

Was Nebuchadnezzar
Ready for Baptism?

The Ethics of
an Invitation

Being Honest in
Our Outreach

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Adventist *Today*

WHAT WE KNOW AND DON'T KNOW ABOUT
EVANGELISM





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A Light to Be Seen, Another to See By

By Loren Seibold

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14-16, NKJV).

An overlooked detail in this familiar passage is that Jesus talks about two distinct, and quite different, sources of light: a city and a lamp.

The view of the hilltop city is from a distance, outdoors and at night. You scan the horizon. A cluster of lights against the blackness: a city on a low rise. Once spotted and identified, you’ve located yourself in the map of the landscape. You know which direction to travel. The light is too distant to illuminate your path. Missteps are inevitable. But if you travel toward it, you’ll eventually reach the comforts of civilization.

A lamp on a stand is, by contrast, personal and intimate. In this metaphor it’s still nighttime, but now within a dwelling. The flame of an olive-oil lamp (not much more than a saucer with a wick) is smoky and guttering. But elevated, it provides a surprising amount of light in a dark space. Bring it close beside your chair, and you can even read by it, or stitch a torn coat.

One light meant to be seen, the other to see by.

It is easier to program for the first. We know how to be seen. We rent the convention center for meetings, send out flyers, and put ads on TV. We write our names on universities and hospitals. We publicize our healthy lives. We mail endless books and magazines, even to those who don’t want them.

We’re not as good at the second. When people reach the hilltop city, when they enter our dwelling, do they find a warm, friendly light there?

A friend told me of an evangelistic crusade in her

church. Artfully presented messages by a speaker with considerable talent convinced a dozen visitors to be baptized. But after the meetings, as the new members began to attend church services, she noticed that they seemed uncomfortable. After the impressive evangelistic program, ordinary church was a disappointment. Dull, really. The regular preacher was less charming than the evangelist. Mundanity intruded into their new spiritual world: church business, money, and occasional whiffs of conflict. The existing members weren’t unkind, but neither were they warm or especially welcoming. The new members and the old were there, it seemed, under different contracts: the new because of the convincing message, the old less for that than other social and cultural reasons. After a few weeks, the new members had vanished.

What good is attracting people, if we bring them to a dark, inhospitable place? I suspect that the big flaw in our soul winning is us. If we were, as Jesus was, impressively Christian; if we welcomed those who came among us; if we made space for them in our hearts and homes, we’d need fewer evangelistic crusades. Our lighting failure isn’t the city on the hill, but the lamp on the stand. People notice a lighthouse, but at the end of the day they need someone to light a candle in their darkness, to hold the lamp high for them, to shine the flashlight along their path.

We act, I think, as if doctrine is the product we have to offer a dark world. But Jesus recommends good works as the way to glorify God. His message in this passage, as in the parable of the sheep and the goats, is that goodness precedes and ultimately exceeds doctrine. That behavior trumps truth. That the world is less impressed by what we say than by how we act. And that you have to be nice before it really matters whether or not you’re right.

Jesus’ message is that goodness precedes and ultimately exceeds doctrine ... that you have to be nice before it really matters whether or not you’re right.

WHAT WE KNOW AND DON'T KNOW ABOUT EVANGELISM AND CHURCH GROWTH

By Monte Sahlin

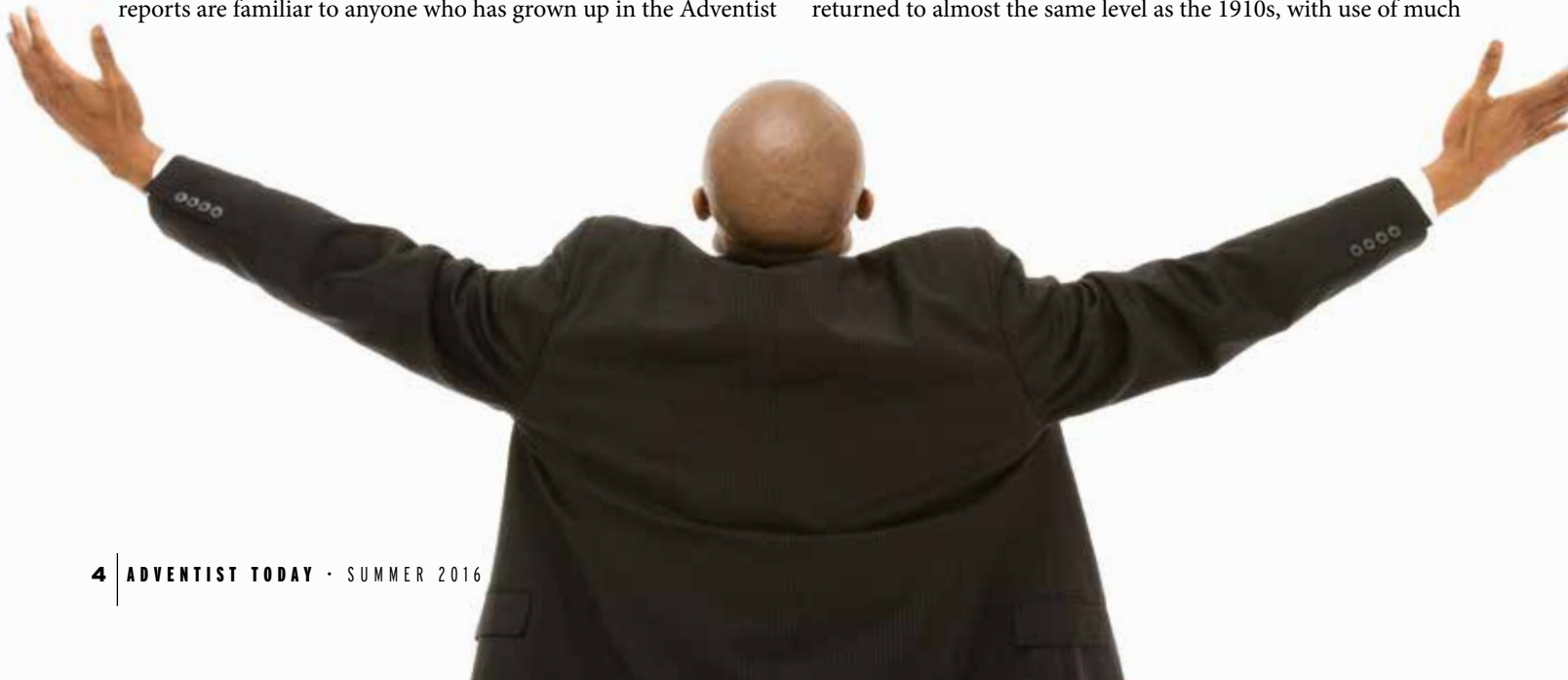
SINCE THE 1950S CONSIDERABLE RESEARCH HAS BEEN CONDUCTED about why and how Christian congregations begin, grow, decline, and die. Church-growth research among conservative Protestants, as well as congregational studies more widely, has become a scholarly discipline in its own right and serves as a useful body of information for pastors, congregational lay leaders, and denominational executives. When I was a ministerial student at La Sierra College in the 1960s, I got permission to take a graduate school course in the sociology of religion at Loma Linda University and ended up making a career of research and development in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

Adventists have kept statistics from the beginning of our movement, but we gave more attention to counting the number of converts than calculating net congregational growth or decline. We did little to understand how organizational or contextual factors might encourage or discourage growth. Evangelism reports are familiar to anyone who has grown up in the Adventist

faith. God is praised for the number of individuals who “took their stand,” though there is little attention to actual analysis of what really happened, what kinds of people responded, and how many remained as strong church members.

Figure 1 displays the growth rate in the North American Division (NAD) for each decade, beginning in 1900. The first decade of the 20th century had the slowest growth rate on the graph, averaging about 1 percent per year. It was a time of reorganization and conflict within the denomination, which may have discouraged growth. But the second decade had the fastest growth rate, averaging nearly 6 percent each year. That’s because Bible lectures that addressed the apocalyptic fears felt by so many people were very appealing as America plunged into its first major overseas war and modernity blossomed.

The growth rate dropped by half in the 1920s as peace returned and prosperity ramped up, but when the Great Depression hit, it returned to almost the same level as the 1910s, with use of much



the same evangelistic approach. From the 1940s through the 1970s, we maintained an average annual growth rate of between 3 and 4 percent, and what most Adventists think of today as “traditional evangelism” was born. From the 1980s on, Adventist church growth in the NAD has slowed, and much of the growth is due to returning Adventist dropouts and migration from the proportionately larger Adventist communities in various parts of the world, not from fresh converts.

Eras of Change

In the 1880s and 1890s, Adventists focused on city missions and gospel preaching as Americans became more urbanized. As the movement grew, the primary goal of evangelism efforts was planting new congregations in communities where none existed. After World War II, Fordyce Detamore introduced the short campaign of three weeks, in which he focused on “backsliders.” After the high growth rates of the 1910s-1930s and the dislocation of the war, there was an ample supply of disconnected former Adventists. Detamore found he could fill the seats in a revival tent and rapidly rebaptize many who already knew Adventist doctrines.

Detamore’s approach is today’s traditional evangelism. But our time is dramatically different from the 1950s. The rules have changed relative to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and the role of organized religion. North America has become much more secularized, and Evangelical Christianity is involved in a political culture war in the United States.

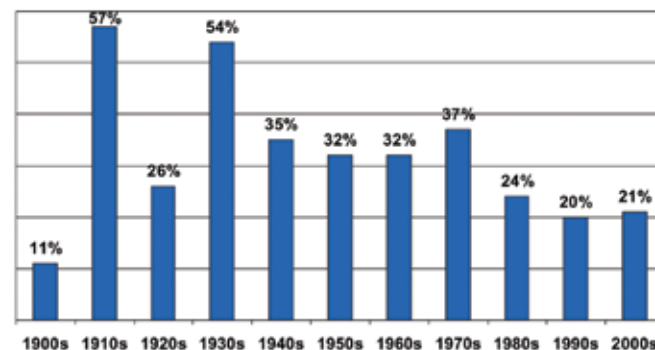
Adventist Research on Church Growth

The first research among Adventists using the church-growth model was conducted by Dr. Gottfried Oosterwal in the 1970s. Russell Johnson completed a Doctor of Ministry paper evaluating evangelism in the Southern California Conference in 1977, and at about the same time the Southeastern California Conference commissioned a number of studies through a research taskforce. This all set the stage for the seminal study of the current era, by Des Cummings and Roger Dudley in 1981. Whereas the previous studies had included samples of small areas of the NAD, their study was the first to look at the entire NAD and utilize the same church-growth analysis methods of the leading Christian scholars on this topic.

For almost three decades, the majority of new members joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America each year have been immigrants. (The exception was in 1995-1996 at the height of the satellite-linked evangelism campaigns.) But a 2004 survey in the Columbia Union Conference found that about seven in 10 of the members who identified themselves as immigrants said they were raised in an Adventist family. In other

Figure 1. Decadal Church Growth Rates

North American Division



words, most of the baptisms in fast-growing immigrant churches are people who already had a connection with the Adventist faith. In 1999 through 2006, when I had student assistants interview the pastors in eight major cities of the East Coast and Midwest for the research published in *Mission in Metropolis*, the pastors of the immigrant congregations told us in those confidential conversations that they knew many of the people they baptized were already Adventists in other parts of the world. They pointed out the difficulty of processing membership transfers from outside the NAD and said that for many immigrants, being rebaptized here made sense.

