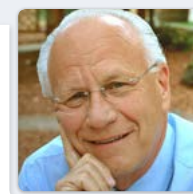


George R. Knight, EdD, is professor emeritus of philosophy and church history at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



# Ground zero in the great controversy: The struggle for the minds and hearts of the next generation

**H**iroshima! Ground zero! I was standing at the spot above which the world's first atomic bomb detonated. Frightful in its consequences. Shattering in its implications. The world was never the same.

- Ground zero is where the action takes place.
- Ground zero is where change happens.
- Ground zero is where the course of world history is shifted in new directions.

## Ground zero and education

Ground zero in the great controversy between Christ and Satan is the struggle for the hearts and minds of the next generation. Education is not something that takes place at the edge of human history for the benefit of children and young adults. No! Education stands at the very center of where the future is going. The education of today's young people will shape tomorrow's world.

Hitler understood the strategic importance of education.<sup>1</sup> As a result, one of his early moves was to gain control of the schools because he saw them as shapers of the next generation as he sought to fulfill his mission of world domination, the Nazi millennium. Hitler not only sought to control

education through the schools but also by such avenues as the media and the Hitler Youth movement. He utilized every avenue possible to control and shape the minds of the young because he knew that their minds and hearts would determine his success. In short, Adolf Hitler realized the basic truth that education is ground zero in the great struggle for world dominion. Education for Hitler was not only an "evangelistic" technique to win the hearts and minds of the young but also a tool that prepared leadership for the future of the National Socialist movement. And Hitler was not alone in grasping that fact. Hundreds of miles to the east, Joseph Stalin and the Communist Party followed the same pattern in Russia.

For both Hitler and Stalin, education was central to the accomplishment of their mission. With that truth in mind, secularist George S. Counts has pointed out that "to shape educational policy is to guard the path that leads from the present to the future. . . . Throughout the centuries since special educational agencies were first established, the strategic position of the school has been appreciated by kings, emperors, and popes, by rebels, reformers, and prophets. Hence, among those opposing forces found in all complex societies, a struggle for the control of the school is always evident. Every

group or sect endeavors to pass on to its own children and to the children of others that culture which it happens to esteem; and every privileged class seeks to perpetuate its favored position in society by means of education."<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Counts observed that the failure of revolutions has been a record of the failure to bring education into the service of the revolutionary cause. Revolutionary bodies will possess no more permanence than the small bands of idealists who conceived them if the children of the next generation cannot be persuaded to push the revolution to its logical conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus knew the significance of that truth. One of the titles central to His ministry was *didaskalos*, which means "teacher" or "master." Instructing His 12 disciples was the focal point of His mission because He knew that without trained leadership, His mission would have no impact on the future. And one of His last commands was for His followers to take His message to all the world. That command should be called the *Great Educational Commission* because at the very heart of that commission was the charge to *teach* all that He had taught.

Martin Luther, too, realized the centrality of education. At the very core of the Reformation was the doctrine of justification by faith as taught in the Bible. But people could not truly

grasp that all-important understanding unless they had a Bible in their own language. So Luther translated both testaments into German. But that would do no good unless people could read. And it was that insight that eventually led to the development of universal public education. In 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Ninety-Five Theses, we need to remember that the great initiator of the Protestant Reformation was primarily an educator. He knew that if the truths of the Reformation were to prosper that its leaders needed to invest in education, especially along two lines: (1) the education of future leaders and (2) the education of the populace in the principles of the Bible.

The Puritans who settled the New England wilderness of North America in the late 1620s and early 1630s grasped that same idea. As a result, by 1636 they had established Harvard to train leaders, and in 1642 and 1647 they had legislation in place for compulsory elementary and

secondary education so that children could be taught Puritan principles.

Similar thoughts led to the development of public education in the young United States. The same can be said regarding the rise of Roman Catholic education. Every movement needs both leaders who understand its principles and a populace in harmony with them.

