



# Adventist Higher Education and Its Unique Design

For centuries, higher education has been a multi-billion-dollar industry that has involved governments, private non-profit and for-profit investors, and religiously affiliated institutions.<sup>1</sup> Despite their grandiose and diverse presence, one may wonder about the necessity of colleges and universities. This question mainly pertains to the purpose of higher education, which is a complex one to answer. However, colleges and universities are socially organized institutions focusing on learning and creating all

forms of knowledge. They prepare experts and everyday citizens to work in various professional or governmental entities,<sup>2</sup> and also the church.

Education has traditionally focused on developing individuals and their skills to contribute to specific fields of expertise. As students continue to learn and grow their skills, they apply competencies to sectors that impact their future and communities. As societies evolve, education adds new and more complex purposes to enrich its influence and meet society's demand for trained professionals. Currently, many higher education institutions are dedicated to generating

knowledge and making discoveries that significantly impact human advancement. Many individuals perceive education to be a powerful tool for achieving personal and community benefits to such an extent that governments and numerous organizations expect schools to facilitate social progress. The expectation that they will discover and transmit information that leads to solutions is a core underlying assumption that leads societies to support higher education systems.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to education services, many people ask how a particular institution measures up compared to others that offer similar programs. This question is also applicable to Adventist higher education. What sets it apart from other models of higher education? Prospective students and their parents may ask about its unique contributions to professional, personal, or spiritual growth and development. Their perceptions are crucial for students considering entering tertiary education, retention of current students, and ensuring community, church, and alumni support for the institution. Therefore, this article will examine some fundamental principles underpinning Adventist higher education that make it unique.

## Why Does the Adventist Tertiary System Exist?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has founded multiple colleges and universities with various goals. One of the most apparent purposes is to train individuals to meet the church's demand for human resources. Additionally, the pioneers believed that Christian education was equivalent to providing the means to rescue youth from the wrong and harmful education offered by secularized institutions.<sup>4</sup> In this case, Adventist education was conceived to act as an organized means to facilitate salvation and service aligned with the mission of the church. As Ellen White ex-

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pressed it, “In the highest sense, the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, ‘other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, this education would provide a biblical worldview centered around a prophetic perspective of human pursuits because the pioneers believed that news of Jesus’ imminent return must be disseminated.

The unique perspective of Christian higher education involves training human beings, guiding their minds, and promoting physical and spiritual development to impact society in positive ways that set it apart from secular institutions. At Adventist colleges and universities, this perspective goes a step further whereby the aim of seeking to advance God’s kingdom restructures the entire education process to include activities deliberately chosen to achieve a holistic purpose not found in secular institutions. This approach includes activities deliberately chosen to achieve a holistic purpose not found in secular institutions. An Adventist tertiary institution’s academic aims are to do more than convey facts and teach students how to research and analyze society’s problems. Their ultimate goal is to produce spiritually transformed students who can positively impact society and advance the kingdom of God. However, to change the world, individuals must first be transformed through a personal relationship with God.<sup>6</sup>

### Frameworks for Adventist Education

Duane Litfin,<sup>7</sup> in his book *Conceiving the Christian College*, debates the overall approach of a conservative faith-based institution. The discussion hinges on the two possible frameworks institutions could implement to deal with competing ideas in education. The first is the typical approach used in most public and some elite private universities. It is an open system that allows the coexistence of all kinds of views of reality, what Kerr<sup>8</sup> calls “multiversity,” as opposed to a more comprehensive “university” with clear defining parameters of interpretation. This welcoming view of

higher education is described as an “umbrella” that is big enough to house all possible explorations of knowledge. Interpretations and models of reality coexist as potential and parallel alternatives. In short, there is no dominant narrative to guide life or actions. This fragmented view tends to lead to individualistic attitudes about reality and life.

