

# Questioning Sabbath School

*By Stefanie Johnson*

Sabbath School in Adventism turns one hundred fifty years old this year. With a series of Bible-based questions formulated first by James White, Sabbath School predates organized Saturday morning worship, church buildings, and even the name “Seventh-day Adventist” by a decade. It is one of the oldest rituals in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

I had my suspicions that this aging institution had lost its edge in a contemporary context. I believed that Sabbath School was outdated and that I had run out of questions to ask of the Scriptures. Then it became part of my job description. As a task force worker in Florence, Italy, I was given charge of all of the nonclassroom activities designed for the English-speaking students, including workshops and Sabbath school.

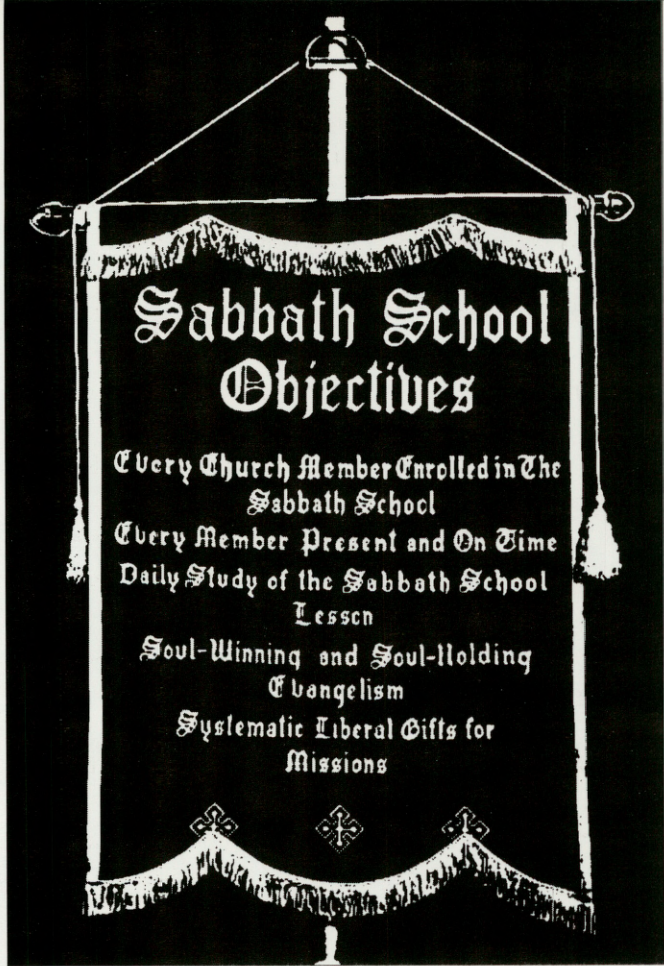
On the first Sabbath morning, I began to understand how truly boundless the questions could be. The students stumped each other repeatedly. Attracted by the difficult passages, they attacked and searched the Bible voraciously. Sometimes we were finished in the requisite fifty-minute time slot, but on other Sabbath mornings I watched as they talked through church and lunch and into the afternoon. Spontaneous addi-

tional group Bible study spilled into the week as students gathered in each other's rooms to read and question together.

These sixteen college students reintroduced me to the power of a vibrant Sabbath School based in tenacious biblical inquiry. In carrying on such a thoughtful conversation with Scripture, these students put my finger directly on the pulse of my religion, still beating after one hundred fifty years.

Sabbath School and youth have a long history of energizing one another. This ritual appeared in nascent Adventism as its young founders were emerging from a shattering misinterpretation of Scripture. As James and Ellen White traveled constantly in the 1850s, working to galvanize what would become the Seventh-day Adventist Church, James





composed a series of lessons containing post-Disappointment questions directed at the Bible. James organized a pilot study group in Rochester, New York, in 1853, and similar groups quickly followed in private homes.

Biblical inquiry powerfully engaged early Adventists, rekindled hope, and served as the fertilizer for growing both the community and its individuals. One early Sabbath School attendee, William Covert, wrote, "I became so engaged in my Sabbath School study that I often remained up nights till ten or eleven, and possibly sometimes till midnight."<sup>1</sup>

Tenacious study, such as that described by Covert, strengthened an entire religion emerging from the Great Disappointment. L. Flora Plummer, who authored a turn-of-the-century book entitled *Early History of the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath School Work*, writes, "There is no power in anything in this world to hold together so scattered a flock save the power there is in God's message to this world."<sup>2</sup> Sabbath School was the place where people connected with that message.

