

Adventist Education in the 21st Century
By Warren C. Trenchard
Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature
La Sierra University
September 17, 2010

Introduction:

Education is the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills, and values from one generation to another. In this regard, education occupies the nexus in the present between the past and the future. As a subset of education generally, Adventist education is the process by which Seventh-day Adventism deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills, and values from one generation of Adventists to another. Adventist education is also a setting for transmitting the knowledge, skills, and values of the larger society, albeit in a context of Adventist values.

In this paper I will consider twelve traits that I think have historically characterized Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education and how these relate to the role of Adventist education in the 21st century. I do not wish to imply that my list of characteristics is definitive or complete. I present them alphabetically without ranking.

Biblical

- The foundation of Adventist education is the Bible.
- “The Holy Scriptures are the perfect standard of truth, and as such should be given the highest place in education.” (Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 17)
- The Bible is our principal source of revelation about God and his will.
- The Bible points to the universe and our world as another source of revelation about God. This is to be studied through science.
- Bible and science, when rightly understood, shed light on each other.
- “Rightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other. Together they lead us to God, by teaching us something of the wise and beneficent laws through which he works.” (Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies on Education*, p. 56)
- We generally apply the “rightly understood” only to science, but it also applies to the Bible.
- The Bible must be read entirely and each part taken seriously in its entirety to be “rightly understood.”
- When read in this way the Bible emerges as the normative source of revelation about the existence of God, the divine source of all that exists, the human predicament, and the divine response of salvation.
- It is not the normative source of information and practice for everything it contains or considers, e.g., politics, psychology, mathematics, history, sociology, domestic relationships, or science.
- Special revelation means that the Bible normatively teaches us that God is the Creator and the Source and Sustainer of everything in the universe.

- Natural revelation suggests that it is through scientific investigation and the discovery and interpretation of evidence that we can progressively and normatively understand how God has functioned as Creator and Sustainer.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is biblical in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Complete

- Adventist education recognizes that education is multilevel and lifelong.
- It includes kindergarten through university and professional schools.
- It quickly developed from elementary schools to a college in the latter half of the 19th century and to a medical school early in the 20th.
- It recognizes that there needs to be educational opportunities for Adventists and provided by Adventists throughout the whole range of education.
- Adventist higher education is centered in the arts and sciences with many professional and academic graduate programs.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is complete in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Comprehensive

- Adventist education has always focused on the importance of educating the mind, body, and spirit (or soul).
- “To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life.” (Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 15-16)
- It is, as we say, holistic.
- In Asia it is common for Adventist schools to be named Sam Yuk or some variation of this depending on the language. The expression means “three bodied” and refers to the tripartite focus of Adventist education.
- We once took the “hand” part of this triad very literally and taught students to plant and prune, to cook and crochet.
- In most cases this physical survival approach is no longer practical or possible, given the urban setting of many schools and other factors.
- There are other kinds of survival skills that make sense in the 21st century, like financial literacy identity theft protection, and technological skills.
- The School of Business at La Sierra University has just launched the Edward C. Allred Center for Financial Literacy and Entrepreneurship to bring financial literacy education to academy students.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is comprehensive in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Critical

- Adventist education calls for students to be individual thinkers.
- “Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator-- individuality, power to think and to do. The men in whom this power is developed are the men who bear responsibilities, who are leaders in enterprise, and who influence character. It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought.” (Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 17)
- Students need to develop critical thinking skills and have opportunities of applying them in real situations.
- While this reaches its full development in higher education, it should be introduced in the education of children as early as possible.
- Students need to be exposed to all the options relating to issues and the evidence associated with each.
- They need to be given not only the skills to work through these themselves but the permission and encouragement to do so.
- As a society or a church we should never be afraid of seeking truth wherever it may be found and critically testing its validity.
- We are often good at this when we bring people into the Church but too often seem to abandon it when the same people immerse from the baptism.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is critical in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Essential

- Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is necessary for the Church to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
- The Church faces daunting issues and challenges in the 21st century: e.g., relevance, credibility, marketing, and evidence.
- Rather than seeing Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, as causing many of these problems, the Church should consider it to be its greatest asset in addressing them.
- Adventist higher education represents the greatest concentration of highly educated people and quality resources in the Church.
- There are eager minds among both faculty and students who are ready and willing to work tirelessly on these issues and challenges.
- There are no easy or immediate answers to many of these challenges, such as the relationship between religion and science, between belief in God as Creator and openness to the evidence of how God has conducted the creation.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is deemed to be essential in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Futuristic

- Education is not only to be for now and but also for eternity, not only for the present but also for the future.
- “The education that does not furnish knowledge as enduring as eternity, [sic] is of no purpose. Unless you keep heaven and the future, immortal life before you, your attainments are of no permanent value.” (Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 192)
- Between now and eternity is the future until the end of time.
- Although Adventist education must appreciate and transmit the best and the most sustainable from the past, it must be focused on making a difference in the future.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is futuristic in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Inclusive

- Adventist education has long embraced diversity and openness to persons of all races, nationalities, genders, and economic status.
- In the latter half of the 19th century Willie White brought education to emancipated African Americans in the Southern United States.
- Adventist lay organizations and student groups have led in the advancement of education for young women in Afghanistan and Ethiopia.
- Adventist education must not be elitist or exclusivist.
- It must be not only for the orthodox, as some would define it.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is inclusive in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

International

- Just as the Adventist mission is to all the world, so also Adventist education has always been international.
- Before the end of the 19th century Adventist had established schools in Canada, England, Australia, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, Africa, Argentina, Denmark, and Brazil.
- Education was among the first things that Adventists exported to the world.
- Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, must be international in content and delivery systems and not just in geography.
- Examples of different practices in Adventist education around world include the acceptance of government funding and the role of general education.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is international in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Legitimate

- When Adventists started a medical school it needed to be accredited, as did the colleges that supplied its students.
- “From the light that the Lord has given me, I know that our training-schools in various parts of the field should be placed in the most favorable position possible for qualifying our youth to meet the tests specified by state laws regarding medical students. To this end the very best teaching talent should be secured, that our schools may be brought up to the required standard. (Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 490)
- In most parts of the world authorization to operate and grant degrees has been simply a matter of government fiat. This is in contrast to the United States, where government-sanctioned accrediting organizations, both regional and discipline specific, have provided legitimacy to educational institutions. The principles of the latter system are beginning seriously to influence the former in various parts of the world.
- Not only have Adventist educational institutions taken authorization through accreditation or government approval seriously, but Adventist professionals have participated significantly in accreditation processes and organizations.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is legitimate in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Progressive

- Adventist education, like Adventism itself, is oriented to present truth.
- The original name of the *Adventist Review*, started by James White in 1849, was *Present Truth*.
- Adventists officially believe that truth is never static in the face of new evidence and revelations.
- “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.” (Preamble to the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs)
- Changing “truth” among early Adventists, e.g., Shut Door, start of Sabbath
- Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, must have a vital role in this development.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is progressive in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Serving

- Adventist education is to be modeled on the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

- Service to others in the name of Jesus of Nazareth is the most important criterion in the final judgment—not doctrinal orthodoxy—according to Matthew 25:31-46.
- Examples are the worldwide work of ADRA, the international medical service of Loma Linda University, and the commitment of La Sierra University to the service of others exhibited in leadership in the Service-Learning movement in the United States and in its Carnegie Foundation classification for community engagement—unique among Adventist institutions.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is serving in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Superior

- Adventist education is to be the head and not the tail.
- “The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, . . .” (Deut 28:13 NRSV)
- Ellen White quoted this and other promises and concluded, “These promises given to Israel are also for God’s people today.” (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 351)
- We cannot always lead but we should not always follow.
- Examples include the international superiority of Loma Linda University in some areas of health care like proton treatment for cancer and La Sierra University in the success of Students in Free Enterprise.
- If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, is superior in this sense in the 21st century, it may be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal.

Conclusion:

I have suggested that Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, has historically been biblical, complete, comprehensive, critical, essential, futuristic, inclusive, international, legitimate, progressive, serving, and superior.

If Adventist education, especially Adventist higher education, retains all of these twelve characteristics in the 21st century in the ways I have suggested, it will be relevant and significant. If it is not, it will be sectarian and marginal. Let us pray that it is all of these things and work diligently to make it so.