In the modern world, the struggle to control the minds and hearts of the young is still on the front burner. Thus the United States has been shaken for the past half century by the “culture wars”<sup>4</sup> regarding what should be taught in the schools. The plain fact is that those who control education have the power to shape the future.

Ellen White had no doubts about that truth. “By a misconception of the true nature and object of education,” she wrote, “many have been led into serious and even fatal errors.”<sup>5</sup> Again, she wrote, “The necessity of establishing Christian schools is urged upon me very strongly. In the schools of today many things are

taught that are a hindrance rather than a blessing. Schools are needed where the word of God is made the basis of education. Satan is the great enemy of God, and it is his constant aim to lead souls away from their allegiance to the King of heaven. He would have minds so trained that men and women will exert their influence on the side of error and moral corruption, instead of using their talents in the service of God. His object is effectually gained, when, by perverting their ideas of education, he succeeds in enlisting parents and teachers on his side; for a wrong education often starts the mind on the road to infidelity.”<sup>6</sup>

### Some do not get it

The idea of the centrality of education in the struggle for the hearts and minds of the next generation seems clear enough. Christ understood it, as did Hitler, Stalin, Luther, the Puritans, Ellen White, the leaders of the American democratic system, and the Roman Catholics.

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But some Seventh-day Adventists have failed to grasp one of the most elementary facts of political and religious history—namely, that education stands at ground zero in the great controversy.

For example, some pastors, and even administrators, have argued that Adventist education “is stealing money from evangelism.” A concerned church member has written that “the pastor of my church has decided that Christian education is irrelevant and not soul winning and therefore our local [Adventist] school should be closed so as not to waste any of the money that he could be putting into his evangelism to win souls. . . . He has even presented a sermon on the evils of not bearing fruit, which is a great sermon topic, except when his whole point was that our academy does not bear any visible fruits and therefore should be closed.”

From that perspective I wonder how our pastor/friend would have evaluated the ministry of Jesus, who worked with His disciples for three years and went to the cross without one of them having

been converted. But the New Testament tells us that they eventually got the point and became mighty evangelists. Jesus had planted seeds that over time sprouted into a worldwide harvest. That is what educators of all types do.

Yet it is one of the sad facts of Adventist history that the denomination had a difficult time supporting Christian education. It would be nearly 20 years before the denomination established its first successful school. That 1872 school became Battle Creek College in 1874, the year that Adventism sent its first official foreign missionary.

The development of the denomination’s first college and the sending of its first missionary in the same year was no accident. The Adventist leadership had come to recognize that it had a duty to preach the three angels’ messages to all the world. And, if it was to do so, it needed an educational system to prepare pastors, editors, translators, and other skilled individuals to work not only in English but also in other languages.

It was mission that led to the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And at its best a conscious recognition of mission stands at the very heart of Adventist education.

That truth is further emphasized by developments in the ongoing history of Adventist education. The establishment of a college to train leadership was good in itself, but it only fulfilled half of the educational imperative. The other half was the establishment of an elementary system to guide the hearts and minds of the young in their earliest and most formative years. But that would not take place until the 1890s, 50 years after the Millerite disappointment.

The decade itself is of interest because it was during the 1890s that Adventism truly became a worldwide movement. In 1890, the denomination had only 8 missions with a handful of missionaries, but by 1900 it had 42 missions around the world with nearly 500 missionaries. But that was just the beginning. By 1930 the church was

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supporting 8,479 evangelistic workers outside of North America representing 270 missions.

The 1890s also witnessed the turning point in Adventist education. The church entered the 1890s with 16 schools, but it exited the decade with 246. And, as with mission, that expansion would continue, with over 600 schools in 1910 and more than 2,000 in 1930.

Once again we see that mission expansion and education go hand in hand. At its very best, Adventist education and Adventist mission partner on at least two levels.

