



Essential Elements in the Philosophy of Adventist Education

What makes Seventh-day Adventist education distinctive? While there are many distinguishing features, these merge into a single defining construct—the *philosophy* of Adventist education.

At first glance, Colossians 2:8 seems perplexing: “Beware lest anyone spoil you through philosophy or vain deceit . . .” (NIV).¹ Based on this statement, it would appear as if philosophy itself would be off-limits. Philosophy, however, is but “a set of ideas about how to do something or how to live.”² It is derived from the Greek *φιλοσοφία* (*philosophia*), which in literal terms means “love of wisdom.”³

The problem, then, is not in having a set of guiding principles about how we conduct education, nor is it in seeking after wisdom. After all, Scripture reminds us that “wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom” (Proverbs 4:7, NKJV).⁴

As Paul points out, the problem is from *where* we obtain that “set of ideas.” It is where we head in our

search for wisdom. He warned, “Beware lest anyone spoil you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the *tradition of men*, after the *rudiments of the world*, and not after *Christ*” (italics supplied).

In essence, one can formulate and implement a biblical God-centered philosophy of education. Or one can adhere to its antithesis, a secular approach that strikes God from the equation, whether through a traditional or contemporary philosophy of education. Therein, the danger.

It is vital that we, as educators, clearly understand the biblical philosophy of Adventist education. Ellen White wrote: “Teachers need to become acquainted with true philosophy, and where can this be found more perfect and complete than in the Word of God. This Word opens a sure path, in which our feet can travel with safety.”⁵

Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy is based, then, on the bedrock of Scripture. It is also guided by the writings of Ellen G. White, particularly in works such as the book *Education*.⁶ And it is expressed succinctly in *General Conference Working Policy*,⁷ section FE 05 10 (see Figure 1

on page 19). Based on these sources, this article will highlight seven key components that serve as essential elements of an Adventist philosophy of education.⁸ These interconnected elements help us to identify the purpose, product, paradigm, perspective, process, power, and priority of Adventist education.

1. The image of God

At creation, human beings were formed in God’s image, after His likeness (Genesis 1:26, 27). Being created in God’s image, *imago dei*, provides us with the capacity to love (John 3:16, 17; 1 John 4:16), the ability to relate and communicate (Genesis 1:3, 26-29; 2:18, 23; 3:8), the aptitude to administrate (Genesis 1:28; 2:15), and the facilities for creativity, decision-making, and rational thought (Genesis 2:16, 17; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 1:18). Consequently, whenever we make a friend, hug a child, name a pet, paint a portrait, or send a text message, we proclaim that we are made in God’s likeness.

However, the foremost feature of the “image of God” is found in our spiritual and moral nature (Genesis 9:6; John

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4:24). We can communicate, develop relationships, exert leadership, and evidence creativity. But unless these are guided by moral values derived from principles embodied in God's character,⁹ the result will not be God-like.

Consider, for example, dominion—the ability to govern (Genesis 1:26-28). Whether self-serving or focused on selfless service, the *manner* of our rule is ultimately of greater consequence than the mere *fact* of such rule.

Our God-given abilities, then, are not ends in themselves. Instead, they provide us with the capacity to make ethical decisions and live moral lives. Consequently, it is in the moral realm, in character, where the image of God is most clearly revealed.¹⁰

Scripture states that we have been *rescued* “from the dominion of darkness” (Colossians 1:13)¹¹ and that the Lord *restores* our souls (Psalm 23:3). Why are redemption and restoration necessary? Included in the *imago dei* is

volition, the ability to make decisions. This freedom of choice includes the ability to love or not to love, to trust or distrust. It includes the ability to choose good or evil, godliness or ungodliness.¹²

Tragically, the first human beings distrusted the Creator and chose to reject a relationship with God. As a result, all human beings “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23; 5:12). Throughout human history, people progressively lost their likeness to the Creator, and the image of God has become increasingly distorted and deformed.

