

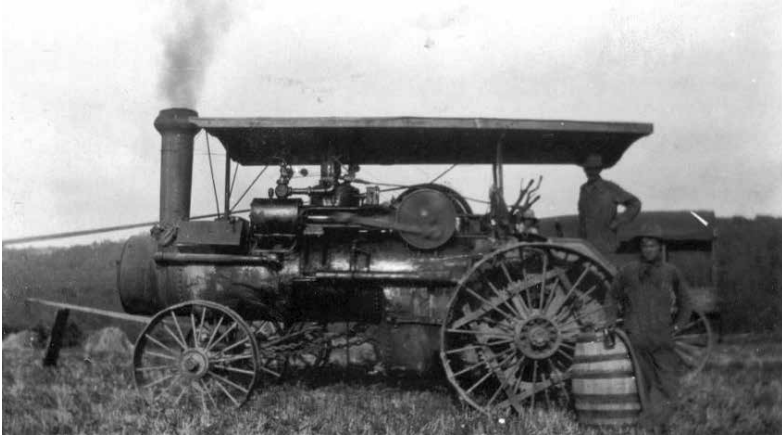
# Education in the Garden of Eden

My grandfather emigrated from a German settlement in Ukraine in the late nineteenth century. In his early years in the United States, he could read little English. One year at camp meeting, he bought a book by Ellen White that had been translated into German. It contained a statement saying, “It is no longer safe to send them [our children] to the public school.”<sup>1</sup> This statement created a problem for my grandparents.

They had homesteaded in Kidder County, North Dakota, and had built a two-story house on the land. The problem was that the house was several miles from the nearest Adventist Church, over in Bowden County, too far for his nine children to take the horse and buggy to school every day. So, my grandparents determined to move. They purchased a quarter section (160 acres) of land just one mile from the church. But this created another problem.

There was no house on the new property since it was just farmland, so my grandfather decided to move the house he had built. He hired two steam-propelled engines used for harvesting, attached them to the house, and over the next three days, pulled the house to the new property close to the church.

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At first, there was not even a school in operation at the church. But my grandfather's commitment to a Christian education caught on, and before long, Bowdon County Church School was opened at the church.

My uncle Emil fondly remembered that as long as the Bietz children were in the elementary grades, a church school was in operation. He quoted my grandfather as saying, "If none of the other members send their children to church school, mine will be there. We'll always have a school, even if I have to board the teacher and pay the salary."<sup>2</sup> One year my grandparents did just that.

### The value of Christian education

Public schools in the late 1800s—especially in a rural North Dakota agrarian community—did not face the influences of television, internet, and smartphones, yet my grandparents resolved that Christian education was a priority. They had a "Garden of Eden" vision for an environment in which their children would find their identity in Jesus among peers in a Christian community.

My father maintained that same priority for my brother and me. As kids, we were driven many miles to attend a Christian school when the excellent public schools in our district would

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have been much more convenient for my parents. It was in that school that I crystalized my commitment to Jesus and gave my life to him. It was there among the influence of my peers and mentors that I slowly made the transition from “my parent’s religion” to personally choosing my faith for myself.

Even if I had not been the church pastor when our daughters were school age, there would not have been a question about where my wife and I wanted to send them. The public and prep schools in our area were known for excellent teachers and high academic quality, but we also wanted them to have an environment under the influence of friends and teachers from the church. They received excellent academic training and are professionally successful today, but more importantly, these days, I find I am learning about spirituality from them.

As Ellen White says in the book *Education*, “True education means more than the perusal 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. 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>3</sup>

Education is about life itself, getting to know the Creator of life. In the Garden of Eden, getting to know the Creator was walking with God “in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8, KJV). In the imperfect secular environment of our world, getting to know the Creator is walking with mentors and peers who believe in their Creator. It is in a living learning community where they will walk with Jesus.

### The dangers of society

Some would suggest that integrating young people into society by exposing them to the world works like a vaccine. They believe exposing young people to the world and its temptations

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inoculates them against those temptations, similar to the way the body develops immunity through controlled exposure to a disease. Some proponents of this theory express concern that Christian schools are too much like incubators, isolating the young from the world.

