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### Damascus Road or Emmaus Road?: Conversion, Nurtutre or Both?

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# Damascus road or Emmaus road?

## *Conversion, nurture, or both?*

We have all heard them. Dramatic stories of conversion. They are appealing. And they are biblical. “As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? . . . I am Jesus. . . .’ So he, trembling and astonished, said, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’ ” (Acts 9:3–6, NKJV). Exciting! Damascus road testimonies are often riveting; Emmaus road ones, less so.

Emmaus road experiences, on the other hand, are when God moves on your heart in a gradual, incremental, almost imperceptible way, and looking back you declare, “ ‘Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?’ ” (Luke 24:32, NKJV). We know which testimonies get the most attention—but which ones are more valid? Ellen White states, “A person may not be able to tell the exact time or place, or trace all the chain of circumstances in the process of conversion; but this does not prove him to be unconverted.”<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament implies that even those nurtured in faith must be born from above (John 3:3, 8),

suggesting some kind of conversion experience. However, although the New Testament describes conversion in the lives of first-generation Christians, it does not describe how those who have been nurtured in the Christian faith experience conversion. As a result, most evangelical Protestant denominations have tended to adopt one of two approaches to children’s faith formation: either the (sometimes dramatic) conversion approach or the (always gradual) nurture approach.<sup>2</sup>

Although these two approaches can be considered “on a continuum with conversion on one end and nurture on the other,”<sup>3</sup> their extremes tend to adopt the following positions:

Conversion	Nurture
Evangelism	Education
Point in time	Process
Personal sin	Original sin
Non-sacramental	Sacramental
Believer’s baptism	Infant baptism
Supernatural	Natural
Crisis/experience	Developmental
Decision/choice	Learned behavior <sup>4</sup>

Adventist praxis has tended to emphasize nurture; however, as evidenced above, an Adventist understanding of children’s faith formation does not fit neatly into the nurture perspective. What should we be aiming for—the Damascus road or the Emmaus road?

### Conversion and youth: The Damascus road

In the Old Testament, the concept of conversion is portrayed primarily through the Hebrew verb *shubh*, which means, “to turn,” “return,” or “repent” and which is often used to describe “turning away from evil” and “return[ing] to God,” particularly in the sense of returning to an “ ‘original relationship’ ” with God.<sup>5</sup> This turning is the outcome of divine initiative, for it is God who calls human beings to “turn” or “return” to their covenantal relationship with Him.<sup>6</sup> Scholars suggest that the New Testament word *metanoia* can be “understood as the equivalent for the Hebrew *shuv* [*shubh*],”<sup>7</sup> as it implies “look[ing] at the past, at that from which [one] has turned,”<sup>8</sup> and describes a turning “from the direction in which [one was] going to its opposite.”<sup>9</sup> From the various New Testament narratives of conversion, it

is evident that conversion brings about “multifaceted” or wholistic change in the life of the believer.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, both the Old and New Testaments portray conversion as a turning away from sin and turning or returning to a relationship with God and a righteous life, in response to divine initiative. Ellen White asserts that this is a supernatural process brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. While it requires a freely chosen human response, even this choice is enabled by the power of God.

a supernatural transformation, “a new life altogether,” brought about by the power of God.<sup>16</sup>

This does not, however, mean that human beings play no role in their conversion. Although White asserted that “human effort avails nothing without divine power,” she also declared that “divine effort” is “of no avail” without “human endeavor.”<sup>17</sup> However, because God gives human beings free will, He never forces them to choose Him against their will.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the human component of conversion is the choice

was a human turning to God in response to divine initiative.<sup>24</sup>

### Nurture and youth: The Emmaus road

The Old Testament is filled with the theme of adult responsibility to guide and nurture children in the way of the Lord (Exod. 12:26, 27; 13:8; Lev. 23:43; Deut. 6:1, 2; Josh. 4:22, 23; Prov. 22:6; Isa. 38:19). Central to an Old Testament understanding of spiritual nurture is the divine command given in the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9), which asserts that the

*Adventist praxis has tended to emphasize nurture; however, as evidenced above, an Adventist understanding of children’s faith formation does not fit neatly into the nurture perspective.*

