

**FAITHFULNESS TO THE IDENTITY OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST
CHRISTIANITY IN THE ADVENTIST SCHOOL**

Introduction

Since the Great Disappointment four core theological convictions or “pillar doctrines” have defined and distinguished Seventh-day Adventists from other Christians: belief in the literal Second Coming of Jesus, Christ’s two-phase ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, the seventh-day Sabbath, and humanity’s conditional immortality. The central question for this paper is, how can these core convictions be nurtured and applied within each of the denomination’s 5,600 schools, colleges and universities around the world? This essay proposes that these core convictions imply particular characteristics of the schools’ environment and of the teachers’ consciousness and pedagogy. First, outlining the rationale behind such a claim, it will explore, and propose as normative, *some* of the possible characteristics of the school and teacher implied by each of the four convictions.¹ The experience of the writer will be used to examine ways in which schools and teachers are (or are not) applying these convictions.²

Rationale

Two main reasons underlie my assertion that the core convictions of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity suggest particular characteristics of the Adventist school and teacher. The first is based upon the principle of socialization. This principle holds that “our ‘person’ – who and how we are in the world – is formed in large part, by influences of our social and cultural context.”³ This means the kind of cultural, social, and religious environment in which we exist largely shapes our “being,” for “we are never mere observers in our ‘place;’ rather, we take on as our own its patterns of meaning and role models, its attitudes and values” as part of our own identity.⁴ Given the role of socialization in forming one’s personal faith and identity, Seventh-day Adventist schools and teachers must consider carefully *all* aspects of the school’s life in order to examine if they are intentionally and faithfully fostering Seventh-day Adventist

Christianity. Thus, the focus is upon the whole school program and every teacher, rather than on the explicit teaching of doctrine (and the religion teacher) within the Adventist school.⁵

The second reason emerges from the example and work of Thomas Groome in his book *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent*. Groome demonstrates a compelling vision for education suggested by the “core convictions of Catholic Christianity,”⁶ and leads one to assume therefore that other spiritualities also imply a particular approach to education. Groome has inspired me to wonder what vision for education might be suggested by the core convictions of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity. What follows is a brief and humble attempt at articulating such a vision.

The Conviction in the Literal, Premillennial, and Imminent Return of Christ

The initial effect of the Sabbatarian Adventists’ belief in the soon coming of Jesus was to hinder the establishment of the denomination’s formal education system. Many early Sabbatarian Adventists questioned whether their belief in the “immediate coming of the Lord” was compatible with giving their “children an education,” for “why educate Adventist children for a world that would be gone before they grew up?”⁷

A. Characteristics of the School

i. Nurturing a Community of Intelligent Christians

The answer proposed by two of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church, reveals what should be a particular characteristic of the Adventist school. James White argued, “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.”⁸ Similarly his wife, Ellen White, wrote, “Ignorance will not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best

appreciated by an intellectual Christian.”⁹ The responses of the Whites draw upon their holistic theological anthropology, which views spiritual and intellectual development as interrelated and interdependent. Spiritual preparation for the parousia, rather than demanding the suspension of one’s intellectual powers requires intentionally nurturing them. Consequently, the conviction in the Second Coming implies that Adventist schools be places that challenge students to engage and strengthen their mind and offers a strong refutation of the “anti-intellectualism” sometimes evident within the church. In practice, then, this characteristic of the school would seem to demand, minimally, that the Adventist school maintain a multi-disciplined curriculum, well trained teachers, the fostering of “critical consciousness,” and an organizational structure in which all members of the school community work together to solve and resolve problems.

B. Characteristics of the Teacher

i. Educating for Eternity

The expectation of the Second Coming requires that teachers not only adopt a school wide program and individual pedagogies that nurture the intellectual development of students, but also that their work goes beyond the finite. While good scores on standardized achievement tests, and sound preparation for entrance into college and the work force may be some of the goals of Adventist teachers, they are not the primary aim of education. Instead, the Second Coming suggests that Adventist teachers contribute to “an education that cannot be completed in this life, but will be completed in the life to come.”¹⁰ All Adventist teachers, of every discipline, should aim to encourage within their students an attitude for learning for *all* of life, for eternity.

ii. Possessing and Nurturing a Spirit of Hope

In contrast to fostering such positive learning outcomes, some forms of teaching on the Second Coming I have witnessed can produce the opposite effect. For example, approaches that

adopt enthusiastic and speculative apocalyptic commentary on the “signs of the times,” and emphasize a very negative and quite literally painful near future for Advent believers leave many students fearful. Rather than longing for the eschaton, anytime soon, many live in dread of it or reject it altogether.