Litfin then introduces the “systemic approach,” where preference is given to a more defined framework to guide what happens within an institution of higher learning.<sup>9</sup> Students

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are exposed to different views and alternative ideas of reality, as in an umbrella design. However, “engagement takes place, with great intentionality, within each course as professors seek to help students think Christianly about every subject.” Thus, “Students are introduced to competing voices at every turn, though typically with a view, in the end, to developing them into effective Christian thinkers.”<sup>10</sup>

This is similar to what Ellen White described as proper education. Its purpose is to find ways to “train young people to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people’s thought. . . . Let them contemplate the great facts of duty and destiny, and the mind will

expand and strengthen.”<sup>11</sup> The systemic goal is to provide a biblical structure for the dominant secularized views that prevail among most institutions of higher learning. Essentially, this is a curriculum design challenge that all Adventist colleges and universities must face. Professors, administrators, and other personnel align themselves with the underlying philosophical foundations that regulate the principles and policies that build and govern an Adventist institution of higher learning.

In his *The Idea of a Christian College*, Holmes underscores a comparable point, saying that a college “is a place to think, to raise questions and doubts and discuss them openly, and the Christian college must encourage students to do so in dialog with more mature minds, to confront the best information and arguments available.”<sup>12</sup> Simply put, the “systemic approach” to higher education presents an intentional set of assumptions to develop the missions of teaching, research, and engagement.

Every aspect of the academic endeavor must fit into a biblical pattern that functions as a structural framework for a genuinely Adventist education. These patterns are not deterministic but, rather, holistic biblical Gestalt<sup>13</sup> principles that offer outlines for each institution’s involved actors—educational leaders, teaching faculty, staff, students, and boards.

The initial patterns used to develop a college or university curriculum framework are based on a biblical worldview<sup>14</sup> that provides an underlying story to make sense of reality. What are the basic biblical presuppositions? Sire<sup>15</sup> provides questions to guide the exploration of these assumptions using Genesis 1. Here is a summary:

1. *What is the ultimate reality?* God is the answer! This is a complex concept, but the Bible offers some descriptions of His character and attributes. He is infinite and omnipotent, yet personal and reachable. He intervenes in human affairs for their benefit. Although He is omniscient and the Creator of everything, He transcends matter. His character is goodness and love.

2. *What is the external reality?* God spoke the universe into existence, following a framework of natural laws during its formation. Although nature follows a particular order, it is not predestined. Instead, it is an open system of interactions that allows for manipulation.

3. *What is a human being?* God created humans in His image. They have the intelligence and personality to explore the world, accumulating and building knowledge. They are capable of reproducing and living together in a society. They can make free-will decisions with moral implications.

4. *What happens to a person at death?* God did not create death, but it is the consequence of the sin that tainted this world. Therefore, people and other living beings cease to exist when they die and they have no memory afterward. However, God provided a solution to death through Jesus Christ. Human beings who consciously accept His death as their Substitute will not face eternal extinction. Hell and heaven are realities that come after the judgment.

5. *What is right?* God's Word is the foundation for making choices about moral dilemmas. God's character is expressed in the Bible and constitutes the norm for making ethical judgments. The Bible is the ultimate reference point for understanding good actions and screening decisions.

6. *What is history?* History is a meaningful, linear sequence of events. Though humans have free will, God intervenes to shape and guide their development.<sup>16</sup> One day, this world will come to an end through the final intervention of God to re-establish His kingdom.

Understanding the worldviews that shape a framework is crucial for designing Adventist education. To develop curricula, fundamental elements such as reality, the nature of human beings, the needs of society, behavioral codes, and purpose must be considered. Using the Bible as a conceptual framework, educational processes can be reorganized to achieve specific learning outcomes.

### **Some Foundational Ideas**

The following section aims to clarify the key ideas Adventist tertiary institutions can utilize while designing their courses and co-curricular activities. These ideas are based on a biblical worldview and serve as the foundation for creating a unique concept of Adventist education.

#### **The Idea of Human Nature**

The anthropological belief that sin has profoundly affected human nature is at the core of all assumptions.

**“True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being and the whole period of existence possible to man.”**

Human nature has been “fractured” by sin that modified all possible relationships. As Ellen White put it, “In order to understand what is comprehended in the work of education, we need to consider both the nature of man and the purpose of God in creating him. We need to consider also the change in man's condition through the coming in of a knowledge of evil, and God's plan for still fulfilling His glorious purpose in the education of the human race.”<sup>17</sup>

In contrast with humanistic philosophy, this statement claims that sin is the root of all evil and that no human being can solve it. Therefore, education employs a redemptive approach

to empowering each student through a relationship with his or her Creator. This approach acknowledges that students can find true healing and restoration to develop their potential only through this relationship.