Ellen White’s thoughts on conversion developed within the context of her understanding of justification by grace through faith, central to which was her understanding of human sin. On their own, human beings are helpless to overcome the effects of sin. “Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort . . . are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart.”<sup>11</sup> Without the initiative of God’s grace, “all human effort is unavailing”<sup>12</sup> and human beings are forever doomed.<sup>13</sup> It is the Holy Spirit that “makes effectual” what Christ did for humanity on the cross,<sup>14</sup> and it is by the “transforming agency” of the Holy Spirit that human beings can experience conversion, becoming “new creature[s].”<sup>15</sup> Thus, conversion is not a natural process, “a modification or improvement of the old”; rather, it is

to “come to Christ,” central to which is repentance, defined as “sorrow for sin and a turning away from it.”<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the question of *how* individuals experience conversion, “the Spirit of God operates differently with different individuals”;<sup>20</sup> thus, “conversions are not all alike,”<sup>21</sup> sometimes being “imperceptible,”<sup>22</sup> particularly in the lives of those nurtured in faith. Thus, “in working for the conversion of our children, we should not look for violent emotion as the essential evidence of conviction of sin. Nor is it necessary to know the exact time when they are converted.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout her writings, White used the term *conversion* to describe a variety of spiritual experiences, ranging from radical transformation to the daily turning to God that is ideally the experience of every Christian. However, the common element in each of these experiences

foundation of faith is knowledge of the nature of God, which adults are to diligently share with their children through the ordinary tasks of everyday life for the purpose of encouraging children to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength. This theme is repeated in the “the first and greatest commandment” of the New Testament (Matt. 22:37, 38, NIV). Furthermore, the admonitions of the Old Testament to guide and nurture children in the way of the Lord are also repeated when fathers are instructed to “bring [their children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4, NIV).

Therefore, the Scriptures are clear that adults are to be diligent in nurturing the faith of children, teaching them to love God with their whole being. This theme of wholistic faith development is echoed in the writings of Ellen White, who viewed adult responsibility

as cooperation with God in the task of nurturing children's love for Him, as well as their ability to choose to follow Him. Central to Ellen G. White's understanding of the spiritual nurture of children was her understanding of the classic theological questions of human sin and divine redemption.

Ellen White did not espouse a purely Augustinian understanding of original sin; however, she believed that while human beings had originally been created in God's image, "through sin the divine likeness was marred, and well-nigh obliterated,"<sup>25</sup> resulting in a nature with "a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, [they] cannot resist."<sup>26</sup> In His grace, however, God had not left humanity "without hope" and had devised "the plan of salvation."<sup>27</sup> Thus, God's *justifying* grace, "the free gift of God in Christ," was available to all who chose to accept it.<sup>28</sup>

Ellen White, however, also believed in God's *sanctifying* grace, the grace that works in our lives "to change and mold us into [God's] image."<sup>29</sup> Through the power of *sanctifying* grace, "the soul,

paralyzed by sin, the darkened mind, the perverted will" can be "invigorate[d]" and "restore[d]."<sup>30</sup> While White considered *justifying* grace to be free, a gift from God, she believed that *sanctifying* grace required human "co-operation" with the power of Christ.<sup>31</sup> It was in this process of cooperation between "divine grace" and "human effort"<sup>32</sup> that Ellen White saw a role for spiritual nurture or "all educational effort,"<sup>33</sup> for it was through this process that the "image of [the] Maker" could be restored in humankind.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, for Ellen White, "true education" was wholistic; that is, it had "to do with the whole being," resulting in "the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers."<sup>35</sup>

In the early years of a child's life, Ellen White believed that children were like "young trees" that needed to be "tenderly trained."<sup>36</sup> Too often, she warned, young children were "left to *come up* instead of being *trained up*."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, White recognized that children's faith was influenced by more than propositional teaching; that through the

ordinary interactions of daily life parents "connect their children with God";<sup>38</sup> that "the looks, the tone of the voice, the actions,—all have their influence" upon children.<sup>39</sup> Ideally, White believed that these daily interactions between children and parents would "bind the hearts of the little ones to them by silken cords of love," thus beginning to teach them about the love of God.<sup>40</sup>

Consistent with her understanding of the human need to voluntarily choose God, however, White did not assert that diligent spiritual nurture would always result in godly children. Rather, she emphasized the need for parents to mold the child's will, for "in the battle of life," children would need strength of will.<sup>41</sup> Authoritarian parenting might produce outwardly obedient children, much like "well-drilled soldiers"; however, White believed that children trained in this way would ultimately "lack strength and steadfastness" once "the control ceases."<sup>42</sup> Thus, children were to be encouraged to make choices, based on "reason and principle," so that, with

## BRING the children: *Principles of effective children's ministry\**

### Bless them

Christian ministry is Jesus' love in action. Christ's love is the motive, the method, and the hoped-for result. Children's ministry seeks to show Jesus' love to children so that they can know Him and come to love Him too.

