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The higher view of education

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Aim

This paper aims to explore the relevancy of Ellen White's book, *Education*, in a postmodern setting. Further, it intends to address whether the guiding influence of the Prophetic Gift is still relevant to Adventist education. This discussion is based on the writer's personal conviction that at certain crucial times God takes the initiative to communicate. To follow through such a position one needs to explore what God expects us to hear? What are the central themes of His communiqué? How relevant are they to life in the contemporary day and age?

Preamble

Even though the postmodern paradigm is fading into history, society continues to struggle with the aftermath of the postmodern ethos. Grenz defines postmodern consciousness as "the loss of the centre."¹ Middleton and Walsh speak of life as "cast adrift, exposed, uprooted and above all frightened."² Further, they propose that postmodern life is engulfed with fear of environmental destruction, fear of economic insecurity, fear about sexual immorality and the fear of odd ideas confronting every day life.³ McGrath refers to postmodernism as "the world beyond comprehension and mastery."⁴

Makay, a psychologist and social researcher, speaks of the deep-seated insecurity within the Australian society. He credits the fear of the future, and the internal human insecurities and doubts to the lack of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Postmodern philosophy shaped a pathway of uncertainty, subjectivity and pluralism. It began a frantic deconstruction of God's purpose for the spiritual, mental and physical development of human potential. Interestingly, Mackay suggests that at the same time, "we are almost instinctively attracted to the confident voice; the strong leader."⁵ He reasons the "moral vacuums" of human life "yearn to be filled."⁶

In what way can Seventh-day Adventist education respond to the needs of the contemporary world? Does it have a voice, which gently, yet confidently helps participants to refocus on the most essential matters in life? If so, what are they? With these thoughts, allow me to trace briefly the background to Ellen White's classic book, *Education* (1903).

Historical background

In a letter written to Brother and Sister Starr, April 11, 1900, Ellen White referred to her forthcoming book on education:

I want all our teachers and students to have this book as soon as they possibly can. I can hardly await the process of publication. I want the principles contained in this book to go everywhere. We must take a higher stand on education.⁷

One wonders what made her so anxious to see this book in the hands of students and teachers. Ellen White began preparing the material around 1890. Most of the preparation was completed in Australia with the help of a literary assistant with a teaching and missionary background, Miss Sarah Peck. Her major task was to gather the counsels on education written by Ellen White in 1890 and before. However, she noticed that Ellen White's counsels were divided into two main streams, those suitable for the Seventh-day Adventist church and those for the wider society.⁸ The counsels for the church were included in *Testimonies* Volume 6 (1900) and *Counsels to Parents and Teachers* (1913). The material included in the new book *Education* dealt with broader principles.

While Miss Peck compiled and sorted out the material written in previous years, Ellen White kept adding new thoughts.⁹ She wrote, "I have been reading some chapters of the book on education. Sister Peck has been gathering this matter from a mass of my writings." She adds, "I have read three chapters this morning and I think the arrangement is excellent." Early in 1900, William C. White wrote:

During the past two years, I think Mother has written more upon the principles of education, the importance of Bible study, and the importance of combining labour with study, and the value of agriculture as the ABC of all agricultural training, than in all the years before. I think she had written more largely upon it than on any other branch of our work.¹⁰

Since Ellen White had already published a book on Christian education in 1884, one wonders why she was so eager to write and publish another book. I suggest that three key factors influence her keen interest in what she refers to as the higher view of education.

In what way can Seventh-day Adventist education respond to the needs of the contemporary world? Does it have a voice, which gently, yet confidently helps participants to refocus on the most essential matters in life?

