

Adventist Heritage: Required or Optional?

Imagine my surprise when, assigned to teach Adventist history at a college other than where I now work, I discovered that some students in my class who had attended Adventist primary and secondary education had no idea why 1844 was a significant date for Adventism. I wasn't asking for an analysis of how William Miller had arrived at the conclusion that Christ's second coming would occur in that year. Nor had I asked them to provide scriptural support for the pre-advent investigative judgment. I was simply asking if they knew why 1844 remains important for Adventists.

Having taught Adventist beliefs and history at four higher educational institutions in different parts of North America over the past seven years, I can testify that my initial shock has been replaced by grudging acceptance of the reality that most of our students are simply not in tune with our heritage. Certainly, many are quite knowledgeable about our past. But far too many students in Adventist colleges know little about the origins of our denomination and are uncertain about what constitutes an Adventist identity. Perhaps I'm hyper-sensitive about this issue, since I teach denominational history. And maybe the students have a better understanding of our past than is evident from their comments in class. But conversations with my colleagues in both history and religion departments across North America have only confirmed my observation. I even wonder sometimes if Adventists in general are sliding toward mass amnesia about our heritage. Indeed, we have much to fear for the future, as we seem to be raising a generation that is ignorant of "the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."¹



Why should our colleges require a course on Adventist heritage?

trators at Pacific Union College said something that made me stop and think. In response to students' perennial complaints about required worship and chapel attendance, the administrator said, "We require what we value." Certainly, not everything that we value can be required, but adding an Adventist heritage course to the general education requirements makes a strong statement about what we value as Adventist institutions.

Currently, most Adventist colleges follow the liberal-arts model, which includes a sizeable number of general education courses—roughly one-third of each student's overall coursework. These include courses on composition, literature, history, art, music, mathematics, basic sciences, social sciences, health, business, and religion. In some cases, students are required to take specific courses within these disciplines because they are considered foundational to a well-rounded college experience. In essence, colleges require these courses because they believe that

This woeful state of ignorance and amnesia leads me to recommend that a course on Adventist heritage be required of all students in Adventist colleges and universities. While this will not entirely solve the problem, it is an important step toward deepening the sense of heritage and identity among our youth and young adults. Naturally, this step should be followed by a re-visioning of the way we present our heritage at all levels of Adventist education. But this article will focus on mandating Adventist heritage education on the tertiary level as the first step.

Why Teach Adventist History?

Why should our colleges require a course on Adventist heritage? Several months ago, one of the adminis-

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What would an Adventist heritage course look like?

the subject matter is an indispensable part of their students' college education.

Adventist heritage should be one of these required courses because our identity and heritage as Seventh-day Adventists lie at the core of our existence and mission. Just as mandatory English composition and math courses equip our students with skills that are vital to a life of useful service to the world, the mandatory Adventist heritage course would lead them to reflect on what it means to be an Adventist, where we have come from as a community, and where we ought to go as individuals and as a church. In short, it would empower our students with a deeper sense of identity, heritage, and vision as Adventists.

Currently, this is not happening anywhere in North America. Four colleges include an Adventist history course as one among several that fulfill either the history or religion requirement,² but no Adventist college or university in North America requires an Adventist heritage course for all undergraduate students.³ Thus, it is quite likely that most students graduate from most Adventist colleges without substantive exposure to the heritage that has shaped today's church.



J. N. Andrews, first Adventist foreign missionary.



Early "beast chart" used in evangelism.

Why a College-Level Course?

Some may question why Adventist heritage needs to be required on the college level when the academy religion curriculum includes it. Each year, 10th graders using *His Story: In Our Time*⁴ as their second-semester religion textbook learn about the history of the Adventist Church. However, that is not enough, for the following reasons:

First, a great number of students entering Adventist colleges come from public or other private schools, having had no formal education in Adventist beliefs and heritage. Many of them come looking, perhaps for the first time in their lives, for a distinctly Adventist



Elmshaven, Ellen White's last home, in St. Helena, California.

educational experience. Many of these students are non-Adventists for whom their time at an Adventist college may be the only opportunity they will have to learn about our heritage.

Second, even for students who studied Adventist history at the academy level, a college-level course will be helpful. While the academy-level introduction to denominational history tends to focus on the facts and stories from history, the required college-level course would focus on a more in-depth, critical discussion of the history, current issues, and future direction of Adventism. Such a college course is urgently needed to help our students understand and embrace Adventism as they make, perhaps for the first time, a personal decision to remain (or become) a Seventh-day Adventist.

