

## What Knowledge is of Most Worth? Adventist Colleges and the Search for Meaning

By George R. Knight

More and more thinking people in my community have stopped sending their children to Seventh-day Adventist colleges. And I don't blame them," said the voice at the other end of the telephone. "Even though we sponsored our four children to Adventist institutions, I am not sure I would do it again."

This telephone call took place only a few weeks ago. It would be bad enough if it had come from a disinterested "crank," but the sentiments were expressed by a professional who is deeply committed to Adventism and quite active at the local and the national/international levels of the church; a person whose finger is on the pulse of one of the largest Adventist institutions in North America.

As educational costs escalate at both private and public colleges, more and more Adventist parents are asking pointed questions. Does the cost differential result in a better "value"? Can Adventist schools win the "quality-of-education war" against the heavily endowed Harvards and Stanfords or the leading state institutions?

If the goal of Adventist education is out-Harvard Harvard, it is doomed to failure. In fact, in most cases Adventist education can't even out-Podunk local Podunk U. when it come to facilities and financial base.

Even if Adventist institutions *could* out-Harvard and out-Podunk the Harvards and Podunks of the land, we would have to ask if it is worth the effort. I think not. Mere survival in the competitive marketplace is insufficient grounds for sacrifice by either the sponsoring denomination or the teachers who work at less-than-market salaries.

The survival of Adventist colleges will not be worth the effort if these schools fail to produce a unique product. Their product must fill a gap that other institutions do not and *cannot* fill. In order to achieve this goal, curriculum planners must define what is unique about Adventist higher education.

### "What Knowledge is of Most Worth?"

The observations of Herbert Spencer provide some helpful insights into this subject. Spencer suggested back in 1854 that "before there can be a rational *curriculum*, we must settle which things it most concerns us to know; . . . we must determine the relative values of knowledges."<sup>1</sup>

For Spencer, the "question of questions" for all education was "What knowledge is of most worth?" In seeking the answer, he made a list of human activities based on their importance. He established the following stratification in terms of descending value: (1) activities that relate directly to self-preservation, (2) activities that indirectly minister to self-preservation, (3) activities having to do with the rearing of offspring, (4) activities that pertain to political and social relations, and (5) activities that relate to the leisure part of life and are devoted to the tastes and appetites.<sup>2</sup>

In the next 87 pages, Spencer's essay analyzed human affairs from a naturalistic-evolutionary perspective. And what knowledge did Spencer conclude was of most worth? "The uniform reply," he said, is "Science." "This is the verdict on all the count."<sup>3</sup>

By way of explanation, Spencer related science (broadly conceived to include social and practical sciences as well as the physical and life sciences) to his five-point hierarchy of life's most important activities. His answer assumed that whatever activities occupy the peripheral aspects of life should also occupy marginal places in the curriculum, while those activities that are most important in life should have the most important places in a course of studies.<sup>4</sup>

Christians will reject Spencer's conclusions, which reflect a naturalistic view of reality and truth. However, they must come to grips with the larger issue underlying his argument. Spencer's questions, "What knowledge is of most worth?" is the most important curricular question Christian college planners can ask. They can learn much from the rational procedure Spencer used in developing his answer.

### Ranking the Curriculum

Mark Van Doren noted that "the college is meaningless without a curriculum, but it is more so when it has one that is meaningless."<sup>5</sup> The Adventist educator must, with Spencer, settle the issue of "which things it most concerns us to know." The answer, as Spencer noted, will help us assess the relative value of various items in the curriculum.

Authentic and viable curricula must be developed out of, and must be consistent with, our presuppositions about ultimate reality and truth. Different philosophic approaches to education will produce different curricula.

This means that *the curriculum of Adventist schools and colleges must not be a mere readjustment or adaptation of the "secular" curriculum of the larger society*. Biblical Christianity has a unique worldview. Therefore, the Adventist curriculum must incorporate a unique philosophic framework and content if the denomination's schools and colleges are to help the church perform its special mission to the world.

The answer to Spencer's question has a direct relation to one's philosophical perspective. For Spencer, steeped in naturalism and biological and social Darwinism, the most valuable knowledge related to the survival of the fittest and the continuing evolution of the human race. Thus, science in all its forms undergirded his optimistic and humanistic curriculum. He believed human beings could promote the progress of their

incomplete and evolving world through proper education.

### Central Principle of Curriculum

The Christian, however, cannot accept that answer. From the biblical perspective, human beings are "lost," selfish, and self-destructive. Mere education in the sciences may only make them more dangerous to themselves and their environment. The core of an Adventist philosophy of education must be centered in biblical principles.

Those principles are as follows:

1. The existence of the living God, the Creator-God;
2. The creation by God of a perfect world and universe;
3. Humanity's creation in the image of God;
4. The "invention" of sin by Lucifer, who forgot his own creatureliness and sought to put himself in the place of God;
5. The spread of sin to the earth by Lucifer and humanity's fall, which resulted in the partial loss of God's image;
6. The inability of human beings, without divine aid, to change their own nature, overcome their inherent sinfulness, or restore the lost image of God;
7. The initiative of God for humanity's salvation and restoration to its original state through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
8. The activity of the Holy Spirit in the plan of restoring God's image in fallen human beings and His work in the calling out of the community of believers, the church;
9. The return of Christ at the end of earthly history;
10. The eventual restoration of our world (and its faithful inhabitants) to its Edenic condition; and
11. Christ's commission to preach and teach the apocalyptic message of Revelation 14 to "every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people."