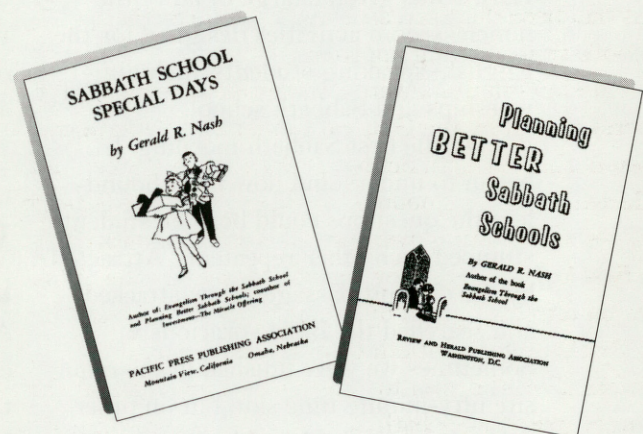
James White's question-driven Sabbath School was undoubtedly built upon a preexisting model in the Methodist Church. James and Ellen White were Methodists before joining the Millerite movement. Central to early Methodist congregations were groups

of twelve, known as "class meetings." In his article, "The Methodist Connection to Adventism," Gregory Schneider describes these meetings, in which each member was subjected to intense inquiry. These questions were meant to "unify the believers around motives, feelings and actions."<sup>3</sup>

The format was so personal in nature, in fact, that in one instance a visitor was so frightened by the intimacy of the questions that he tried to leave before the meeting ended. When the doorway was blocked by regular attendees, the visitor scurried up the chimney to escape.<sup>4</sup>

Although James White likely borrowed the idea of question-oriented small groups from these Methodist class meetings, there was a central difference between the two rituals. The questions at the Methodist meetings were focused upon feelings and daily behavior, whereas the Adventists staked their Sabbath School to incisive inquiry of the Bible. Challenging the Word is the powerful heritage of the ritual of Adventist Sabbath School.

Sabbath School grew so rapidly that some organization was deemed necessary to provide support to local teachers. In 1889, an independent General Sabbath School Association, located in Oakland, California, formed a loose affiliation of spontaneously created state Sabbath School organizations. This association acted as a conduit through which successful ideas and encouragement could be shared from one Sabbath School to another across North America. Frequent conferences were held to encourage such exchange.



In addition to developing Bible study materials for church members, the Sabbath School Department has sought to help teachers through publications such as these books by Gerald R. Nash. The Sabbath School Objectives pictured above left are from *Planning Better Sabbath Schools*.

One of the largest such conferences occurred in 1907, in Mount Vernon, Ohio. After three days of exchange, the over two hundred attendees concluded that they must “urge more thorough study.”<sup>5</sup> Plummer writes of the convention’s outcome: “The inspiration of the meeting was lasting. Each worker returned home with more courage and with increased ability.”<sup>6</sup>

S. N. Haskell wrote, “Nothing has accomplished more in so brief a period of time than the Sabbath School interest among our people, who have thus become interested in the truths of the Bible.”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it was this success that led to Sabbath School becoming more of a tool for the developing worldwide institution. The “Reorganization Conference,” held in 1901 in Battle Creek, Michigan, ensured that all independent branches of the Church, including Sabbath School, would become General Conference departments. The more removed from the local level the Sabbath School administration became, the more difficult it was to define success simply in terms of enthusiastic Bible study.

Other measurements quickly came to the fore. The Sabbath School Department under the leadership of L. Flora Plummer sought to improve the quality of local Sabbath Schools in several ways. “Both improved attendance and a better quality of participation were the goals of the ‘perfect record’ plan. Members who were on time each week for a three-month period and who had studied their Sabbath School lesson daily were entitled to a ‘Card of Honor.’” And her efforts bore fruit. “In 1913 she reported that over 3500 persons had been baptized as a result of the Sabbath School’s soul-winning approach.”<sup>8</sup>

Mission offerings were another measurement of success valued by the General Conference. Offerings taken during Sabbath School at the turn of the century collected amazing amounts of money. “By 1920 Sabbath Schools were raising over a million dollars a year; in the first half of 1921 they supplied three-quarters of all mission offerings given by Seventh-day Adventists.”<sup>9</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, the General Conference had begun to emphasize evangelism as the primary goal for Sabbath School. So it was a concern for church administration when attendance began to slip. “Sabbath School Rally Day” was instituted on the second Sabbath of every March, intended to bring together those who formerly attended church.

