

## Chapter 8

### Education and Redemption

Ellen White summarizes the relationship between education and redemption in her book on education:

“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.”<sup>i</sup>

How does one best communicate the story of redemption and the gift of free grace in an educational setting? The expressions “act naturally,” “found missing,” “plastic glasses” and “giant shrimp” are known as oxymorons—expressions that in their superficial or literal meaning are self-contradictory. Does the term “institutional grace” also fit that definition – an oxymoron? Is it possible to communicate grace in an institution like a church or school?

The nature of grace is accepting and forgiving, while the nature of an institution is to establish itself by using rules, policies, and regulations. Grace accepts you as you are, shortcomings and all, while an institution is more likely to accept you when you measure up.

The word *institution* comes from the root word “to stand” or to establish. The institution is organized by people who “stand” for something and who wish to perpetuate their convictions. Therefore, they establish policies and standards. In order to ensure that their convictions persist into the future they “institutionalize” their ideas. The result? Institutions develop church manuals, policy manuals, student handbooks, and education codes and they teach those things and require certain behaviors.

This brings us back to the question, “Is ‘institutional grace’ an oxymoron?”

I heard a story about a woman who had a child out of wedlock and the church extended grace by welcoming her into the church. They gave her a shower and helped her extensively as she cared for her new baby. The result? It all went so well she had another child out of wedlock. When are we enablers, and when are we extending grace? Imagine Moses, the institutional leader, saying, “Lord, these children of yours have built a golden calf. I think that this is really a problem of environmental depravity caused by their poor home conditions in Egypt. They are not responsible for these actions.” That was not the response of Moses or God. It was clear that they needed to learn a lot about the God that redeemed them from Egypt, they needed a lot of education about God’s grace and His law.

In the New Testament the church leaders sought to find that balance between the application of law and grace. These leaders were teaching the newly forming church about the true God and how He was redeeming man.

“Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses you cannot be saved”<sup>ii</sup>

They were educating the new believers that salvation required the performance of certain Jewish rites such as circumcision. They wanted to make circumcision a requirement of being redeemed. “You can’t abandon the rules given to us by Father Abraham!” they exclaimed.

“This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So, Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.”<sup>iii</sup>

We live in an age of independent individualism that generally thumbs its nose at institutional rules. Their response to church and school is, “I am my own person, and you shouldn’t presume to restrict my liberty.” We can learn something from Paul’s response to the dispute in the early church. Why did Paul go to Jerusalem? It is because he cared about the community. The institution, the church, was important to him. What “the brethren” had to say mattered to Paul.

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’”<sup>iv</sup>

If you translated this into a contemporary setting it might read, “Then some of the believers who belonged to the conservative party stood up and said, “‘We must not allow anyone who eats meat, wears jewelry or \_\_\_\_\_ to join the church.’” (I am sure you could fill in the blank from your experience.)

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question.”<sup>v</sup>

I would have liked to listen in on this committee meeting of the apostles and elders. Considering the relationship between Jews and Gentiles during this time it was no doubt a passionate discussion. The Jews regarded the Gentiles as heathen. According to Jewish law, you didn’t marry them, you didn’t eat with them, and you didn’t enter their houses. Now all of these “heathen” were accepting Jesus and joining the church. I am sure that the Jews who had been following God all along said that the standards were falling. They wanted to educate these new followers of Jesus in the rules of the Torah. In defending their views, they quoted the Old Testament rules about circumcision.<sup>vi</sup>

“After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are’”<sup>vii</sup>.

Thus, in the early development of the institutional church, Peter said God made no distinction between Gentile sinners and Jewish saints rather all live under grace. James summarizes the decision made at that first General Conference session.

“When they finished, James spoke up: ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. . . . It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God’”.<sup>viii</sup>

The basis of the decision was not a string of quotations from the Old Testament proving the importance of circumcision. The Judaizers were doing that. They didn’t decide to set up circumcision clinics in churches. The leaders didn’t get out the policy book, the church manual, or the student handbook. James expressed what seemed to be the consensus of the group after their discussion. And that consensus was expressed in six words: “We should not make it difficult”. Human institutions tend toward making things difficult, toward being exclusive. We like to belong to a privileged group and to be chosen for the platinum credit card and the first-class upgrade on the airplane flight. The party of the Pharisees wanted to use their “club,” to elevate their exclusivity. Jesus came to teach us about what God is like and He is not exclusive but desires all to receive redemption.<sup>ix</sup>

What does “Don’t make it difficult” mean in an institution; in a church or school setting? It means rational rules mediated by relationships. If institutional rules are understandable and explainable to a reasonable person, then they are “not difficult!” Notice I said, “a reasonable person.” (I know that churches and schools don’t always deal with reasonable persons.) Adventist educational institutions are presented with a complex task. On the one hand, the gospel is free, and the story of salvation taught as not being behavior dependent. On the other hand, this task is pursued in a social setting that requires a rather long list of behavioral standards and rules.

Discipline is necessary for every institution, including schools and churches. No group can achieve community unless it holds some things in common. The very definition of community is to hold some things in common and that means rules and law which require discipline. But the human inclination is to apply *punishment*, not *discipline*. Discipline is redemptive, whereas punishment is punitive. In a disciplined community, the members express responsibility for one another by making sure correction is applied with grace.

If we look at different categories of rules it will help institutions “not make it difficult” for students and church members. Dividing rules into categories may help.