The bottom line is that this was church growth generated by migration, not by making converts. Immigrants are more open to the Adventist message due to experiencing dislocation and a need for relationships, but the evangelists working in immigrant communities are, in general, no more effective at winning converts than are those working among the native-born ethnic majority.

What Kinds of People Respond to Evangelism?

In 1986 the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University contracted with the Donnelly Marketing Corporation to perform an analysis of the entire membership list of the NAD, as well as all of the new members who joined in a two-year sample (1981-1982). Donnelly used the address of a household to connect it with more than 600 data points from the census, with public records such as driver licenses and point-of-purchase data from major retailers. Donnelly identified 47 lifestyle segments in communities across the United States, a far more sophisticated framework than the traditional working class/middle class/upper class model.

This study found that from one-tenth of a percent up to a half percent of the total number found in each of the 47 segments were Adventists. But in 17 segments, there were above-average

percentages of both Adventist members and new converts. These “tried and true” segments represent about 34 percent of the total U.S. population. Most of the people in these groups were lower-middle-class and blue-collar workers with only a high school diploma or some college courses.

Five segments—consisting mostly of immigrants and low-income families from urban neighborhoods—contained above-average percentages of converts but below-average percentages of members. These could be thought of as breakout areas where Adventist outreach was advancing. However, these advancing segments contained only 11 percent of the total population in the country.

In three segments, representing 9 percent of the total population, the percentage of members was above average, but the percentage of converts was below average. Here Adventist faith was losing ground, and evangelism effectiveness was in decline. These were primarily white, working-class families from metropolitan areas in the Northeast.

In 22 segments, both the percentages of members and the percentages of converts were below average. We might think of those as “unplowed ground,” where Adventist evangelism has never been very successful. These segments contain the largest share of the U.S. population: 46 percent all together. They are characterized by higher education, higher incomes, fewer ethnic minorities, and more professionals.

What Happens to the Converts?

There is a common belief among North American Adventists that most of the people who are baptized as a result of evangelism never come back to church. But follow-up studies conducted a year or two after the conclusion of evangelism campaigns have found that not to be true. Follow-up surveys with the pastors who participated in NET '95, NET '96, and NET '98 had these pastors review the lists of the people they had baptized 18 to 24 months earlier. On average they found that 85 percent were still attending and only 10 percent had dropped out of the church.

In 2002 Dr. James Park (now professor of evangelism and church growth at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines) completed a dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary that documented one of the largest Adventist evangelism campaigns in recent years: ACTS 2000 in Los Angeles with evangelist Mark Finley. Parks found the one-year retention rate to be much lower for new members who joined solely as a result of the public meetings than for those who had already formed an attachment to a local Adventist church.

The most complete Adventist study of new members that I am

aware of is a survey that I directed in 2000 for a local conference using the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all adults who joined the church for an entire year—a total of nearly 300 individuals. My research assistants conducted interviews with almost all of them about two years after their accession (although in some cases we spoke with only one of a baptized couple to get information on both). A total of 71 percent were still active members of the Adventist Church, though some had moved to another state.

The average age of the new members was 44. Similarly, a 1992 summary of data from more than a decade of evangelistic campaigns in the Southern Union Conference found that two-thirds of the nonmembers attending were over 30 years of age and one-third were over 50. The median age for converts from NET '95 was 43. This suggests that public evangelism appears to appeal more to the middle-aged and older than it does to young adults. One of the announced goals of the NET '98 satellite-linked campaign with Dwight Nelson was to reach out to young adults, but 60 percent of the participating pastors reported that their local church made no attempt to contact young adults, 30 percent reported that no nonmember young adults attended, and 69 percent reported that no young adult was among the new members baptized. Overall, about one in four of the new members baptized was a young adult. Clearly, it is not impossible to engage young adults, but it requires intentional effort on the part of congregation to do so.

The majority of the new members in my study had a high school diploma and some college credits, but only 20 percent had completed a college degree and less than 1 percent had earned a graduate degree. The largest number of the converts were blue-collar workers, and half of that number were professionals or managers. Much the same pattern had been found earlier in the Southern California study.

Six in 10 of the new members were women. There was a definite family orientation: nearly two-thirds were married, with just 18 percent never-married singles and 13 percent divorced singles, although the adult population in North America has a significantly larger percentage of singles.

Asked about their childhood religious background, more than four out of five new members said that as children their parents took them to church: 39 percent grew up Adventist, 21 percent were Protestant, 20 percent were Catholic, and another 20 percent were unchurched. Among the NET '95 converts, one-third said they had been raised Adventist, 29 percent Protestant, 17 percent Catholic, and 15 percent with no religion. Six percent were not Christians.

In fact, many of the people baptized through Adventist evangelism are already part of the Adventist community. In the ACTS 2000 campaign, a third of the baptisms were children of Adventists and another 24 percent were returning dropouts being rebaptized. Another one in 10 said they had Adventist relatives, while just 35 percent had no prior contact with an Adventist. The NET '95 survey found that 29 percent of the converts had previously been baptized members before dropping out and then being rebaptized in that campaign.

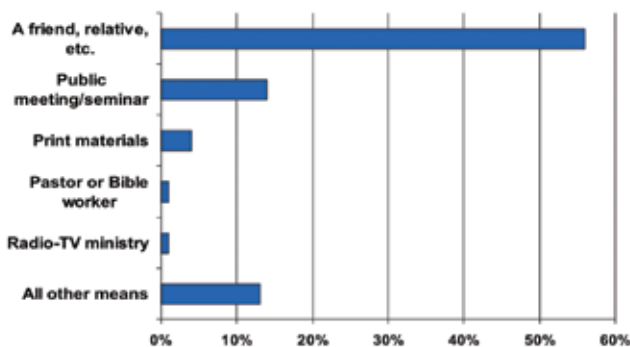
How Conversions Happen

Articles promoting various evangelism ministries often make statements attributing converts to a particular program or event. In fact, research shows that almost all conversions involve multiple factors. People join the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a result of an accumulation of influences and contacts over time, not due to one or two activities in a short interval. This highlights the difference between the traditional perceptions of church members and the reality reported by converts. In the major study of new members that I directed, about two-thirds told the interviewers that they had known about the Adventist faith for 10 years or longer before they decided to join.

My interviewers asked, “How did you first become aware of the Adventist Church?” A majority said it was through a friend, relative, or other personal acquaintance. Just one in seven mentioned public meetings or seminars, and almost as few mentioned other types of programs and institutions. A very small percentage credited printed materials, radio or television, or visits by a pastor or Bible worker. (See Figure 2.)

In the Southern California study, two-thirds said they were personally invited by a friend or relative or a pastor, and 61 percent of these were attending an Adventist church before

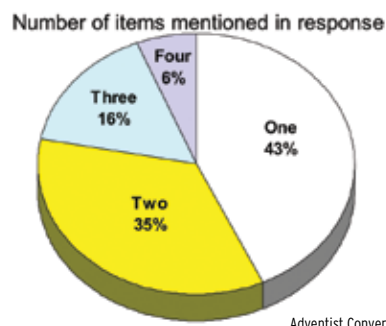
Figure 2. How did you first become aware of the Adventist Church?



they went to public evangelistic meetings. Only 15 percent were attending a church of a different denomination, and 22 percent were not attending any church.

The pattern that emerges from this research is that evangelistic meetings serve an important role in winning converts, but it is not as important as building relationships. When new members were asked, “How did you decide to join the Adventist Church?” one-third mentioned their attendance at meetings and about one in 10 mentioned attending church on Sabbath. Yet nearly 40 percent said that a relationship or a family connection with the Adventist faith prompted their decision to join the church. Only one in four said that it was because of the doctrines taught by the Adventist Church. An equal number mentioned life events or problems, attributed their feelings or emotions, or described personal spiritual motivations. Ultimately, the decision to become an Adventist often has multiple dimensions and cannot be analyzed simplistically, as shown by how many new members gave more than one response to this question. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. How did you decide to join the Adventist Church?



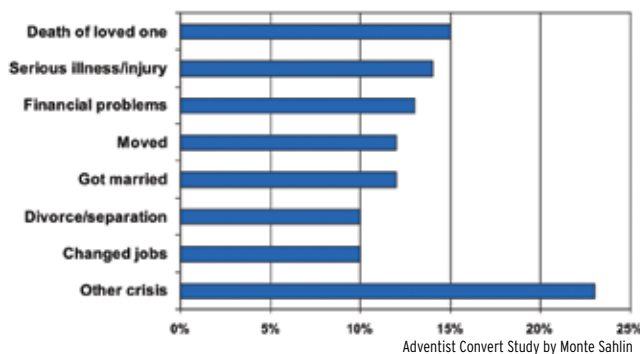
Adventist Convert Study by Monte Sahlin

Life Changes and Conversion

Interviewers showed new members a list of life events from a well-known instrument for measuring the level of stress in a person's life, then asked whether any of these corresponded to events in their lives in the prior 12 months. A strong majority of the new members had at least one of these significant events occur in their life in the year they made a decision to join the church. (See Figure 4.)

This is an indicator of needs in the lives of our new members that our church activities should help meet. It also points to the kind of outreach ministry that will bring our faith into contact with people who are likely to find joining the church something they feel a need to do. And finally, it's a measure of the degree to

Figure 4. Life Events in Year Prior to Decision to Join the Church



which the Adventist faith is actually satisfying and nurturing to those who join the church. Does an Adventist faith experience actually help people to deal with suffering and disappointment in life, as well as the joys and achievements? Does it pass the “so what?” test in the everyday life of believers?

The Dropout Problem

It is widely believed that new converts rapidly drop out of the Adventist Church. In fact, my study of new members found that 71 percent were still regularly attending church when my interviewers contacted them about two years after they were baptized. There is a dropout problem, but it is not among the recently baptized. People raised in Adventist families are more likely to drop out than are converts.

Of the 29 percent of the new members we were able to interview who had been baptized into the Adventist denomination as children or young adults, a majority reported that they quit attending church between age 18 and age 50. Very few were first baptized when they were over 50 years of age, and equally few quit attending when they were over 50 years of age. Bottom line: our church has difficulty holding onto young adults who joined as children.

Why did these members quit attending? Most mentioned personal problems, especially the breakup of marriages, and said the Adventist faith was simply not meeting their needs. As young people mature through their 20s and 30s into their 40s, when their lives do not go in the way they expected, their membership in the Adventist Church does not seem to be very effective at helping them deal with disappointment, suffering, and failure. Another third spoke of problem people in the church, of feeling that they did not fit in or were not accepted, or conflict in the congregation. All of these items are descriptors of an

unsupportive atmosphere at a time when people needed friends who were understanding, supportive, and able to help them make spiritual sense out of life’s difficulties.

The popular belief among church members is that people leave because they don’t believe in doctrines or have been sidetracked by worldly temptations. But only 5 percent said they left because they did not believe in doctrines, and 10 percent attributed their exit to worldly temptations. Very few mentioned failures in church activities. Five percent said they quit attending because of the worship style, and only 7 percent because the needs of their children were not being met.

I have personally interviewed more than a thousand Adventist dropouts, and what I have heard validates this. Most Adventists profoundly misunderstand why people quit attending, especially our inability to help them make spiritual sense of their lives. The typical Adventist worldview is too black-and-white, with no room for gray areas and no sensitivity for the ambivalence people feel when their childhood faith no longer works in their adult life. The primary reason why we have a dropout problem is that we do not seem to be skilled at helping people develop a mature faith.

The Adventist Relationship

Because they grew up in Adventist families, most former Adventists maintain a relationship with the Adventist faith even after they quit going to church and end their church membership. Many are aware of what is going on in the denomination, including the latest fights and scandals and organizational issues. They admire some Adventists who have a wise and mature religious experience, and they read and appreciate books by certain Adventist writers, but they see much of what goes on in our denomination as profoundly immature and sometimes just silly.

Still, significant numbers of dropouts come back to the Adventist Church, and relatively few join other religions. As noted above, about a third of the new members who join the denomination each year are former members returning. Those raised in Adventist families seem to never completely stop being Adventist, even among those who no longer believe in key elements of our theology.

The Baby Boomer generation in North America, the first generation of Adventists in which the majority were born into the faith rather than converted as adults, have had a conflicted relationship with the church organization as well as their generational cohorts in the faith. They encompass a wide range of extremes in their approach to religion and church life, but most never really stop being Adventist in some sense. It is unclear if future generations will have the same kind of relationship with the faith.

It is, however, clear that this generation of Adventists in North America have an experience very different from the masses of younger Adventists, mostly converts, in the global south, where the church is growing rapidly.

Assimilating New Members

My interviewers found that new members were likely to attend less often: 51 percent of the new converts had gone to church at least three out of the last four Sabbaths, as compared to 73 percent of the long-term members. Just 40 percent held a church office or volunteer assignment, as compared to 58 percent of members across the NAD. At the same time, the percentage of new members who were participating in a small-group Bible study was slightly more than the average for the NAD.

Getting the children of new members involved in church activities is a key element in retaining the converts and meeting the needs of these families. Nearly half of the new converts we interviewed indicated that they had children living in their home, but only 11 percent had a child enrolled in an Adventist school and only 19 percent had a child who participated in a Pathfinder Club or youth group.

The spiritual life of the new members was strong, as measured by two questions about their assurance of eternal life and their relationship with Christ. Most indicated a high assurance of eternal life and a close relationship with Christ. These are close to the norm for active members across the NAD.

The converts' evaluation of their local church was largely positive. Most gave high marks to the pastor's leadership, music, worship service, Sabbath School, lay leadership, activities for children and youth, and local evangelistic outreach. The one area where more than 60 percent of the new members said the local church was not very effective was community service. Two-thirds reported that everyone in the congregation was open and welcoming; only 4 percent reported that they did not find any church members who were accepting of them at a personal level.

How many personal friends do new members have in the congregation? A third said they had none, but 46 percent said they had one to five personal friends, and 20 percent had six or more. Interdenominational research (including Adventists in the sample) shows this to be a real test of evangelism and church growth. Unless new members have six or more personal friends each by the end of their first year in a congregation, there is a high chance they will not stay for the long term.

The Adventist Church seems to be more effective at recruiting new members than fully assimilating them into the fabric of a congregation, where they can find sustaining relationships. This

may be why we have so many lonely Adventists, so many highly individualistic and even dysfunctional members, and so many members who do not attend church regularly.

Essential Elements of Adventist Church Growth

Since 1980, several major studies of Adventist church growth have been conducted by the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University. The first of these was published in *Adventures in Church Growth* by Roger Dudley and Des Cummings in 1983. I have been personally involved with four of these, starting in 2000. The results were first published in my book *Adventist Congregations Today* in 2003. The additional surveys in 2005, 2008, and 2010 revealed much the same outcomes as the 2000 survey. These findings provide a very accurate picture of what actually produces growth in Adventist congregations in the United States in the current era.

The Adventist Church seems to be more effective at recruiting new members than fully assimilating them into the fabric of a congregation, where they can find sustaining relationships.

They also give a picture of what does not result in growth.

In all of the studies in this series, five things consistently correlate with growth in Adventist churches in the United States:

1. *Community involvement is the factor with the strongest correlation to growth in Adventist churches.* Several types of community service programs produced strong correlations: employment counseling, job training classes, group meals for senior citizens in the community, a homeless shelter, a substance abuse program, a family counseling service. In addition, growing churches make sure that local community leaders are informed about the services that the Adventist church provides. Note that few of these are the traditional Adventist community service programs.

2. *A rich spiritual life in the congregation also has a very strong correlation to church growth.* A key item was “This church helps members deepen their relationship with God.” The stronger the agreement with this statement as descriptive of the local church, the more likely it was to be a growing congregation. A similar correlation exists with the statement “This church is spiritually vital and alive.”

3. *The congregation is intentional about growing.* Members believe that the church has potential for growth. All church activities are coordinated to focus on outreach and growth.

4. *An open and supportive atmosphere or relational dynamic exists in the congregation.* The members are excited about the future of the church. They welcome innovation and change.

5. *The one program that correlates with growth is special worship services that are designed for the unchurched.* Some have a “seeker service” every Sabbath on Friday night or late Sabbath afternoon. Others use a community Bible class that meets off church property on Sabbath or at the church on Sunday. Still others have a “friend day” once a quarter. Whatever the timing or exact design, there is a regularly scheduled worship service for nonmembers.

Perhaps the most surprising finding is a lack of a correlation with evangelism activities. That’s because both growing congregations and declining congregations are equally likely to have evangelistic campaigns. This *doesn’t* mean there is no need for evangelism. In order for people to join the church, there must be pathways or rites of passage. But to simply host evangelistic activities and ignore the five elements above will not result in significant growth over the long haul.

What About Large Churches?

For many Americans, a discussion of church growth brings up well-known megachurches that draw thousands of attendees and are known for contemporary Christian music and superstar pastors. A few Adventist congregations in North America are in that size category: congregations associated with major Adventist education and healthcare institutions, historically African-American urban congregations, and a few multicultural congregations in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas. Of the more than 6,000 local churches in the NAD, about 10 percent of the total contain the majority of the total membership. These large congregations often have a higher rate of growth than the average for the division.

The type of music used for worship does not correlate with growth in Adventist congregations, though it does in interdenominational research. Also, while nearly half of the fastest-growing churches in the NAD have two or more worship

services each Sabbath, it isn’t clear whether the multiple services are creating growth or whether growth is creating the need for multiple services.

Do small-group ministries produce growth? Involving from 10 to 40 percent of the members in small-group ministries does seem to help Adventist congregations grow, but the correlation is not very strong.

How does pastoral tenure correlate with church growth? Declining churches are much more likely than growing churches to report four or more different pastors serving over the previous decade. A growing church is more likely to be led by a succession of three or fewer pastors during the last decade, although the correlation is not very strong.

A much stronger correlation exists between church growth and follow-up contact with newcomers who attend church on Sabbath. Growing churches are more likely to quickly make contact and seek to develop a relationship with their visitors.

Public Awareness of the Adventist Church

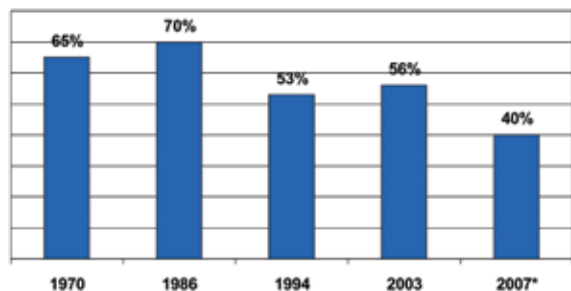
The biggest problem connected with church growth for the Adventist denomination in North America may be simply our lack of visibility to the public. Nearly half of the general population has never heard of the Adventist Church, and a much smaller percentage knows anything substantive about it. This is curious when you consider the following facts: breakfast cereal, one of the most commonplace things in America, was invented at an Adventist hospital; the denomination operates the largest Protestant school system in the United States; a national newspaper labeled it the fastest-growing denomination; and the Pew Research Center found it to be the most diverse denomination.

A series of national surveys, starting with a Gallup Poll in 1970, have asked a random sample of Americans, “Have you ever heard of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?” Name recognition has declined since its high point in 1986. (See Figure 5.) Those who answered affirmatively were asked, “What comes to mind when you hear the name Seventh-day Adventist Church?” Many of those who recognized our name said “nothing” or told the interviewer, “It is a religion”—a fact they were told in the question.

Dr. Ben Carson’s recent campaign for the U.S. presidency may have boosted name recognition, though no survey has been taken. It is impossible to know whether the comment of his Republican opponent Donald Trump—who said, “I don’t know about [Carson’s Seventh-day Adventist faith]”—was intended to confess ignorance or meant to cast aspersions on him. Either way, it demonstrates the public lack of clarity about who we are.

In other words, the vast majority of people in the United States

Figure 5. Name Recognition of the Adventist Church by the General Public



Public Perceptions Study by Center for Creative Ministry.
*2007 from Metro Surveys in the East and Midwest.

have no clear idea about us, even after more than 150 years of preaching the Adventist message and welcoming millions of converts worldwide. In the most recent surveys, fewer than 10 percent could tell the interviewers one true fact about the Adventist religion. Only 12 percent said they knew someone who was an Adventist, and just 4 percent said they had ever attended an Adventist church or event of any kind.

The Adventist Church is largely invisible in America. The problem is more pronounced in the cities of the East and Midwest than it is on the West Coast and across much of the Sunbelt, where the largest share of Adventist hospitals are located. The average person is not likely to respond to a message coming from an unknown organization. Adventist evangelism is increasingly marginalized as more and more of its public media efforts go into the Adventist television channels. Just as people don't turn on the History Channel unless they are interested in history or the Cooking Channel unless they are interested in cooking, so most will not go to an Adventist channel such as Hope Channel or Three Angels Broadcasting Network unless they are already interested in the Adventist faith. We are "preaching to the choir" and not really doing media evangelism anymore.

Additionally, creativity is limited because outreach programs must earn their own way through donations from the audience, which means that media ministries tend to be shaped by an insider agenda. Money goes into programming that gives Adventists what they want to hear instead of meeting the needs of the unreached. Sadly, exceptions to this are often seen as questionable and criticized for not "preaching the straight testimony."

What Can Your Local Church Do?

The research above lays out the steps that help a congregation move the mission of Christ forward in today's world. Get involved in the community. Make sure that the people coming to church

on Sabbath have a rich and meaningful experience with God. Set goals. Encourage an open and caring fellowship where creativity and innovation are valued. Have regular occasions where outsiders are made welcome and comfortable conversations occur.