A transition from Sabbath School as a growing grass-roots movement nourished primarily by Bible study to an

exercise in attendance is evidenced by an excerpt from an anonymous poem. Composed and circulated specifically for recitation on Sabbath School Rally Days, the poem is entitled, “Don’t Stay Away From Sabbath School.”

Don’t stay away because it rains. That would not keep you from your business.

Don’t stay away because company happens to drop in; bring them.

Don’t stay at home because you are lazy; idle men tempt the devil.

Don’t stay away because the school is imperfect; should you find and join the perfect school, its perfection would cease....

Don’t stay away because you know more than the teacher; you might enjoy the singing.<sup>10</sup>

One response to this comic poem might echo the rebuke of Revelation 4 to the church in Ephesus: “But this I have against you, that you have left your first love.” By the mid-twentieth century, Sabbath School and the General



Just as Christ the Shepherd went in search of the lost lamb, Rally Day was created by the Sabbath School Department to encourage congregations to bring back those who formerly attended church. This illustration is from the Gerald R. Nash book *Sabbath School Special Days*.



Conference had been married fifty years.

A revolution was necessary—in the truest sense of the word—a full circle return to the original intent and practice of the Sabbath School ritual. And, true to its roots, Sabbath School found renewed life in a small group of youth.

Eugene Shirley, at Union College in 1978, began to publish a quarterly set of lessons that asked cutting-edge theological questions. Designed for a college-aged audience, the *Collegiate Quarterly* was authored by Adventist chaplains and professors. After only a few issues, circulation rose to twenty thousand.

However, the theological tumult of the late 1970s and early 1980s made the General Conference nervous about the challenging inquiry posed by Shirley, who had by then gone on to graduate school in Claremont, California. In an effort to “regularize” Sabbath School materials, the North American Division took control of the *Collegiate Quarterly* and Shirley left in 1981. The following editor, Doug Morgan, fresh from a master’s degree from the University of Chicago, says his work was carefully scrutinized each quarter by an editorial board. He resigned when the publication became a General Conference entity in 1985.

This most recent institutionalization of Sabbath School strangely coincided with a severe downsizing of the personnel assigned to manage it. At the 1985 General Conference, it was voted that Sabbath School become embedded in the Church Ministries Department. Currently, Sabbath School is paired with the Personal Ministries Department, headed by James W. Zackrison.

Clifford Goldstein, current editor of the only church-published Adult Sabbath School material, converted to Adventism twenty-three years ago. He has a particular interest in new Adventists. He says, of the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, “It is not journalism. It is not the place to deal with controversy. It is meant to present the gospel in the context of present truth in order to cement our identity of ourselves as Adventists, as well as to ground new Adventists in that identity.”

In 1863, the same year that Adventism became recognized as a denomination, the *Review and Herald* carried a series of thirty-two lessons designated for “advanced classes,” in addition to the regular materials published for each division. Now, one person each quarter is saddled with the impossible task of writing questions that will challenge all twelve million Adventists worldwide. “The *Bible Study Guide* lays out material, and peo-

ple must pull out what strikes them individually,” says Goldstein. “It is merely a jumping-off point.”

And, like the local grassroots movement that started Sabbath School one hundred fifty years ago, people are certainly jumping off into new arenas of creativity, asking a wide variety of questions and initiating a plethora of approaches, all in the name of Sabbath School.

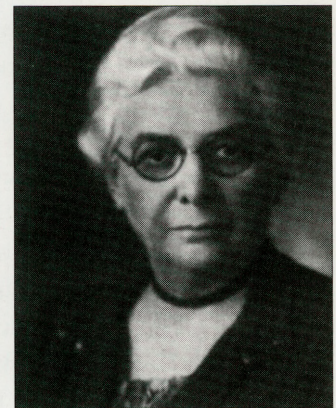
In Nebraska, where the *Collegiate Quarterly* was born, Chris Blake, chair of the English Department at Union College, and his wife Yolanda, have started an outreach-based Sabbath School, described in their book, *Reinvent Your Sabbath School*. The Sabbath School is called “Something Else.”

Chris Blake says of Something Else, “Ministry-driven Sabbath schools are an alternative to superficial, talk-based religion that mirrors a superficial, talk-based culture. In a culture that hungers for reality, we strive to be deeply and actively authentic. In a culture that prizes expediency and exploitation, we covet integrity and compassion.”

