

ELLEN G. WHITE AND THE SECULAR CAMPUS

by William J. Cork

Abstract

Ellen White's statements about secular college campuses provide principles that can guide the development of Adventist campus ministry today. Remarks she made in 1891 and 1895 acknowledge the challenges of the secular campus, but also the necessity of a positive witness. Guided by the principles she outlines, Adventist campus ministry will both support students on the secular campus and live out a non-confrontational ministry of presence in the heart of the university.

Ellen White never wrote a book about public campus ministry, but several of her talks and letters on the issue of secular colleges are gathered together in *Selected Messages*, Book 3, under the title, "Attending Colleges and Universities of the Land." In these passages she acknowledged that Adventist students were attending secular schools (with the support and even the encouragement of some Adventist leaders), and voiced her fears for their spiritual well-being. Yet she also saw the public campus as a mission field and outlined principles for ministry there. This chapter will explore the background of these statements, and then draw out some implications for campus ministry today.

Ellen White wrote at a time when public Higher Education was experiencing a period of growth and transformation in the United States. In the decades following the Civil War, federal land grants encouraged the establishment of state universities. Educational philosophy shifted from an emphasis on the classics to study of applied sciences and technology.¹ Many denominations which had their own colleges saw these new public institutions as competitors. Yet slowly the vision grew that they must provide pastoral support for students at public colleges. This started with individuals on scattered campuses.²

Discussions within Adventism paralleled those in other denominations. Adventists debated what the character of their schools should be as well as the issue of Adventist students at secular schools. The

first question was settled at a Teachers' Institute held in Harbor Springs, MI, in the summer of 1891, under the leadership of W. W. Prescott. This proved to be "the real turning point" in Adventist education, according to George Knight, placing Adventist schools on a solid Biblical and Christological foundation.³ It served as "the first step in the 'adventizing' of Seventh-day Adventist education."⁴

Ellen White played a critical role in the creation of the Adventist educational philosophy, but her remarks to the teachers reveal a broader vision. She shared the reformers' criticism of classical education. In her talk on July 27, 1891, she unleashed a verbal barrage against classical education and reading of "infidel" authors. "We do not want to drink of the turbid streams of the valley. We do not want the corrupted sophistry of infidelity. . . . Many think themselves wonderfully wise in understanding the sentiments of infidel writers, but they will find that they are building upon a sandy foundation."⁵ She warned against thinking that one can read these authors and safely separate the "vile" from the "precious." "The devil is a great deal smarter than you are, and you cannot see what he is driving at."⁶

Despite these strong statements, directed at both secular schools and Battle Creek College's attempt to copy them, she believed that in some cases it might be appropriate for Adventists to enter the perilous world of the secular campus. Some Adventist leaders, especially in the medical field,

actively encouraged this. The medical school at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor was both a nearby resource and a dangerous temptation.⁷ Ellen White said to the teachers,

I have been reading since I spoke here last, the warnings given to some who went to receive a medical education. They might receive that education without losing their spirituality if they were every day under the converting influence of the Spirit of God. . . .

It would be perfectly safe for our youth to enter the colleges of our land if they were converted every day; but if they feel at liberty to be off guard one day, that very day Satan is ready with his snares, and they are overcome and led to walk in false paths— forbidden paths, paths that the Lord has not cast up.

Now, shall professed Christians refuse to associate with the unconverted, and seek to have no communication with them? No, they are to be with them, in the world and not of the world, but not to partake of their ways, not to be impressed by them, not to have a heart open to their customs and practices. Their associations are to be for the purpose of drawing others to Christ.⁸

This last paragraph is critical, as we will see in a moment. It represents the seed of an idea that would grow in her mind over the next few years. She recognized the opportunity for evangelical witness on the public campus, despite the dangers.⁹

In a letter White wrote on October 9, 1891, to Leon Smith (son of Elder Uriah Smith), she again voiced her concerns about the spiritual life of those who would attend secular schools. After warning of the danger “to many of our youth” in listening to the discourses that are given by those who in the world are called great men,” she said:

The youth who go to Ann Arbor [the University of Michigan] must receive Jesus as their personal Savior or they will build upon the sand, and their foundation will be swept away. The Spirit of Christ must regenerate and sanctify the soul, and pure affection for Christ must be kept alive by humble, daily trust in God. Christ must be

formed within, the hope of glory. Let Jesus be revealed to those with whom you associate.¹⁰

Here again is a hint of the possibility of a positive witness, like that which she had raised weeks earlier at Harbor Springs. It is *barely* a hint. And yet four years later, when she reflected back on that conference, this became her dominant theme. More importantly, she developed her thoughts so as to leave no ambiguity:

The Waldensians entered the schools of the world as students. They made no pretensions; apparently they paid no attention to anyone; but they lived out what they believed. They never sacrificed principle, and their principles soon became known. This was different from anything the other students had seen, and they began to ask themselves, What does this all mean? While they were considering this, they heard them praying in their rooms, not to the Virgin Mary but to the Savior, whom they addressed as the only mediator between God and man. The worldly students were encouraged to make inquiries, and as the simple story of the truth as it is in Jesus was told, their minds grasped it.

These things I tried to present at Harbor Heights [sic]. These who have the Spirit of God, who have the truth wrought into their very being, prudent men, wise in their methods of reaching others, should be encouraged to enter colleges, as students live the truth, as did Joseph in Egypt, and Daniel, and Paul. Each one should study the situation and see what is the best way to represent the truth in the school, that the light may shine forth. Let them show that they respect all the rules and regulations of the schools. The leaven will begin to work; for we can depend much more upon the power of God manifested in the lives of His children than upon any words that can be spoken. But they should also tell inquirers, in as simple language as they can, of the Bible doctrines.

There are those who, after becoming established, rooted, and grounded in the

truth, should enter these institutions of learning as students. They can keep the living principles of the truth, and observe the Sabbath, and yet they will have opportunity to work for the Master by dropping seeds of truth in minds and hearts. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, those seeds will spring up to bear fruit for the glory of God, and will result in the saving of souls. The students need not go to these institutions of learning in order to become enlightened upon theological subjects; for, the teachers of the school need themselves to become Bible students. No open controversies should be entered into, but opportunity given for questions upon Bible doctrines, and light will be flashed into many minds, and a spirit of investigation will be aroused.

But I scarcely dare present this method of labor; for there is danger that those who have no decided connection with God will place themselves in these schools, and instead of correcting error and diffusing light, will themselves be led astray. But this work must be done; and it will be done by those who are led and taught of God.

It was November 20, 1895. She was at a camp meeting in Armadale, Victoria, in Australia. Some of the leaders present held an impromptu meeting to discuss some questions that had arisen regarding religious liberty work. Her remarks that day were about witnessing in potentially hostile situations. She started by reading letters she had written the year before to A. T. Jones about work in the Southern United States, and then she answered questions from the leaders gathered. Adventist evangelists, she said, shouldn't be going down South, converting blacks, and telling them they must not only rest on Sabbath but *work on Sunday*. This would just cause trouble in an already delicate situation. The attitudes which supported slavery weren't dead and violence against blacks was increasing.

"Our laborers," she said, "must move in a quiet way, striving to do everything possible to present the truth to the people, remembering that the love of Christ will melt down the opposition."

The final issue on the Sabbath question has not yet come, and by imprudent actions, we may bring on the crisis before the time. You may have all the truth, but you need not let it all flash at once upon minds, letting it become darkness to them. I have had to bear a testimony against Bro. _____ on this point. He would take his chart, go out, knock at a door, and say, 'I have come to give you the third angel's message, and to tell you that the seventh day is the Sabbath.' But even Christ said to his disciples, 'I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.' We must not go into a place, open our satchel, show all we have, and tell everything we know about the truth. We must work cautiously, presenting the truth by degrees.

Then she apparently changed subjects, speaking about colleges and universities. But note carefully, she uses this as another example of the principle of working prudently and cautiously. This provides the immediate context for the section cited above about the Waldensians, who

... entered the schools of the world as students. They made no pretensions; apparently they paid no attention to anyone; but they lived out what they believed. They never sacrificed principle, and their principles soon became known. This was different from anything the other students had seen, and they began to ask themselves, What does this all mean?

This is then followed by the section stressing the importance of entering into secular colleges and universities. She concluded by discussing how to witness to religious liberty principles before governmental bodies. But before going there, she lifted up the example of Christ. He was teaching when he was only 12—not by preaching, but by simply asking questions.

Had [Jesus] led them to suspect that He was trying to teach them, they would have spurned Him. So it was all through His life. By His purity, His humility, His meekness, He rebuked sin. Those around Him could not find a single thing for which to blame Him, yet He was at work all the time. ... If

all our people would work in Christ's way, what a blessing it would be. There are many ways in which to diffuse light, and a great work can be done in many lines that is not now done. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Conclusion: Principles for Campus Ministry

Today, as in Ellen White's day, there are dangers on the public campus. Vulnerable students, away from home for the first time, celebrating their freedom and curious about the world, are subject to moral and intellectual temptation. This occurs in an environment that does not pretend to be able to sustain the Spirit. While we are right in continuing to offer Adventist higher education as a wholistic alternative, we cannot ignore the 70 percent of Adventist college students who attend secular schools. Adventist campus ministry can provide the spiritual component that can help them to survive and flourish. Key elements of such a ministry would include developing a balanced spirituality, centered on continual conversion, as well as providing intellectual formation to meet the challenges of secular philosophy.

But campus ministry cannot be merely a matter of sheltering and supporting Adventist students. It must also be an outreach to the university. This is the critical core of Mrs. White's counsel. We cannot see our goal as the building of centers on the fringe of the campus, but must instead embrace the goal of equipping students (and faculty and staff) for life at the very heart of the academic community as participants in the great conversation. Whereas many evangelical campus ministries thrive on debate and confrontational apologetics, she proposes what we might call an incarnational apologetic of life witness, responding in an attitude of humility and love to those who question what this might mean.

With these principles, we have excellent guidance apropos for today.

Endnotes

- ¹Knight, Gorge R. "The Transformation of Education," in *The World of Ellen G. White*, Gary Land. Ed. Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1987, 161-175, esp. 168-169.
- ²See, for example, Evans, John Whitney. *The Newman Movement: Roman Catholics in American Higher Education, 1883-1971*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980. See also Hora, Galen, editor. "A Brief History of Lutheran Campus Ministry." N.P., 2006; <http://archive.elca.org/campusministry/celebrate100/files/presskit/abriefhistory.doc>.
- ³Knight, George R. *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists, 2nd Edition*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004, p. 96. See also Prescott's report, 1893 GCDB, 349ff.
- ⁴Knight, George R. "Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education in the United States," in *Religious Higher Education in the United States: A Source Book* edited by Thomas C. Hunt and James C. Carper. New York: Garland, 1996, 387-412, esp. 392-393.
- ⁵Ms 8b, 1891; MR No. 692; 9MR 67.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, 68.
- ⁷Daniels, A. G. *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1936, 354.
- ⁸Ms 8b, 1891; the last portion appear in 3SM 231. The entire manuscript appears in *Spalding and Magan's Unpublished Manuscript Testimonies of Ellen G. White*. 1915-1916. Payson, AZ: Leaves-Of-Autumn Books, 1985, 19-25.
- ⁹Her passion for evangelism, and her interest in new methods, were evident elsewhere in that conference. That's where she presented the manuscript for *Steps to Christ* to the teachers and it was decided to have it published by a non-Adventist publisher, Fleming H. Revell. See Douglass, Herbert E. *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998, 445.
- ¹⁰Letter 26, 1891; 3SM 232-233.