

Education, by Ellen G. White

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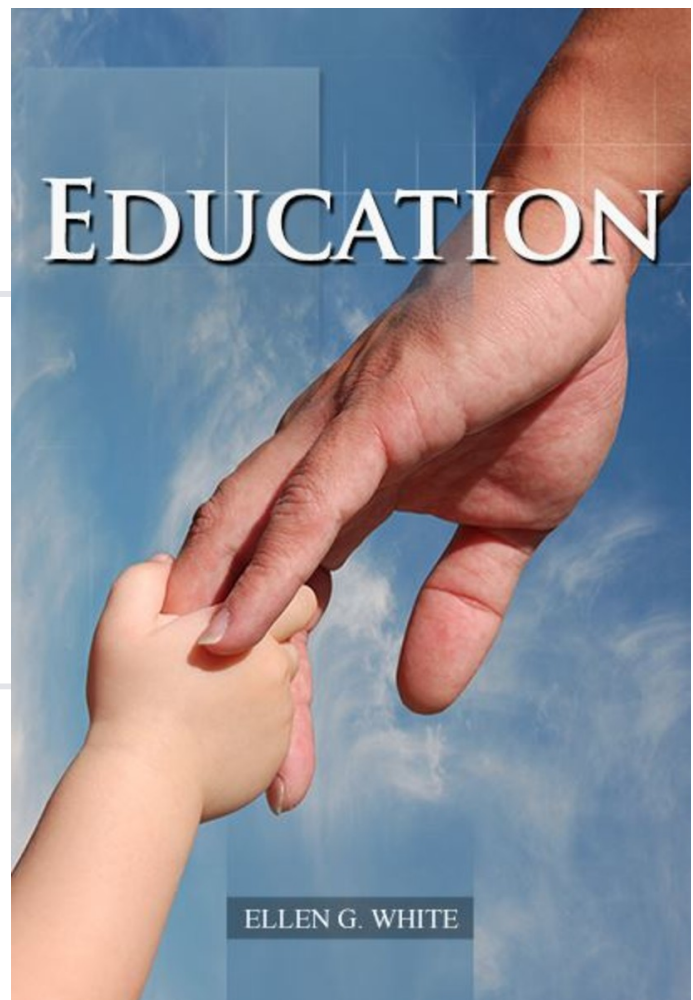
Education is Ellen G. White's classic work on the principles of Christian education.

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) played a fundamental role in defining the rationale, philosophy, and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education. Having partially completed only primary education, she was nevertheless aware of contemporary discussions on the subject of education, especially in the United States, at a time when several thinkers were advocating changes in curricula and methods.

Ellen White's views on education are connected to her core metanarrative of the Great Controversy between good and evil, God and Satan, beginning in heaven and later coming to earth. This conflict involved Adam and Eve, was also evident in Jesus' ministry, and will end with God's ultimate victory. For her, education is a key agency in the process of restoring humans to God's original plan.

White's convictions on education were articulated in the midst of extensive travels, a heavy preaching schedule, and prolific writing on other topics, while raising three children. She saw herself as a reformer who promoted integrating biblical faith with formal learning. Thanks to her inspired vision and persistence, the Adventist Church has developed a global system of education with unique characteristics.¹

The beginnings, however, were halting.² During the 1850s and 1860s the small group of Seventh-day Adventist believers established a few schools sponsored by congregations and families concerned for the Christian



Education by Ellen G. White

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

formation of their own children. But these were scattered and short-lived initiatives.

After the Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially organized in 1863, it was evident that the movement of some 3,500 members needed to prepare ministers anchored in Biblical beliefs and committed to mission. This led to the foundation of Battle Creek College in 1874, which soon began training teachers and accountants. Nurses continued to receive training in the neighboring Battle Creek Sanitarium. Still, implementing a new paradigm for educating students was rendered difficult with teachers who had been trained in secular models.

As the Adventist Church became more involved in educating its own children and youth, Ellen White wrote several articles on the subject for denominational journals. Her most significant essay, "Proper Education" (1872), was later incorporated into *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, pp. 131-160. Actual reform, however, did not begin in earnest until an important educational convention was held in Michigan in the summer of 1891 with about 100 educators and church administrators in attendance.

As White interacted with Adventist educational leaders regarding issues such as school location, design, curricula, faculty selection, finances, dormitory life, recreation, and student discipline, her own views broadened and matured. We can trace this development in her articles and in her three books on the subject: *Christian Education* (1893), *Special Testimonies on Education* (1897) and *Education* (1903). In 1913, two years before her death, her various writings addressed to Adventist members were published in the book *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education*.