This theological assumption has practical implications for developing curricular and co-curricular activities. For instance, students are exposed to worship services that help them to connect with God. The academic programs offer Bible classes to help them understand the Scriptures better. The school provides spiritual support to guide students through important life decisions, allowing them to better know and experience their Savior, Jesus Christ.

#### **The Idea of a Wholistic Approach**

Adventist education strives to develop students wholistically by utilizing a biblical understanding of humanity. It emphasizes the importance of nurturing the mind, body, and spirit in a comprehensive education model:

“True education means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being and the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, character development is the ultimate goal:

“For this school, the youth are to be educated, disciplined, and trained by forming such characters, moral and intellectual, as God will approve. They are to receive training, not in the customs and amusements and games of this worldly polluted society, but in Christ's lines, a training, which will fit them to be collaborators with the heavenly intelligences.”<sup>19</sup>

For this to be a reality, teachers are vital. As Ellen White wrote in *Education*, “To aid the student in comprehending these principles, and in entering into that relation with Christ

which will make them a controlling power in the life, should be the teacher's first effort and his constant aim."<sup>20</sup> By following this approach, students can acquire wisdom from Heaven, making them wiser and better equipped to face life's challenges.

Wholistic training focuses on developing the technical skills required for a particular trade as well as on transforming the entire individual. Students need to learn that human beings consist of a combination of mind, body, and spirit and must prioritize all these dimensions to lead a well-rounded and successful life. John Wesley Taylor V adds the importance of its commitment to stewardship, with "an institution-wide emphasis on health and wellness."<sup>21</sup> Adventist higher education thus must embody all the dimensions of human development; this is a crucial objective. Students on Adventist campuses must have the curricular and extracurricular space to develop the ability to apply these principles daily.

### The Idea of Purpose

The purpose is based on a biblical worldview reflected in various forms of action: to train students in multiple fields of expertise and help people be ready for the second coming of Jesus. Additionally, the academic environment supports preparation for this life and the one to come: "Our school was established, not merely to teach the sciences, but for the purpose of giving instruction in the great principles of God's word, and in the practical duties of everyday life."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, higher education institutions are part of this commitment to social transformation for the betterment of the kingdom of God on earth.

Reflecting on the mission of Adventist education at all levels, George Knight argues that, in addition to preparing students for a productive and successful career, our schools must prepare them for the world to come and equip them to play a significant part in the fulfillment of the "apocalyptic vision" of the church, "teaching of

its unique doctrinal package and especially the denomination's apocalyptic understanding and the implications of that understanding for worldwide mission and the Second Advent."<sup>23</sup>