This is not new. Over a century ago, Ellen White said this on page 143 of her book *The Ministry of Healing*: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow me.'" This gets quoted again and again, though often people fill it with their traditional set of ideas and miss the relevant, updated content that this framework must have if it is to continue to be used today.

There are, in fact, a number of models in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe where this approach is successfully implemented for growth. A growing number of Adventist pastors have written Doctor of Ministry papers documenting these projects. *The Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, a scholarly journal published at Andrews University, regularly documents these growing churches. Many of these pastors and some of their lay leaders have told me, "We don't want publicity." Why? In part, because they do not want to hold themselves up as a success story when they are continually experimenting. They don't want to encourage others to fall back into a predictable pattern in today's dynamic culture.

Furthermore, as soon as a congregation gets labeled as "innovative" or "progressive" or "contemporary," self-appointed critics descend upon it, accusing them of "spiritualism," being in league with the devil, and all kinds of hurtful nonsense.

Although not well-publicized, the contemporary pattern for Adventist church growth is working well, even where the official statistics do not reflect growth. This is because the dislocation in the economy and the workforce, as new technology and globalization constantly shift, means that a small congregation can have excellent growth for a few years, and then the growth is wiped out as key families must move for new jobs. This can be discouraging for young pastors and result in leadership burnout. They need our prayers and support.

The mission of Jesus Christ goes on; it is the mission he laid out at the beginning of his ministry on Earth in Luke 4:16-18, which he reiterated and placed in the context of believers looking to his return at the end of time in Matthew 25:31-46 and then consummated in the vision of Revelation 20 shared with John. It is authentically the Adventist mission, and it continues to move forward even in our complicated world. 🏠

Continued on page 30

BACK IN 1965 I HAD JUST FINISHED my internship and was one year into my first district. I had never even attended an Adventist public evangelism series, but I felt the need to immerse myself in this traditional outreach paradigm. The conference provided me with a budget of \$400. I designed my own simple handbill and had the members distribute it to their friends. On opening night the little congregation of 18 members packed

Yet I have not given up on public evangelism. I still believe it to be one of the most effective means of reaching new people. Scholars who have studied our growth attribute it primarily to public evangelism.¹ But changing times require new methods. I still see baptisms from public meetings—from 30 to as many as 150 people in a single series, depending on the size of the congregation. But these kinds of results can happen only if the

evangelists failed to adopt his target audience. People began to believe that a short series could accomplish sowing, cultivating, and reaping like the earlier six-month meeting, except in just a few weeks.

In order for public evangelism to work in the 21st century, one must recognize that it is a reaping event—one that does not do much sowing and cultivating. Interests must be prepared and ready to make a decision during the meetings.

WHY WE SHOULDN'T GIVE UP ON PUBLIC EVANGELISM

by Russell Burrill

their 50-seat church with more visitors than members. I was hooked. This was a powerful means of reaching people and winning them to Jesus.

Society has changed. Television has made advertising more sophisticated, and America is more secular. If I were to repeat my first series in the same way I did it then, hardly anyone would attend. From that first investment of \$400, I saw nearly 40 visitors come on opening night, and they all had connections with my members. To get 40 visitors out now, I would need to spend not \$400, but over \$40,000. And most of them would have no connection with my members and would drop out quickly.

meetings are conducted differently than we did in the last century.

Where We Went Wrong

One of the problems of public evangelism is that we've come to expect the meetings to do everything—sowing, cultivating, and reaping—all in just a few weeks, which is unrealistic.

A little history is helpful here. In the early to middle part of the 20th century, Adventist public evangelism consisted of five or six *months* of meetings held *every day of the week*. This made for a long relationship, and in such a setting the meetings could be expected to accomplish more.

Then Fordyce Detamore pioneered a method of holding a series of meetings, lasting three or four weeks, primarily targeting former Adventists who did not need six months to make a decision. But while adopting his methodology,

Do public meetings still reach people who've never had any connection with the Adventist church? Yes, there are individuals whom the Holy Spirit has made ready apart from our involvement. I have found that when the church has done its preparatory work—when people are ready to be baptized in the meetings—God entrusts to them others with whom they have had no prior contact.

Evolving Evangelism

Here are some of the ways evangelism is changing.

- Presentations have become far more Christ-centered. In the past, most of our converts came from other Christian

churches, and we rightly assumed that they knew the basics of the gospel and needed only to be instructed in the “truth.” However, we can no longer assume that our audience has a religious background. This means that while we do still preach the prophecies, the prophecies are an excuse to present the gospel.

- Instead of four or five weeks, meetings today tend to run one or two weeks. Usually the problem with the

Scholars who have studied our growth attribute it primarily to public evangelism. But changing times require new methods.

longer meetings is not the nonmember attendance, but the patience of the members with attending meetings over such a long period of time. A short meeting can be just a reaping event where there isn't a lot of public advertising. Or, we may use advertising to get people into an ongoing study program and fellowship with the local church. Baptism and church membership come later.

Similarly, the meeting that lasts two or three hours is a relic of the past. Long preliminaries are out. Most successful meetings today last from 60 to 75 minutes.

- The 21st century is a relationally starved time, and people are desperately looking to build relationships. Our meetings facilitate that. Some successful evangelists seat the people around tables and preach for only 20 minutes, after which a group leader at the table leads a discussion of the topic. Even in a traditional preaching meeting, we can place a row host in every pew whose job is to sit in the same row each night and to build relationships with the interests. The row host also walks forward with any visitors who stand up to accept Jesus,² so that the new convert is tied to the host rather than to the visiting evangelist. Refreshments after the meeting each night provide a time for members and visitors to interact. Sometimes near the end of the series we arrange for a Saturday night party at a member's home after the meeting and invite our interests to attend.

- A choice of times enables us to reach more people than a single presentation could. In one large series (where we baptized approximately 150 people), we offered meetings at 5:15 p.m., 7 p.m., and 8:30 p.m. In another town we offered two locations for a 7 p.m. video showing of the 5:15 p.m. meeting. We've even shown the video meeting at noon. By providing all of these options, we reach more people with very little additional expense.

Who's Attending? And Why?

I've done surveys in all of my meetings in order to understand who is coming and what motivates them. Here are some noteworthy results:

- Our advertising primarily attracts church people, but most of them do not complete the series. Unchurched people are attracted by handbills featuring a lot of beasts, while church people are more attracted by handbills showing Jesus on the cover.

- The people we baptize come primarily from an unchurched background and are usually under the age of 40. Older people are much more difficult to reach.

- The unchurched people we reach with public evangelism are primarily what researcher George Barna has described as “religiously unchurched”—people who are deeply committed to the Christian faith but have given up on the organized church.

- Public evangelism does a poor job of reaching church people and secular people. Secular people just never show up for any kind of religious meeting. They must be won through one-on-one relationships that require significant time.

Despite its limitations, public evangelism is still successful in reaching the religiously unchurched. This outreach method has come a long way since 1965, and after adaptations for these changing times it remains a valid tool for reaching an important part of society. If we stop using it, we will stop growing. 🚫

¹ Ronald Lawson, “Reassessing the Size of Mormons, Adventists and Witnesses: Exploring the Dynamics of Their Global Growth and Testing the Reliability of Their Membership Data” (Queens College, 2009), pp. 22-23.

² For a full description of the row host system, see my book *Reaping the Harvest* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Books, 2007).

WHAT'S MISSING IN OUR MISSION

BY ALICIA JOHNSTON

MY FIRST DAY OF SEMINARY WAS JARRING—NOT BECAUSE I HAD driven across country from Arizona to Michigan, not because I was back in the life of a student after quitting my job days earlier, and not even because spending money would be difficult for the foreseeable future. Rather, my biggest shock came from being around religious people.

Days before, my world had been different. Instead of a chapel, I had been in a sparsely decorated conference room at a mental health clinic. Instead of fellow seminarians, I'd spent my hours with my co-therapist and a room of teenage clients struggling with illicit drug use. Instead of prayers to begin and end every meeting, my co-workers and I had rarely spoken about God in our professional practice. The school where I had earned my psychology degree was subtly anti-religious, yet we were all trying to make the world a better place. We were seeking compassion and wholeness for ourselves and those around us, and we were right there in the places where people were suffering.

In my practice as a counselor, I had to help people seek wholeness through any means *except* God, and that wasn't working for me. So I sat in the seminary chapel with well-dressed people in a beautiful room, praying and talking about God. We were seemingly far from sin, and I was having a hard time adjusting. I missed sinners. Teachers prayed before every class and there was weekly chapel, yet I recall my new friends complaining that the seminary didn't do enough to support their spiritual lives. All the while I missed hanging out with drug addicts.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that I myself wasn't very religious when I went to seminary. I felt uncomfortable with overt discussion about God. Maybe that's not a good thing, but it is the way most people in the Western world feel.

Thinking Like Outsiders

It's been a long time since I sat in those circles with drug-using teens. I guess I've become as religious as the rest of my seminary associates, talking easily about God and praying comfortably in the presence of other religious people. It's easy to assume that everyone is as comfortable as I am when I pray. I've become relevant to church people again. But I'm afraid I'm losing the relevancy that matters. I have reconnected with church culture and disconnected from the people I'm supposed to be reaching.

What does all this have to do with the church and her mission? Everything. So many of our conversations about evangelism center on programs and approaches. We know that what we are doing isn't working like it used to, and we want new methods. But what if the programs aren't the problem, but only a symptom of a deeper problem we rarely talk about? We don't get our hands dirty. We live sanitized lives with sanitized people, dealing with the messes inside the church as best we can, but without genuine connection to our communities. Like a rich politician trying to commiserate with middle-class Americans ("my father gave me a small loan of a million dollars"), we are disconnected.

In our local churches, we spend a lot of time on things that only we care about without thinking of what people in our

communities care about. One of the reality checks I had as a church planter is how little the average church member thinks about the lives, values, and concerns of the unchurched and secular. In the abstract, we know that we want more people in our churches. But people are not abstractions. We need to get personal and start thinking like outsiders instead of insiders.

We church leaders want people to invite their friends to church. The best way to do that is to create a church service that will be fun and relevant for their unchurched and unreligious friends to attend. As it is now, too many people would be embarrassed to bring their friends to church. That's because church isn't for them. It's for church people. If we start thinking like outsiders, we might end up making a lot of changes we never dreamed of before. People could even start wanting to bring their friends.

What we are really talking about here is a missional church. Such a church has a strong sense of outward orientation. Its mission is truly to the world. Evangelism is not a program in this type of church; it is everything.

Religious Coercion

Recently I preached about whether Christianity is coercive. I looked briefly at the teachings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche as well as historical examples of the religious coercion to which they responded. I concluded that Christianity is indeed coercive, because it has put religious people on the throne, making us the arbiters of truth. This is in contrast to Revelation 4-5, where we see a panorama of worshipers—all of the creatures in the universe—around a throne. I am not on that throne. You are not on that throne. Religious leaders are not on that throne. God is on the throne.

If religion has become coercive, it's because we have pushed God out of his place on the throne. We are left with vital questions. Will we let religious leaders on the throne tell us how to live? Will we put ourselves on the throne of our own lives and answer to no one? Will we give power to some other corrupt person or institution? Or will we worship God?

It's a message that is highly critical of the church, and honestly so. Secular people are painfully aware of the realities of religious coercion. By not talking about it, we send the message that we are more of the same. By talking about it, we send the message to both Christians and secular people that we know how to be different and are striving to be so.

Sometimes I don't want to air our dirty laundry. I want to pretend that things are okay when they aren't, but never have I regretted choosing honesty over self-protection. There is nothing

quite like having someone who is a critic, who has been broken and battered by the church, sitting in the pew each Sabbath, dialoguing with you during the week, and telling you how much he or she appreciates your perspective. Secular people attending our church services love to see these types of issues addressed.

Do irreligious and secular people engage the gospel through my preaching? That has become my new standard of success.

Our Collateral Damage

Another example is how the church has addressed same-sex relationships. I'm neither surprised nor disturbed that the church is consistent in its affirmation of marriage between one man and one woman. I am, however, disturbed that we are unconcerned about the collateral damage from the arrogance and ignorance displayed in the enforcement of this belief. A child in a religious home who identifies as LGBTQ is four times more likely to take his or her own life. This means that we are directly responsible for three of those four deaths. Add to it the violence perpetrated against LGBTQ people, which finds justification in the things said in church. People are dead who would be alive if it weren't for us. That is disturbing. You can bet that nonreligious people find it disturbing. The church makes half-hearted statements about loving the sinner and hating the sin, then we move on. But we can't move on. So many damaging sermons have been preached that it's not enough for us to say we love them and move on. We have to do more to protect the people in our communities and correct people in our communities who may have violent tendencies.

Besides the obvious morality of it, the treatment of LGBTQ people is increasingly important in our society. If we are incapable of understanding and caring about the issues that are important in the world around us, we will fail in our mission. We are losing any shred of moral authority we once had. People don't care about our prophetic interpretations if they see that our hearts are callous to suffering.

The Other-Centered Church

These are only two examples of what it looks like to be other-centered in Adventist churches. The principle can be applied to all areas. Just think of each encounter a guest might have—from the way we market our church, to the community involvement we do or do not have, to the way our church members talk about our church, to the small groups we have, to the parking lot we hope they might drive into, to the greeters, to the building, to the bulletins, to the music, to the way we talk about money... all of those things. But even more importantly, think about the attitudes

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THE ETHICS OF EVANGELISM

By Jim Walters



EVANGELISM MEANS, LITERALLY, TELLING “GOOD NEWS.” IN THE New Testament, it’s the preaching of the gospel. Ethics, on the other hand, is the study of issues related to right or wrong actions and good or bad character.

I can’t find more than a couple of articles on the ethics of Adventist evangelism, and my hunch is that we have generally not seen a need to scrutinize it. The underlying assumption has evidently been that sharing the gospel, however it is done, is good and right. Is the preacher bringing people to Jesus? Is the evangelist bringing converts into the church? If so, then we conclude that we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing.

I recall that as a student colporteur I was taught a practice that is now illegal: rushing to a customer’s bank and cashing the check before the customer has had time to reflect and perhaps change his or her mind. I sold some \$50,000 of *Bible Story* sets and *Bible Readings for the Home* volumes over six summers, all prior to my studying ethics. Now I’ve grown up. Adventism has matured, too. And as church members have become more educated and morally sophisticated, it’s only appropriate that we reflect on evangelistic best practices.

In this short piece, I’ll alternately don two hats I’ve worn during my denominational career: (1) that of a pastor-evangelist and (2) that of an ethics professor.

Pastoral Practice

Upon graduating in 1970 from Andrews University seminary, I began my ministry in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference, where I pastored a rural district in the mountainous terrain where Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina converge.

Evangelism in Georgia-Cumberland in the early ’70s was huge. At workers’ meetings the conference president would encircle himself with his young pastors, who would announce their evangelistic goals for the ensuing year. On the camp meeting’s main hall stage, a large board listed each district’s evangelism offering goal, with pastors parading before what seemed like thousands to hang a number below the goal to indicate the amount raised. I also remember that a couple of months prior to camp meeting, the conference sent out a card listing “Seven Steps to a Successful Evangelism Offering” (or so I recall), with the fourth step being “preach a spiritual sermon” on a particular countdown Sabbath.

Morale among pastors was good, overall. The president showered us with gifts that included large boxes of delicious north Georgia apples, umbrellas, and a sturdy yardstick that I’ve used for 44 years and just pulled from my front closet (imprinted “Measure Up—Talk Christian Education—Georgia-Cumberland Conference”).

I don't recall much unrest about the evangelistic thrust, but I did know one young pastor—a good friend—who suffered a nervous breakdown, at least in part because of evangelistic stress, and ultimately quit the ministry. I personally didn't have difficulty reaching my evangelistic goals, but I still vividly recall an ever-present evangelistic pall over my whole person whenever I ventured out of my enclave and mixed with townspeople. I found myself forced to size up all non-Adventists I met in terms of baptismal tank suitability. I couldn't see each person as a unique individual. I recall thinking at the time that I didn't attend seminary to become an Adventist commodity salesman. Even as a young pastor in his late 20s, I was significantly discomfited by what the evangelistic pressure was doing to my soul, and this was a factor in my deciding to pursue advanced education in a related but different area of study.

One bright spot in my Georgia-Cumberland evangelistic experience burns brighter than any negative memory: a three-week crusade with Voice of Prophecy evangelist Ben Green. The meetings, held in a rented theater in a small north Georgia mountain town, were not memorable. But what is forever seared in my mind is a tale Ben shared as we drove the mountain roads doing visitation. In an earlier crusade, a wonderful Baptist woman who had memorized many scriptural passages had attended Ben's meetings. Although the woman was a member of a warm and caring Baptist congregation, she was sincerely interested in joining the Seventh-day Adventist church. Unfortunately, the local Adventist congregation suffered significant spiritual dysfunction, and Ben confessed to me that if the Baptist woman joined the local Adventist group, he surmised that her Christian faith could suffer great harm. The upshot was that Ben felt that he couldn't conscientiously, as a Christian evangelist, lead this woman from her healthy Baptist church into an unhealthy Adventist congregation.

Theological Ethics

Let me suggest five ethical directives for Adventist evangelism:

1. *Put gospel over doctrine.* Ben Green was theologically astute in recognizing that a strong relationship with God in a supportive church family is more important than subscribing to correct doctrine in a dysfunctional congregation. We Adventists have some wonderful doctrines, and the Sabbath is one of our gems. However, precisely because of our fine doctrines we need to keep our priorities straight: the good news of God's free acceptance of us, aside from the law (or correct doctrine), is our basic biblical faith. The apostle Paul couldn't be clearer: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6, NIV). The good news is that God

accepts us just as we are. In the words of Paul Tillich, sometimes in our human despair "a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know."¹

2. *Put people first.* Jesus, by definition, is the Christian's example for so many aspects of life, and this is surely true when it comes to the sharing of the gospel. Jesus gave unstintingly of himself for others, one on one. It's no wonder that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Jesus "the man for others." Jesus invited the children to come and sit on his lap, and I like to think he learned the name of each. In the gospel story, Jesus commissions his disciples for evangelism by underscoring the preciousness of each person, reasoning by analogy to God's notice of even a sparrow's death and that the very hairs of one's head are numbered by our God. The Jewish thinker Martin Buber admired Jesus, and surely Jesus met Buber's criteria for genuine relationship: an I-Thou relationship that encounters the other as an end in himself or herself, versus an I-It relationship in which the other is used as a thing to ulterior ends. Buber is eloquent: "The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being."²

3. *Be wary of institutionalism.* A good idea will die with its original thinker if that idea isn't put into a rule or a policy or institutionalized in some form. However, when institutions become big, complex, and old, they harbor a host of challenges. An important one is how the institutionalized members can uphold the founding idea, and not merely the forms, policies, and bureaucracy that perpetuate the original idea. It's too easy to confuse the kingdom of God with one's ecclesiastical organization, not realizing that God Almighty sits over, and is not captured by, even the best denomination. In a moral dilemma an individual, qua individual, may transcend self-interest in doing the right thing. However, in such a dilemma an institutionalized member is more likely to rationalize advocacy for institutional goals that are articulated in godly language, language that camouflages the self-interest mixed into those goals. This issue is well developed in Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932).

4. *Be honest.* The Voice of Prophecy three-week crusade in my church district was not labeled as affiliated with the Adventist church—even in the fine print. When I knocked on doors as a student colporteur, I introduced myself as representing the Home Health Education Service and was trained to be evasive if asked for my denominational affiliation. My church is doing better in this regard; recently Loma Linda University Health,

1926 GC Statements List 4 Principles for Missionary Work

By Jim Walters

Roy Allen Anderson, a progressive former editor of the Adventist church's *Ministry* magazine, wrote a perceptive article titled "Christian Ethics in Evangelism" in the November 1960 issue of the journal. In it he concluded: "To make Christ known to all men everywhere is our only objective, and we pray that in all our contacts with others they may take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus." (Anderson will surely be excused for using what is now seen as sexist language.) From a 1926 General Conference statement, he then quotes four principles that pertain to missionary work. Both Anderson's essay and the General

Conference statements on evangelism indicate that a broad understanding of the gospel (vs. a sectarian interpretation) has long characterized the best of Adventist thought. Here are those enlightened 1926 statements:

1. "We recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem the Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ."
2. "Wherever the prosecution of the gospel work brings us in touch with other societies and their work, the spirit of Christian courtesy, frankness, and fairness should at all times


guide in dealing with mission problems."

3. "We recognize that the essence of true religion is that religion is based upon conscience and conviction. It is therefore to be constantly our purpose that no selfish interest or temporal advantage shall draw any person to our communion...."
4. "Before admitting to church membership anyone who is a member of another church, every care shall be exercised to ascertain that the candidate is moved to change his religious affiliation only by force of religious conviction and out of regard to his personal relationship to his God...."

San Bernardino (LLUH/SB) opened a large community clinic and college, to which the San Manuel Native American tribe made a sizable contribution. Tribal leaders blessed the facility and performed a ritual chant to begin the dedication ceremony. Officials from LLUH/SB unabashedly spoke of its mission to extend the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus Christ, and Randy Roberts, vice president for spiritual life, prayed in the same vein.

5. *Respect human vulnerability.* In Jesus' healing of the 10 lepers, only one returned to Jesus after reporting to the authorities. I like to think that the single leper came back for the spiritual healing that Jesus could offer. Although glad he could rid the nine of their physical malady, Jesus was especially gratified at this one's return. At Seventh-day Adventism's best, we respect our being created in God's image, with "individuality, the power to think and to do."³ However, we're wrong if we would use healthcare as a "great entering wedge"⁴ in taking advantage of physically and emotionally damaged patients to advance even admirable doctrinal ends. We must do to others as we desire them to do to us. And just as we resent others for taking advantage of us when we are vulnerable, we must resist taking advantage of others when they might do something in a weakened state that they'd not likely do when strong. In an insightful ethical analysis of church practices, ethicist Margaret Battin cites a Vatican II statement on evangelistic techniques: "the Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the faith, or alluring or enticing people by unworthy techniques."⁵

Years ago when I arrived at Andrews University as a new seminary student, I happily got reacquainted with Smuts van Rooyen, a seminary upperclassman I'd first known back at Southern Adventist University. I still recall a lively debate on evangelism we had in the seminary parking lot. Smuts contended that the sharing of news about Jesus' salvific death was absolutely essential for another to be saved, and I argued that God's grace was sufficient for saving all of the true-hearted, citing Ellen White's reference to some in heaven who were ignorant of the gospel but highly moral.⁶ My point isn't who was right in the parking lot, but something much more grand: Our God is ultimate grace and mercy, desiring all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4).

And with such good news, we need not be tempted by unethical evangelistic techniques any more than we'd be tempted to use deception for inviting people off the street into a downtown banquet hall. Ethics and evangelism aren't intrinsically at odds. Evangelism and ethics are one. Good news and right practices naturally go together. 

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 162.

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd ed. (C. Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 3.

³ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), p. 17.

⁴ White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), p. 513.

⁵ Margaret P. Battin, *Ethics in the Sanctuary: Examining the Practices of Organized Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 141.

⁶ White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 638. "How surprised and gladdened will be the lowly among the nations, and among the heathen, to hear from the lips of the Saviour, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me!'"

BEING OPEN AND HONEST TO THE WORLD

BY JIGGS GALLAGHER

TRANSPARENCY HAS BEEN A HOT POLITICAL TOPIC THIS CAMPAIGN year in America. It's important for a candidate to be honest with his or her constituency. Hiding things or fudging the truth often ends badly at the ballot box.

I have thought for many years about the Seventh-day Adventist Church's public face, especially as it relates to evangelism. As a public relations professional who began my career in my 20s at the General Conference, I always advocated for being open and above-board in planning public evangelistic efforts, in print and broadcast advertising and signage at the site.

At the time I was often outargued and outvoted, usually by ordained ministers with years of evangelism experience. They would say that a person's interest must be piqued with an intriguing topic (usually eschatology), then he or she must grow to trust the speaker, become acquainted with fellow attendees, and grow comfortable with the idea of becoming involved with the church.

The usual pattern was to rent a neutral space, such as a public high school or civic auditorium, or (in earlier days) to pitch a large tent. The host congregation would erect a sign inviting people to learn about last-day events and would create an innocuous-sounding sponsoring organization, such as "Revelation Explained, Inc." When someone would ask an usher to explain who was actually sponsoring the meetings, the answer was something like: "Oh, this series is non-denominational; it's for *everyone!*"


The tactic often backfired. A zealous layman or Protestant minister or Catholic priest would dig deeper, find out that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was the sponsor, and write a letter to the newspaper outing the event. The denomination did not share the "any publicity is good publicity" viewpoint of circus entrepreneur P.T. Barnum, who famously said he didn't care what anyone wrote or said about him as long as they spelled his name correctly.

All of this came to mind recently when I found in our mailbox

a hand-typed letter to my wife (who is a Reform Jew), from a woman named Debbie Miller, with an address in a town near ours. We didn't know Debbie Miller from Adam (or Eve). When my wife opened it, in addition to a letter there was a small, one-fold religious tract about the end times. Ms. Miller asked my wife to prayerfully read the tract and consider its message. Curious, I turned the tract to the last page, put on my reading glasses, and in fine print at the bottom found the initials "JW" and a post-office box number. I knew that this was from the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Times have changed, and so has the church in the 40 years since I felt like a lone voice in the wilderness arguing for openness and transparency in evangelism. While the stealth approach sometimes brought in large numbers of converts, which made the conference evangelist and the local church look good (initially), the sad result was that within a year or two, as many disappeared out the back door of the church as had initially stamped in at the front. This occurred for several reasons, including a lack of discipleship and rooting in the convert's new church.

I believe that seeking fewer but more well-grounded converts is more likely to make lifelong Adventists than duping people in the beginning of their experience with the denomination. Many missiologists feel that having individual church members simply invite their friends from work or the neighborhood to attend an event at church (perhaps a not-explicitly-religious service in the beginning) is more effective than formal meetings where members of the public attend without much knowledge of the church.

Each local church and each pastor must work out an effective method of growing the church, and certainly many methods will be tried. I just hope that when a public presentation is made, the church will be proud of its name and use it prominently to attract interests. 



THE ETHICS OF AN INVITATION

By Gerald Winslow

I HAVE DEVOTED MUCH OF MY professional life to studying, teaching, and writing about Christian ethics. And like most followers of Jesus, I suppose, I have wondered about when and how to share my beliefs and invite another person to join my community of faith.

At first glance, the conjunction of “ethics” and “soul winning” brings to mind a predictable set of questions. If by “soul winning” we mean the transfer of allegiance from one religious community to another (often from one Christian denomination to another), is this not harmfully insensitive to the potential ruptures of personal relationships, including family ties? Is it also not disrespectful of the faith heritage of other Christian groups? What if the person, whose soul is being won, is happily and healthfully engaged in one faith community and is now being invited to join a toxic congregation, constantly beset by infighting? Readers may multiply such questions at length.

Within Adventist circles these questions are by no means new. For example, I recently came across an article titled “Christian Ethics in Evangelism” written by the legendary Adventist evangelist Roy

Allan Anderson and published in 1960.¹ Anderson admitted that some forms of “proselyting” are not only misguided but also unethical. He explained: “A proselyter [sic] in this definition then is one who stoops to deceptive methods to gain his ends. It is not so much *what* he does but his method, *the way he does it*, that decides his classification.” Later in the article, Anderson cites a 1926 statement adopted by the General Conference that includes this affirmation: “We recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem the Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.” Considering the fact that this official statement was published 90 years ago, one realizes that our topic is hardly new.

Many of us have had our own occasions to wonder about some of the methods used in evangelism. For example, I recall hearing one of my family members tell of being awakened at an evangelistic meeting and told it was time to take her stand for baptism. She was 9 years old. I also recall an Oregonian widow in her 80s, whom I met while working in an evangelistic campaign during my college days. She expressed her commitment to receive a Christian

baptism and to join the Adventist church. The senior pastor—my mentor who was conducting the meetings and whom I admired—insisted that the widow remove her wedding ring prior to baptism. She had worn the ring continuously for more than 60 years. She wept as the pastor used a wire cutter to facilitate the ring's removal. I am still haunted by the memory of that deed.

But now I am wondering about something else. Are most of the people who will read these words in need of being cautioned about overly zealous “soul winning”? Perhaps I might be forgiven for doubting this. I see little, if any, evidence. So I must wonder about the wisdom of warning people against something they would never consider doing. The words that come to mind in this regard are from C.S. Lewis. In his *Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil named Uncle Screwtape offers this advice to his novice nephew:

“The use of Fashions in thought is to distract the attention of men from their real dangers. We direct the fashionable outcry of each generation against those vices of which it is least in danger... The game is to have them all running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood, and all crowding to that side of the boat that is nearly gunwale under.”²

So one might today imagine Screwtape advising his nephew to warn the Adventists who consider themselves to be progressive against the ethical dangers of evangelistic fervor.

My own confession is that I have often been too cautious about inviting people to join my Adventist community of faith. One story will suffice. Sitting in my faculty office one day some years ago was a doctoral student for whom I had agreed to serve as dissertation advisor. She was a highly intelligent single woman from Europe whom I had known for a couple of years. After some minutes discussing her research proposal, she asked me an


entirely unexpected question: “Would it be possible for me to join the Adventist church?” I assured her that she would be welcome, and we talked about how that could occur. A few months and some Bible studies later, I baptized her in one of our campus churches. She is now a cheerful, faithful, active church member who also serves as a professor at our university. My perception is that her life has been immeasurably blessed by the fellowship of her church family, by the sense of purpose that comes from being part of a prophetic

The larger ethical question for today's progressive Adventists is the failure to offer appropriate invitations to join our faith and enjoy the fellowship of our faith community.

movement, and by teaching at a faith-inspired Adventist university.

So why did I not ask her to join my church? Given the power differential between students and their professors, an ethical caution about offering a possibly unwelcome invitation to join a faith community is no doubt warranted. The same is true for the imbalance of power between patients and their healthcare professionals. In the healthcare setting, it is considered unethical to take advantage of patients' and their families' vulnerability during stressful episodes of acute care by emphasizing distinctive doctrinal teachings. No doubt this contributed to my reluctance to invite the doctoral student to join my church.

When I try to describe what I think are additional reasons for reticence, many other barriers come to mind. For example, in my world we relate to students and patients from many different faith traditions, including no faith at all. Most of us wish to be respectful of these differences, just as we hope others will be respectful of our distinctive beliefs. It is also true that some believers fear that their particular congregation would disappoint guests, due either to the quality of the shared worship experience or to unresolved conflicts in the church. (That is not true of the congregation of which I am a member, I must hasten to add.) Others may believe that extending an invitation to their church requires them to possess extensive knowledge about its teachings. Or they may feel reluctant because feelings of doubt or dissonance in their personal belief system have produced a seemingly troubled faith.

Of course, thoughtful readers can add to this descriptive list of reasons for the rather common reluctance to invite others to join us. But I believe that the larger ethical question for today's progressive Adventists is the failure to offer appropriate invitations to join our faith and enjoy the fellowship of our faith community. Finding the right time and the right way to extend such invitations requires discernment guided by the promised Spirit. For followers of Jesus, this is a central feature of the joy of accepting his commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20, NIV). 

¹ Roy Allan Anderson, “Christian Ethics in Evangelism,” *Ministry*, November 1960. This article can be accessed at <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1960/11/christian-ethics-in-evangelism>.
² C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperCollins e-books), letter 25.

JOLTED BY JESUS' MATTHEW 24 statements that Herod's temple would be razed to its foundations, his disciples corner him on the Mount of Olives and demand to know more. "Tell us," they insist, "when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?" (verse 3, ESV).

Jesus replies with a litany of predictions, including one in verse 14 that many have taken to be a clear signpost: "And this gospel of the

growing faster than our hardworking evangelists could keep up with. Was our lethargic Laodiceanism really handcuffing heaven? If "I am coming soon" meant two thousand years, might it not become three thousand at this rate? And might we lose the personal immediacy of a prophecy's fulfillment being near, "even at the doors" (verse 33, KJV)?

The central question of Matthew 24:14 is whether Jesus' return is *caused* by the gospel's universal proclamation

Kai Tote—Causation?

Moulton's and Geden's Greek New Testament concordance² lists 10 New Testament instances where the phrase *kai tote* ("and then") is used.³ One of them is Matthew 24:13—the gospel is preached worldwide, "*and then* the end will come" (NKJV, emphasis mine). Does what comes after *kai tote* (the world's end) happen because of what came before it (the gospel's spread)? In other words, is the end of the age caused by, or simply subsequent to,

MATTHEW 24:14: CAN WE FINISH THE WORK?