The good news is that restoration is possible! How does it happen? Paul points out that by looking to Jesus, by contemplating His life and teachings, we are changed into His likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). This restoration brings about a re-formation of our lives, a metamorphosis (Romans 12:2), in which old things are passed away and “all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV).

Ellen White affirmed that “the true object of education is to restore the image of God in the soul.”¹³ Consequently, the “image of God” component of the philosophy of education highlights the *purpose* of Adventist education and leads to the following implications:

- Students are God's creation and thereby possess inherent value.
- As educators, we are to express in our lives the attributes of God.
- Adventist education is to lift up Jesus so that students may see who God truly is and be transformed into His likeness.

2. Whole-person development

Luke 2:52 states that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” This multifaceted growth incorporated four crucial dimensions: intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social development.

Similarly, Ellen White, in the opening paragraphs of the book *Education*, wrote that “true education is the harmonious development of the physical, mental, and spiritual powers.”¹⁴ She then added that such a learning experience “prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come,” emphasizing the socio-emotional component.

Whole-person development describes the *product* of Adventist education. In the mental arena, the educational experience is to impart wisdom, a correct application of knowledge that seeks to glorify God and bless those around us. It contributes to higher-level thinking: analysis, evaluation, and creative thought and action. Fundamentally, it seeks to frame a biblical worldview, where each aspect of life and learning is viewed through a biblical lens, with students endeavoring to understand the discipline and its applications as God sees them. The physical component incorporates a healthy lifestyle, a solid work ethic, and recreation as re-creation—a change in routine that contributes to restoring God's image. The spiritual focus encompasses Bible study, the development of

Figure 1. General Conference Working Policy, FE 05 10 – Philosophy of Education

The Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education is Christ-centered. Adventists believe that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God's character and purposes can be understood as revealed in the Bible, in Jesus Christ, and in nature. The distinctive characteristics of Adventist education—derived from the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White—point to the redemptive aim of true education: to restore human beings into the image of their Maker.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that God is infinitely loving, wise, and powerful. He relates to human beings on a personal level, presenting His character as the ultimate norm for human conduct and His grace as the means of restoration.

Adventists recognize that human motives, thinking, and behavior have fallen short of God's ideal. Education, in its broadest sense, is a means of restoring human beings to their original relationship with God. Working together, homes, schools, and churches cooperate with divine agencies in preparing learners for responsible citizenship in this world and in the world-to-come.

Adventist education imparts more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person—spiritually, intellectually, physically, and socially. Its time dimensions span eternity. It seeks to develop a life of faith in God and respect for the dignity of all human beings; to build character akin to that of the Creator, to nurture thinkers rather than mere reflectors of others' thoughts; to promote loving service rather than selfish ambition; to ensure maximum development of each individual's potential; and to embrace all that is true, good, and beautiful.

a personal and corporate relationship with God, and the formation of moral character. The social dimension features service, witness, and orienting life and vocation as a response to the divine calling. In all, a “harmonious development”¹⁵ that prepares the student for life here and “in the world to come” (see Figure 2).

This key concept has several implications:

- Students are to experience whole-person development at each educational level.
- As educators, we are to incorporate key spiritual, physical, and social goals throughout the program of studies in a balanced approach that further develops cognitive competencies.
- Missional experiences and service learning are to be hallmarks of Adventist education.

3. All truth is God’s truth.

Scripture makes it clear: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father” (James 1:17, NKJV). “The Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6). “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

God, then, is the Source of truth, revealing facts and principles through Scripture, His created works in the physical world and human society, and creative and reflective thought processes. However, each of these must point toward and function in harmony with its Source. And among these, we must recognize Scripture as the clearest and most comprehensive revelation of God’s truth (see Figure 3).

The role of the Word in the teaching and learning process is highlighted throughout the Bible. David declared, “The teaching of your word gives light” (Psalm 119:130, NLT).¹⁶ And Christ prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

What, then, is the place of the Bible in Adventist education? It is not to be a slice of the curriculum, one subject among many, competing for the student’s time and attention. Instead, the

Word of God is to be core to every subject area (see Figure 4 on page 21).