Even a cursory glance at this list indicates the radical nature of the Adventist worldview compared to that of the larger culture. Such a radical perspective demands a reorientation and refocusing of the Adventist college curriculum.

Just as important, however, is a unification of the curriculum along rational Christian lines. Alfred North Whitehead highlighted the basic problem when he noted that college offer students *Algebra, from which nothing follows; Geometry, from which nothing follows; Science, from which nothing follows; History, from which nothing follows; a Couple of Language, never mastered; and lastly, most dreary of all, Literature, represented by plays of Shakespeare, with philological notes and short analyses of plot and character to be in substance committed to memory. Can such a list be said to represent Life, as it is known in the midst of the living of it? The best that can be said of it is, that it is a rapid table of contents which a deity might run over in his*

*mind while he was thinking of creating a world, and has not yet determined how to put it together.*<sup>6</sup>

### Finding a Pattern

It is not that we have failed to recognize the needs for a coherent pattern into which to fit the various subjects of the curriculum. The problem comes in *discovering* a suitable pattern. In our high-tech world, knowledge has become so fragmented that it is very difficult for us to see how our individual realms of expertise relate to the whole subject area. Scholars have largely lost the ability to communicate with one another because they cannot relate their subject matter to other areas of knowledge. As a result, such insightful essays as C. P. Snow's warnings about "Two Cultures" take on renewed significance.<sup>7</sup>

Modern secularists, having rejected Christianity as a unifying context for otherwise isolated disciplines, are faced with a particularly vexing problem. The authors of Harvard's influential report on general education remarked that "the search continues and must continue for some over-all logic, some strong, not easily broken frame within which both college and school may fulfill their at once diversifying and uniting tasks. This logic must be wide enough to embrace the actual richness and variegation of modern life. . . . It must also be strong enough to give goal and direction to this system."<sup>8</sup>

For Adventist educators the problem is quite different. They know what knowledge is of most worth because they realize humanity's greatest needs. They recognize that the Bible's cosmic revelation transcends the limited human realm. Inspiration not only reveals humanity's condition, but also provides the remedy for that condition. Adventist teachers further realize that all subject matter becomes meaningful in light of the biblical worldview. The problem for Adventist educators has not been to *find* the pattern of knowledge in relation to its center, but to *apply* what they know.

### A Patchwork of Ideas

All too often the curriculum of the Christian school has been "a patchwork of naturalistic ideas mixed with biblical truth." According to Frank Gaebelein, this has led to a form of "scholastic schizophrenia in which highly orthodox theology coexists uneasily with a teaching of non-religious subjects that differs little from that in secular institutions."<sup>9</sup> The challenge confronting curriculum developers in a Christian school is to move beyond a curricular view focused on the bits and pieces, to clearly and purposefully integrate the details of knowledge into the biblical framework. Simply adding "Christian courses" to the curriculum is not enough. The entire curriculum must reflect the Christian worldview.

### Teaching Students to Think Christianly

Beyond that, the curriculum needs to be implemented in a manner that enables students to learn "to think 'Christianly.'" That means, writes Arthur Holmes, that "we locate each field of inquiry within a Christian understanding of life as a whole and that we

interpret what we know in that larger context."<sup>10</sup> Harry Blamires points out that believers have retained "a

Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality," but they no longer possess a Christian mind.

In other words, most modern Christians see religion in its moral, worship, and spiritual aspects, while having largely succumbed to secularism as a way of thinking. They too often fail to consider everything from the perspective of the Christian world view—"the view which sets all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view which relates all human problems—social, political, cultural—to the doctrinal foundations of the Christian faith, the view which sees all things here below in terms of God's supremacy and earth's transitoriness, in terms of Heaven and Hell."<sup>11</sup>

Blamires points out that except for a very narrow field related to personal conduct, most Christians use a frame of reference constructed by the non-Christian mind. They also utilize a set of intellectual criteria that reflect non-Christian evaluations.<sup>12</sup>

A related problem, notes Blamires, is that people often fail to make the distinction between thinking *Christianly* and thinking *about* Christian ideas. "To think secularly," he writes, "is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth. . . . You can think Christianly or you can think secularly about the most sacred things. . . . Likewise you can think Christianly or you can think secularly about the most mundane things."<sup>13</sup>

If Adventist higher education is to be "worth the trouble," its curriculum must meet distinctively Christian and Adventist criteria for relevance and success. *Market-driven criteria that evaluate success in terms of job placement and admission into graduate and/or professional programs are inadequate justification for operating Adventist colleges and universities.* Other institutions can perform these goals as well, and perhaps cheaper.

These tasks are a legitimate part of Adventist institutional goals. However, they are not the main or controlling factors that shape a Christian curriculum must provide distinctively Christian/Adventist philosophical and theological insights. It must package the entire curriculum within the perspective of an Adventist worldview, and it must produce graduates who can think Christianly about every aspect

of life. *To do less than that is to make Adventist higher education expendable; not only in the minds of thinking people, but in actuality.*

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1909), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 13, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Van Doren. *Liberal Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Frank E. Gaebelien, "Toward a Philosophy of Christian Education," in *An Introduction to Evangelical Christian Education*. J. Edward Hakes, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur F. Holmes. *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.