First, as the denomination entered new areas of the world, it realized the need to train leaders. Thus the 1890s saw the establishment of Adventist training schools and colleges in the far corners of the earth.

The second great change in Adventist education during that decade was the development of a worldwide elementary system through the urging of Ellen White, who wrote that there should be an Adventist school established where there were as few as six children.<sup>7</sup> The elementary system functioned as an evangelistic arm of the church to win the hearts and shape the minds of the young in their formative and most impressionable years.

Shane Anderson highlighted the importance of education when he wrote that “in my experience Adventist education is one of the most effective ways to prepare young people for the second coming of Christ. . . . I believe that our schools—rightly run—are more successful at doing this than any other single evangelistic method, including Revelation seminars, church planting, felt-needs evangelism, or contemporary worship services. Also I believe that Adventist education has been the key to propagating our unique Adventist mission in the world. It has been the medium for shaping our values, finding our spouses, and raising Advent-minded families. Adventist education has even provided a nationwide and, yes, global sense of connectedness and community.”<sup>8</sup>

The most important words in Anderson’s statement are “rightly

run.” Just what is it that Seventh-day Adventist schools are supposed to teach through dedicated Christian teachers who have a firm commitment to the Adventist Church and its mission?

## Adventist educational essentials<sup>9</sup>

That question brings us to the three essential goals of Adventist education. The first is to prepare young people to function successfully in this present world. Education for excellence in this life and success in this world is an essential aspect of Adventist education. But if that is all it achieves, it has failed. After all, that is also the function of the public or government schools. And they often do an excellent job in accomplishing that goal.

That thought brings us to the second great goal of Adventist education, which Ellen White hints at in the opening paragraph of her book *Education*. “True education,” she writes, “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 with the whole period of existence possible to man.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Adventist education is for this earth. But it is more. It is also education for eternity.

That goal comes into sharp focus in *Education’s* first chapter and again in its fourth as Ellen White repeatedly sets forth education as a “work of redemption.” “The teacher’s first effort and his constant aim,” she writes, is to help students come into a saving relationship with Christ.<sup>11</sup>

With those forceful ideas Ellen White sets forth education as evangelism. And with that fact she places education at the center of the great controversy and views teachers as God’s agents or ministers in the struggle over the hearts, minds, and souls of the coming generation. Adventist education is not at the edge of the church’s mission to the world but, rather, one of its most crucial elements.

But there is a third aspect of the Adventist educational commission—namely, the 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.

Adventism’s unique task is to preach God’s end-time apocalyptic message found in Revelation 14:6–12 to all the world. That understanding has led generations of Adventist young people to give their lives in obscure mission fields and has prompted older church members to sacrifice not only the nearness of their children but also their financial means to fulfill the prophetic imperative. It has also placed education at the center of the denomination’s agenda.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Adventist schools are unique institutions that fill a special place in the great end-time controversy between Christ and Satan. As such, they not only prepare students for life in this world, they not only introduce young people to Jesus as Lord and Savior, but they also inspire the coming generation with an understanding of God’s end-time apocalyptic vision with the aim of leading them to dedicate their lives to that vision and the advent of their Lord. ❖

- 1 See George R. Knight, “Adolf Hitler and Ellen White ‘Agree’ on the Purposes of Education,” *Journal of Adventist Education*, 65, no. 1 (2002): 4–11.
- 2 J. Crosby Chapman and George S. Counts, *Principles of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 601, 602.
- 3 George S. Counts, *The Soviet Challenge to America* (New York: John Day, 1931), 66, 67.
- 4 James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2002).
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1913), 49.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1923), 541.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 6:199.
- 8 Shane Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education (and How to Give it a Fighting Chance!)* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2009), 12.
- 9 For a more complete discussion, see George R. Knight, “Education for What?” *Journal of Adventist Education*, 79, no. 1 (2016): 6–12; George R. Knight, *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016), 63–108.
- 10 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), 13.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 15, 16, 30.