Ellen White underscored the role of Scripture as the great unifying factor in the program of studies: “The Bible should be made the foundation of study and of teaching.”¹⁷ Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, stated it this way:

“I am much afraid that the universi-

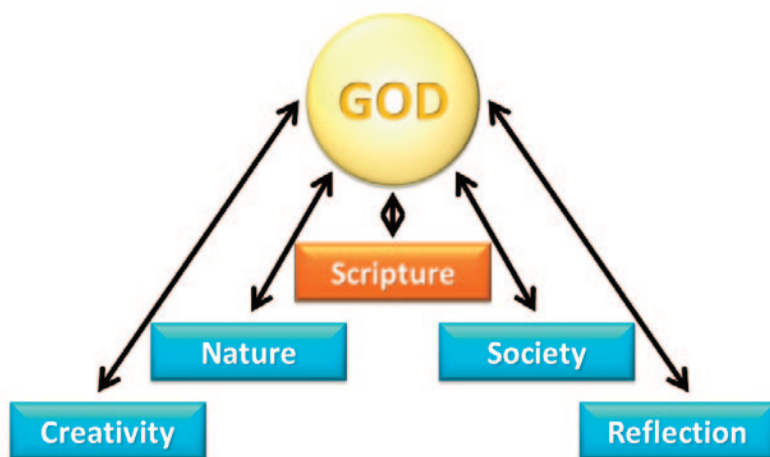
ties will prove to be the great gates of hell, unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, and engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not unceasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt.”¹⁸

Figure 2. Dimensions of Whole-person Development



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Figure 3. God, the Source and Reference of Truth



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Recognizing God as the Source of all truth is a sustaining *paradigm* in Adventist education and leads us to the following implications:

- Students should interact personally with God’s Word in each subject area.
- As educators, we are to intentionally connect all knowledge to its Source.
- Adventist education is to make the Word of God the foundation of all academic endeavors.

4. A comprehensive spiritual framework.

Likely from ancient times, we have inherited the problem of dualistic thinking. We create false dichotomies: love vs. authority, mercy vs. justice, theory vs. practice, student vs. subject.

The most problematic, however, is the spiritual-secular divide. We label some aspects of life as spiritual—such as attending religious services and conducting personal devotions—while we consider the rest secular, without reference to God or His plan for our lives. The same dualism can enter education, where the religion course, the Week of Prayer, or a devotional thought is viewed as spiritual, after which we get on with the rest of learning from a secular frame (see Figure 5).

Scripture, however, holds that a spiritual perspective is to permeate all. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31, NKJV). “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17).

Paul further affirmed that we must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). A program of studies is made up of courses comprised of topics that consist of concepts. If all thoughts acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, this means that all concepts, topics, courses, and, in fact, the entire educational program must recognize that Jesus is Lord.

A comprehensive Spirit-filled *perspective*, then, encompasses Christian life and learning (see Figure 6). Paul wrote, “Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the