The Curriculum

What would an Adventist heritage course look like? The "ideal" course would not be too different from the ones that are currently offered in denominational colleges and universities across North America.⁵ But it would be more than a history course. It would not only



James and Ellen White and their sons, Willie (left) and Edson.

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study Adventism's past, but also take a deliberate look at current issues in Adventism and the Adventist identity. The questions central to this course would be:

- What lies at the core of Adventism?
- What were the driving forces behind the birth and growth of Adventism?
- What makes Adventism unique?
- How should Adventism grow and change to fulfill its mission more effectively? While the course's primary orien-



Central School Building, Avondale College, Australia.

tation is historical, it will clearly include theological and sociological features as well. As such, it might best be team-taught, utilizing instructors not only from history and religion departments, but also from all other departments who have given serious reflections on the meaning and value of Adventism in the world.

An Introduction to the Adventist Worldview

In essence, this course will provide each student with a solid introduction to the distinctly Adventist worldview. It will show them how we as a faith community have come to view God, the world, and humanity. It will also afford students a deeper understanding of the Adventist philosophy of history, couched in the theme of the Great Controversy. They will see that this view of history offers an alternative to



two other views of history: the evolutionary/directional (that history is a process that unfolds from primitive to advanced) and cyclical (that history proceeds in cycles following the deterministic pattern of growth, dominance, and decay). They will learn about a God who works out the salvation of the human race through a process of redemptive acts in Earth's history, though opposed by the evil one.⁶ They will also come to recognize that what happens on Earth has "cosmic dimensions" and "eternal consequences."⁷

Arthur F. Holmes, in his classic work, *The Idea of a Christian College*, states that a Christian college ought to be concerned with "the development of Christian perspectives in all areas of life and thought." It should "[retain] a unifying Christian worldview and [bring] it to bear in understanding and participating in the various arts and sciences, as well as nonacademic aspects of campus life."⁸ To paraphrase Holmes, an Adventist college has the responsibility to work toward developing Adventist perspectives on life and lead students to apply the Adventist worldview in all situations of life. While the Adventist worldview should be part of every facet of Adventist education, the proposed course will make a compelling case for that perspective and lead students to make a deliberate effort to apply it in every area of their lives.

Not Only About the Past

Though the term "Adventist heritage" seems to point to the past and its impact on the present, the proposed course is ultimately about shaping the future. As Ellen White wrote more than a century ago, we have "nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."⁹ Given the current level of knowledge about and appreciation for our heritage among our college students, it appears that we have much to fear for the future. The church needs to help the so-called millennial generation find a sense of continuity and connection with the Adventist identity and heritage. Otherwise, our future as a faith community will be in serious jeopardy.

George Knight, who has applied sociologist David Moberg's research on the "life cycle" of religious organizations to the Adventist church, has suggested that the North American Adventist church may have entered Moberg's fourth stage of institutionalization, which immediately precedes the fifth and final stage of "disintegration." Knight rightly urges that the Adventist Church recommit itself to its founding purpose and mission that have provided its reason for existence and impetus for growth.¹⁰ The millennial generation, too, needs to know and understand clearly the mission of the church and the purpose for which it exists. Otherwise, Adventism may very well find itself spiraling down

into the period of disintegration.

Therefore, we must proactively teach and emphasize the Adventist identity and heritage to today's young people in order to ensure the future health of our community. This does not imply that the identity of 21st-century Adventism needs to be the same as that of the 19th century, or that changes in our self-understanding or theology equal apostasy. No doubt, changes are happening in the psyche of the millennial generation—perhaps even in areas that are considered to be core. However, such changes must not be made without an informed understanding of our heritage. The question is: Will we let the changes just happen, or will we determine proactively what changes we will and will not accept?

To be sure, one cannot expect a single college course to instill the Adventist worldview in all our students or to turn all of them into proactive theological thinkers. But it will represent an important step toward deepening our students' understanding of our heritage while sharpening their identity as Seventh-day Adventists. It will also signal a strong message to our community and to the world about what we value as a movement. To these ends, I urge Adventist colleges to require a course on Adventist heritage to all their students as part of the general-education requirements. ✍



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Joseph Bates, early Adventist leader.

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