

Ellen G. White Counsels on Courtship ¹

When the work on the book [“Christian Education,” known today as *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students*] was first outlined, no consideration was given to dealing with the question of courtship in denominational schools. There were differences in policies from college to college; some allowed students of mature age and of good standing to meet in the dormitory parlor by permission of the preceptress. Other college administrators thought no provision should be made for such association, and were certain that their position was in harmony with the testimonies and Ellen White's oral teachings (DF 251, WCW to Elders G. A. Irwin and E. E. Andross, Sept. 7, 1912).

In early September, 1912, W. C. White talked over this matter with his mother. He mentioned to her that administrators who were inclined to some leniency felt “that the strong and unqualified statements in the testimonies regarding this matter refer to and apply chiefly to the schools made up largely of young and immature students” (ibid.).

Ellen White responded at length, pointing out that the young and the old cannot be treated alike and that “age and character must be taken into account.” She stated that men and women of sound experience and good standing have a right to expect some privileges not granted to the young and immature.

She mentioned also that if administrators are too stringent in this matter, they shall make a serious mistake. If students feel that they are dealt with unjustly and without consideration, there is greater temptation to disregard the rules of the school and the advice of the teachers (ibid.).

Pacific Union College, nearby, was one of the schools holding to the more conservative position. Its president, C. W. Irwin, had served in the Avondale school, where the school calendar quoted from an E. G. White letter stating: “We have labored hard to keep in check everything in the school like favoritism, attachments, and courting. We have told the students that we would not allow the first thread of this to be interwoven with their schoolwork. On this point we are as firm as a rock” (Letter 145, 1897).

This he had enforced as president of the Avondale school and was currently attempting to enforce as president of Pacific Union College. As W. C. White discussed with him the forthcoming book of counsels on education, Irwin pressed hard for the inclusion of something on courtship, rather expecting that it would be an elaboration of the counsel given to the Avondale school.

However, as noted earlier, the discussion W. C. White had with his mother did not support this, but indicated rather that Ellen White would make a definitive statement for general

¹ Taken from Arthur White's *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years (1905-1915)*, pp. 382-386

use. When the new chapter on “Department of Students” was prepared, W. C. White sent a copy to A. G. Daniells with a description of the procedure followed in its preparation.

“You will observe that this chapter is made up of three parts: first, a broad statement on general principles of department. This was drawn from *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 4. Following this is a statement regarding what may be permitted in our colleges in the association of men and women who, are mature in age and of good experience. This is followed by a restatement of the instruction Mother has always given in such schools as the Battle Creek College, the Avondale school, and elsewhere” (WCW to AGD, Feb. 7, 1913).

The crucial paragraphs in the chapter allowing for association of mature students, were dictated by Ellen White. She then reviewed them several times, commenting on each principle and expressing her approval of the wording.

When the chapter was submitted to Professor Irwin, he was surprised to find that it did not accord with the instruction given to the Avondale school. He wrote to W. C. White that the instruction was “something entirely new” and that he was “at a loss to know how to make it agree with matter which Sister White has written on other occasions.” He inquired whether some new light had been given to her on this point (DF 251, C. W. Irwin to WCW, Feb. 12, 1913). What Irwin had not taken into account was the different circumstances under which the seemingly divergent counsels had been given. When she had written in 1897 the larger number of the students were under 16 years of age. The Avondale school at that time was primarily an academy, not a college. The majority of students in the church's colleges were older and more experienced and mature. Ellen White, in providing general counsel for denominational educators, took this into account and wrote accordingly.

Important Principles Enunciated

The whole experience was wholesome, for it drew out from W. C. White an explanation of principles that has been most valuable in dealing with the Ellen G. White counsels, in both primary and secondary ways. Of this he wrote to C. W. Irwin:

“One of the most perplexing problems we have to deal with in preparing Mother's writings for publication is in just such matters as this, where the conditions of a family, or a church, or an institution are presented to her, and warnings and instruction are given regarding these conditions. In such cases, Mother writes clearly and forcefully, and without qualification regarding the situation presented to her. And it is a great blessing to us to have this instruction for our study in dealing with similar conditions elsewhere. But when we take what she has written, and publish it without any description, or particular reference to

the conditions existing when and where the testimony was given, there is always the possibility of the instruction being used as applying to places and conditions that are very different.

Very much perplexity has been brought into our work in this way, by the use of what Mother has written on the subject of diet, and on the use of drugs, and on other subjects that you will think of without my enumerating them; and when the time has come for instruction to be given to some individual, or family, or church, which presented the right course to be taken, under conditions which were different from those contemplated in former writings, the exception made, or the different course advised in view of the different conditions, has often come as a surprise to those who felt that the instruction they have been studying was of universal application. In our book-making, as we have met this perplexity, Mother has given us very comprehensive and emphatic instruction as to how we shall deal with such matters. We are endeavoring to follow that instruction faithfully. It was in response to this instruction that several manuscripts were prepared that Mother read at the last General Conference, among which was the article entitled, ‘Faithfulness in Health Reform’” (DF 251, WCW to C. W. Irwin, Feb. 18, 1913).

Another consideration pointed out by W. C. White was: “Often people read into a statement many things that were not contemplated when it was written. And this makes it important that everything that is to be printed shall be studied in its many bearings before it is sent to the printers” (Ibid).

Neither Ellen White nor W. C. White considered the “perplexities” referred to as a deterrent to a multiple use of materials. In 1868 she was instructed to publish testimonies addressed to individuals and families, for the counsel given to one would be useful to another (5T, pp. 658, 659), and the Lord did not give a vision for each individual situation. She made a provision in her will for the production of books from her manuscripts.

W. C. White told Irwin that from the outset, in developing the chapter on “Department of Students” it was thought that the statement written to the school at Cooranbong, if used, “ought not to stand alone, but that a more complete presentation of Mother's views should be given than was found in that one manuscript” (DF 251, WCW to C. W. Irwin, Feb. 18, 1913). And he told of how, with the manuscript ready to go to the printer, and considering the far-reaching nature of the statement on courtship, he asked Ellen White to read the chapter again. He reported that “she began with ‘Courtship,’ and read to the end, commenting upon and approving point by point of the instruction” (DF 251, WCW to J. E. White, Jan. 25, 1913).

The chapter was included in the finished manuscript as it went to the printer, with the subtitle “Courtship” replaced by the less-pronounced “Association With Others.” The portion in question reads:

“In all our dealings with students, age and character must be taken into account. We cannot treat the young and the old just alike. There are circumstances under which men and women of sound experience and good standing may be granted some privileges not given to the younger students. The age, the conditions, and the turn of mind must be taken into consideration. We must be wisely considerate in all our work. But we must not lessen our firmness and vigilance in dealing with students of all ages, nor our strictness in forbidding the unprofitable and unwise association of young and immature students” (*Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students*, p. 101).

Thus, Ellen White refused to allow a statement written to meet the needs of the Avondale school in its beginning days, with its enrollment of young students, to be used as a rule to guide in college administration. The book came from the press in mid-May, 1913.