bible at the center of education; still, I would argue, it has fallen short if that is all it has accomplished. After all, those are functions that every evangelical Christian school should be accomplishing. And if we only manage to accomplish what other Christian schools are already doing, then there is no pressing justification for duplicating their activities in yet one more Christian school.

That conclusion brings me to the third aspect of the Adventist educational commission. That third aspect

relates to the teaching of its unique doctrinal package and especially the denomination's apocalyptic understanding and the implications of that understanding for worldwide mission and the Second Advent.

Adventism's unique task is to preach God's end-time apocalyptic message found in Revelation 14:6 to 12 to all the world. That understanding has led generations of Adventist young people to give their lives in obscure mission fields and has prompted older church members to sacrifice not only the nearness of their children, but also their financial means to fulfill the prophetic imperative in the Apocalypse of John. It has also placed education at the center of the denomination's agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that Adventist schools are unique institutions that fill a special place in the great end-time controversy between Christ and Satan. As such, they not only prepare students for life in this world and introduce young people to Jesus as Lord and Savior, but they also inspire the coming generation with an understanding of God's end-time apocalyptic vision that leads them to dedicate their lives to that vision and the advent of their Lord.

Adventist educational identity and mission include all three of those factors in proper relationship. And Adventist education, we must never forget, stands at the center of the Great Controversy. Schools are about evangelism and mission. Schools are about not only preserving the ideas and mission of Adventism, but also bringing about the long-awaited eschaton. And only with that thought in mind can we grasp the importance of understanding Adventism's educational purpose. After all, we as Adventists have not one but two Great Commissions.

- The first commission is to spread the full teachings of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

- The second is an educational

commission to establish and support a system of schools to not only evangelize the church's young people but also to prepare the next generations of leaders to enable the church to accomplish its worldwide mission. ✍

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