Contrary to nurturing a spirit of fear, an understanding of the Second Coming “as the consummation of God’s creative and redemptive purpose for individual persons and for the whole universe” is a source of hope. It places God at the center of our lives and keeps us, while working in this world, “looking forward to the world to come.”¹¹ Such looking forward places sin, suffering, and death as “temporarily” holding back the fulfillment of God’s “desire for man [and woman]” and reminds us that “ultimately God will accomplish His plan.”¹² The Adventist teacher should therefore maintain and nurture a spirit of hope for the future,. A hope, however, which is not grounded upon anything on earth, for “to look for a kingdom of God beyond history is to declare the provisional and ambiguous character of every human structure, and the fragmentary character of every human plan and program.”¹³

Conviction in the Two-Phase Ministry of Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary

The second core conviction of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity has been a source of controversy within the church, and also perhaps the most difficult to understand. Researchers have shown it is the one core conviction that has the “lowest” definitely believed rating among younger church members and new converts.¹⁴ Even without entering into the specific details or controversial points of the sanctuary doctrine, the notion of the sanctuary and of Christ as our high priest ministering in heaven on our behalf seems to suggest a particular characteristic of the Adventist school and teacher.

A. Characteristics of the School

i. A Place Where God is in Our Midst

Glen Greenwalt in referring to the debate over the sanctuary has concluded that we “have gotten so caught up in the timetables and the pots and pans of the sanctuary that we have lost sight of the central truth: *God gave the sanctuary so that he might dwell in our midst.*”¹⁵

Drawing upon Ellen White’s exegesis of Leviticus 26, Greenwalt asserts that this is the first of three principles concerning the sanctuary established amongst the Israelites. The second principle, “was a warning . . . not even God can dwell forever in a polluted environment . . . the sins of the people would force God to abandon his sanctuary and leave it desolate.” However, the third principle contained a promise following this warning, “If Israel sins; and then repents of her sins, God will again dwell in the midst of his people and restore the fortunes of the sanctuary and the land.”¹⁶ These principles have significant implications for the ethos and modus operandi of the Adventist school. First, it reminds us that God desires to dwell in our classrooms and hallways, but that God’s dwelling is conditional, it depends on our faithfulness to do God’s will and our willingness to repent when we fail. The Adventist school that claims God in its midst (as mine does very publicly), therefore, can only make this claim if it is structured and conducted in such a way as to practically seek and apply the will of God, including works of justice and mercy, as the Hebrew prophets repeatedly preached. It also demands fostering an atmosphere and culture of humility and openness, which gives space for repentance and conversion to occur.

B. Characteristics of the Teacher

i. God is Active on Our Behalf, Teachers Active on Their Student’s Behalf

While the sanctuary highlights God’s desire to dwell amongst us, Jesus’ work as our high priest and mediator shows that he “offers us mercy and grace in time of need . . . can sympathize

with our weaknesses . . . [and] can help those being tempted and make atonement for sin.”¹⁷ On a personal level, this provides Adventist teachers with an assurance of “salvation” and knowledge that we can “approach God’s throne with confidence.”¹⁸ In terms of our pedagogy it suggests that we model the actions of Christ as high priest, sympathizing with students’ weaknesses and *giving voice* to their needs and concerns. This may be an obvious role for teachers, but certainly many teachers are primarily focused on teaching their content areas and not on advocating on behalf of the wider concerns of children and adolescents today.