First, she aimed to refocus Adventist education on biblical principles. She counselled the editors of *Christian Education* (1899) to “attract the attention of their readers to the Book of books” and to focus on the principles that flow from the “greatest Teacher that the world ever knew.”¹¹ She pointed out that such education is found in the Word of God.¹²

Second, her personal spiritual journey and search for God’s presence empowered her with Christ-like sensitivity, passion and concern for people’s welfare. In 1898, she wrote a letter to her son Edson in which she referred to some parents’ unkind attitudes towards their children. “Children are treated like dogs, ordered about, scolded and beaten and the children are educated in such a rough manner they can but be coarse and rough... Satan is pleased to have this work going on in families.”¹³ She counselled, “due respect must be given to children, for they are the Lord’s heritage.”¹⁴

Thirdly, before publishing the book *Education* in 1903, Ellen White sent copies of her manuscript to several readers asking for critical comments. Her son William sent some sections of the manuscript to Professor Sutherland, president of the Emmanuel Missionary College. His covering letter highlights a few interesting insights about the underlying theme of this book.

You will notice that since you saw the manuscript last a wide range has been taken out. More of the plan of redemption has been worked in by drawing from Mother’s published works, such as Patriarchs and Prophets, Great Controversy, Desire of Ages, Mount of Blessings and Christ’s Object Lessons. This required much labour but we hope that this book is sufficiently strengthened to compensate both for the labour and delay.¹⁵

The most important contributing factor for the urgency was the completion of her major work *The Desire of Ages* (1898) in which she enlarged the themes of God’s involvement in the human drama. She wrote, “In these days we hear much about ‘higher education’. The true ‘higher education’ is that imparted by Him ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’.”¹⁶ Her new book explored the principles of education in the context of the Great Controversy theme involving God’s plan of salvation and the view of education that will last through eternity.¹⁷ From this stance, she explored the dynamics of God’s purpose for life, namely the development of the spiritual, mental and physical faculties.

With this objective, she envisioned to revolutionise the ethos of Christian education. No wonder that she wrote, “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.”¹⁸ She

explained, “We must receive a knowledge of God, the Creator, and of Christ the Redeemer, as they are revealed in the sacred word.”¹⁹

In all this, she was not setting prescriptive rules for education. Rather, recognising the freedom of human individuality with ‘power to think’ creatively, she highlighted the value of the principles relevant to life’s journey in all times. Knight points out that in, 1901 Ellen White wrote, “The Lord has not designed any one special, exact plan in education,” and further “no exact pattern can be given for the establishment of schools in new fields.”²⁰

Avondale became the guinea pig of her experiments and the principles she explored in the book *Education* were to become a pattern for Seventh-day Adventist schools around the world. Under the umbrella of God-inspired thoughts, she wrote, “the school in Avondale is to be a pattern for other schools which shall be established among our people.”²¹ Can her voice and guidance be still relevant in the contemporary postmodern pace of life? What do we hear God saying?

Relevance of the book *Education*

Time and space does not allow for an elaborate discussion of this topic. Nevertheless, allow me to share a succinct summary of what I consider as Ellen White’s two central themes and to explore their relevance for postmodern life. The first theme explores the purpose of education and the second theme touches on God’s purpose for life.

The purpose of education

The opening chapter of the book *Education* begins with an emphatic statement suggesting that, “True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study.”²² Ellen White suggests it includes, a) a holistic view of human life (physical, mental and spiritual); b) a broader view of life. She claimed that education prepares the students for “the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.” Yet, I suggest that this is not the central point of her vision for education. Knight, notes correctly that for Ellen White, the purpose of education is to lead students to God and to a saving relationship with Jesus.²³ White follows her opening thoughts with the statement that education which empowers students with the joy of service, both in this life and in the life to come, flows from the heart of God.²⁴

It may appear that in taking such a view she disqualifies both intellectual and vocational preparation. I suggest, however, that she does not discount the pursuit of intellectual and professional goals. Rather, she simply recognises that because of sin, “man’s physical powers were weakened,” “his