Eighty regular members offer prayer, money, time, comfort, a listening ear, and tangible assistance of all kinds to the needs of their immediate community. Blake says, “Action creates faith. Without burrowing into real needs there is no real community.”

Another creative approach to the Sabbath School hour is occurring in Sacramento, California. At the Carmichael Seventh-day Adventist Church, Jim Higgins, Aram Perez, John Verzosa, and Hal Wright started what they describe as a “nontraditional Sabbath School,” called “Wire Choir.” Each week, members carry banjos, basses, harmonicas, and flutes to church, and they share music as a prayer among them.

One of the primary elements of the Wire Choir’s vision statement is to “be a community with each other.” When asked to define the greatest success of this Sabbath School format, Perez says, “I believe it’s the fellowship of the group. Wire Choir’s success is filling a specific need that some people have to find a place to play music together that glorifies God.”



L. Flora Plummer served as the first secretary of the General Conference Sabbath School Department.

The arts were central to another successful Sabbath School started seven years ago on the campus of La Sierra University. Susan Ross, a former youth pastor there, is an artist who employed various forms of art, including interpretive dance, during the program on Saturday mornings.

Jodi Cahill, who works in the chaplain's office at La Sierra remembers: "This was one of our most successful programs. Susan was so creative, and the students seemed to love her. We had over one hundred students attending on a regular basis."

It is this variety of approaches to Sabbath School that Zackrison is working to promote. "Sabbath School

**T**hough the administrative vision and grassroots creativity speak to an exciting vibrancy in parts of the Adventist Church, do these things necessarily speak to the position of Sabbath School, as a unique and specific ritual, one hundred fifty years after its creation? Is it possible to expect that the institution of Sabbath School will carry the responsibility of all nonworship elements of church life? What has happened to the spirit of scriptural inquiry that defined Sabbath School for so many of its most vibrant decades, and is that approach still relevant in an altered culture and context?

## Is it possible to expect that the institution of Sabbath School will carry the responsibility of all nonworship elements of church life?

only happens on the local level," Zackrison says. "We [at the General Conference] can only make suggestions. We want to encourage a variety of approaches."

Zackrison has been working with Gary Swanson, current editor of the *Collegiate Quarterly*, to develop an approach that would foster creativity for Sabbath School. "We have to be realistic," says Swanson. "People come to Sabbath School for different reasons, and though we must be unified in our beliefs, there must be a variety of approaches to the presentation of those beliefs."

Zackrison has reinstated local level Sabbath School associations, reminiscent of the first state organizations formed in the late nineteenth century. It is Zackrison's hope that this decentralization of infrastructure will encourage variety. "Sabbath School was a very creative entity from its inception," Zackrison points out. "It was the Sabbath Schools that funded the [missionary ship] *Pitcairn*, along with many other mission projects. It is our hope to encourage that same kind of creativity today."

To broaden the possibilities, Zackrison is traveling all over the world promoting a four-fold purpose for Sabbath School, challenging each group to incorporate some element of local outreach, world missions, fellowship, and study in each meeting.

What the current approach of Zackrison and Goldstein neglects is the advanced spiritual growth of some members. Our church runs an educational system of over thirty-six hundred schools, ninety-nine of which are tertiary, so our Sabbath Schools should provide an intellectual encounter that is at least as rich.

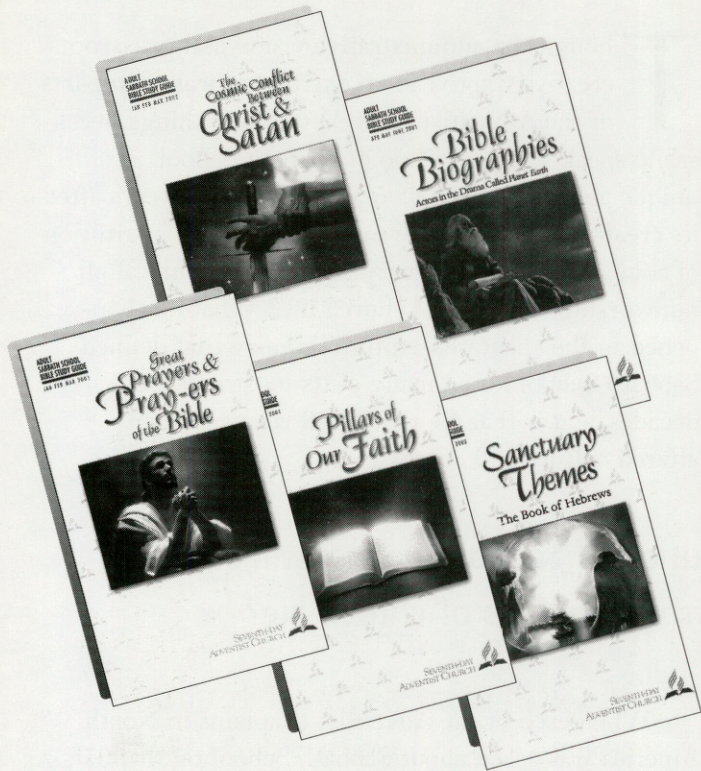
When each of the Adventist chaplains in North America was asked about Sabbath School on their campuses, there was one surprising common denominator: study. Cahill from La Sierra says, "I have found that students want to move past the froo froo and get to the heart of study."