### Relate to them

God has created children to develop in a particular way: intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. For us to be effective in ministering to children, we need to reach out to them in ways that are appropriate to their stages of development.

### Involve them

Inside the church, we share the life of the congregation with them, involving them fully in the church's worship, fellowship, and outreach. Outside the church we involve them in our recreation, our jobs, and our hobbies—we let them see us living life as Christ's followers. In this way, they learn from us as an apprentice learns from a master craftsman.

### Nurture them

Children's ministry is not merely programs, it is about positive, supportive, and encouraging relationships

in the love of Christ. This is Christian disciple-making. It involves modeling and instruction—and it takes lots of time and focused attention.

### Grow them

Children's ministry is ministry to, with, and through children. Effective children's ministries equip children to minister to others—to peers and even to those who are older. Therefore, give ministry opportunities to children. By involving children actively in the ministries of the congregation, children develop a sense of ownership, a sense of responsibility to the congregation and to its disciple-making mission.

\* Adapted from Ted Johnston, "Principles of Effective Children's Ministry: BRING the Children," Grace Communion International, accessed May 15, 2018, [gci.org/children/5](http://gci.org/children/5).

increasing maturity, they would have the confidence to “think and act for themselves.”<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the goal of parental guidance and nurture during these earliest years is to develop the child’s “capabilities and powers,” in order that they might become the “human agencies through whom the divine influences can co-operate” later in life.<sup>44</sup> In this task, however, parents were not alone; rather, they were “labourer[s] together with God.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the goal of spiritual nurture is to encourage an environment that facilitates optimal spiritual development. In summary, therefore, conversion can be experienced in a variety of ways, and, in the lives of those nurtured in faith, it can occur gradually and almost imperceptibly. The outcome of conversion is wholistic transformation.

This, however, raises an important question: does spiritual nurture leading to the formation of faith mean that a new birth conversion experience is no longer necessary?

### Toward a Seventh-day Adventist theology of children’s faith formation

As outlined previously, the Scriptures appear to portray a tension between, on the one hand, the need for adults to nurture the faith of children and, on the other hand, the need for the new birth of conversion. Thus, while adults are encouraged to create an environment that facilitates optimal spiritual development, the Scriptures do not suggest that optimal spiritual nurture negates the need for conversion. However, while the Scriptures provide counsel on the *how* of spiritual nurture, they do not address the subject of *how* those who are nurtured in faith experience conversion. Thus, Adventist understandings of children’s faith formation have tended to be influenced by Ellen White, who emphasized the importance of spiritual nurture. She also provided practical counsel while asserting that it was not “necessary to know the exact time when [children] are converted.”<sup>46</sup>

### Child faith formation

As a result, Adventist praxis has tended toward a more nurturist emphasis. However, as evidenced above, while the Adventist denomination has never clearly articulated a theology of children’s faith formation, Adventist theology has seemed to be cognizant of the Scriptural tension between nurture and conversion, and thus Adventist praxis does not fit neatly into either the nurture or the conversion approaches adopted by most evangelical Protestant denominations. For example, extreme nurturist approaches tend to adopt an Augustinian understanding of original sin, and thus a sacramental understanding of baptism, resulting in the baptism of infants. In contrast, Adventists believe that humans are born with a tendency to sin, but without the guilt of Adam’s original sin, and thus practice non-sacramental infant dedication and believer’s baptism.

Furthermore, while an extreme nurturist approach views faith formation

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as a natural outcome of careful nurture; rather than as a supernatural process, the Adventist understanding of spiritual nurture, influenced by the writings of Ellen White, has always recognized that faith formation is the work of the Holy Spirit and that adults are not alone in this task; rather, they are “labourer[s] together with God.”<sup>47</sup> And finally, while an extreme nurturist position suggests that faith is the natural outcome of optimal learning and development, Adventist theology has always recognized that Scripture teaches the need for new birth through conversion. Thus, while Adventist praxis has always emphasized the need for wholistic spiritual nurture, Adventist theology has also underscored the importance of recognizing one’s “state as sinners and of the way of salvation through Christ,”<sup>48</sup> as well as the need for supernatural transformation, a wholistic “change in the heart” that results in “new thoughts, new feelings, new purposes.”<sup>49</sup>

## The bottom line: Discipleship

Thus, as evidenced above, Adventist theology and praxis of children’s faith formation appears to be a synthesis of the nurture and conversion approaches, or what Kevin Lawson has termed a “combined approach.”<sup>50</sup> Lawson suggests that both the conversion and nurture approaches have strengths that can be utilized and weaknesses that need to be addressed. According to Lawson, the conversion approach tends to pressure children to respond to emotional invitations, often resulting in responses based on a desire to please adults rather than the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, the nurture approach may assume that children come to an understanding of their need for grace through participating in the life of the church and the Christian family, when, in fact, they may just be going through the motions out of a desire to please the adults in their lives, rather than a

genuine understanding of personal sin and their need of forgiveness. The combined approach, suggests Lawson, appears to address the weaknesses while utilizing the strengths of both the Damascus road and the Emmaus road. The combined approach begins with nurture that encourages children to love and serve God and then, as children grow older, provides opportunities for them to recognize their personal sin and need for grace. While not always cognizant of the theology that has informed praxis, the Adventist denomination has always practiced this approach.