In today's digital world, it would be impossible to isolate young people even if we wanted to. What they need is to be surrounded by mentors and peers of faith so that they can experience life in a community of faith without being immersed in the world. The goal is to provide an environment where the world can be seen from the Christian point of view. This type of "incubator," or garden, provides the necessary environment for growth so that students, when confronted by the world, can handle the challenges to their faith.

Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard, stated that every student should "be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well [that] the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life."<sup>4</sup> That was the original goal of most schools established on Christian principles, but as James Burtchaell points out in his book *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities From Their Christian Churches*, most of those schools no longer stand by those principles. Most universities and colleges have moved from the belief of their founders to the disbelief of secular culture.

One need not reflect for long on the public-school environment or the secular college/university environment of agnosticism and atheism to understand that it is not conducive to finding God's answers to life's most profound questions. Public higher education today has traveled a long way from the Garden of Eden.

In the Garden of Eden, arguably a perfect environment, Satan managed to confront our original parents with the lie that if they partook of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they not only would never die but would be like God.<sup>5</sup>

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So even in a perfect environment, Adam and Eve exercised their God-given gift of free will to disobey him. Today, our world is full of proverbial trees of knowledge of good and evil. Satan has many avenues for confronting students with schemes that would derail God's plan for their lives. Adventist Christian schools are not Garden-of-Eden perfect, but the chance for mentors and friends to positively influence spiritual growth is much better than at any secular public school or university.

Arthur F. Holmes, former professor of Christian Philosophy at Wheaton College, puts it another way. "We need to ask how values are transmitted. Young people assimilate them more from example than precept, more from their peers than from their elders, and more by being involved than by being spectators."<sup>6</sup>

In a Christian setting, the peer group—the community of students that come together in a living learning community—creates the environment for the maturing of faith. In such a setting, they can be involved in Christian service rather than just being spectators on Sabbath. It is as students connect in a faith environment that they develop the character to be counterculture Christians resisting the secular culture. The apostle John offers this cautionary note: "Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity" (1 John 2:15–17, *The Message*).

Or, as Ellen White put it, "To love Him, the infinite, the omniscient One, with the whole strength, and mind, and heart, means the highest development of every power. It means that in the whole being—the body, the mind, as well as the soul—the image of God is to be restored."<sup>7</sup>

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In the Garden of Eden, Satan directly contradicted God when he claimed Adam and Eve would not die but would become like God (Genesis 3:4, 5). His lie is reminiscent of Isaiah’s description of Lucifer seeking to be like God (Isaiah 14:12–14). The temptation many have today is to go to Ivy League schools or private, expensive high schools, where some believe the young people will get smarter and get careers that could make them, if not like gods, at least like the rich and famous. As Ellen White put it, “By every species of deception, he [Satan] is endeavoring to induce man to eat of the forbidden tree. He thus tempts man to disobedience by leading him to believe that he is entering a wonderful field of knowledge. But this is all a deception. Elated with his ideas of progression, man is setting his feet in the path that leads to degradation and death. Satan, in a deceptive garb, still lurks in the tree of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>

Eve was deceived when she saw that the fruit on the tree looked good. It was physically appealing to her, as there are things about an Ivy League education that appeal. John Milton, in the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, expresses the appeal of the forbidden fruit in the mouth of Eve:

Here grows the Cure of all, this Fruit Divine,  
Fair to the Eye, inviting to the Taste,  
Of vertue to make wise: what hinders then  
To reach, and feed at once both Bodie and Mind?<sup>9</sup>

“The cure of all” is the exclusivity of being one of the few accepted, the knowledge that you are above average, the appeal of bragging about your educational understanding—all these attract the human side of selfishness, the desire to be the smartest person in the room, to attend the most prestigious schools, to be exalted over those around you. Jesus, being God, humbled himself, becoming nothing, to the point of death on the cross