Speaking of Sabbath School on his campus, Rich Carlson, chaplain at Union College comments, "The most amazing part is that it is quite traditional and yet we still get hundreds showing up each week. We run out of quarterlies regularly and the complaints often come when we let the first part of the program go too long and we sacrifice lesson study time."

Perhaps the years of stretched resources and personnel for Sabbath School at the General Conference level have resulted in a slightly diluted vision. Though there is a great deal of vibrancy in many church communities, the pulse of Sabbath School is to be found in those places where people still gather, as they did one hundred fifty years ago in Rochester, New York, to earnestly question Scripture—to live up to our self-proclaimed designation as "people of the book."

There are exciting ways in which that intellectual inquiry is reshaping itself for the twenty-first century. Several Adventist campuses, along with *Spectrum* magazine, maintain Web sites that post weekly essay commentary on the Sabbath School quarterly, asking questions that





Recent topics in the *Adult Bible Study Guide* series include "The Cosmic Conflict Between Christ and Satan," as well as specific books of the Bible like *Amos*.

will challenge even a generational Adventist.

Additionally, modern descendents of the hour-long Sabbath School classes started by Jack Provonsha and Graham Maxwell in Loma Linda in the 1960s are growing. Roy Branson and Don Ortner currently lead an hour-long class at Sligo Church, dipping into the rich resources of the Washington, D.C., area to present scholars, professors, theologians, archeologists, writers, and other visiting lecturers to a packed fellowship hall each week.

At Sunnyside Church in Portland, Oregon, one small group has rediscovered the first love of Sabbath School attendees in 1853. Each week, the approximately twelve regular members meet to study the Bible. "We come to look at the Word of God, and to take it seriously, in all its permutations," says Dave Reynolds, one of the group's original members. "Jesus was right," Reynolds continues, "when, on the road to Emmaus he told the two disciples that everything they needed to know about him could be found in the Scriptures."

The only rules for the group are that the Bible must be taken seriously, each comment must be respected, and there is no such thing as a bad question. This

return to biblical inquiry and small group exchange has had exciting results. One couple, disillusioned with Adventism, left the Church, but still attended the class. One member, an accountant for the U.S. government, was so excited about what he was learning that he returned to graduate school and earned a master's degree in biblical languages. The study often runs overtime, through church and into lunch.

"Do we leave every week with great insights? No," Reynolds says. "But, we do so often enough that it keeps bringing us back week after week. You merely need to come confront the Word of God seriously, and you will be blessed."

Perhaps, finally, as Sabbath School turns one hundred fifty years old the answer to its vibrancy, and its future, may be found in questions. As long as we continue to provide a forum where those who are serious about the Bible and their religion can engage with them and question them, Sabbath School will remain both vital and relevant.

As Friedrich Nietzsche imagined of time spent with Socrates, one of the greatest proponents of the question, the student "Goes away richer, not having found grace nor amazed, not as blessed and oppressed by the good of another, but richer in himself, opened..., less sure perhaps..., but full of hopes that as yet have no name."<sup>11</sup>

## Notes and References

1. L. Flora Plummer, *Early History of the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath-School Work* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, [1911?]), 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. *Spectrum* 25.5 (Sept. 1996):32.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Plummer, *Sabbath-School Work*, 37.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. Richard W. Schwartz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1979), 379.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Gerald R. Nash, *Sabbath School Special Days* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1966), 41.
11. Christopher Phillips, *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 22.

Stefanie Johnson teaches in the English Department at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland.