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Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

THE NURTURE OF FAITH IN THE TEACHING OF
DENOMINATIONAL HISTORY

by

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Introduction

Teaching a course in Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) history at the college level presents challenges not always experienced by the teacher of the other Bible subjects that constitute the compulsory requirements in religion for the different courses of study. Adventist students entering college in 1990 at the age of eighteen have spent all their adolescence in the post-Glacier View years. During this time many have been exposed to serious questions about the teachings of the church raised by Ford,¹ Rea,² and others. Authority figures have cast doubt on SDA principles of prophetic interpretation, on fundamental teachings concerning the sanctuary and the investigative or pre-advent judgment and on the integrity and authority of Ellen White and her writings. Rapid technological changes, increasing materialism, a growing manifestation of secularism and humanism and the demoralizing effects of the media have added to the spiritual confusion experienced by many youth.

Such influences have come at a time when, according to the Piagetian theory of cognitive development, they have been passing through the stage of formal operational thinking.³ During the years between eleven and fifteen the brain of the adolescent is increasingly capable of conceptual and abstract thinking. This development of the mind provides the basis for understanding several adolescent characteristics: their high idealism, their rebellion against authority and their questioning of traditional values. They are now capable of testing and internalizing their own value system as well as understanding more readily the principles of law and morality.

Upon entering college, students have resolved many of these developmental issues, but the events of the 1980s have still left their mark on a generation who have heard questions raised about the

church and its history, but have not always heard satisfactory answers. Even if they have heard some answers, they may not always perceive them as relevant or meaningful for living in the last decade of the twentieth century. Attitudes towards learning about denominational history have often been exacerbated by the Master Guide requirements and the teaching/learning methods used to fulfill them. The teaching of meaningless names and dates often arouses resentment and contributes little to the understanding. Consequently many students enter a college course in Adventist history with negative attitudes and expectations.

The Importance of Faith

At the heart of SDA education is the development in the student's life of a faith relationship with Christ. The nurture of faith has been described by Rasi as "a result of the interplay between divine and human factors." It is both "a gift of God and a human response to God's trustworthiness." (See Eccl. 3:11; Rom. 12:3; Heb. 11:1,2). "It develops as human beings make sense of the experiences of life and place their trust in something or someone."⁴ Faith brings to the Christian the belief that God is near to and concerned about both the individual and the church at large. It is also the channel through which all of God's promises are fulfilled and all of His blessings received. It gives assurance that God loves the sinner and the church and that He is leading both to a glorious consummation. It reveals Him as working in the church to finally accomplish the gospel commission. It challenges Christians to surrender their worldview to Christ and thus see the world and all it contains as God sees it. What part then can the study of Adventist history play in the nurturance of faith?

The Subjective Nature of Historical Study

It must first be recognized that the teacher of history, sacred or secular, does not, indeed cannot approach the discipline without any presuppositions. All historians bring their subjective beliefs to its study.⁵ The British historian, E.H. Carr (1964); saw history as a dialogue between the past and the present. The past is what has happened. "History is our reconstruction of the past." In this dialogue, both the past and our reconstruction of it in the present bring their respective contributions.⁶ Ronald Wells further clarifies the Christian perspective by a reference to the multiple lens glasses with which the optometrist tests our eyes. Compared with the secularist, Christians have "an extra set of lenses" which allows them "to see what others see but also more than they and perhaps more clearly."⁷ The well-known picture below illustrates this concept from Gestalt psychology. At first glance most people see the young lady. In reality, both the young and the old lady are there, but not everyone can see them.



Figure 1. Young lady or old?

The Canadian historian, C.T. McIntire, acknowledges that both Christians and non-Christians alike "see" reality as consisting of time and space. However Christians insist there is a third dimension -spirit (or ultimate) - and that a unified view of the world and its history must therefore be three dimensional.⁸

The Teacher's World View

What the Christian "sees" in this way constitutes his worldview. Walsh and Middleton suggest that world view is "always a vision of life." It "determines our values," and "comes equipped with an eschatology, a vision of the future, which guides and directs life." This suggests that a worldview is also founded on an ultimate faith commitment. "Where we place our faith determines the world view we will adopt."⁹

Christian teachers adopt their worldview because they direct their faith to God and to His revelation through His Son and the written Word.¹⁰ Adventist historians also take into account the insights provided in the writings of Ellen G. White. Both the Scriptures and Ellen White's writings (in their function as a telescope directed to the Bible¹¹) see history as the outworking of the great controversy between two universal antagonistic forces - the powers of righteousness under Jesus Christ and the forces of evil led by Satan.¹²

Fundamental to this view is the belief that God has acted in human affairs in the past and still acts today; that nations rule only under His sovereignty and that the history of the world is moving inexorably towards its final climax in the personal return of Christ.¹³ Thus the belief held by SDAs that their movement was raised up by God in fulfillment of Bible prophecy to play a key role in preparing the world for that great event imparts to the study of their history special significance.¹⁴

Rationale for the Study of Adventist History

It should be noted that both the Bible and the writings of Ellen White stress the importance and value of tracing the history of God's people and of teaching it to the next generation. At both the Exodus and the entrance of Israel into Canaan forty years later, God commanded Israel to teach their children the meaning of these great events. See Ex. 13:14; Joshua 4:2-7.

The ultimate purpose of such instruction is described in Psalm 78 where the writer declares that the wonderful words and acts of God in the past should be told to the "generation to come" that they might "know them," and "that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God but keep his commandments; and may not be like their fathers . . . whose spirit was not faithful to God." Ps. 78:4,7,8. RAV. (See also Deut. 6:20-25). Because they could trace the activity of God in their past history the Israelites were exhorted to teach it to their children and thus set their hope in God for the future. As Richard Rice states, "Their concept of the future was essentially an extension of God's actions in their past (Cf. Isa. 48:2-0,21; 51:10,11)."¹⁵

Similarly, Ellen White has emphasized the spiritual benefits of recalling the lessons from our past history.

The dealings of God with His people should be often repeated. How frequently were the way marks set up by the Lord in His dealings with ancient Israel! . . . Special pains were taken to preserve them, that when the children should inquire concerning these things, the whole story might be repeated. Thus the providential dealings and the marked goodness and mercy of God in His care and deliverance of His people were kept in mind . . . For His people in this generation the Lord has wrought as a wonder-working God. The past history of the cause of God needs to be often brought before the people, young and old. We need often to recount God's goodness and to praise Him for His wonderful works.¹⁶

In relation to the need for teaching about the operation of the prophetic gift in the church since 1844, Ellen White wrote,

As the end draws near and the work of giving the last warning to the world extends, it becomes more important for those who accept present truth to have a clear understanding of the nature and influence of the Testimonies which God in His providence has linked with the work of the third angel's message from its very rise.¹⁷

In 1881, Ellen White published an often-quoted statement. The full implications of its last sentence we may not yet understand.

In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what the Lord has wrought, I am filled with astonishment, and with confidence in Christ as leader. **We have nothing to fear for the future, except, as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.**¹⁸

Course Objectives

In view of the above rationale, specific objectives for a course in denominational history may include the following:

1. To study the rise and development of the great Advent Movement in the United States and to see its biblical basis as a logical extension of the principles of prophetic interpretation received from a long line of Christian scholars.
2. To examine the biblical foundations for the expectation that the premillennial return of Christ would occur on October 22, 1844.
3. To trace the factors, influences and the development of the teachings that led to the rise and progress of the SDA church after the Great Disappointment in October, 1844, and to stress that the search for truth is an ongoing process that requires an openness of mind on the part of members of the church to the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

4. To study the character, roles and experience of selected individuals in the development of Adventism so that students may become better acquainted with God's dealings with people and how He works through them to accomplish His will.

5. To examine the origin, purpose and operation of the gift of prophecy and to provide a biblical basis for the student's faith in Ellen White as an authoritative and legitimate prophet of the Lord.

6. To strengthen the student's faith in the SDA church's claim to uniqueness because of its special prophetic mission to the world, symbolized by the proclamation of the three angels' messages described in Revelation 14.

7. To study the reasons for the church's emphasis on health and to encourage the student to adopt health principles that will preserve the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

8. To gain an appreciation of God's leading in the early development of the church that will inspire faith and confidence in His present and future guidance of the church and in the student's own life.

9. To learn lessons from the past experiences of the church that are relevant and beneficial to both individuals and the church at large in the 1990s.

Such objectives indicate that the study of denominational history may serve to nurture faith development along a number of dimensions. In summary, three of these are particularly noted. First and foremost, the teacher of Adventist history is seeking to lead students to a faith in Christ who is the head of the church. Col. 1:18. This is accomplished only by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13) whose presence in each class is essential.

Second, as the prophetic chapters in the books of Daniel and Revelation are opened (especially Daniel 2,7,8,9, and Revelation 12, 13,14 and 20), and their fulfillment traced in the rise of the Adventist Movement, the teacher aims to strengthen the student's faith in God's Word as well as in the role and function of the SDA church in the plans and purposes of God. The historical study of the continuing search for truth as the church became organized and directed to its worldwide mission also provides openings for faith nurture.

Third, the teacher has many opportunities in such a course to build confidence in the operation of the prophetic gift through the life and ministry of Ellen White. The emphasis here should not only be on a study of the biblical evidence for the gift or on the supernatural manifestations associated with it. The ultimate goal is to encourage students to listen with a willing heart and open mind to the voice of the Spirit of God as He speaks to individuals through her writings.

Suggestions for Achieving the Objectives

It is beyond the space limitations of this paper to survey an entire course in denominational history. However, in the section that follows, a brief description of some teaching methods and a selection of topics will be outlined to illustrate how the above objectives may be achieved.

At the beginning of the course the students are invited to state the extent of any prior study or reading in SDA history that they have done, as well as to share their expectations of the course. They are also asked to list any questions they have about the church's history or the ministry of Ellen White. Then at the end of

the course they are given the opportunity to honestly and anonymously evaluate the course of study by stating what topics helped them and why, where improvements in the course and its presentation could be made, and any general reactions to the semester's study. These two questionnaires have been found to be most useful in making the course of spiritual value to each student.

The textbook used is Light bearers to the Remnant by Richard W. Schwarz. This text is generally appreciated by students for its fair and comprehensive treatment of our history. The reading of selected chapters is tested during the semester. After each test (generally on three or four chapters), a period is devoted to giving students opportunity to raise questions about the topics covered in their reading. It is important that students feel that this period is presented in an open and non-threatening manner. They should feel that an accepting and encouraging climate for learning and questioning exists where they can raise concerns and if possible, share their doubts, particularly if opportunity is given for their questions to be written down and asked anonymously.

Visual aids always add a dimension to a course's presentation. Students appreciate viewing photographic slides taken at the historical sites mentioned during the lectures or in the textbook. A new and valuable visual resource being completed in 1990 is the series of nine 30-35 minute video presentations on SDA history prepared by the Adventist Media Center in Wahroonga, Australia. Entitled "Keepers of the Flame", this series has been filmed on locations in Europe, the United States and Australia, and adds interest and authenticity through its drama and documentary approach to Adventist history.

The first area of study in the course's presentation is the rise of the Advent Movement in the United States during the 1840s. This is a fruitful field of study. The biography of William Miller, his search for truth, and an examination of his extensive preaching ministry is an inspiration to read. His character illustrates many virtues worthy of emulation.¹⁹ It is often a surprise to students to discover that there were many other contemporary scholars who came to the same conclusions as he did, though these were unknown to him at the time. It is important also to help students understand that Miller's comprehensive scheme of prophetic interpretation was essentially the same as that held by many in the centuries before him, including many of the great reformers of the church.²⁰

Contributing significantly to the students' understanding and faith development is the inclusion in the course of four lectures and Bible study on the book of Daniel. Comparatively few of the students have the opportunity of studying this book during their course of study at Avondale. This segment is generally much appreciated by them and is presented in the context of examining the evidence that led Miller to draw his conclusions relative to the time of the Lord's return.

The bestowal of the prophetic gift upon Ellen Harmon (White) and her subsequent ministry to the church during the following seventy years presents many opportunities for an honest examination of truth and growth in faith. The six volumes of her biography written by Arthur L. White contain many insights that students find new and challenging. The biblical basis for faith in this gift should be examined in an open and non-confronting manner. The writer has at times given students the opportunity to study the Testimonies for the Church with the aid of a study guide for each volume.

The response to this assignment is surprisingly positive and has changed the attitudes of many students who initially were prejudiced against these books. The circumstances of the bestowal of the great controversy vision in 1858 and its subsequent recording and enlargement provide a strong base for the study of the great controversy theme and its application to the life of the student. In her book Education, Ellen White wrote,

[The student] should gain a knowledge of (the Bible's) grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.²¹

The writing out of the great controversy story may also be used to examine current issues such as Ellen White's use of historical sources, charges of plagiarism, and the nature of inspiration.²²

Another important aid to faith is the consideration of hermeneutical principles to guide students in their application of Ellen White's writings to their lives today. The modern student, now one hundred years removed from her world and her writing style, has difficulty in seeing any relevance and current application of her counsel. Examination of the differences between principles and policies²³ and providing students with "rational, objective rules/ tools" for deriving meaning and discovering truth should be a high priority in such a course of study.

Adventist history includes the biographies of many great men and women of God. Reading these books can inspire a sense of mission and commitment to God's service as well as challenge the reader through the courage, loyalty and dedication of these champions of faith.

They can also remind us of God's willingness to save and use the weakest of instruments for His work. A selection of biographies suitable for recreational reading and research in denominational history is included in the Appendix.

The SDA church has faced many crises and issues in its early history, the investigation of which can inspire faith and provide guidance in character development. Some selected examples follow:

(a) the relationship between the Bible and the writings of Ellen White e.g. Ellen White's role in the 1848 Bible Conferences and in the determination of the time to commence the Sabbath.²⁴

(b) how to relate to those who differ from our perception of truth e.g. in the period immediately following the 1888 Minneapolis Conference.²⁵

(c) conflict over the interpretation of the sanctuary e.g. the A.F. Ballenger controversy in the early 1900s.²⁶

(d) distinguishing between essential and non-essential doctrinal beliefs and how we relate to them e.g. comparison between the A.F. Ballenger controversy and the issue over the interpretation of "the daily"; the conflict over the law in Galatians at Minneapolis.²⁷

(e) God's guidance of the church through times of crisis e.g. the pantheistic crisis of 1903-05; the Salamanca vision of 1890.²⁸

(f) the meaning of righteousness by faith in our experience e.g. Minneapolis and its aftermath.²⁹

(g) is God responsible for disasters? e.g. the destruction by fire of the buildings at Battle Creek in 1902 and the reasons for it.³⁰

(h) do we accept as inspired only that counsel from Ellen White based directly on a vision? e.g. the crisis at Battle Creek in 1882 and Uriah Smith's experience.³¹

(i) how do we relate to those who claim to be prophets? e.g. Anna Rice Phillips.³²

(j) God's knowledge of us individually e.g. the experience of the churches at Washington, New Hampshire, and Bushnell, Michigan, in 1867.³³

(k) life lessons from the past e.g. Hannah More - returned missionary snubbed by the headquarters church; Moses Hull - SDA evangelist who became a leading exponent of spiritualism; John Kellogg brilliant surgeon, administrator, author and lecturer, and his subsequent departure from the church.³⁴

(l) God's leadership in the mission of the church e.g. the founding of Avondale College and Loma Linda.³⁵

Conclusion

These and many more examples that could be cited provide teachers of Adventist history with ample opportunity to challenge and inspire their students as together they seek to reconstruct the history of the church in an open and truth-seeking way. Any history may be taught in a detached and uninteresting manner stressing only names, dates and disconnected events. However Adventist teachers, whose worldview includes recognition of the movement's prophetic role in the purposes of God, may approach its study with conviction and enthusiasm. They will encourage a candid and honest examination of the past, for truth loses nothing by investigation. Their students may conclude their

study not only with their faith strengthened in God and in the SDA church as it seeks by God's grace to fulfill its destiny, but also with a greater commitment to play their part in preparing the world for the coming of the Lord.

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