First: Some behavior standards are integral to doctrinal beliefs, integral to the communities very existence. Without these laws or rules the community does not hold anything in common and is not really a community at all. The ten commandments and the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs would fall in this category. They are an expression of fundamental church teachings, are supported by Scripture, and provide the community with its core identity. These rules are non-negotiable.

Second: Some behavior standards grow out of our religious cultural heritage. Among other things, these include conservative dress standards and Sabbath church attendance. We refrain from or embrace these items because they form a part of our image—this is who we are. They are part of our religious tradition. These rules or policies simply reflect our corporate culture and how we wish to represent ourselves. We don’t exclude people from the church, nor do we make judgments about them if they don’t follow these rules.

Third: Some behavior policies simply are necessary rules of engagement for situations when adolescents and adults are in close proximity. These include such things as where you can park your car, and for a school not using your cell phone in class and a prohibition on eating in class or at the library.

In order to create rational regulations, we need to understand these categories of rules. It is important that we don't seek to place heavy moral implications on transgression of behavior standards that are simply chosen institutional or cultural norms.

Of course, even when administrators feel they have a good rationale for a rule, students and parents may not agree. So, in the end, it is the relationship that balances law and grace. The Old Testament provides us with a perfect illustration. The Shekinah glory or presence of God resided in the Mercy Seat above the tablets of the law. It was there that mercy and law joined. The presence of God brought them together. In New Testament times, Jesus showed us through His life and teachings how to combine law and grace. He died to uphold the law but also to give us grace.

In the setting of Christian education, we have incarnational teachers, deans, and administrators who combine law and grace in their lives. They model living the rules and loving the students. The institution does not communicate grace either by throwing out the rules or making them innocuous. It communicates grace by having grace-filled people, those who have experienced the gospel in their own lives, mediate the rules of institutional life. Pastors, faculty and staff first must melt students with their love before they can mold their opinions. Too often, we seek to mold their opinion before we melt them—and they rebel. Through loving relationships, we can unite grace and law. The following chart illustrates the grace-full school:

ISSUE	Non-Grace Orientation	Grace Orientation
School Atmosphere	Cold and suspicious	Friendly and accepting
Principal	Warden	Helper
Teachers	Police	Mentors
Employees	Treated with suspicion	Treated with trust
Dormitory	Prison	Home

Deans	Parole officers	Friends
Acceptance Policies	Open to the perfect	Open to the teachable
Student Handbook	What you can't do	What you don't want to do
Questions	Don't ask	Freedom to question
Obedience	From fear	From love
Sin	Breaking the rules	Breaking the relationship
Second Coming	Fear	Joy
Faith	Leap in the dark	Leap into light
God	Judge to appease	Father to love
Law	Restrictive instruction	Loving guidelines

At the beginning of this chapter, we used Moses as an illustration of someone who would not ignore the sins of the Israelites when they worshiped a golden calf. He carried out some very severe punishment. But when God suggested to Moses:

“I have seen these people, . . . and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation”.<sup>x</sup>

Moses manifested the love of a true leader. He went back to the LORD and said,

“Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written”.<sup>xi</sup>

Moses mediated the law with such love that he was willing to relinquish his own salvation for the people he served. That kind of love will always communicate grace, even in an institutional setting with many rules.

So, is institutional grace an oxymoron? No, unless the people of the institution are not incarnational representatives of Jesus and His love. When Pastors, administrators, and teachers experience God's love and His unconditional acceptance there will be institutional grace and it will not be an oxymoron.

Many years ago, in Fenton Forest a decision had been made that all the forest folks would get a free lunch. It was felt that this would decrease the high level of poverty and assure a stable forest environment. For a few years it seemed to work well and there was a higher standard of living in the forest and with no need to compete over the food supply the folks got along better. Fenton Forest really became a lovely place to live.

Sometime after the free lunch policy went into effect a group began to question the policy. It had been many years since it was instituted and they, in their careful study of economics concluded that there was no such thing as a free lunch. They began to express doubts about the generosity of the one who provided it and his ability to keep paying for it.

It was the conviction of this group that their economic and forest conditions would improve if each person paid for their own lunch. They said it would bring more money into the local forest economy and the result would be a better forest, besides how did they know how long their benefactor would be able to continue providing the free lunch.

They called those who wanted a free lunch, freeloaders - folk who were not contributing to the forest economy. They ignored the fact that those on the free lunch program were working as hard as they and in some cases a bit harder. They simply rallied around the slogan, "There is no such thing as a free lunch!"

Then one day the one who made the decision concerning the free lunch program and who also had paid for free lunches came and found that His generous provisions had not been accepted or appreciated by some. He asked them why, but they were speechless. And so, he cast them out into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

**By Dr. Gordon Bietz**  
**Associate Director Higher Education**  
**North American Division**

---

<sup>i</sup> Ellen White, Education p. 15.2, 16.0

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 15:1, NIV.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 15:2, NIV.

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 15:4, 5 NIV.

<sup>v</sup> Acts 15:6 NIV.

<sup>vi</sup> Genesis 17:9-14, Leviticus 12:3, Genesis 34:15

<sup>vii</sup> Acts 15 7-11 NIV

<sup>viii</sup> Acts 15:13-19 NIV

<sup>ix</sup> 1 Timothy 2:3-4 NIV

<sup>x</sup> Exodus 32:9, 10 NIV

<sup>xi</sup> Exodus 32:31 NIV