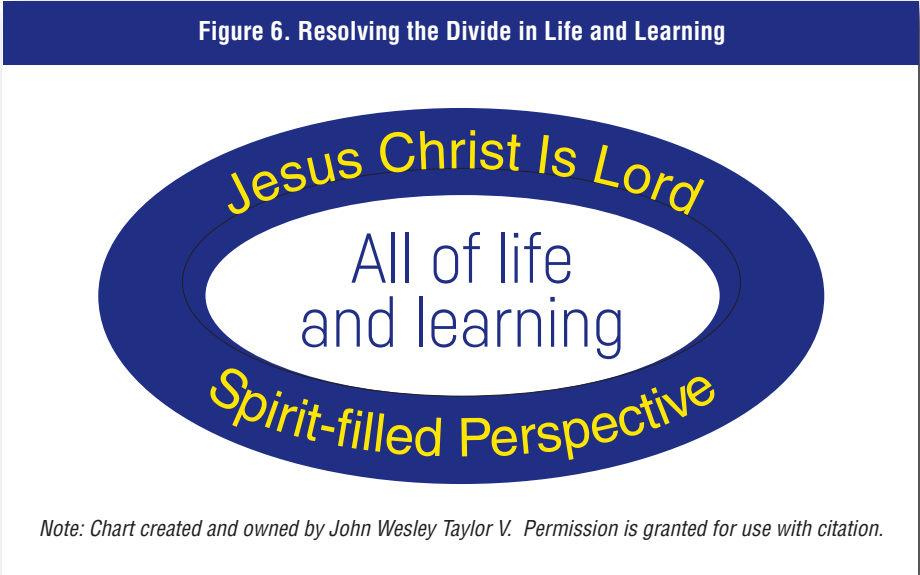
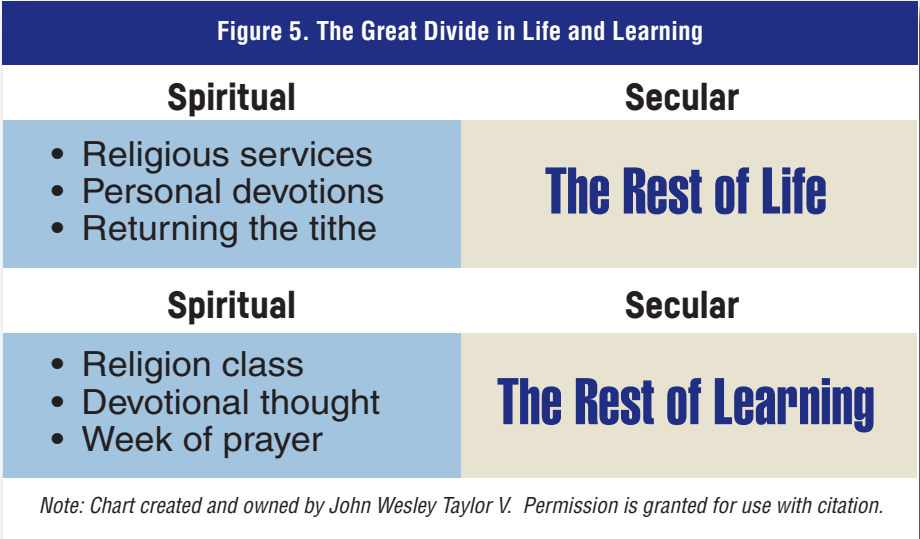
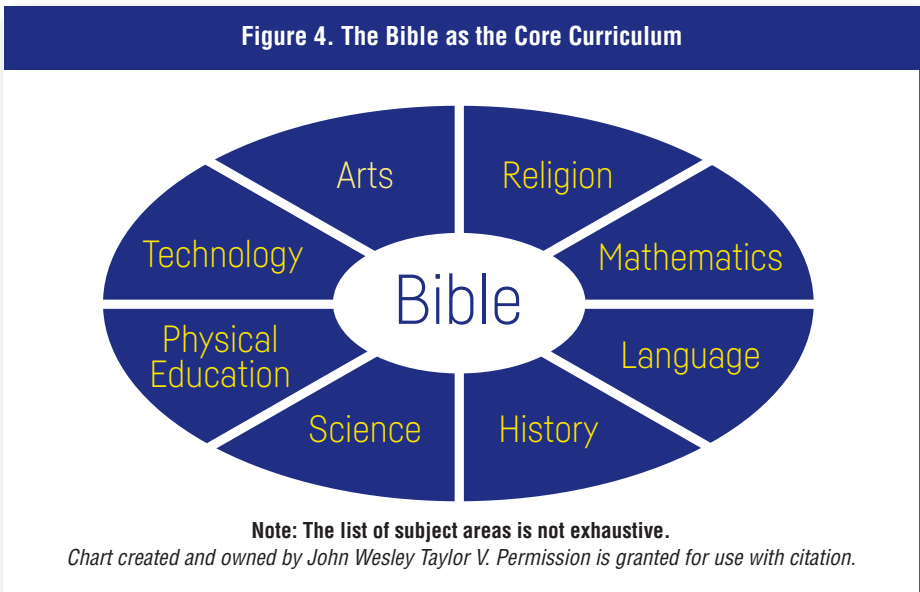