Jesus commissioned His followers to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19, NIV). This commission includes children. A clearer understanding of the theology of children’s faith formation, particularly of the tension between nurture and conversion, can encourage Adventist parents, teachers, and ministers to be more intentional in their approach to discipling children. ☞

- 1 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1892), 57.
- 2 Scottie May, “Conversion or Nurture of Children: A Survey and Analysis of Post-Bushnell, Popular Literature and Current Curriculum” (unpublished document, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1990).
- 3 Scottie May, “Reflections on Childhood Religious Experiences: Patterns of Similarity and Variability in Perceptions of Adults From Three Evangelical Churches” (EdD dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993), 35.
- 4 Adapted from James Riley Estep Jr., “Childhood Transformation: Toward an Educational Theology of Childhood Conversion and Spiritual Formation,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2002), 199.
- 5 J. A. Soggin, “בּוֹשׁ בּוֹשׁ לָשׁוּב,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1315.
- 6 Ronald D. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 17.
- 7 Jacob W. Heikkinen, “‘Conversion’: A Biblical Study,” in *The Meanings and Practices of Conversion: Papers From the National Faith and Order Colloquium*, Chicago, 1966, ed. William A. Norgren (Indianapolis, IN: Council on Christian Unity, 1969), 4.
- 8 Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 348.
- 9 Heikkinen, “‘Conversion’: A Biblical Study,” 5.
- 10 G. T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 154.
- 11 White, *Steps to Christ*, 18.
- 12 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1923), 70.
- 13 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1923), 166.
- 14 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 671.
- 15 White, *Desire of Ages*, 391.
- 16 White, *Desire of Ages*, 172.
- 17 Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1917), 487.
- 18 White, *Steps to Christ*, 44.
- 19 White, *Steps to Christ*, 23.
- 20 Ellen G. White, “Results of the New Birth,” *Signs of the Times*, Nov. 30, 1891, 56.
- 21 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 287.
- 22 Ellen G. White, “The Burning of the Books on Magic,” *Signs of the Times*, Feb. 18, 1886, 98.
- 23 White, *Desire of Ages*, 515.
- 24 F. Guy, “An Interpretation of the Concept of Conversion in the Published Writings of Ellen G. White” (master’s thesis, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, 1955), 8, 9.
- 25 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), 15.
- 26 White, *Education*, 29.
- 27 White, *Education*, 15.
- 28 Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1964), 83; cf. Stuart Tyner, *Searching for the God of Grace* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2006), 217–221.
- 29 Tyner, *Searching for the God of Grace*, 221.
- 30 White, *Education*, 29.
- 31 White, *Education*, 29; cf. Tyner, *Searching for the God of Grace*, 222.
- 32 Ellen G. White, “The Co-operation of Man With God,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Oct. 30, 1888, 673.
- 33 White, *Education*, 29.
- 34 White, *Education*, 15.
- 35 White, *Education*, 13.
- 36 Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1954), 18.
- 37 Ellen G. White, “Duty of Parents to Their Children,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 19, 1854, 45; emphasis in original.
- 38 White, *Child Guidance*, 48.
- 39 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 7:50.
- 40 White, *Child Guidance*, 86.
- 41 White, *Education*, 289.
- 42 White, *Education*, 288.
- 43 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 3:132, 133.
- 44 Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1923), 263.
- 45 Ellen G. White, “Parents and Children to Be Agents for God,” *Signs of the Times*, September 10, 1894, 692.
- 46 White, *Desire of Ages*, 515.
- 47 White, “Parents and Children to Be Agents for God,” 692.
- 48 White, *Child Guidance*, 491.
- 49 Ellen G. White, “The Sanctifying Power of Truth,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 25, 1899, 469.
- 50 Kevin E. Lawson, “In Right Relationship With God: Childhood Conversion in Evangelical Christian Traditions,” in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives From the World’s Religious Traditions*, ed. Karen-Marie Yust et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 115.