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mental capacity was lessened" and "his spiritual vision dimmed."²⁵ So she reminds us, "all true knowledge and real development have their source" in the knowledge of God.²⁶ Therefore, the first objective of Christian education is to direct human minds to God's own revelation of Himself.²⁷ Here, she does not refer to excluding intellectual and philosophical gymnastics but to a foundational, relationally experiential knowledge of God. "The mind of man is brought in communion with the mind of God, the finite with the Infinite. The effect of such communion on body and mind and soul is beyond estimate."²⁸

The intimacy of such a relationship provides an environment for the highest intellectual development.²⁹ She explains, "Whatever line of investigation we pursue to arrive at truth, we are brought in touch with the unseen, mighty Intelligence that is working in and through all."³⁰ She concludes, "In this communion is found the highest education."³¹ The nature of such education "is as high as heaven and as broad as the universe."³² Further, "it cannot be completed in this life" but "will be continued in the life to come."³³

Ellen White's focus on a relational knowledge of God responds to the needs of the floundering ethos of the postmodern climate, namely what Grenz defines as human loss of centredness. Life in the contemporary world resembles a whirlpool of disoriented activities. The loss of coherent cosmology with a reliable point of reference turns people's minds inwards to a self-oriented world of emotional anxieties, detached from the past, insecure about the present and unsure about the future. Ellen White's emphasis on God sways human life from uncertainty, insecurity and hopelessness to a point of reference anchored securely in the heart of God. From this vantage point, she explores the principles and values for life's journey.

The purpose of life's journey

Exploring the theme of God's purpose for life Ellen White wrote, "Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range." There is a need of a broader scope, a "higher aim" which prepares students not only "for the joy of service in this world." Her next point, breaks the boundary of the limits set by "selfish desires" and "worldly ambitions" and unfolds a visionary perspective of the higher education.³⁴ It prepares students for "the joy of wider service in the world to come." The wider view of life's purpose enables students to discover their God-given individuality and uniqueness "with power to think and to do." At the same time, it trains them to be visionary thinkers, dreamers, movers and shakers, not the slaves of circumstances.³⁵

Is it possible to assume that the true nature and quality of what service in our contemporary world means should flow from the inspired thoughts, which gently bring into focus what matters to God? Is it possible to assume that the joy of service in this world should reflect the principles of the wider service that will last through eternity?

White links such preparation with the development of the physical, mental and spiritual faculties.³⁶ The goal is specific. It is aimed, "for the stability and uplifting of the society."³⁷ For this purpose, the book *Education* unfolds the principles of what I define as an incarnational purpose of education.

This focus ties education with ministry and service. Loxburgh and Romaniuk define the incarnational view as ministry that allows people "to engage each other in the reality of their life situation" rather than "strategic plans from above."³⁸ Exploring the incarnational nature of Christ's ministry, they write:

The narratives of Jesus' presence among us start among the ordinariness of people's lives. Jesus begins with their lived experience; he enters those experiences weaving God's story through their lived lives. He draws people into a new imagination about the nature of the good news he incarnates.³⁹

In other words, the incarnation view of ministry enhances Christian education with the principles of transformational qualities.

As noted, the primary object of education includes a relational and personal knowledge of God (John 17:3). Further, recognising the Bible as the main source of God's revelation, one "should gain knowledge of its grand central themes," such as "the view of God's original purpose for the world, the rise of the great controversy, and the work of redemption" (creation, salvation, eternity).⁴⁰ However, intellectual understanding of God's worldview requires practical application of the divine values and attitudes to life's journey. She refers to the principles of "truth, obedience, honour, integrity and purity."⁴¹ It demonstrates that God's purpose for life has a transforming quality. In her view, service moves beyond the realm of activism. It has a deeper incarnational meaning. In fact, an intimate relationship with God leads to a reversal of human attitudes and it develops sensitivity to engage with students "in the reality of their situation."⁴²

Ellen White wrote, "He who seeks to transform humanity must himself understand humanity."⁴³ Here, she upholds the example of educator par excellence, Jesus. In her view the service that provides a force for the stability and uplifting of the society, needs to reflect the depth of Christ-like attitude.

