

How Education Affects Adventist Ecclesiology

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November 21, 2014

My San Francisco home is located near several recognized geological fault lines. A fault line occurs as massive pieces of the earth's crust, known as tectonic plates, collide and scrape slowly against each other. When built-up pressures release suddenly, the resulting earthquake can be very destructive. Even as life on the surface continues mostly unaffected by the looming disturbances just beneath the skyscrapers and residences of the Bay Area, the forces underneath can be ignored only at our peril.

When writing earthquake compensation policies, insurance companies calculate just how far a structure is from a known fault. Premiums, of course, are much higher when one lives right on top of a fault line, as the risks there are so much higher.

Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education in North America sit astride a fault line that rumbles frequently and, on precipitous occasions, has been known to cause considerable damage. As with much of California geography, when the cities were being built, little was known about fault lines and the tectonic movements that cause them. Similarly, the Nineteenth Century founders of Adventism did not know that its colleges and universities in North America would someday occupy these dangerous locations.

I will use the analogy of tectonic plates to describe enormous pressures underneath the church that, while often ignored or denied, threaten to leave the infrastructure of the church significantly altered.

What I am sharing is *a* perspective and is limited mostly to the character of the North American experience with Higher Education institutions. It is an invitation to become conspicuously conscious of these tectonic pressures. The landscape in which Adventist Higher Education in North American is operating is both shaping, and being shaped by, the collective belief experiences of its individual members. These belief experiences, by design, come into sharp focus on every college and university campus. The church may well be too young fully to appropriate that it has a history, that this history is dynamic, and that the church of today is emphatically *not* the church of 1844, of 1888, of 1915, or even of 1985.

Let me assert what I see as the core issues suggested by the analogy of tectonic plates. For nearly two millennia the great belief-related controversies in the Christian tradition have been staged between and among key spokespersons for the faith – often between super-interpreters of belief. The battles have centered on which super-interpreter speaks with greater authority, or whose hermeneutical

processes are the most persuasive? Should one believe Pelagius or Augustine; Tertullian or Marcion? Francis of Assisi or Boniface VIII? Closer to home, was it F.D. Nichol or M.L. Andreasen? Was it Jones and Waggoner or J.N. Loughborough? Was it Colin Standish or Des Ford? Though the particular issues of these historic battles varied, what they all had in common was an appeal to a single source of authority, the Bible – a commonly shared evidentiary base, by which God, the world, and the cosmos could most accurately be known. Dogmatic battles over soteriology, eschatology, and Christology were fought by these super-interpreters as they pressed their varied appeals to *the same sacred text*. With some variation in hermeneutical practice, they each claimed to be the more accurate interpreter of a version of reality that was based on the Bible.

I propose that the battles within the Adventist faith community, specifically as played out in its institutions of higher education, are now shifting from hermeneutics to epistemology – from *what you know* from the Bible to whether the Bible is a valid *means for knowing*. It is a dramatic shift in focus from how you interpret the sacred texts to whether these texts are even relevant. In a very real sense, a 19th Century tectonic plate is scraping mightily against a 21st Century plate, right underneath Adventist colleges and universities.

I believe that the shift from hermeneutics to epistemology is pervasive, penetrating, often private and painful, and essentially irreversible. The epistemological fault line begins within individuals and thus begins as private. When these private struggles are aggregated among 21st Century faculty, they impact the church's higher education enterprise in dramatic ways. Once an individual has made the personal shift from defining one's worldview via hermeneutics to making decisions about epistemology, there is little likelihood of that individual turning back to care about hermeneutical contests. When significant numbers of these individuals make decisions about higher education, either as faculty or administrators in these institutions, or as families deciding where to enroll their students, the tectonic plates begin to scrape.

Adventism came into existence in the mid-19th Century when the appeal to the absolute, invariable authority of the ancient texts had reached a new level of popular appeal. The Christian tradition was awash with new claims of inerrancy, of biblical literalism, of a single consistent declaration of eternal truths that could be extracted across the span of 66 books by the manipulation of key texts. These assertions included the assumption that each text was equally weighted with eternal verities. Adventism was the product of a particular schema proposing that numbers scattered throughout the texts suggested mathematical codes that could produce accurate predictions of the future. Early Adventist champions claimed superior interpretive acumen and thus precise access to the divine mind, grounded in these notions of biblical inerrancy. Similarly, these early champions asserted confident conclusions about current activities in the heavenly sanctuary and about the precise meanings of the symbolism in the books of Daniel and Revelation. Speaking to audiences who worked from the same premises, who accepted the same meanings

embedded in earthquakes, falling stars, and European national divisions, these early champions founded a denomination that then took on a life of its own.

These historic Battles of Champions are no longer the core challenge facing higher education in North American Adventism. The contests around the 1888 General Conference are historic relics, not because one side has surrendered and the other declared victory, but because the authority to which each side once appealed is fading in its significance. The contest around hermeneutics itself is being left by many in the rear view mirror. For an increasing number of members, the battle now is an epistemological one. It is a collision – a core contest between diametrically opposed ways of knowing what is so. It is a contest between revealed truth and discovered truth, and the fault lines run through the middle of most Adventist campuses.

Let me review my premises. First, the world of today is profoundly different from that of the 1850s with regard to *how persons figure out what is so*. Biblical literalism and inerrancy was both relatively new and largely uncritically accepted by the denomination's founders. This literalistic world-view served to define the foundational beliefs on which the church was built and by which it has since grown, originally in North America and now especially in 3rd world countries. All of you who have (or whose parents have) a copy of *Bible Readings for the Home Circle* on your shelves fully appreciate the foundations on which the church's belief systems were built. If you have participated recently in a Revelation Seminar, or a similar evangelistic outreach, you can confirm this assertion. The academy Bible Doctrines textbook from which I studied at MBA, delivered with the requirement to memorize 160 key texts per semester, served as the belief foundation for thousands of current members. Being, and remaining, a member of the church was defined by where one stood with regard to doctrinal truth-claims.

In the 170 years since the church's founding, *ways of knowing* in the Western world have deeply, dramatically, pervasively, and irreversibly changed. The epistemology of science, of evidence-based reasoning, of peer-reviewed publications, of insistence upon repeatable verification, has touched virtually every aspect of our lives. A biblical worldview, shaped and framed by the cosmology of ancient civilizations, is challenged at every turn, by media from *National Geographic* to *The New Yorker*, and from the earliest moments of one's life. The result, especially in North America, is a profound collision of epistemologies. Adventist higher education is being both impacted by, and contributing to, this collision. Higher education is the sector that exists to introduce each new generation to the canons of knowledge and, more recently, to contribute to what is known. It is, therefore, the battlefield upon which most of the skirmishes are being played out. It sits astride the fault lines of the church. As you read the Web-posted "Comments" on many of the *Spectrum* or *Adventist Today* stories, it should be clear to the reader from which side of this fault line each writer is speaking.

Permit me to underscore where these conflicts are centered and why they matter at both a personal and collective level. The ways of knowing – the methodologies and conclusions supporting serious thinking today – are vastly different now in ways that could not have been imagined by church leaders in 1860.

We understand the Cosmos not by memorizing texts from Genesis but by viewing through the Hubble telescope, the Planck satellite, and the radio telescopes linked from dozens of global locations. We explore subatomic particles exposed through the large hadron collider at CERN. We have seen cosmology become a scientific discipline. We view actual photographs of the infinite, expanding, chaotic, very ancient universe. We ponder Black holes, dark matter, dark energy, quarks, the speed of light, the Doppler effect, and pleochroic halos.

We grasp the planet where we live through the expanding disciplines of biology, geography, paleontology, archeology, nuclear physics, chemistry, the mapping of the human genome, neurology, psychology, and biochemistry.

The typical graduate-level SDA university now draws from, and contributes to, as many as 50 distinct disciplines and hundreds of sub-disciplines. Its libraries provide access to as many as 47,000 peer-reviewed scientific journals and scholarly periodicals (Ulrich's). Faculty-designed assignments within these disciplines require students to go to these peer-reviewed, highly selective sources, to critically analyze relevant findings, and to search for triangulation in order to validate findings based on multiple sources of inquiry. Students can pore over evidence of everything from tectonic plates to sub-atomic particles; from chemical and pharmaceutical reactions to the processes for accurately constructing histories. With near universal access to the world's knowledge, and with evidence-based reasoning positioned at the core of every bachelor's degree, Adventist students' minds work in profoundly different ways than they did in 1874. In a world where Roman Catholics constitute 17% of the world's population and Moslems make up 23%, young Adventists increasingly wonder how a Sunday Law is a greater threat than ISIS. The detailed eschatological that made sense in the 19th century seems surreal in the 21st.

The self-understanding and mission of the denomination's higher education system has migrated dramatically since its founding. This is suggested even by institutional name changes:

From Battle Creek College (1874) to Emmanuel *Missionary* College [1901] to Andrews University [1960]; from Southern *Missionary* College [1944] to Southern College of SDAs [1982] to Southern Adventist University [1996]; from College of Medical *Evangelists* to Loma Linda University [1961]. These institutions have moved vastly beyond their founding purpose of training Bible students to be missionaries with a view to the immanent parousia. They exemplify a new goal: Preparing a broadly defined, professionally educated church membership ready to participate fully in the present world through hundreds of professions and thousands of career pathways. For most of these students, a biblical worldview based on the first ten

chapters of Genesis does not enter the horizon of either their education or their career or professional practice.

The academic vision of the programs at Adventist colleges and universities now resides well beyond a narrow Bible-based curriculum. Faculty, required to be highly qualified in their disciplines, embrace the whole spectrum of professions, disciplines, and career paths. This vast scope of intellectual inquiry increases the number of epistemological collision-points across the disciplines; it also moves the whole meaning-making endeavor beyond the reference point of a biblical worldview. The resulting challenges are daunting:

It's hard to recruit a PhD in linguistics who will affirm that all language groups began at the Tower of Babel.

It's challenging to imagine a geologist affirming Mount Everest as being formed by the hydraulic forces of The Flood after examining the multiple evidences for the impact of converging tectonic plates over long periods of time.

It's difficult to defend the distinctiveness of human creation when DNA analysis reveals extremely high commonalities in the genetic codes among all forms of life.

It's hard to stand in awe of a massive dinosaur skeleton (like the one we see at the Chicago airport), to acknowledge this is one of perhaps hundreds of species of these huge, extinct animals, and then plausibly calculate how Noah shepherded two of each species into the Ark, keeping them fed and their cages clean for more than a year – and without Cameron Crow being there to anesthetize them!

Thoughtful persons look through our optical and radiographic telescopes, see objects from which the light began to emanate more than ten billion year ago, and experience profound dissonance in postulating that all heavenly light began on the second day of creation six thousand years ago.

It's difficult to examine supernovas and black holes that gobble up galaxies, in an expanding, chaotic, accelerating universe and readily credit Ellen White's lyric sentiments of the clockwork-like, pristine universe – with a location in its midst called "heaven."

The founders of the Adventist higher education system had absolutely no capacity (and clearly no inclination) to envision what the higher education system would look like 150 years later. They expected an immediate Second Coming. To even think about an EMC celebrating a Centennial would have seemed a sacrilege to them. They could not have conceived of these institutions turning out electrical engineers, atomic physicists, neuroscientists, and anesthesiologists – every one of whose preparation relies entirely on the adoption of the scientific method – upon the givens of open inquiry, peer review, replicable experiments, and the many intellectual components that comprise progressing humanity.

I do not deny that these collisions are profoundly unsettling. Some feel the need to ascribe blame for their existence to some perverse or intentionally evil strategy. I have seen the blame cast to the doorways of the liberals, the intellectual elites, the Laodiceans, and even the Jesuits among us. Reading the online entries of the “hall monitors” in the various church blogs suggests that some are desperate to expose the forces of evil among the faithful. I find these interpretations to be both frantic and uninformed.

In searching for sinister forces to blame for the wrenching results, some would want to blame accreditors (particularly “secular accreditation”) for this shift. May I reference WASC, where I have worked as a senior office for some eleven years?

About a third of WASC institutions self-identify as faith-based; and roughly a third of the Commissioners typically are from faith-based institutions. These institutions cover the full spectrum – from ultra-conservative Catholic and Protestant, to evangelical and independent churches, to progressive Jesuit, Buddhist, and (soon) even to Islamic institutions.

There is a strong American tradition of protecting the mission of faith-based institutions of higher learning. The federal Department of Education is highly sensitive to any perceived intent to constrict the mission of any religiously based institution. I can assure you that the agency I represent does not have an agenda that is contrary to the distinctive missions of the highly diverse institutions we accredit.