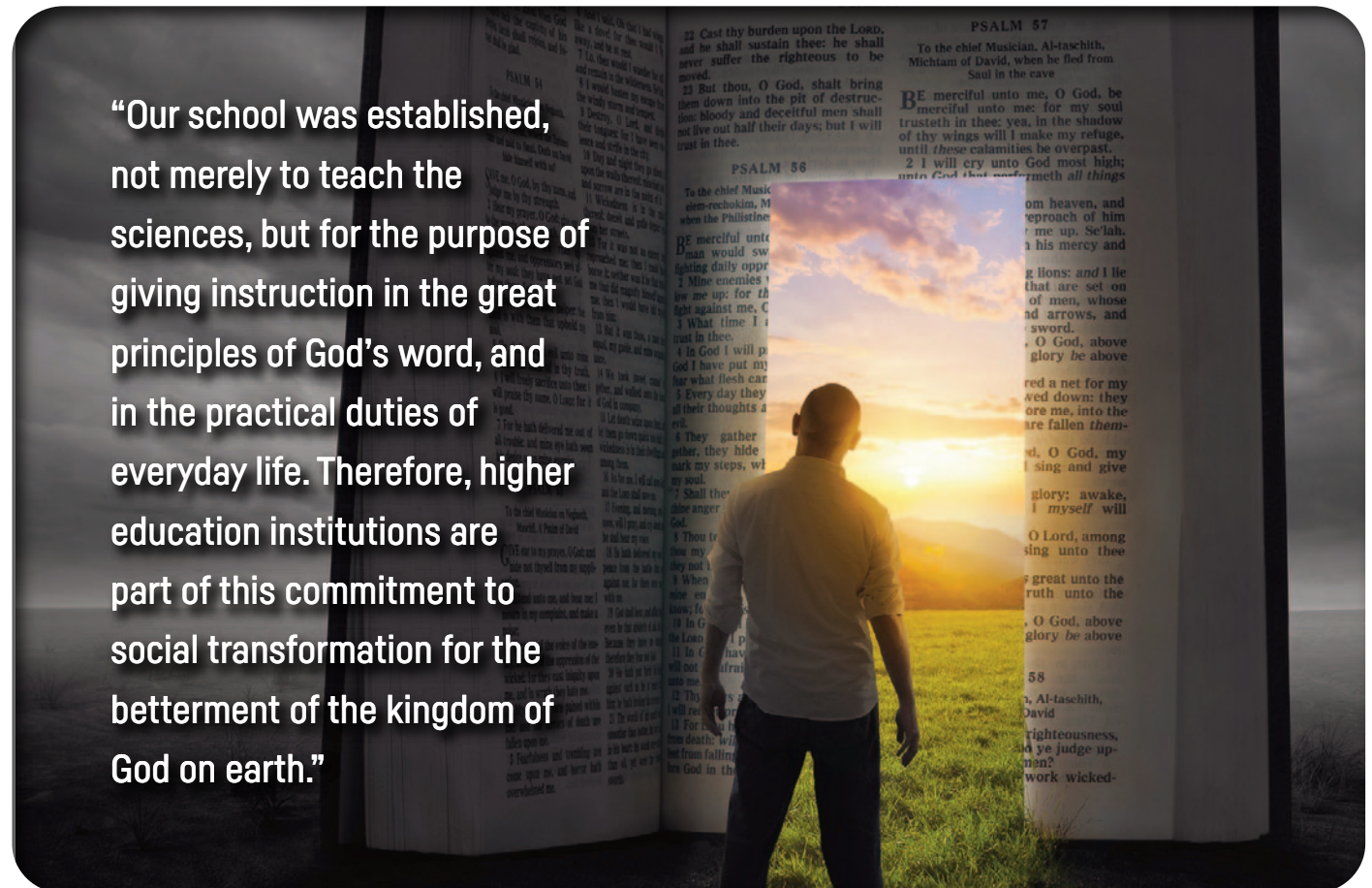
Taylor, writing about the "special character" of the Adventist university, notes the central role of faith development, the implementation of "a distinctive Seventh-day Adventist identity," and its contribution "in meaningful ways to the strategic priorities of the gospel commission."<sup>24</sup> This is the biblical commission for education.

### The Idea of Knowing

Students and professors are encouraged to explore the world, understand and manage the variables that produce cause and effect, and discover new information. However, knowledge is created within biblical parameters, as Ellen White emphasized:

"It is the duty and privilege of all to use reason as far as man's finite faculties can go, but there is a boundary where man's resources must cease.

**"Our school was established, not merely to teach the sciences, but for the purpose of giving instruction in the great principles of God's word, and in the practical duties of everyday life. Therefore, higher education institutions are part of this commitment to social transformation for the betterment of the kingdom of God on earth."**



There are many things that can never be reasoned out by the strongest intellect or discerned by the most penetrating mind. Philosophy cannot determine the ways and works of God; the human mind cannot measure infinity. Jehovah is the fountain of all wisdom, of all truth, of all knowledge.”<sup>25</sup>

Science and faith must go hand in hand. As Ellen White put it, “Rightly understood, both the revelations of science and the experiences of life are in harmony with the testimony of Scripture to the constant working of God in nature.”<sup>26</sup> Scientific research should exalt faith, since it provides evidence of what God has created. The Bible adds a spiritual dimension to pursuing discoveries that mere facts cannot unveil. Adventist colleges and universities form a counter-cultural set of institutions that offer a different view of discoveries and alternative interpretations to current theories and scientific facts, which tend to discredit God’s Word and spiritual dimensions in human lives.

