# Adolf Hitler and Ellen White "Agree" On the Purposes Of Education

**Adolf Hitler had a great deal to say about the role of human nature in education, a topic that stands at the absolute center of a Christian approach to education.**

By George R. Knight

Adolf Hitler was one of the 20th century's most influential philosophers of education. More remarkable yet, Hitler's educational philosophy on the surface sounds remarkably like that of Ellen White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### Obvious Parallels

Take the area of health, for example. "The individual's education," Hitler penned, "has to focus upon and to promote first of all physical health; for . . . a healthy, vigorous spirit will be found only in a healthy and powerful body."[1] Ellen White would find that sentiment easy to agree with. "The health," she wrote, "should be as faithfully guarded as the character. A knowledge of physiology and hygiene should be the basis of all educational effort."[2]

Secondly, Hitler believed that the training of the mental abilities was important.[3] What educator could disagree with that?

Thirdly, Hitler noted that character education stands near the very top of the hierarchy of educational values. As he put it, "besides physical training," education must "put the greatest emphasis on the training of the character."[4] That certainly sounds like something Ellen White would support. For example, in the book *Education* she wrote that "character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings."[5]

In those three points, Hitler has described the three-fold education so dear to the heart of Adventist educators—the physical, the mental, and the spiritual or moral. The book *Education* makes that same point when it states that "true education . . . has to do with the whole being. . . . It is the harmonious de-

velopment of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers."[6]

The parallels don't stop with the three-fold education of the whole person. Our famous author notes that "of highest importance is the training of will power and determination, as well as the cultivation of joy in taking responsibility."[7] That quote lists two important points in Ellen White's philosophy of education. First, the importance of the will, which she calls the "governing power in the nature of man."[8] And second, "joy in taking responsibility," which she calls the "joy of service in this world and . . . the higher joy of wider service in the world to come." It is no accident that the first and last pages of *Education* explicitly highlight the joy of service.[9]

Hitler went on to note that education (1) is a lifelong experience, (2) should develop "courage for confession," and (3) should be made available to all children, even to those from

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poor families.[10] Those ideals all seem close to the heart of Christian education's ideals.

It is also important to note that for Hitler, education had to be useful. As he put it, "youthful brains must in general not be burdened with things 95 per cent of which it [sic] does not need and therefore forgets again."[11] Ellen White repeatedly set forth a similar argument in her campaigns against allowing the "pagan" classics of Greece and Rome to dominate the curriculum.

Hitler also uplifted the importance of manual labor. "We wish," he wrote, "at a time when millions of us are living without understanding the real importance of manual labor, to teach . . . through the institution of labor service, that manual labor does not degrade or dishonor but rather does honor to everyone who performs it faithfully and conscientiously, as does any other work."[12] In pursuance of that ideal, he suggested that all young people of both sexes and of all economic backgrounds should be introduced to manual labor.[13] Such ideas, of course, were also set forth by Ellen White, who repeatedly highlighted manual labor and indicated that "the youth should be led to see the true dignity of labor."[14]

Lastly, Adolf Hitler had a great deal to say about the role of human nature in education, a topic that stands at the absolute center of a Christian approach to education.[15] That topic will be discussed at some length later in this article.

**We need to read deeper than mere words and practices to unlock the philosophy of any given author. It is the underlying philosophy that provides meaning and shape to a person's words and methods.**

### The Crucial Role of Philosophy

On the surface, the educational ideals of Adolf Hitler and Ellen White have many similarities. But below the surface is a world of difference.

Hitler, for example, valued physical health because it made better soldiers, better killers. For him, character meant mindless obedience so that any order would be carried out, even to the cold-blooded murder of innocent men, women, and children. Willpower meant the ability to do the distasteful if ordered to do so. I once read about the training of a certain group of SS officers. They were each given a beautiful German Shep-

The underlying philosophy of education according to Hitler produced soldiers who would unquestioningly commit acts of barbarism.

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herd puppy to raise. They were to sleep with it, eat with it, and play with it. The final exam was for the young man to kill that "best friend" with his own hands. That's the sort of character and willpower Hitler needed to conquer the world.

Joy in taking responsibility meant joyfully giving one's life for the Fatherland, while manual labor was important in the building of airplanes, tanks, and other war materiel. Hitler's millennium, of course, was the Thousand Year Reich. And his idea of the resurrection was the resurrection of the German Fatherland, which was destined to rule the world.

*The moral of the story: We need to read deeper than mere words and practices to unlock the philosophy of any given author. It is the underlying philosophy that provides meaning and shape to a person's words and methods.*

If I were the devil, I would encourage Adventist educators to read at the surface level. I would help them forget the importance of the underlying categories of metaphysics (the issue of reality), epistemology (the issue of truth), and axiology (the issue of values) that provide the all-important interpretive framework. I would lead them to overlook the fact that people can utilize the same words and programs while embracing opposite meanings and purposes. I would get them to read at the level of mere words rather than at the level of the meaning that helps them interpret the true import of the words.

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Ellen White emphasized that Adam and Eve were created in the image of God and were endowed with capacities capable of almost infinite development.

And when it comes to the educational philosophy of the Bible and Ellen White, if I were the devil, I would urge them to ignore it. If that didn't work, I would get Adventists to take the ideas of Ellen White out of their historic and literary context and encourage them to implement her counsel in a wooden, inflexible, and mindless manner. Furthermore, I would do everything I could to get them to ride hobby horses and to take an unbalanced approach to Ellen White's counsel. I would encourage them, as she would say, to take her "strongest expressions and without bringing in or making any account of the circumstances under which the cautions and warnings are given, make them of force in every case."[16] By such an approach, I could do a great deal to destroy her influence in the church and its educational system.

### The Strategic Place of Purpose

If I were the devil, I would do all I could to confuse Adventist educators about the real purpose of education. I would encourage them to think that the purpose of education is to transmit information; to develop social responsibility; to foster physical, emotional, or social health; to prepare students for the world of work; or even to develop character or to create a Christian mind. Now, all of those are worthy objectives. And as long as I could get people to narrowly focus on one or more of them as of central importance, I just might be able to win the battle.

In particular, I would do everything I could to get educators to "skip over" that little passage at the beginning of the book *Education* where Ellen White lays out the purpose of Christian education. Building on the biblical model of *Eden to Eden restored*, she writes that if we desire "to understand what is com-

prehended in the work of education, we need to consider" four things: "[1] the value of man and [2] the purpose of God in creating him. . . . [3] The change in man's condition through the coming in of a knowledge of good and evil, and [4] God's plan for still fulfilling His glorious purpose in the education of the human race."[17]

She continues to flesh out the core of her philosophy of education by refining those four points. First, in reflecting on human nature, she emphasizes that Adam and Eve were created in the image of God physically, mentally, and spiritually. Second, she highlights the purpose of God in creating human beings as one of constant growth as individuals ever "more fully" to reflect "the glory of the Creator." To that end, humans were endowed with capacities capable of almost infinite development.[18]

"But," thirdly, she notes in discussing the entrance of sin, "by disobedience this was forfeited. Through sin the divine likeness was marred, and well-nigh obliterated. Man's physical powers were weakened, his mental capacity was lessened, his spiritual vision dimmed."[19]

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The ultimate aim of education: service to God and other people for both here and the hereafter.

While those three points are foundational to Ellen White's philosophy of education, the fourth point is absolutely crucial. It is here that she most fully describes the primary purpose of education. "Yet," she notes, in spite of its rebellion and fall, "the race was not left without hope. By infinite love and mercy the plan of salvation had been devised, and a life of probation was granted. To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul, that the divine purpose in his creation might be realized—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life."[20]

Ellen White returns to that theme in the fourth chapter of *Education*, where she points out that every individual is the scene of a microcosmic great controversy between good and evil, having a desire for goodness but also having a "bent to evil." She goes on to note that students "can find help in but one power. That power is Christ. Co-operation with that power is man's greatest need. In all educational effort should not this co-operation be the highest aim?"[21]

She adds that "in the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one. . . . To aid the student in comprehending these principles, and in entering into that relation with Christ which will make them a controlling power in the life, should be the teacher's first effort and his constant aim. The teacher who accepts this aim is in truth a co-worker with Christ, a laborer together with God."[22]

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### The Anthropological Center of Educational Purpose

Without being technically a philosopher of education, Ellen White hit the pivotal point of educational philosophy when she placed the human problem at the very center of the educational enterprise. Illustrative of that truth is Paul Nash's *Models of Man: Explorations in the Western Educational Tradition* (1968) and *The Educated Man: Studies in the History of Educational Thought* (1965), which Nash developed in conjunction with two other authors.[23] Both books demonstrate the centrality of views of philosophical anthropology or human nature to all educational philosophies. Exemplifying that viewpoint are such chapter titles as "The Planned Man: Skinner," "The Reflective Man: Dewey," "The Communal Man: Marx," "The Natural Man: Rousseau," and "The Existential Man: Buber." I was so impressed with Nash's approach that soon after I had completed writing *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective* in 1979, I almost filed it and started over with what I believed would

be a more insightful book on the philosophy of education built upon the foundation of philosophical and theological anthropology. To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet attempted a synthesized, systematic approach to educational philosophy from the perspective of varying views of the nature and needs of human beings. (By the way, Adolf Hitler had no problem with an anthropological approach to education. For him, the purpose of education was to develop the master race.)

It doesn't take much thought to place Ellen White in Nash's framework. The title for his chapter on her would be "The Redeemed Man: White" (or "Redeemed Person" for modern readers). The problem of sin, along with redemption and restoration, dominates her approach to education. The primary function of education from Ellen White's perspective is the introduction of students to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, with a subsidiary purpose being the development of the *imago Dei* in each person (combining the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects). Such an educational purpose, of course, naturally implies that the primary function of the teacher is to be a pastor or minister within the classroom setting.

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**Educational Purposes and Redemption**

The phrase "redemptive education" captures the essence of what Adventist education is all about. It not only defines Adventist education as Christian and as being founded on the centrality of God and the Bible, but also explicitly sets forth the primary task of Christian education.

But it does more than that. It implies the problem that all humans have faced since Eden—the problem of sin. Any adequate theory of education must deal with the sin problem. That came to my attention during my "intermission" from Adventism. By 1969, I had become disillusioned with both my lack of perfection and the lack of perfection in the church. As a result, I turned in my ministerial credentials and fully intended to leave both Adventism and Christianity for the agnosticism in which I had been raised.

My problem at that time was that I needed to retool, since all of my academic degrees were in theology. I quite naturally turned to the study of philosophy, since I was still looking for the meaning of life. My special field of interest turned out to be the philosophy of education. And the area of my dissertation happened to be philosophies of revolution, since I still wanted to make the world a better place in which to live.

By the early 1970s, I was up to my ears in revolutionary philosophy. And I found many of the ideas not only challenging but also enchanting. I was quite enamored with those forms of socialism and Marxism that suggested that the truly revolutionary society, the truly good society, would be one in which individuals contributed what they were able to the common good and withdrew only what they needed. I was impressed also with the social reconstructionism of George S. Counts with his *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* and the more contemporary Paulo Freire with his truly revolutionary *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

I was nearing the point of being somewhat of a revolutionary myself. After all, I had been filling my mind with revolutionary ideas for a number of years. I had only one problem. If the revolutionary programs and strategies that I had been studying were correct, how come none of them had worked? After all, there had been ample time. Many of those theories had been around for decades and some for centuries. Yet not once did they meet the expectations of either theorists or practicing revolutionaries. Freire and others might talk of educating the peasants on the way to achieving a workers' utopia, but the result historically had always been the rise of a new class of oppressors who merely replaced those who had been dispossessed of their power.

I concluded that, throughout history, the reason revolution after revolution had failed to achieve their goals was that their philosophies had an inadequate understanding of both human nature and the power of sin.

As this became clear, even though I did not realize it at the time, I had taken my first intellectual step back to Christianity. I had also taken my first step back toward Ellen White's philosophy of education. Philosophy and theology for me have never been mere academic exercises. To the contrary, they have been existential interactions with stubborn facts from which I have been unable to escape. Some of those stubborn facts are

foundational to any adequate philosophy of life or philosophy of education.

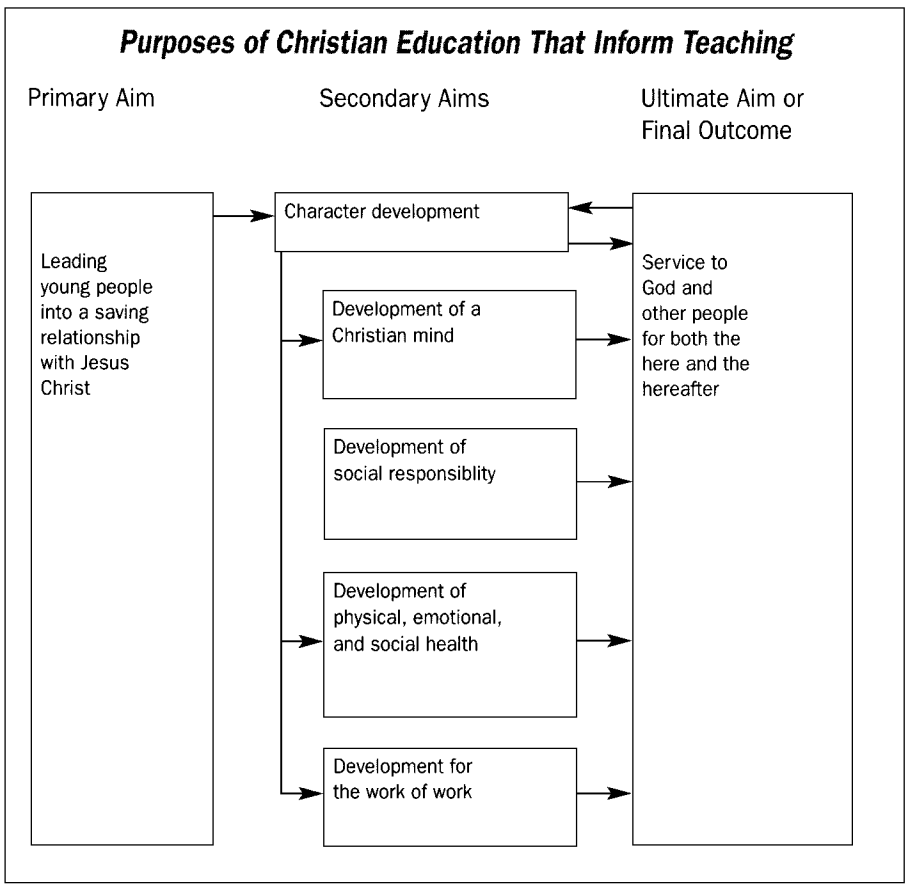
All philosophies must deal with the problem of evil and how to overcome it. But the biblical perspective is the only one that provides either an adequate diagnosis or a sufficient solution to the deepest problems that we face as human beings. The Eden-to-Eden pattern in the Bible is crucial to an adequate understanding of education. The Bible's view of a high creation of humanity in Genesis; its picturing of the disharmony of the world as being due to rebellious, personal sin rather than to some mindless evil; and its central organizing theme of God's multiplicity of attempts to reach out and restore fallen humanity to its previous condition, all stand at the very foundation of a Christian philosophy of education. Ellen White builds her educational philosophy upon that biblical pattern. And in the process of setting forth that philosophy, as might be expected, she expounds upon educational implications not made explicit in the Bible.

The educational philosophy advocated by Ellen White and the one implied in the Bible put the needs of the student at the very focal point of the educational endeavor. *"The nature, condition, and needs of the student,"* I wrote in *Philosophy and Education, "provide the focal point for Christian educational philosophy and direct educators toward the goals of Christian education."*[24]

**The primary function of education from Ellen White's perspective is the introduction of students to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, with a subsidiary purpose being the development of the *imago Dei* in each person (combining the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects).**

Central to a Christian understanding of education is the *imago Dei* concept, that Adam and Eve were created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Yet they fell. And at the Fall, the image was fractured and grossly distorted, but not destroyed (Genesis 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9). As John Calvin put it, a "residue" of the image continued to exist in humanity after the Fall, "some sparks still gleam" in the "degenerate nature."[25] Thus, human beings are neither completely good nor totally evil, but a complexity of both. Behaviorist B. F. Skinner helped us discover the ratlike side of human nature, and such humanistic psychologists as Carl Rogers have captured glimmers of godlike potential in each human, but only as we put those two perspectives in proper relationship can we begin to gain an adequate picture of the young people with whom we work—individuals with both ratlike and godlike potential. Blaise Pascal caught that complexity when he noted that "man is neither angel nor brute." He also pointed out that "it is dangerous to make man see too clearly his equality with the brutes without showing him his greatness. It is also dangerous to make him see his greatness too clearly, apart from his vileness. It is still more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both. . . . Man must not think that he is on a level either with the brutes or with the angels, nor must he be ignorant of both sides of his nature; but he must know both."[26]

It is that anthropological complexity, set forth in both the Bible and Ellen White's writings, that educators must deal with. Every student is the site of a great




SOURCE: Adapted from George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*, 3d ed. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), p. 203.

controversy between good and evil on the microcosmic level. It is humanity's lostness and potential that provide the primary purpose of Adventist education. The greatest need of each individual is to become "unlost." And just as Jesus came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10, KJV), so modern education has a ministry of reconciliation.

When I first began teaching, I heard repeatedly that character development was what Adventist education was all about. But I soon had to reject that position to seek a more basic purpose. C. B. Eavey reflects that deeper purpose when he writes that "the foundational aim in Christian education is the bringing of the individual to Christ for salvation. Before a man of God can be perfected, there must be a man of God to be perfect, without the new birth there is no man of God."[27] In other words, true character can develop only in the born-again Christian. Character development outside of that experience may produce good humanists or even good pharisees, but it is not congruent with the Christian model.

Ellen White raised the same point as Eavey when she wrote that "education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ."[28] With that truth in mind, it is not difficult to see why she claimed that the primary purpose of Adventist education is to help students find Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Flowing from that primary aim is what might be thought of as the secondary aims of Christian education—to develop the following: (1) character, (2) a Christian mind, (3) social responsibility, and (4) physical, emotional, and social health; as well as to (5) prepare students for the world of work.

The primary and secondary aims of Adventist education naturally lead to what might be considered the ultimate aim of Adventist education: service to God and other people for both the here and hereafter.[29]

The various aims of education are portrayed in the figure on page 10.

This figure highlights the various purposes of Adventist education. All of them are significant, but they reflect a progression that is of utmost importance.

Educational purpose is absolutely central to education. Authors such as Adolf Hitler and Ellen White may at time use very similar (or even identical) wording in their descriptions of the ideal education, but the end products they seek may be worlds apart.

As Christian educators, we need to read deeper than the level of mere words; we need to grapple with the philosophic meaning that undergirds the words and gives them force and purpose. Then and only then will we be in a position to truly understand what Christian education is all about and how it differs in purpose from all other educational programs. And only with that understanding in place will we know how to deliberately craft a system and a curriculum that genuinely applies our philosophy.

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