

Closing the College (1882-1883)¹

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The delegates to the session of the General Conference in early December 1881 re-elected George Butler to the presidency and expressed their gratitude for his leadership. Butler was ill with malaria at his home in Mount Pleasant, Iowa; they prayed for his recovery and for wisdom from God. They prayed “that God may impart to him strength and wisdom sufficient to enable him to bear up under the arduous labors, and to meet the weighty responsibilities, which will devolve upon him for the year to come.”²

This resolution was prophetic. It would indeed be a very difficult year for him, especially regarding Battle Creek College.

Change of Leadership at the College

The interpersonal conflicts at Battle Creek College were one of the first things to confront Butler. Since Goodloe Harper Bell opened his school in 1872, the college had benefited the denomination and had become an institution people were proud of.³

The school had been Bell’s dream, and he served as its first teacher in the early years. Once the college was incorporated in March 1874, James White became its titular president with Sidney Brownsberger as its acting head. Brownsberger worked tirelessly in these first years to establish a thriving school, inviting students to attend, raising funds for its operations, and seeking to build its reputation. However, he also had the difficult responsibility of navigating the various expectations people had for the college. By late spring 1881, he was exhausted and discouraged and quit his responsibilities.⁴

¹ This paper is adapted from chapter 13, “Challenges to Education and Mission (1882-1884),” in my biography of *George I. Butler: An Honest but Misunderstood Church Leader* (Pacific Press, 2024).

² S. N. Haskell and U. Smith, “General Conference,” *RH*, January 3, 1882, 11.

³ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 18-26; Allan G. Lindsay, “Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1982), 165-231.

⁴ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 27-41. By April 1882, he was the president of Healdsburg College in California.

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According to Emmett Vande Vere many factors contributed to Brownsberger's resignation. "In the first place, he had led the college too far away from the denominational blueprint"—a blueprint that focused on practical education, physical work, and development of Christian character for a life of service to God and humanity. The criticisms from church leaders, including Ellen White, leveled at his leadership indicated that he had been failing at this for some time. But most distressing was the deteriorating discipline among the students. Since there were no residence halls, students lodged in community homes where standards of behavior were generally more relaxed and certainly not uniform. The misbehavior of students in the city of Battle Creek tarnished the reputation of the college and thus led to many dismissals. This in turn had driven many students to transfer to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. These defections to a secular university were more than many could bear, and Brownsberger's decision to leave the college was a relief.⁵

Within a few weeks, the College board had selected a new president, Alexander McLearn. Their decision was premature and ill advised. McLearn had been a Baptist minister and had recently accepted Seventh-day Adventist teachings but had not yet joined the denomination. He had the exceptional qualification of having a Doctor of Divinity degree, a level of education that likely dazzled many board members, hoping it would add prestige to the college. But he had little acquaintance with the history of Seventh-day Adventists or the educational goals that had established Battle Creek College. He also had little experience with the internal and contentious dynamics of the Adventist community in Battle Creek.⁶

McLearn took leadership of the college on July 24, 1881. Two weeks later James White died and within a few weeks Ellen White left for California. George Butler, who naturally should have become the next chairman of the board and could have advised him, was traveling extensively that summer and became too ill to travel to Battle Creek. Since he could not supervise the transition of leadership and likely become the board president, Uriah Smith instead was elected to the position—another misstep.

Crisis at the College

⁵ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 41.

⁶ Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 197.

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While it appeared at first that McLearn would continue to run the College as he had found it, he soon began to make some decisions that alienated some constituency members, and especially Goodloe Bell. Against Bell's advice, McLearn cancelled the Teachers' Drill program, which was a brief program for those who wished to teach in public schools, and he also relaxed the socialization rules among male and female students, something Bell and many others disapproved immensely. Naturally, these decisions antagonized those who feared this "might jeopardize the existence of the college."⁷ By December 1881, when the annual session of the General Conference met, the one Butler could not attend because of illness, the conflicts between all parties had created a lot of tension in Battle Creek.

Hoping to redirect the focus of the education provided at the College, Ellen White had written a testimony on September 25 to be read during the annual session of the General Conference. It was a solemn message. She saw a danger that the college would be "turned away from its original design." She also stated that the college should not be molded after other colleges. Unless the College remained a unique school, there would be "no encouragement to parents to send their children" to it. This was the sticking point: the College had to be a distinctively Seventh-day Adventist institution of learning. White also addressed the interpersonal conflicts at the College. She deplored an attitude of selfishness among the teachers who at times were too independent or seeking supremacy. She encouraged them to "counsel together." It was a testimony all could learn from and encourage everyone to make the College the institution God intended it to be.⁸

But strife among teachers and with board members soon resumed. By early January 1882, things were unraveling rapidly. Smith, as board chair, decided to investigate this conflict, reviewing teachers' records, including McLearn's. Smith allowed both parties to formulate formal "charges" against each other and then conducted eight investigatory meetings regarding these charges. In the end, Smith aligned with the president and backed his handling of the situation. However, in doing so, Smith found himself opposing the majority of the board, who sided with Bell, consequently creating more tension. The investigation ended with both Bell and McLearn being censured for their conduct, a censure they both accepted with sincere apologies.

⁷ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 44.

⁸ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 21-24, 35-36, 60; Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 200-204; Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 44.

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Although at first this appeared to have resolved the tension, the repentance was short-lived, and the uproar and accusations began anew within just a few days.⁹

This was when Butler took over the chairmanship of the College Board and discovered how much teachers resented Smith for conducting his investigation into their conduct. By then, Butler also felt that Smith had become part of the problem, passing private information to others. No doubt, much harm had been done by this investigation; the reputation of teachers had been severely damaged, and the entire church community, with faculty, teachers, and students, was deeply divided. Moreover, Butler's response and attitude toward Smith are also curious. Was he too quick to take sides? It seems that from the earliest moments of this crisis, Butler believed McLearn was in the wrong.¹⁰

After a few weeks of a semblance of normalcy, things began falling apart again by the middle of February when another incident between McLearn and Bell reignited the conflict. As the board refused to force McLearn out, Bell resigned his position. By then, an exasperated Butler felt he had very little influence on how to resolve this toxic and dysfunctional situation and had only a grim outlook on the future of the College. People were gossiping about all kinds of conspiracies, and even his own brother-in-law, Ransom Lockwood spread the rumor that Dr. Kellogg had poisoned James White to get rid of him. Writing to William White, Butler shared his frustration. "Our plans for helping the school seem broken down entirely." He saw "no prospect of any improvement in the school but expect it to go on from bad to worse."¹¹ Butler had accurately predicted the outcome.

By the beginning of April 1882, Butler and the college board felt that indeed some changes were desperately needed. Once the school year ended, he believed McLearn and some teachers should no longer be employed. He admitted that he could not invite young people to attend the College before some radical changes were made. "The experience of the last winter has been a terrible one to me," he confided to Ellen White. "I have not a particle of faith that the present order of things is in harmony with the order of God. But for the present it seems

⁹ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 45; Vande Vere, *Rugged Heart*, 57. Allan Lindsay provides a detailed account of these investigation meetings. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 208-216.

¹⁰ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 45; Land, *Uriah Smith*, 120-124; G. I. Butler to S. N. Haskell, January 30, 1882.

¹¹ G. I. Butler to W. C. White, February 3, 1882; G. I. Butler to W. C. White, February 20, 1882; G. I. Butler to W. C. White, February 22, 1882.

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impossible to change it.” Butler hoped that once the school year concluded, something could be done. One problem remained, however: Smith felt very differently and continued to oppose any changes in leadership or teachers.¹²

The Testimonies of Ellen White

Had Ellen White any words of wisdom for them?

By then Ellen White had written a long testimony to Uriah Smith with a request it also be read to the Battle Creek church. But Smith equivocated the request, believing the letter was merely her opinion, since it did not refer to any vision she had received regarding the matter. Smith simply put the letter aside. Having learned that Ellen White had sent Smith a testimony, Butler asked to read it.¹³

This letter solidified Butler’s perspective on the issues; it would perhaps be best that the College be closed. He wrote Ellen White that he “felt the case was almost hopeless.” Closing the College for a time might help some “people come to their senses.” Maybe it “would open their eyes.” In any case, Butler repeated that he could not “advise our young people to come here to [this] school till there is a radical change in this place.”¹⁴

As people in Battle Creek became aware that Ellen White had sent a letter to Smith to be read to the Battle Creek church, pressure mounted on Smith to let people see this letter. A meeting was called for Saturday night, May 11, and the letter was read by professor C. W. Stone, both Smith and Butler declining to read it, Smith because he did not perceive it as a testimony, and Butler because he feared people would think he was basking in “a spirit of triumph.”

Butler noted that many church members responded positively, although many of Smith’s supporters believed this letter was not a true testimony of Ellen White and reflected only her personal opinion. Yet, a key person of this entire saga was absent—President McLearn. So, even though the meeting may have done some good, the conflict over the management and direction of the College still simmered. In fact, the situation looked so grim that some people on the Board felt that perhaps it would be better to have no President or even Principal at all. The situation

¹² G. I. Butler to E. G. White, April 6, 1882.

¹³ E. G. White to Uriah Smith, March 28 (Letter 2a), 1882.

¹⁴ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, April 26, 1882.

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indeed did look hopeless.¹⁵

Does It Have a Future?

As the summer months arrived, Butler and his colleagues continued to wrestle with the future of the College. Some decisions were nonetheless made. McLearn's contract as president of the College was not renewed and some teachers were let go. But things still looked grim. "Our College is enough to break the back of a giant and for the life of me I know not what can be done with it," he confided to William White.¹⁶

Sensing her help was sorely needed, Ellen White decided to intervene more forcefully and prepared a special testimony to the Battle Creek church which included her message about Battle Creek College of September 1881 (the one read during the General Conference session in December 1881), along with two letters, the one addressed to Uriah Smith (March 28, 1882) and another to the Battle Creek Church (June 20, 1882).¹⁷ It was a strong set of messages intent on stirring the lethargy of all those involved in this polemic. But to those described as being in darkness and self-complacent, this testimony must have sounded like a long and rambling tirade. She stated clearly that the letter she had written to Smith in March had been a testimony and not her mere opinion; and the same was applicable to this testimony. To disregard her messages was to reject warnings from God. This special testimony was published in late July and was immediately distributed to church members. But by then, McLearn had threatened to sue the College Board for \$2000. Butler hoped this testimony would help people see the kind of spirit animating McLearn.¹⁸

For weeks Butler continued to agonize over what to do next. His advice was that the College be shut down for the coming school year. He felt it would be the best way to deal with the conflict and allow time to heal the divisions, but the College Board refused. Battle Creek

¹⁵ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, May 16, 1882; E. G. White to G. I. Butler, C. W. Stone, A. B. Oyen, and J. H. Kellogg, May 5 (Letter 11), 1882.

¹⁶ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, August 12, 1882; G. I. Butler to W. C. White, June 30, 1882.

¹⁷ This special testimony was published as a pamphlet of 84 pages in 1882 (PH 117) and was included in *Testimonies for the Church*, no. 31 (1882). It is found in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 21-36, 45-98.

¹⁸ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, July 31, 1882; G. I. Butler to E. G. White, June 28, 1882; G. I. Butler to E. G. White, July 16, 1882.

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residents and church members had sacrificed a lot of money and energy to establish the College, and many students had already paid their school year in advance. It was unthinkable to close it.¹⁹

Agreeing with Butler, Ellen White thought also the College should be closed, and on August 3 wrote another testimony to church members in Battle Creek.²⁰

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This latest admonishment finally worked, at least for those on the College Board. On Saturday, August 12, Butler wrote a long letter to Ellen White detailing all the meetings that had taken place earlier that week. At last, the Board had decided to *delay* the opening of the College. Her latest testimony had had the desired effect. "I have felt a great relief since my mind came to this decision and feel that it is right," he penned.²¹ Although opposition to this decision had not all disappeared, in early September 1882, the Board further decided to simply close the College for that school year.

In a long communication in the *Review and Herald*, Butler explained the reasons for this difficult decision. He understood that it was "a most humiliating step" to take, since it proclaimed to the world that the College was closed "because of troubles among us."²² With this long article Butler hoped to win over a large segment of the church membership, exposing the difficulties experienced in Battle Creek. Of course, all members could read the testimonies of Ellen White and make up their minds about the troubles at the church's headquarters. But for those living in Battle Creek things were different and a spirit of resistance was alive and well. Those who had been supportive of McLearn agreed to raise a fund to compensate his lost wages for the school year with the agreement that he would consent "to take his suit against the College Board out of court." Perhaps this was a good solution, but one that rubbed Butler the wrong way. He almost preferred that the lawsuit would go ahead and see McLearn lose in court.²³

As the weeks wore on, Butler reported to William White that more and more people in Battle Creek came to understand Ellen White's point of view and repent of their obstinacy. Perhaps a major corner had been turned. With the College closed for the year, things went back

¹⁹ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, August 2, 1882.

²⁰ E. G. White to "Brothers and Sisters in Battle Creek," (Letter 21) August 3, 1882.

²¹ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, August 12, 1882.

²² G. I. Butler, "Unpleasant Themes," *Review and Herald*, September 12, 1882, 586-587.

²³ G. I. Butler to W. C. White, September 17, 1882.

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to some sense of normalcy in Battle Creek. By the spring 1883, the Board was now able to consider reopening the College. “If men with open eyes had led the college into the ditch of closure, possibly a blind man could lead out of it,” comments Vande Vere, as the Board voted to invite W. H. Littlejohn, their sightless pastor from Allegan, Michigan, to be its third College president.

The College reopened on September 5, 1883, with eighty students, and a total enrollment of 264 by the end of the term. Littlejohn served as president for two years and his administration smoothed over the College’s relationship with the church membership. In obedience to Ellen White’s counsels and to facilitate a better grasp on student discipline, a residence hall was built in the autumn of 1884, and small industries were started. But by then, two other Adventist colleges had been established, one in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, where Butler had sent his twin sons, under the leadership of Goodloe Bell, and one in Healdsburg, California, on Ellen White’s doorstep, headed by Sydney Brownsberger. Both institutions were at first academies (providing elementary and secondary education) and had rapidly taken hold of White’s vision for a school, learning lessons from the conflicts and missteps of Battle Creek College. In time, both institutions also began to offer college-level education, and they quickly received widespread endorsements from church leaders.²⁴

Lessons Learned from the College Crisis

In hindsight, however, the College crisis revealed two other uneasy issues needing to be resolved – which still today remain unresolved to some extent.

One would be the significance and extent of Ellen White’s inspiration and how to distinguish what is authoritative in her writings. And a second issue, closely dependent on the first, would be the proper attitude one should have in response to White’s counsels. These issues concerning White’s prophetic role would come up again before the end of the decade in relationship to the discussion on righteousness by faith in Minneapolis.

In part, this crisis lasted longer, much longer than it should have because Uriah Smith, the chairman of the College Board at the beginning of McLearn’s presidency, did not consider Ellen White’s first letter to him (of March 28, 1882) as being an inspired testimony.²⁵

²⁴ Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 48-52.

²⁵ G. I. Butler to E. G. White, April 26, 1882.

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Part of Smith's problem with White's communication seemed to focus on the fact that White had not really considered his side of the crisis and had unreservedly sided with Butler and others in favor of Bell and against McLearn. This baffled Smith. Two weeks before she wrote him her testimony of March 28, Smith explained to her that McLearn had come to the College with sincere intentions to carry out the "policy of the school," not to change anything. But within three days of the beginning of school, Bell had claimed his teacher's rights had been infringed upon by McLearn. Although now it appeared to have been an issue of discipline and how to curtail the worldly behavior of some students, Smith claimed this was not the issue that started the troubles. "McLearn has a standard of discipline as high as anyone; but he takes a different method to secure that result, from what some others would," Smith explained. Smith was not sure if it would work in the long run, but he felt confident adjustments could be made. He believed McLearn to be a reasonable man. In any case, there had not been half the violations to discipline this year as some claimed and morale appeared to be good among young people. Furthermore, Smith felt the Board had not acted properly by not going to McLearn first to discuss adjustments to school discipline. There were a lot of misunderstandings, lack of proper communication, and too much needless agitation of this problem by George Butler. Smith hoped his explanation would help Ellen White better understand the situation.²⁶

Hence Smith was very perplexed when he received White's letter of March 28 in which she evidently blamed him for the troubles and essentially exonerated Bell. But what also stands out in this letter is the way she articulated how people are to receive her testimonies, something Smith was failing to do. It is evident that Smith struggled with his reception of White's testimonies. Like other Adventist pioneers, he had come to believe in White's prophetic gift and its role in the end-time remnant people of God. He accepted that this gift was manifested in her life. But how to distinguish between White's common, day-to-day opinions on various matters and her inspired communications was a more difficult task. Those with a personal acquaintance of the human Ellen White were more prone to having this difficulty. White herself had stated that not everything she said or wrote was to be considered inspired. So how was one to make this crucial distinction? (I'm not sure anyone of us has found an answer to this question even today.)

²⁶ Uriah Smith to E. G. White, March 14, 1882.

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Smith's concerns with Ellen White's testimonies, their authority and trustworthiness, did not go away. Gary Land, in his biography of Uriah Smith, points out that of all the Adventist pioneers, Smith is one who quietly and privately held on to his reservations, and likely until his death.²⁷ In my biography of George Butler, I point out that Butler would also face some very similar challenges with Ellen White's testimonies to him later in that decade.

But what mattered most at the time was the reopening of the College and turning the page on a tumultuous period of interpersonal conflicts.

So, the Battle Creek College was closed for one year and we are relieved that such a history did not repeat itself. Now, if you have done the math, is it this year or next year that we will celebrate the 150th graduating class?

²⁷ Land, *Uriah Smith*, 127-128, 137-138; G. I. Butler to E. G. White, June 17, 1883; Uriah Smith to Dudley M. Canright, April 6, 1883.