BY MAYLAN SCHURCH

kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."¹

I'm not the only Adventist who, as a middle schooler, listened to updated world population counts with a sinking feeling. The total seemed to be

or merely happens *subsequent to* it. In other words, could human action—such as some sudden and powerfully articulate evangelistic zeal that overmasters the population surge—really affect heaven's timetable? After all, don't the effectual, fervent prayers of righteous men and women avail much? Didn't pre-Flood evil precipitate the Deluge? Didn't Joshua's intercession cause God to work an astronomical miracle with the sun?

worldwide evangelism?

The 10 New Testament *kai tote* references are about equally divided between the two possibilities. In Matthew 9:15 Jesus mentions that when the bridegroom is taken from his friends, "*then* they will fast" (NKJV, emphasis mine). In this case the absence of the bridegroom *caused* the fasting. But in Matthew 16:27, Jesus says, "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, *and then* He will reward each according to his works" (NKJV, emphasis mine). Here the reward isn't directly caused by Jesus' arrival, but simply happens subsequent to it.

The World

What about the “world” to which the gospel will be preached? Rather than the most commonly used *kósmos*, this verse appropriately uses *oikoumené* (“habitable earth”⁴), since it is Earth’s inhabitants who must respond or at least acknowledge the gospel’s “witness” (*marturion*), which will go to “all the nations” (*pasin tois ethnesin*). “All the ethnicities” certainly doesn’t limit the intimidating universality of Jesus’ prophecy.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION OF MATTHEW 24:14 IS WHETHER JESUS’ RETURN IS CAUSED BY THE GOSPEL’S UNIVERSAL PROCLAMATION OR MERELY HAPPENS SUBSEQUENT TO IT.

Which brings us to “finishing the work.” This is not a biblical phrase. But 2 Peter 3:12 (“looking for and hastening⁵ the coming of the day of God,”) suggests that Peter’s readers can speed or slow its arrival. And this implies that whatever the “work” is, it must be completed before the *Parousia* can happen.

But can humans know when this work will be finished—and do they need to know? In an online interview⁶ with Loren Seibold, executive editor of *Adventist Today*, Dr. Friedburg Ninow, dean of La Sierra University’s HMS Richards Divinity School, says: “I’m wondering what people mean by ‘finishing the work.’ The present

population growth, the relationship between [the number of] Adventists and the world population ... puts so much pressure on the individual.”

Ninow suggests that the idea that we can bring Christ back by our actions “seems a very self-centered Christianity, in a way” and adds, “I want to focus on the gospel.” He continues, “The everlasting gospel is not the gospel of self-sanctification but a gospel that extends grace to one’s fellow-man.”⁷

Jesus does insist, in several parables, that the end will finally come. But again, these parables divide themselves into ones in which the end is totally unexpected and ones in which the end is the result of a natural development, which might be observed by the perceptive. For example, the 10 bridesmaids did not know the hour of the bridegroom’s arrival (Matt. 25:1-13), and neither could the householder predict the thief’s assault (Matt. 24:43). But in the cases of Jesus’ assertion that the fields are “white for harvest” (John 4:35, NKJV) and his story of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:30), observers can sense approximately when the time is near, because a natural growing process is taking place.

Conclusion

Back when thousands of U.S. forces were fighting in Afghanistan—and when this troop presence was causing concern back home—a National Public Radio interviewer asked a United

States military officer in charge of a team of soldiers his opinion about the controversy. “I don’t focus much on that,” he replied. “My team and I are just working our little lane.”

It seems to me that the best approach to take to this issue is one of humility. Whether the gospel’s final planetary coverage will happen through electronic means or through angelic assistance, I need not obsess about population counts or Laodiceanism. I need to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send forth reapers—and that he will help me work my little lane. 📌

¹ NKJV; NRSV, ESV, and NIV use “testimony” in place of “witness.”

² William F. Moulton and Alfred S. Geden, *Concordance to the Greek New Testament*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978).

³ Moulton lists only 10 references that use *kai tote*, though many more use *tote* alone.

⁴ This refers to “the inhabited world as distinct from the (relatively) uninhabited.” See Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed.), Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 157.

⁵ Greek *speudō* has not only a definite force, wherein the verb’s subject is the active agent of the hurrying (such as “Zacchaeus, make haste” in Luke 19:5-6), but also a hint of eager anticipation. In 2 Peter 3:12, the NRSV uses “hastening” but footnotes the alternate “earnestly desiring.”

⁶ <http://tinyurl.com/AToday5>

⁷ <http://atoday.org/finishingtheworkinterview.html>



Was Nebuchadnezzar Ready for Baptism?

By Alden Thompson

The issue of evangelism opens a wonderful Pandora's box. My title suggests why; "Was Nebuchadnezzar Ready for Baptism?" is an outrageous question, one I had never asked until I started writing this article. Door-to-door solicitation, Bible studies, public meetings, a decision for baptism, and church membership—all of that would have been entirely foreign to both Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. So do they have anything to teach us on the topic of evangelism?

The word *evangelism* is directly related to the word *gospel* (translated *evangelion* from Greek), or good news—the title given to the four narratives (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) telling of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But until he arose, Jesus' announcement of his imminent suffering and death was not good news for his followers. Whenever he said he was going to die, they objected. Their Messiah was a conquering king, not a suffering servant.

I want to explore three worlds of evangelism: (1) the Old Testament and its seeming absence of traditional evangelism, (2) the New Testament world and its sharp transition from crushing disappointment to a great joy shared with disarming simplicity, and (3) the increasingly complex world of Adventism.

I pose three questions, one for each of the three worlds, that can help us apply to our day Jesus' clarion call to evangelize the world: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14, NIV).

1. For the Old Testament: How did God's people relate to the "other," the people not part of the household of faith? Even though God's Old Testament people knew nothing of modern forms of evangelism, they still faced a world of nonbelievers. Did they seek to win them? Run from them? Ignore them? Send them packing? Slaughter them? Yes to all of that. That's why I could have titled this article "A Whole-Bible Approach to Evangelism." And our question must be: Are those Old Testament models still applicable today?

2. For the New Testament: How did baptism serve as the gateway into the church? Circumcision was the rite of passage into the Old Testament community, and baptism is the New Testament equivalent. The stories of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16) reveal the liberating simplicity of the baptismal rite. When Philip answered the eunuch's question about the identity of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the eunuch said: "Here's water. Why can't I be baptized?" Philip performed the rite, no questions asked.

Similarly, the Philippian jailer, astonished that no one tried to escape from the earthquake-shattered jail, fell down before Paul and Silas and cried out: "What must I do to be saved?" Their answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31, NIV). After washing the prisoners' wounds, the jailer and "all his household were baptized" (Luke 16:33). Our question: Is such simplicity possible today?

3. For Adventism: What is the content of the faith that a believer must affirm in order to be a part of the people of God? Our denomination has recently given this last question a more urgent focus by its handling of our formal statements of belief. In 2015, the General Conference (GC) voted several changes in Adventism's 28 fundamental beliefs. Some were quite contentious. But even more sobering is the attempt to use our current statement not simply to describe Adventist beliefs, but to prescribe them, using the revised document as a hiring tool for religion teachers in Adventist colleges and universities. Through its International Board for Ministerial and Theological Education (IBMTE), a plan has been proposed that would require every religion teacher who is teaching half-time or more to sign off on the 28 fundamental beliefs and four other documents as the basis for a five-year renewable endorsement. Without compliance by its faculty, an Adventist college or university could lose its denominational accreditation.

In 1872, Adventists adopted their first unofficial statement of belief—and the word “unofficial” is crucial. The unnamed author (Uriah Smith) included these emphatic words in the preamble: “We have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.”¹

Quite aside from accreditation issues, the IBMTE requirements are a radical departure from that first statement of belief. And the controversy over this issue throws into bold relief the questions I have posed: What is the content of the faith that a believer must affirm before being baptized by an evangelist? And who determines that content?

This article develops the thesis that it is time to return to the simple covenant used by Adventists when they began organizing local churches in 1861. In the process, we must clarify that all of our statements of belief merely illustrate and apply this simple covenant:

“We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ [Rev. 14:12].”²

I base my conclusions most directly on the analysis of changes made to our statements of belief in 2015 and on the explanatory materials on the General Conference website.³ I conclude by listing practical steps to help us move in the direction of this simplicity.

At the outset, I should note that given the current well-intentioned but dangerous attempts to legislate what Adventists believe, I was expecting my analysis of the 2015 changes to be quite disappointing. And disappointed I was, to be sure. But what surprised me was to discover a clearly discernable silver lining on the General Conference website, evidence that the ideal for which I have long sought and prayed, is, in many respects, already very close at hand.

Old Testament: Diverse Ways of Relating to the “Other”

The issues we’re raising here would have puzzled both Daniel and Nebuchnezzar. Baptism? What’s that? I know of no Old Testament text in its support. In the New Testament, John the Baptist practiced a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4), though his baptism of the sinless Jesus must have symbolized something other than repentance. With or without baptism, Daniel gives no overt indication that he intended to win Nebuchadnezzar to his Jewish faith. Indeed, there is ample evidence in the book of Daniel itself to suggest that Nebuchadnezzar was simply adding the God of the Jews to his private list of personal deities. Naaman’s confession in 2 Kings 5:15-16 is a much clearer one. Nevertheless, Babylon’s king provides us with a useful springboard for illustrating the diverse ways that God’s people have related to those not part of their faith community.

1. *Cautious resident aliens.* In Genesis, both Abraham and Jacob related to their neighbors positively, but as cautious and vulnerable resident aliens. The rescue of the Sodomites in their battle against the Mesopotamian invaders (Genesis 14) shows Abraham at his most generous. He refused to take any spoil, but insisted that his allies get their share. Regarding the faith status of the 318 trained men who had been born in Abraham’s household (verse 14), Scripture doesn’t say.

A not-so-flattering narrative in Genesis 20 tells how Abraham lied to King Abimelech about his relationship to Sarah, just as he had done earlier to Pharaoh (Genesis 12). Incensed at the patriarch’s deception, Abimelech sent him away.

When Sarah died, Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah from the Hittites as a burial place for his wife (Genesis 23). He did not confront or attack; he negotiated: “I am a foreigner and a stranger among you,” he said. “Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead” (Gen. 23:4, NIV).

The horrific story of Dinah’s rape (Genesis 34)

also illustrates Israel's resident-alien status. After the Canaanite Shechem had raped Jacob's daughter, the young man and his father, Hamor, negotiated what appeared to both sides as an honorable way through the dishonorable event, one that closely tracked later biblical law. In the Pentateuch, adultery involving a married woman required the death penalty for both parties (Lev. 20:10), but the rape of a virgin simply required the male offender to marry the girl—without

I believe we should return to the original covenant Adventists used when organizing local churches in 1861.

any possibility of divorce—and to pay 50 shekels of silver to her father (Deut. 22:28-29). Shechem went far beyond 50 shekels, offering to pay “whatever you ask” for the privilege of marrying Dinah (Gen. 34:11, NIV). Jacob's sons also demanded that all of the city's males be circumcised. The men agreed, but then Dinah's brothers vented their anger, slaughtering all of the adult males, taking the women and children captive, and plundering the wealth of the city for themselves. Jacob's horrified comment shows that he knew how tenuous his resident-alien status actually was: “You have brought trouble on me,” he said, “by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land” (verse 30, NIV).