Some of the hall monitors who accuse accreditors of pushing faith-based institutions away from their founding beliefs urge that WASC-type “secular” accreditation be surrendered and that Adventist institutions should apply for accreditation to the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE). Were this to happen, most academic programs would be eliminated as not meeting ABHE’s *own* standards requiring every course outcome to be explicitly linked to biblical “knowledge” and a biblical world-view. In this scenario, Adventist graduate schools would cease to exist. Most programmatic accreditors (such as LCME, APA, ABET, etc.) would withdraw from approving professional programs at these institutions. Most undergraduates would be eliminated from consideration by the majority of graduate schools, most likely including Loma Linda University. Finally, the epistemological collision would not go away by changing the quality assurance system.

I hear many references to the concept of the “integration of faith and learning.” I have been a participant in a few of these workshops. I have personally concluded that the concept works only when “faith” describes a personal sense of being in the thrall of the transcendent, or as when one is enraptured by Jesus’ principles of compassion and forgiveness. When the notion of “faith” means subscribing in detail to a 4,000-year-old, pre-scientific world-view, “integration of faith and learning” becomes a form of high-altitude jargon that masks the real epistemological conflicts.

To be specific: If all knowledge for all times was captured and solidified 2000+ years ago, then further inquiry is suspect. The higher education community does not hold

that this resulting closure of inquiry is a valid posture. The epistemological collision between revealed truth and discovered truth does not go away so easily.

What do I see going forward for SDA higher education? Will a sudden earthquake shake down the establishment? Is the church's higher education system at a crossroads of either embracing openly the evidence-based mindset, or of moving toward a Bible College self-understanding?

I am doubtful of any sudden, system-wide outcome. The church's higher education system is massive, increasingly autonomous, diverse across many disciplines, and must be loyal to many constituencies. It must appeal to parents who want their kids to get into Loma Linda or to become published scientists. The system is increasingly immersed in the professions (think Kettering, Florida Adventist Hospital, and Loma Linda) whose classrooms can, in practice, be indifferent to many elements of the prescribed orthodoxy.

The denominational system is worldwide. More than 90% of the membership is outside the United States. What North America experiences is vastly different from East Africa's or Indonesia's experience. The quest for unity is currently a high priority in the world church. This may help to keep many tensions below the radar for the foreseeable future.

Will there be some serious, overt collision; some major confrontation of forces? Again, I am doubtful: The persons who most keenly impacted by a 21st Century educational model that must function in the context of 19th Century biblical literalism have either already left the system or are working in a discipline (such as, say, Accounting or Dentistry) where the conflicts do not arise as readily.

The church may find a way to cease denying, fighting, or judging the fault lines that traverse institutions of higher education. Many members have concluded that a sense of collective Adventist *identity* is of greater value than a pristine and imagined integrity in one's list of doctrinal beliefs. These members may have chosen to remain Adventist by concluding that "these are my people; these are the songs I sing and the stories I tell; this is where I have staked my public loyalties and contributed my tithe and offerings; I've spent a lifetime traveling under this banner and it's comfortable and familiar; the pain of leaving is greater than the pain of staying (at least, so far). I fill my days programming computers and selling real estate. If there are troubling issues brewing about ontology, I don't have to think about them."

It would be my hope that the church find a way to be OK with these members. If not a majority, they at least can support the professional and intellectual backbone of the North American church.

Individual members of a faith community are not passive recipients of a tightly packaged, unchangeable statement of belief. Their legacy – the faith they pass on to the next generation – is not identical to that which they receive from the previous generation. Persons of faith individually construct a meaning system, a set of evidences, assumptions, and beliefs, by which they make sense of their present world. In the aggregate, those beliefs are the faith that the community then passes on to the next generations.

For centuries, and certainly at the time when this church was being formed, the primary source for creating cosmic meaning was the Bible; the primary thought process was best described as “key-texting” an array of individual verses from across the 66 books. The church’s commitment to higher education – though not intended to do so – has changed this epistemology wherever higher education is a dominant experience in the life of the membership

The question of “true religion” or, more to the point, of “*the* true religion” becomes less central once a person crosses over the epistemological divide, the meaning-making fault line. Once one moves beyond the priority of biblical literalism, the question shifts to whether one’s personal faith is relevant to one’s personal quest for meaning, adequate to the questions posed by the modern world, able to sustain thoughtful and productive conversations with other honestly thoughtful persons, and is sufficiently motivating to prompt one to bring compassion and justice to the world. A faith community that constructs meaning in this way, and holds honest dialogue with each other, passes forward a profoundly different faith legacy.

As that legacy is shared with the guardians of the historic faith, earthquakes may indeed happen.