Her book *Education* remains the most concise expression of her ideas, as she wrote to the general public, particularly teachers, parents, and students. Its content took shape in stages, beginning around 1896 in Australia, where she was involved in the foundation of Avondale College (est. 1897). The book was organized taking into account her earlier writings on the subject as well as her letters of counsel and additional concepts. It was published seven years later by Pacific Press.³

The main concepts of the book *Education* can be summarized as follows:

The Christian formation of children and youth is the first duty of parents, starting in the home, and later working in cooperation with teachers and church leaders. "Fathers and mothers and teachers need to appreciate more fully the responsibility and honor that God has placed upon them, in making them, to the child, the representatives of Himself" (*Education*, 244). Students learn that they belong to a special people with a history, a mission, and a destiny in which they can play an important role.

The Bible constitutes the basis and reference point of all educational endeavors. "The Bible contains all the principles that men need to understand in order to be fitted either for this life or for the life to come" (*Education*, 123). The curricular and co-curricular programs must reflect the worldview revealed by God in the Scriptures. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the Bible writers will motivate them in their search for truth if they submit to their guidance. Thus, students will become "thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought" (*Education*

, 17).

Teachers and students acknowledge that all truth is God's truth, and that each field of study can broaden and deepen their understanding of truth. God's creation, from the molecular to the stellar, reveals His wisdom and opens up vast areas of learning. "Nature testifies of God. The susceptible mind, brought in contact with the miracle and mystery of the universe, cannot but recognize the working of infinite power" (*Education*, 99). Faith must be based on evidence, which appeals to reason.

The life of Jesus Christ and His teachings should occupy a place of privilege on campus. Students are encouraged to accept Him as Creator, Savior, Lord, and coming King, and to commit their lives to His service, whatever the vocation or profession they choose. "Redemption... is the subject of education" (*Education*, 16). Accepting His grace and establishing a personal friendship with Him bring meaning, purpose, and hope to life.

The main objective of Adventist education is to develop in students a Christian character as they embrace biblical values and learn to make principled choices. This goal is best reached in an atmosphere of responsible freedom and redemptive discipline. "True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements; but above information it values power; above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character" (*Education*, 225).

Educators exemplify and foster a balanced development of their students' lives. Students adopt a simple, healthy lifestyle modeled after God's original plan in the Garden of Eden. They learn a basic trade to strengthen their body and prepare to sustain themselves. Learning and labor are integrated. Education, then, "is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers" (*Education*, 13).

Service to fellow human being, motivated by God's love, is the main purpose of life. Education "prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come" (*Education*, 13). School programs include opportunities for students to alleviate human needs in the neighborhood, their homeland or abroad. Priority is given to active compassion, generosity, and honest work.

Education on this earth is the beginning of a process that will continue for eternity on the New Earth, after Jesus' second coming. "There every power will be developed, every capability increased.... All the treasures of the universe will be open to the study of God's children" (*Education*, 307).

Much has changed in the world since the time Ellen White published her ideas on education. The transition from an agricultural to an industrial, urban economy and beyond is a fact. Schooling has become longer, more specialized, and more expensive.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has expanded globally in terms of members and institutions. It now operates the broadest unified Christian system of education with schools, academies, colleges, and universities in more

than 100 countries and almost two million students enrolled. Adventist education is known for its uplifting influence on society. In fact, about one-half of the students at Adventist schools come from homes with other religious convictions or none at all. At higher levels, the educational institutions are recognized for research and discoveries in health and other areas. Adventist educators also cooperate with church leaders to develop mission strategies, refine theological insights, and provide answers to societal issues of the day.

At its best, Adventist education serves as the main agent in forming the next generation of believers, and training most of its employees and leaders, while attracting new members. In view of this reality, each successive cohort of Adventist teachers and leaders faces the challenge of understanding, adapting, and implementing in new socio-cultural contexts the philosophy and objectives articulated by Ellen White in her book *Education*, which has been translated into more than 30 languages.⁴ In 2000 the White Estate published an updated language adaptation of *Education* titled *True Education*.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. See Floyd Greenleaf, *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2005).

2. See George Knight, ed., *Early Christian Educators* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1983), especially chapter 3.

3. See Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900-1905*, vol. 5 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1981), 179-184.

4. For additional perspectives on this subject, see George R. Knight, *Myths in Adventism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1985, 2009), and Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1998),

especially chapters 29 and 30.

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