The Conviction to Keep and Honor the Seventh Day of the Week a Holy Sabbath

In recent years Adventist theologians have shifted from focusing on the legalistic and eschatological aspects of Sabbath towards exploring what the Sabbath means to one’s lived Christian experience. However, within the community of faith at large an attitude of observing the Sabbath as an obligation continues to be popular. This suggests that the fruits of this recent theological reflection have not been widely shared, and that religious educators and schools must more effectively nurture the Sabbath’s “relationship to our practical Christian life.”¹⁹ In order to achieve this task it would seem necessary that Adventist schools and teachers possess, at the very least, the following characteristics:

A. Characteristics of the School

i. No Work on the Sabbath

While it may seem an obvious characteristic of the Seventh-day Adventist school that there should be no work on the Sabbath, my own experience attests to the reality that Seventh-day Adventist schools and school programs are often extremely busy on this day. Though no Seventh-day Adventist school (to my knowledge) has classes or competitive sports taking place on the Sabbath, in an increasing number of schools fill the Sabbath so many activities (such as

music groups performing in local churches, religious activities on Friday night and Sabbath morning, as well as weekend trips) that strains to see the Sabbath as a day of rest. Although these activities are good in themselves, and for students, it could be argued that we are effectively teaching students that even on the Sabbath we must fill every waking hour with activity, leaving little or no time for rest, for family, and for contemplation. It seems imperative therefore, that all Adventist schools evaluate what their Sabbath actually teaching about the Sabbath.²⁰

B. Characteristics of the Teacher

i. A balanced approach to life and work

In *The Journal of Adventist Education* Kay Rizzo highlights that “each year, the Adventist educational system loses some of its brightest and best classroom teachers because of [the] pernicious, yet preventable problem”²¹ of job burnout. She cites “overwork, discipline problems, school downsizing, disagreements with supervisors or colleagues, and lack of resources”²² as contributing factors to this problem. However, though Rizzo is writing for a Seventh-day Adventist audience, in her list of practical ways for preventing job burnout she does not mention how our understanding and practice of Sabbath can play a role in either avoiding or fostering burnout. At the very least it would seem the Sabbath should temper our tendency towards overwork, for “the Sabbath rest, by placing a limit on work, is designed to counteract [the] temptation to deify work.”²³ It also provides an opportunity and time “*to be alone*,”²⁴ for “*moral [and] spiritual renewal . . . for the family*”²⁵ . . . [and] *for recreation*.”²⁶ Many of these elements are found in Rizzo’s own solutions to the problem of burnout. If not over-programmed with school activities, the Sabbath can provide the Adventist teacher with a shield against burn

out and overwork, as well allowing them time and space to nurture their relationship with God²⁷ and others.

The Conviction that Humanity is Not Inherently Immortal

In his book, *Educating for Life*, Thomas Groome highlights the significant influence of one's view of human nature has on our outlook and approach to all aspects of the world. Groome asserts that our "perspective on the 'human condition' shapes our way of life, our way of relating to self, others, and the world – our entire modus operandi as human beings."²⁸ This assertion is certainly evident in Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy and practice, which has been most visibly shaped by Adventism's theological anthropology, its fourth core conviction. In rejecting the notion that humanity possesses an immortal soul, Seventh-day Adventists consider human beings as "an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit." In view of this "indivisible unity" Seventh-day Adventists have proposed that a healthy body contributes to a healthy spirit and mind, and that true education "imparts more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person – spiritually, intellectually, physically, and socially."²⁹ This holistic approach to education has been a distinctive feature of Adventist schools. Yet, in reflecting upon my experience within Adventist education, it appears that this key characteristic of our theological and educational tradition might disappear if it is not intentionally and creatively nurtured today.

A. Characteristics of the School

i. Educating the Hands

It seems that today many Seventh-day Adventist schools and colleges, rather than offering an holistic approach to education, emphasize the education of the mind. What seems to be missing, in particular, is the bodily aspect of education. Until the 1970s this component was

an integrated part of the school curriculum in both high schools and colleges, with part of the school day given to working on the school's dairy or in its manufacturing industry. Since, most of the dairies, industries, and other forms of physical labor and training have ceased, it appears, that each Adventist school must now explore new ways to achieve this learning outcome. For example, a school might develop a community garden that could be cared for by the students and staff. Likewise, regular community service in which students use their hands instead of just their heads may be an alternative to an industry. Moreover, recent brain based research and Howard Gardner's research into multiple intelligences provide affirmation for the Adventist belief about the relationship between mind, body, and spirit and may also be a resource for finding new ways to achieve our traditional objective of educating the whole person.