image of its Creator” where “Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:10, 11). Notice that the restoration of the image of God involves a renewal of the mind, of our view of life and learning. “Let this mind”—this attitude, this perspective—“be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5, KJV).

In this vein, Ellen White reminded educators, “Bible religion is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas, but its influence is to pervade the whole life, as though the canvas were dipped into the color until every thread of the fabric was dyed a deep, fast, unfading hue.”¹⁹

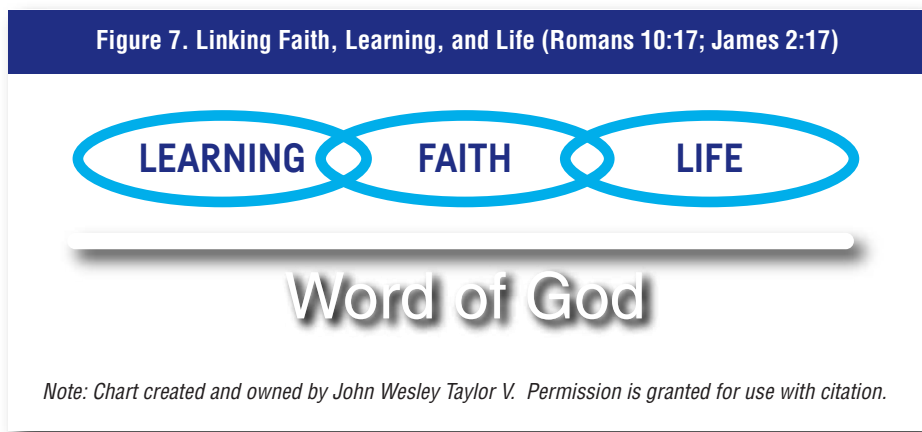
The implications of the all-encompassing spiritual perspective include the following:

- As Christians, we must think Christianly—endeavoring to view all things from God’s perspective.
- The biblical worldview brings a unified approach to life and learning, precluding a spiritual/secular dichotomy.
- As educators, we must ensure that a spiritual focus frames each academic subject and topic.

5. Nurturing faith.

In Scripture, faith, learning, and life are linked. Paul declared, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17, NKJV). Faith, then, is connected to learning about God and His plan for our lives. This is essential but insufficient. Faith must also link to life. As James asserted, “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). This faith-integrative process in learning and life is itself anchored in the Word of God (see Figure 7). We will briefly consider these elements.

Faith. Jesus asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). Faith is trust in something or someone. There are three key dimensions: (1) faith in God, both knowing about God and knowing Him experientially; (2) faith



in the divine revelation—trust in God’s message and confidence in the divine plan; and, perhaps the most difficult at times, (3) faith in persons, in the potential of others and of ourselves, by God’s grace.

Learning. Jesus declared, “Come to me . . . and learn from me” (Matthew 11:28, 29). There are two essential aspects in this process: (1) learning to think Christianly—a change of mind, and (2) learning to live by faith—a change of life. The change of mind involves internalizing the attitudes and priorities of Christ. The change of life involves trusting the divine plan and reflecting that commitment in our choices and actions.

Life. Jesus announced, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, NKJV). This “abundant life” encompasses both a meaningful life and an eternal life. It provides focus and direction in our lives. And the eternal dimension begins as we accept Christ as Savior. “This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

What then is the unity of faith, learning, and life? It is when biblical beliefs and values provide the bedrock for the academic endeavor, which, in turn, seeks to relate Christianity to the full range of the human experience. It is more than just a mixture or a chance encounter. It is when faith is the great integrating factor of all learning and life.