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(Philippians 2:5–8). Paul appeals to us to behave in the same way (verse 3–5), yet the pursuit of educational attainment in a public institution can be about domination and power as contrasted with servanthood and self-denial. Ellen White describes the best school: “The system of education instituted at the beginning of the world was to be a model for man throughout all aftertime. As an illustration of its principles a model school was established in Eden, the home of our first parents. The Garden of Eden was the schoolroom, nature was the lesson book, the Creator Himself was the instructor, and the parents of the human family were the students.”<sup>10</sup>

### The goal of Christian education

The choice of schools depends on the goal of the education. If the goal is to follow Jesus and to serve humanity, learning at the feet of people who know Jesus provides the best training. Peter speaks of the world we face today: “Most importantly, I want to remind you that in the last days scoffers will come, mocking the truth and following their own desires. They will say, ‘What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again? From before the times of our ancestors, everything has remained the same since the world was first created’ ” (2 Peter 3:3, 4, NLT).

The goal of Christian education is found in Proverbs: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10, KJV).

There never was a question in my grandparents’ minds whether their nine children should have the benefit of a church school. They planned for it and believed in it, and the Lord saw them through their commitment. It wasn’t always easy, but they believed that “the education received in childhood and youth affects their entire business career in mature life, and their religious experience bears a corresponding stamp.”<sup>11</sup>

The founding philosophy of my grandparents’ “Happy Home

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Farm,” as they called it, was that “to have your children enter the gates of the City of God as conquerors, they must be educated to fear God and keep His commandments in the present life.”<sup>12</sup>

My grandparents did not end up with a large farm, a lot of land, or extra savings in the bank, but they never regretted the money, time, work, and many prayers offered on behalf of their nine children. Their whole aim in life was to see their children accept the Lord Jesus, join the remnant church, and use whatever talents God gave them to be of service in the home, the church, the community, and society at large.

Of the nine children, each of the four sisters married ministers, three of the five brothers became ministers, and all of them remained in the church. “Point your kids in the right direction—when they’re old they won’t be lost” (Proverbs 22:6, *The Message*).

### Fenton Forest

And for the children and those young at heart, a story. There once was a school in Fenton Forest. In this school, all the inhabitants of the forest learned how to avoid the traps that were placed in the forest by hunters that lived in the big city some miles away. In this school, there were classes such as “Theories of Trap Placement,” “Trap Design,” and “Emergency Medicine” for those who were caught in traps.

Two students enrolled in the school were Freddy Fox and his cousin Sam. Now, they were about as different as day and night. There was a wonderful teacher in the school, and Freddy paid close attention in class. Sam, on the other hand, made fun of the teacher and didn’t listen in class.

Sam passed the class by memorizing a few things he had to and managing to remember them long enough to recognize them on the test.

Freddy, on the other hand, knew the teacher had a lot of



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experience and wanted to learn all he could about traps from the teacher so that he would not get caught. He spent some time after class with the teacher, asking more questions about trap design and placement. He had heard of some careless foxes who had lost some toes in a trap, and he didn't want to lose his.

Both Freddy and his cousin Sam graduated from school. Graduation night, there were the typical parties and celebrations at the Nut Hut in Fenton Forest. However, there was a tragedy the night of graduation that proved that you could get all As in class and still flunk life. Today, Freddy is a prosperous businessman in East Fenton Forest running a den construction firm. Sam, on the other hand, is decorating the shoulders of a lady in the big city.

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1. Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1954), 304.

2. Reinhold Bietz, *Happy Home Farm: An Expression of the Faith and Fun in a Christian Home* (Brushton, NY: Teach Services, 1994).

3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1903), 13.

4. Lynne Cheney, *A Time for Freedom: What Happened When in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 15.

5. "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." Genesis 2:17.

6. Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 82.

7. White, *Education*, 16.

8. Ellen G. White, "The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge," *Daily Bulletin of the General Conference*, March 6, 1899, 158.

9. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 9, lines 776–779.

10. White, *Education*, 20.

11. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1948), 148. Testimony 22, which this is from, was originally published in 1872.

12. White, *Child Guidance*, 298.