ii. Fostering a Healthy Diet and Physical Exercise

While most Seventh-day Adventist schools do not allow meat or caffeinated drinks to be served on campus – there is more to fostering a healthy body, mind and spirit than following these explicit features of Adventist health teaching. Many of other unhealthy choices for students are available at Adventist schools. If we desire to be faithful to our theological anthropology it is necessary that students are provided with food that nurtures a healthy body, as well as educating students (and their families) about the importance of a good diet for life and for learning. Indeed, recent research has confirmed what Adventists have suggested about the important relationship between diet and intellectual development for much of their history. In drawing upon this recent research Jane Healy concludes that “several aspects of contemporary eating habits may be particularly dangerous”³⁰ to brain development and learning. She cites, for example, that a high carbohydrate diet can cause sleepiness and lethargy in children and that the sweetener aspartame (used in soft drinks and other foods) has “a proven potential to disrupt brain

chemistry in some people” leading to symptoms ranging “from headaches and impaired learning performance all the way up to seizures.”³¹ The Adventist school has a responsibility to not allow foods to be available that impair learning and are harmful.

In addition, physical exercise needs to be a regular part of the school curriculum. While this occurs in most Adventist schools until tenth grade, it would seem reasonable to argue that some form of physical education must remain a part of the curriculum for the entire formal education experience of our students. This is particularly important in American culture, in which “a number of studies have shown that an alarming number of American kids are overweight and can’t pass basic physical tests of strength, endurance, and agility.”³² By remaining consistent to their theological and education tradition, Adventist schools have an opportunity to counter a culture apparently intent on nurturing unhealthy and physically unfit people.

B. Characteristics of the Teacher

i. We are not God: Nurturing Our Body, Soul, and Mind

The conviction that human beings are not inherently immortal implies at least two features of the Adventist teacher’s consciousness. Firstly, and most obviously, it reminds us that we are not God. For the teacher this means that we must work in partnership “with God, other educators, and with learners,”³³ and that we are not going to be able to do *everything*, nor are we the savior of every (or any) student that walks into our classroom. Secondly, since we are not immortal nor God, it reminds us that self-care in ministry is important. A balanced diet, exercise, and time to nurture our own spirit and mind are necessary and vital. As stated above, teachers are especially vulnerable to overwork and burn out – fostering such habits can help to

reduce this from occurring. Moreover, if we fail to model such a balanced lifestyle, our students will not be very convinced to embrace it for themselves.

ii. Employing a Pedagogy that Educates the Whole Person

It perhaps goes without saying that in terms of the teacher's own pedagogy, Seventh-day Adventist anthropology presents a challenge and call for every teacher to adopt an approach that not only engages the mind, but also the heart, and spirit. As stated above, research in brain based approaches to education and multiple intelligences may be a source on which the Adventist teacher may draw upon to apply this conviction more intentionally in their classroom.

A Vision for Adventist Schools and Teachers

The four core convictions of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity clearly imply particular characteristics of every Adventist school and teacher. Although the individual expression of these characteristics will take life in different ways in each of our 5600 schools, they nonetheless reveal a common vision. A vision of the school as a place and space in which God dwells, in which the whole person is educated for eternity, and in which a culture of justice, mercy, and openness exist. A vision of the teacher who is an advocate for their students, a person of hope, one who lives in balance, and one who works in partnership with God and others. Schools and teachers holding and living such a vision would indeed be remaining faithful to our tradition and identity, as well as fostering an inclusive and hospitable place for all students.

NOTES

¹ Although the focus of this essay is on the characteristics implied by these four convictions in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist school, this is not to deny the essential place and role of the home and church in religious education. Indeed, in a recent statement of Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy, the home, the local and world church, and the school (including college, and university) were identified as “agencies of education.” Humberto Rasi *et al*, “A Statement of Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy Version 7.8,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 10, sp. ed. (summer 2001): 349. Ideally then, these three agencies must work in partnership, as the “whole community is responsible for the transmission of the Christian tradition to the next generation,” and therefore the four core convictions of Seventh-day Adventism must be applied and lived in the context of the home and church, as well as the school. Francoise Darcy-Berube, *Religious Education at a Crossroads: Moving in the Freedom of the Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 19. However, given that my particular context is the school, and the limitations of a paper of this size, the school and the teacher remains the focus of this essay – though many of the characteristics proposed for the teacher and school, might easily apply to the pastor and church, parent and home.