Nurturing faith is then the integra-

tive *process* in the philosophy of Adventist education. Ellen White wrote, “The students in our schools and all our youth should be given an education that will strengthen them in the faith.”²⁰ This faith-affirming focus leads to the following implications:

- Students must personally experience faith, developed through a relationship with God.
- Teachers are to nurture faith, seeking a transformation in both mind and life.
- An overarching goal of Adventist education is to form persons who trust God’s plan for their lives.

6. Spirit-filled teachers.

The Holy Spirit is the *power* of Adventist education (Acts 1:8). “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will *teach you all things*” (John 14:26, NKJV, italics supplied). Ephesians 4 reminds us that Spirit-filled teaching is a divine gift, granted to “prepare God’s people for works of service” and to edify the body of Christ “in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (vss. 11-13).

In Adventist education, teachers must be competent—demonstrating solid content knowledge and effective teaching skills, serving as caring mentors, and committed to professional growth. While competence is vital, it is nonetheless insufficient to accomplish the task of Christian education. Just as the Earth is surrounded by a

life-giving atmosphere, so competence must be enveloped in commitment.

The concept of commitment is biblical. Paul wrote to Timothy, “The things that you have heard from me, commit these to *faithful* witnesses who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV, italics supplied). Jesus further clarified that “a faithful and wise servant” is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his household (Matthew 24:45).

Ellen White affirmed that “It is not enough that the teacher possess natural ability and intellectual culture. These are indispensable, but without a spiritual fitness for the work he is not prepared to engage in it. He should see in every pupil the handiwork of God—a candidate for immortal honors.”²¹ And we are promised, “Just as surely as the educators of the youth are consecrated to God, so surely will their efforts be crowned with success, in this life and the future life.”²²

Such commitment involves whole-hearted consecration to God and to

fulfilling the mission that He has entrusted. It includes dedication to the salvation of our students, faithfulness to the biblical worldview, and devotion to a life of witness and service. It means that we seek to represent the Master. “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Peter 4:11).

In sum, Adventist educators are to be Spirit-filled—both competent and committed. This unified responsibility is to be our personal priority. Further, the integrated elements of competence and commitment are to guide the institution in the process of hiring, in nurturing the continued growth of its staff, and throughout the personnel assessment process (see Figure 8). Some implications:

- The Holy Spirit is essential to the success of the teaching-learning experience.
- As educators, we are to view our profession as a divine calling, focused on the salvation of our students.

- Christian educators are to be faithful, as God’s representatives.

7. Educating for eternity.

Sometimes, as educators, we adopt a restricted vision of what students can become and focus largely on helping them pass the subject or on seeking to ensure that they can graduate. At times, that vision is expanded by endeavoring to prepare students to be successful in the broader context of life—in their professions, their relationships with friends and family, and as responsible citizens. Adventist education, however, envisions a broader scope: Educating for eternity (see Figure 9 on page 24).

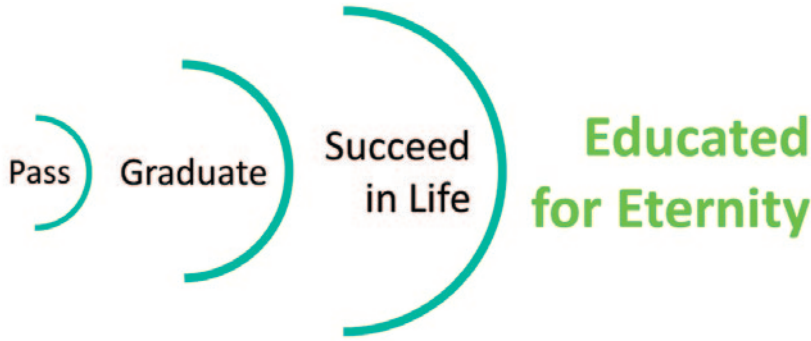
The concept of education with a view of eternity is embedded in Scripture: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47, NKJV). But “how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?” (Romans 10:14, NLT). Believing, then, depends on hearing the Word; and hearing is contingent upon

Figure 8. Competent and Committed Teachers



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Figure 9. Extending Our Horizons



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one who shares the Word.