In every human being He (Christ) discerned infinite possibilities... Looking upon them with hope, He inspired hope. Meeting them with confidence, He inspired trust. Revealing in Himself man's true ideal, He awakened for its attainment, both desire and faith.⁴⁴

For Ellen White, Christ's methodology demonstrates the incarnational, life-inspiring principles and purpose of education. Firstly, He taught how to uplift human value and dignity. Secondly, He awakened new impulses and opened the possibility of a new life.⁴⁵ In other words, through the principles of incarnational service, He helped individuals to discover their God-given uniqueness and inspired them to reach their highest potential. Thirdly, she points out that "it was not on the cross only that Christ sacrificed Himself for humanity" but His "every day experience was an outpouring of His life."⁴⁶

Such education needs to take place in the classroom, lecture halls, homes, churches, in the neighbourhood and in the world at large. She concludes the book with a vision of the wider service in the world to come. "It is in service, that our greatest joy and our highest education will be found—witnessing, and ever as we witness learning and discovering new mysteries."⁴⁷

I suggest the two highlighted themes, which form the heartbeat of Ellen White's book *Education*, respond to the prevailing climate of the postmodern ethos. In that sense, the principles she espouses are relevant and timely for they speak to the moral vacuum of the society that yearns to be filled with a sense of meaning and purpose in life. **TEACH**

Endnotes

- ¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 19.
- ² Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 26.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1996), 180.
- ⁵ Hugh Mackay, *Generations, Baby Boomers, Their Parents & Their Children* (Sydney, NSW: Macmillan, 1997), 190.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Letter 58, 1900 "Sunnyside," Cooranbong, New South Wales, Ellen White to G.B Starr.
- ⁸ Arthur White, *The Australian Years 1891–1900* (Hagerstown, DC: Review and Herald, 1983), 450.
- ⁹ Arthur White, *The Early Elmshaven Years 1900–1905* (Hagerstown, DC: Review and Herald, 1981), 180. In 1894 Ellen White published a book entitled *Christian Education*. In the note to the reader she stated that the book was designed not only for teachers but also for parents, who should be prepared to direct intelligently the education of their children. Ellen White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, Michigan: International Tract Society, 1984), 1.

- ¹⁰ Arthur White, *The Australian Years*, 450.
- ¹¹ Letter 85, 1899.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Letter 145 September 22, 1898. Ellen White to Edson.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Arthur White, *The Early Elmshaven Years*, 181.
- ¹⁶ Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 464.
- ¹⁷ Ellen White, *Education* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1952), 14, 15, 301–309.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 123.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 17.
- ²⁰ George Knight, *Myths in Adventism: An Interpretive Study of Ellen White, Education and Related Issues* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), 18.
- ²¹ Ellen White, Manuscript 92, 1900.
- ²² White, *Education*, 13.
- ²³ Knight, *Myths in Adventism*, 49–51.
- ²⁴ White, *Education*, 14.
- ²⁵ White, *Education*, 15.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 14.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 16.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ In the book *Christian Education* 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. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve him intelligently. The great object of education is to enable us to use the powers which God has given us in such a manner as will best represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God." She asserted that "The agency of the Spirit of God does not remove from us the necessity of exercising our faculties and talents, but teaches us how to use every power to the glory of God. The human faculties when under the special direction of the grace of God are capable of being used to the best purpose on earth and will be exercised in the future immortal life." Ellen G. White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek Michigan: International Tract Society, 1894), 203.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² White, *Education*, 19.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 18.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 17, 18. Ellen White points out that by directing students to the sources of truth and by opening their minds to "great facts of duty and destiny" will empower individuals not to be "slaves of circumstances" but individuals "who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought and the courage of their convictions."
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 29.
- ³⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 75.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ellen White, *Education*, 190.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 29.
- ⁴² Roxburgh and Romanuk, 75.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 78.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 80.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 309.

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