As David Jesse<sup>27</sup> underscores, Christian higher education institutions are places where professors and students explore the pros and cons of ideas, including evolution versus creation. In most of the public and many private universities, this isn’t happening. So, Adventist tertiary institutions must inform students about both sides of a given issue, in order to provide them with a much richer intellectual and faith experience.

### **The Idea of Social Transformation**

Christianity is based on the idea that transformations in society begin with changes at the individual level. A personal relationship with Christ can transform a person’s heart and, in doing so, positively impact the community. Human nature requires redemption to overcome its inclination toward evil. The transformation process begins within the human heart and extends outward, resulting in positive societal change. This can happen when individuals associate together to facilitate structural changes that may lead to a better civilization. In Romans

7 and 8, the apostle Paul discusses the spiritual battle during conversion, which represents the individual-social transformation in the biblical sense.

From an educational standpoint, information is valuable, but human involvement is essential to use data and resources appropriately and make discoveries. However, having more knowledge and technology doesn’t always solve social issues, as improving society requires human interactions. The human factor is often the most challenging and unpredictable vari-

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able. Sometimes, discoveries and knowledge can be weaponized instead of used to solve problems.

Throughout history, good inventions have been used to cause great damage. To name a few, dynamite, nuclear power, and the internet have significantly contributed to specific scientific and human needs but have also been used to cause harm. Using advanced information and resources, highly influential and educated individuals have committed frauds, scams, and atrocities that have ruined the lives of numerous people. Knowledge without a moral and social backbone can become a threat instead of a solution for society. Without intentional consideration about what

makes a comprehensive life and how to utilize resources appropriately, even well-intentioned training may not produce the desired results.

Some higher education researchers, like Anthony Kronman,<sup>28</sup> argue that most tertiary institutions do not prioritize teaching students about the “meaning of life” as part of their education. Graham Spanier expresses a similar concern about developing well-rounded students who will become successful professionals. Universities will make the most significant contributions by assisting students “in exploring ethical issues in their professional and personal lives. I have always believed that the greatest challenges we face in higher education are issues of character, conscience, citizenship, and social responsibility among our students.”<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, a balanced perspective on nature and personal goals is necessary for knowledge to positively impact society. Like other institutions, Adventist colleges and universities must invite students to get involved in solving some of the complex issues that impact society, but they must help them to do so from a biblical approach.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Adventist higher education seeks to offer specialized training that enables students to achieve success in their respective fields. Simultaneously, it also encourages them to use their skills to contribute to society while advancing the kingdom of God as they prepare for Jesus’ coming.

From the beginning, Adventist pioneers remarked that training and service were significant contributions that Christian education must yield: “The strength of our college is in keeping the religious element in the ascendency.”<sup>30</sup> What is that “religious element”? Renewed human beings guided by biblical principles who are capable of reasoning and living according to God’s will for their lives. This crucial commitment serves as an interpretative framework for all their endeavors, helping them align with the

evangelical mission of the church. Without this vital component, graduates may not truly represent the values that Adventist education aims to instill. Knight<sup>31</sup> argues that this eschatological frame provides graduates with a clear sense of mission, empowering them to impact the world positively.

Expanding the kingdom of God requires more than the church can achieve alone. Although local congregations can—and do—promote biblical principles through preaching and teaching the Word of God, they lack the resources to train professionals, conduct research, and address the complexities of various fields of expertise. On the other hand, Adventist colleges and universities are committed to the Adventist mission and seek to apply it to multiple professional fields. By doing so, they contribute significantly to expanding the kingdom of God and improving society. Additionally, Adventist education promotes a biblical purpose of life that equips students with the wisdom to succeed in life and guide others to the source of their wisdom.

Finally, Adventist tertiary institutions have increased their appeal as society and its institutions have become more polarized and highly secularized. Parents are looking for a safe place to send their children for training. This is an opportunity that, well-addressed, can carry on the church's global mission to the whole world until Jesus returns. ✍

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8. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
9. Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College*, 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 26, 27.
11. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 17.
12. Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 74.
13. *Gestalt* is a German word used in psychology to describe the theory of perception. It posits that we perceive reality as a whole, not as sets of elements assembled by our brain.
14. As Sire pointed out, people have assumptions that are crucial in explaining the composition of the world. These assumptions are based on their worldview or *Weltanschauung*, a German term that means "view of the world." See James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 6.
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