“The true science of education,” Ellen White wrote, “will fit the youth for eternal life.”²³ To this end, she encouraged teachers to “Educate as for eternity.”²⁴

Salvation is to be at the heart of the Adventist philosophy of education. “The great Teacher calls for every youth to learn the true philosophy of education: What shall I do to be saved?”²⁵ Consequently, the ultimate priority of Seventh-day Adventist education is that each student may personally experience God’s saving grace in his or her life. “The work of education and the work of redemption are one.”²⁶

Because a God-like character is the only asset “that we can take from this world to the next,”²⁷ character formation is paramount in Adventist education. Ellen White asserted that “The great object to be secured [in the education and training of the youth] should be the proper development of character, that the individual may be fitted to rightly discharge the duties of the present life, and to enter at last upon the future, immortal life.”²⁸ Witness and selfless service are tangible expressions of Christian character, both now and throughout eternity.

The **priority** of educating for eternity provides us with implications for Adventist education:

- Every student is to understand

the true philosophy of education, including its eternal dimension.

- As educators, we are to see our students as God sees them, candidates for heaven.
- Adventist education must prioritize character formation, building a life commitment to witness and service.

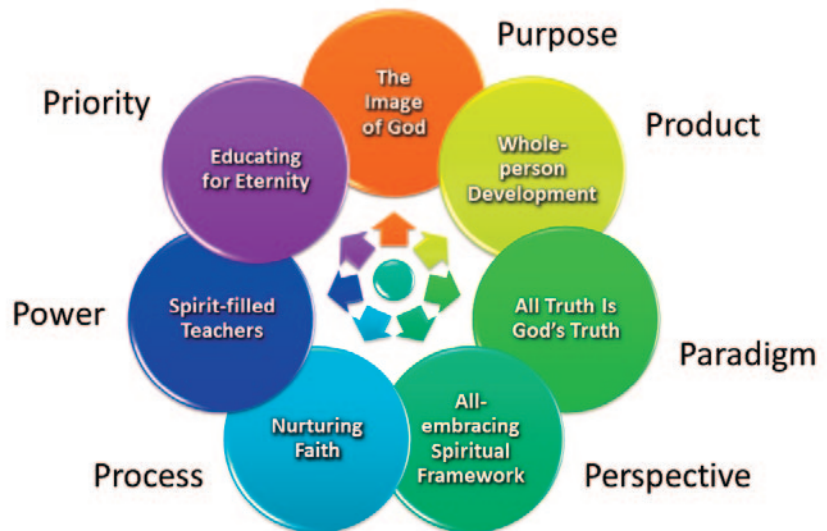
Conclusion

The philosophy of education described in Scripture and delineated in

the writings of Ellen White provides distinctive traits of Seventh-day Adventist education. This educational philosophy enables us to clearly define the purpose, product, paradigm, perspective, process, power, and priority of Adventist education (see Figure 10). These elements, in turn, are essential in carrying forward The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19, 20) through the ministry of education.²⁹

Ultimately, the philosophy of education that we implement represents a personal, but crucial choice. To paraphrase the words of Joshua 24:15, “Choose you this day whom you will serve—whether the gods of traditional education that your mentors served, or the gods of this secular age in which you now live.” Those perspectives are not the only options, however. There is a higher calling—a Bible-based, Christ-centered, heaven-directed philosophy of education. As Seventh-day Adventist educators, may we affirm, “As for me and my classroom, as for me and my school, we will serve the Lord!” ✍

Figure 10. Essential Elements in the Philosophy of Adventist Education



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This article has been peer reviewed.