² This draws upon Groome’s “shared Christian praxis” approach which highlights the importance of the activity of “critical reflection” “primarily on the self,” and on “the whole [of our] sociocultural context with its norms, laws, expectations, ideologies, structures, and traditions.” Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980), 185.

³ Thomas H. Groome, “The Context of Christian Religious Education,” D [Photostat], 3 July 2000.

⁴ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 100.

⁵ Of course, this is not to deny the essential role of courses that teach doctrine or that the effective teaching of doctrine does not require a particular pedagogy. On the contrary, I would strongly argue that both of these are necessary. However, in many Adventist schools today a dualism seems to exist in the minds and practices of some teachers, which perceives that it is the role of only *some* activities and *some* faculty to educate in faith. The principal of socialization reveals that such a dualism is a myth, and hence, the goal of this paper is to break out of this compartmentalized mentality and demonstrate how the whole school environment and all teachers can nurture the religious identity of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity.

⁶ Thomas H. Groome, *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1989), 12.

⁷ Consequently, formal education in the church was “the last major institutional development,” preceded by the establishment of the publishing work in 1849, centralized church organization in 1863, and the health-care program in 1866.” George R. Knight, “The Aims of Adventist Education in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 10, sp. ed. (summer 2001): 196, 195.

⁸ James White, “Questions and Answers,” *Review and Herald*, (23 December 1862): 29; quoted in George R. Knight, “The Aims of Adventist Education in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 10, sp. ed. (summer 2001): 196.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1923), 45; quoted in George R. Knight, “The Aims of Adventist Education in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 10, sp. ed. (summer 2001): 196. Later she described the “work of education . . . [is] to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s [and women’s] thought.” Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), 17.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Education*, 19.

¹¹ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1986), 420.

¹² Sakae Kubo, *God Meet Man: A Theology of the Sabbath and Second Advent* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 156.

¹³ Fritz Guy, “The Church and Its Future: Adventist Theology Today,” *Spectrum: The Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums* 12, no. 1 (1981): 11.

¹⁴ See Roger L. Dudley, *Value Genesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992), 85.

¹⁵ Glen Greenwalt, "The Sanctuary: God in Our Midst," *Spectrum: The Journal of Association of Adventist Forum* 24, no. 2 (October 1994): 47 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷ John Brunt, "Jesus, Our High Priest," (accessed 16 September 2003); available from www.spectrummagazine.org/church/ss/030728/brunt/html; Internet.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kubo, 7.

²⁰ In addition, to further socialize students in the importance of Sabbath perhaps schools should allow time for its preparation. While traditionally many Adventist schools closed at noon on Friday in order to allow time for preparing for the Sabbath, very few do so today. Though Sabbath preparation should not occur only on Friday, allowing students and staff some time to prepare would send a clear message to all that God desires us to be ready for the Sabbath and to stop work within it.

²¹ Kay D. Rizzo, "How to Prevent and Overcome Job Burnout," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 65, no. 5 (summer 2003): 12.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today*, (n.p. 1980), 175.

²⁴ Niels-Erik Andreasen, *The Christian Use of Time*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 90 (emphasis in original). Andreasen suggests that such *time to be alone* "enables us to look at ourselves and to understand what we see" by meditating on our past week, and this "gives us a chance to consider our potential for the future" (92, 95).

²⁵ Such opportunity for family time seems especially important in an age when many families are breaking up.

²⁶ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, 190, 192, 203, (emphasis in original).

²⁷ Indeed, as Sakae Kubo suggests the Sabbath points us back to the Genesis creation week and reminds us of our relationship to God, for "God could have finished His act of creation without making a Sabbath, but He established it so that He could fellowship with man [and woman] in a special way. He wanted to be not only our Creator but also our Friend; not only God over us as Maker but God with us as Friend." The weekly Sabbath, for the Adventist teacher, then, serves to foster within our consciousness a knowledge that God takes the initiative "to manifest his presence among us" (Sakae Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 16, 17).

²⁸ Groome, *Educating for Life*, 71.

²⁹ Humberto Rasi *et al.*, "A Statement of Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy Version 7.8," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 10, sp. ed. (summer 2001): 348.

³⁰ Jane M. Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1990), 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 167, 168.

³² *Ibid.*, 168.

³³ Thomas Groome, *Educating for Life*.

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