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1. Quoted from the *King James Version* of the Bible.
2. *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary*: <https://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/philosophy>.
3. Biblehub, “Philosophia” (n.d.): <https://biblehub.com/greek/5385.htm>.
4. Quoted from the *New King James Version* (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.
5. Ellen G. White, “The Bible in Our Schools,” Manuscript 69, June 17, 1897 (hereafter abbreviated Ms.).
6. _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903).
7. *General Conference Working Policy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2020). Another clear articulation of the philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist education may be found in “Journey to Excellence 2.0,” developed by the Education Department of the North American Division (<https://journeytoexcellence.com/why>).
8. An expanded discussion of the philosophy of Adventist education, written by George R. Knight as a three-part series under the title “Redemptive Education,” may be found in a special issue of *The Journal of Adventist Education* (73:1), available through these links: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201577040404.pdf>; <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201073012217.pdf>; <http://circle.adventist.org/>

files/jae/en/jae201073013823.pdf. Knight also explores the contours of Adventist educational philosophy in his book *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2016).

9. Biblical values lay the foundation for the formation of moral character. “He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, NKJV). Character, in turn, orients moral reasoning. God’s instruction to the Levites can be applied to the work of Christian teachers today: “They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23, NIV).

10. See, for instance, Leviticus 19:2; 20:26; Isaiah 43:15; Ephesians 4:24; 1 Peter 1:16.

11. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture texts in this article are quoted from the *New International Version* of the Bible. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society.

12. The following passages, among others, highlight the human capacity of free will: Numbers 17:5; Deuteronomy 12:11; 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Chronicles 21:10; Proverbs 1:29; 3:31; Isaiah 7:15-16; 56:4; 65:12.

13. Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 1:359.

14. _____, *Education*, 13.

15. The concept of harmonious development in the writings of Ellen White is further examined in an article by the author: “Ellen White and the Harmonious Development Concept,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 76:5 (Summer 2014): 16-19: <https://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201476051604.pdf>.

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17. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1905), 402.

18. Quoted in J. H. Merle d’Aubigné, *The History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, 190 (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2003). Note: French edition published in 1835. English edition published in London in 1846.

19. Ellen G. White, Letter 2, March 4, 1895 (hereafter abbreviated Lt.). Written “to those who work at Cooranbong” (Australia) who were endeavoring to establish an Adventist college, now Avondale University.

20. _____, “A Plea for Loyalty,” Ms. 106, November 20, 1905.

21. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1943), 229. She further stated, “Those who are engaged as teachers in our schools should reach a high standard of consecration.” “No Other Gods Before Me,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 84:24 (June 13, 1907): 8.

22. _____, “True Education,” Ms. 135, October 19, 1898.

23. _____, “What Is Higher Education?” Ms. 1, January 19, 1909.

24. _____, “Diary/The Use of Means and Family Responsibilities,” Ms. 204, October 20, 1903. Referring to the educational work at what would become Loma Linda University, she stated, “We want in every way, everything possible done to have the educating power there that shall be of a sanctified order. We want not trivial work done there. We are working for eternity” (“Sermon/Thoughts on Exodus 19,” Ms. 187, May 19, 1907).

25. _____, *Special Testimonies on Education* (1897). No imprint. (Reprint, Payson, Ariz.: Leaves-of-Autumn Books, 1978), 240.

26. _____, *Education*, 30.

27. _____, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1930), 100.

28. _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, 1:361. Ellen White further emphasized the primacy of character formation in the following statement: “True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements, but above intellectual acquirements, it values character. The world does not so much need men and women of great intellect as of noble character. . . . Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today” (*Education*, 225).

29. As Ellen White noted, “Those who . . . are not willing to learn from the great Teacher the true philosophy of education . . . should never be entrusted with the work of teaching the youth” (“Education,” Ms. 141, October 24, 1898).