2. *Attackers against Yahweh's enemies.* The first major incident between the resident aliens and their neighbors erupted as Israel journeyed to Sinai. At Rephidim the Amalekites attacked the Israelites (Exod. 17:8-17). Their response was not yet under the banner of “love your enemies,” for Exodus declares: “the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (verse 16, NIV). When Edom refused

to allow the Israelites to pass through its territory, however, Israel did turn aside from confrontation (Num. 20:21). Others were not so fortunate. By the time Israel crossed the Jordan and headed for Jericho, its men were seasoned warriors.⁴ The prostitute Rahab told the spies who had taken refuge in her brothel that the people of Jericho were terrified by reports of the Red Sea crossing and Israel's defeat of Sihon and Og (Josh. 2:8-11).

Scripture indicates that the end had come for the Canaanites. Abraham had been told that the sin of the Amorites had “not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:16, NIV), implying that the day of judgment was still to come. By Joshua's day, time was up for the Canaanites. Later, Jeremiah would wistfully report the same looming fate for Judah, desperately wishing that it could be otherwise: “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved” (Jer. 8:20, NIV).

This is a far cry from evangelism in the New Testament sense. Still, there is a tiny glimmer of mercy and hope: In spite of her lies and her profession, Rahab finds a place of honor in Hebrews' hall of fame (Heb. 11:31) and in Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:5).

Other names among Yahweh's violent defenders would include Samuel, who “hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD” (1 Sam. 15:33, KJV), and Elijah, who made no attempt to convert the prophets of Baal but, rather, slaughtered 450 of them (1 Kings 18:40).

3. *Defenders of the Canaanites.* This rather surprising conclusion is suggested by the list of enemies the judges were called to confront. With one exception (Sisera in Judges 4), all of the enemies were invaders from *outside* of Palestine! In other words, the judges were delivering both Israelites and their Canaanite neighbors. Now that is evangelism!

4. *Frightened sectarians.* Some successful Adventist evangelists have quietly focused their ministry on the unbelieving spouses of church members. Many, especially men, have been won to God through their ministry. That approach contrasts sharply with the post-exilic stance adopted by Ezra and Nehemiah. They believed it their unhappy duty to send the foreign wives away from their husbands and families. As recorded in Ezra 9 and 10 and Nehemiah 13:23-27, they asked no questions, sought no conversions. They simply sent them away.

Understanding the context offers some relief, for at a temple honoring Yahweh down in Egypt, Yahweh was said to have a female consort—a wife, just like Baal!⁵ As Ezra and Nehemiah saw it, the community was at risk, so they took extreme steps to preserve an isolationist environment for the faithful but beleaguered remnant.

5. *Respectful servants of the superpowers.* When the major powers of the Ancient Near East made contact with Israel, the Israelites were generally loyal and generous. The major exception was Moses, who went to great lengths to secure Israel's release from Egyptian slavery. But Moses aside, we can cite loyal Joseph in Egypt and faithful Daniel in Babylon and Persia. We could even list the prophet Jonah for his work in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

Jonah a bearer of good news? Yes—and through a judgment-day threat! “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Judgment. No ifs, ands, or buts. Scripture gives no clue as to whether it was God or Jonah who decided on the judgment theme. Regardless, the bottom line is clear; it worked! The whole city repented, and so did God (Jonah 3:10, KJV).

Indeed, there were some evangelists in the Old Testament crowd: Abraham with 318 converts from his own household; the Israelite spies at Jericho with a most notable convert, Rahab; and David, with several hundred converts from among the inhabitants of the Philistine city of Gath. (These Gittites were faithful to Yahweh and to David, so much so that God entrusted the sacred ark to one of them, Obed-Edom the Gittite, who cared for it for a number of months.) Even Jonah with his backdoor evangelism has a whole city to his credit. But these were not “traditional” evangelists. For that, we must turn to the New Testament.

New Testament: Baptism as a Gateway into the Church

At the beginning of this article, I referred to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16) as examples of instant baptism. The eunuch is easier to understand, since he was most likely a Jew who was simply accepting Jesus as the Jewish messiah. But the jailer was a Gentile to whom Paul and Silas promised salvation on the basis of a simple confession of Jesus as Lord.

Other baptisms, in addition to Jesus and those baptized by John the Baptist, include Paul (Acts 9:18); Cornelius' cohort of Gentile believers who were baptized by Peter when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them (Acts 10:47-48); and Lydia, the seller of purple in Thyatira (Acts 16:15). Finally, we should list those rebaptized on the basis of new knowledge, namely, the believers in Ephesus who had been baptized by John but later heard about Jesus and were baptized again in his name (Acts 19:4-5).

The simplicity of the New Testament practice raises several practical questions for Christians today. Should we separate baptism from church membership? Some Baptist churches do just that, baptizing immediately on an individual's acceptance of Jesus, but allowing new believers time for growth and maturation in the faith before they become full members of the body of Christ. That's not really biblical, but a case could be made for it in our complex culture. Complicating the issue for us is the long shadow of Roman Catholicism, which links baptism directly with salvation, giving the impression that baptism marks one's arrival. Thus many pastors prefer to see their converts well grounded in the faith before they are baptized. Those are issues we should address in the light of Scripture.

Seventh-day Adventism: Who Decides the Content of the Faith?

The current turmoil over our 28 fundamental beliefs suggests that the time has come to simplify our approach to Adventist beliefs. The precedents are impressive: Jesus' one-verse summary: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12, NRSV). Ellen White's one-verse touchstone, John 3:16, is an adequate “guide for the soul,”⁶ to use her words. And if we really want to be radical, let's follow Ellen White's lead in her comments on the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46). “Even among the heathen,” she wrote, “are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; ... those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish.”⁷

A survey of key moments in Adventist history underscores the seriousness of recent developments. As

noted above, I believe we should return to the original covenant Adventists used when organizing local churches in 1861. That covenant is the first in a list of several crucial moments in our history:

1861: The original Adventist covenant: “We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ.”⁸

1872: Our first statement of beliefs, *unofficial* and merely descriptive: “In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.”⁹

1883: A proposed church manual was written, serialized in the *Review*, then rejected at the 1883 General Conference. The motion to reject was made by the very committee that had written the manual:

“It is the unanimous judgment of the committee that it would not be advisable to have a Church Manual. We consider it unnecessary because we have already surmounted the greatest difficulties connected with church organization without one; and perfect harmony exists among us on this subject. It would seem to many like a step toward formation of a creed, or a discipline, other than the Bible, something we have always been opposed to as a denomination. If we had one, we fear many, especially those commencing to preach, would study it to obtain guidance in religious matters rather than to seek it from the Bible, and from the leadings of the Spirit of God, which would tend to their hindrance in genuine religious experience and in knowledge of the mind of the Spirit. It was in taking similar steps that other bodies of Christians first began to lose their simplicity and become formal and spiritually lifeless. Why should we imitate them? The Committee feels in short, that our tendency should be in the direction of simplicity and close conformity to the Bible, rather than in elaborately defining every point in church management and church ordinances.”¹⁰

1931-1932: Our first *official* statement of beliefs was prepared by a small committee (1931), then published as an appendix in the first official Church Manual (1932).

1946: A General Conference vote states that changes in the Church Manual can only be made at a full General Conference in session.

1980: Our first official statement of beliefs to be *discussed and voted by a full General Conference in session* included the following notable and contentious items: (A) the preamble, stating that “Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s holy word”; (B) deletion of a crucial “only” from Fundamental Belief No. 1 on the Scriptures while retaining it in the preamble: “The Bible is our only creed”; and (C) addition of a qualifying phrase in the statement on the Gift of Prophecy (No. 17), describing the writings of Ellen White as an “authoritative source of truth.”¹¹

2005: Without any formal explanation as to why this additional belief was added, the 28th belief, Growing in Christ, was published as No. 11.¹²

2015: Controversial revisions were made to the statements on Creation (No. 6) and Christian Marriage (No. 23), and the problematic 1980 phrase “authoritative source of truth” was removed from No. 18 (formerly No. 17) on the Gift of Prophecy.

The trajectory suggested by those dates and events is both sobering and intriguing, especially in light of the current attempt to implement a five-year endorsement plan for religion teachers, a plan that requires affirmation of the 2015 revision. From a simple covenant in 1861 and an unofficial, nonbinding, descriptive statement of beliefs in 1872, we moved to the rejection of a church manual in 1883. Nearly 50 years later, the church adopted its first official statement of beliefs (1931) and incorporated these beliefs into the first official church manual. In 1946, the General Conference stated that changes in the manual can only be made by a full General Conference in session.

In retrospect, the attempt to discuss and vote on a statement of belief by a full General Conference in session should have alerted us to the danger of our way. The deletion of the “only” with reference to Scripture and the attempt to enhance the authority of Ellen White by describing her writings as “an authoritative source of truth” stirred up a storm of protest. Devout European Adventists, in particular, were troubled

by the phrase “authoritative source of truth” and immediately requested that the issue be brought back for discussion and vote at the next General Conference. At that time, church leaders sensed the danger of discussing and voting on beliefs at every GC Session. So the request was set aside. Even in 2005, when Fundamental Belief No. 28 was added, the church carefully orchestrated the worldwide discussions to prevent last-minute requests from the floor.

But now, just 10 years later, a host of changes have been voted and a serious attempt is being mounted to treat this revision as a prescriptive, creed-like statement. In the document voted at San Antonio, major or minor changes in wording were made in all but seven of the 28 statements.¹³

Indeed, if one includes the revision of the texts given for each statement, then all of the statements were revised, for the texts were put in biblical order. A good argument can be made for that decision, but just as good a case can be made for listing the biblical passages in order of importance.

And that raises the next question: If a religion teacher has to sign off on the statement, are the biblical passages included?¹⁴ On the GC website,¹⁵ John Brunt’s video on “The Law of God,” for example, is a superb presentation of law as a gracious guide to life. Yet the “official” Scripture references in the current Fundamental Belief No. 19 include none of the texts that document that positive perspective. Deuteronomy 4:5-8, 13-14; Psalm 119, and Jeremiah 31:31-34 are all missing!

Fortunately, the GC website points to a solution: names, faces, and signed articles. For each fundamental belief, the site offers a well-made video and a cluster of links to additional articles. As I checked out the links, I began to sing the doxology, for remarkable diversity and creative presentations were everywhere evident.¹⁶ The authors can build their own case and use their own texts. They don’t have to check the “official” list to see if they are getting it right. Astonishing! Wonderful!

In conclusion, here are three practical steps I think we should consider:

1. Call a moratorium to all discussions of “beliefs” in official GC Sessions. Instead, let us revel in our common ground. Our name announces to the world the bond that holds us together: blessed day and blessed hope!

2. Instead of multiplying nameless official documents voted by the church, we can publish books and articles *signed by Seventh-day Adventists*. Let’s take a cue from the GC website and add names. Adventism is defined by the confessions of specific Adventists, just as the New Testament church was defined by Peter, James, John, Paul, and all of the New Testament writers. They didn’t have to vote anyone in or out. They spoke and wrote their convictions. And they trusted one another.

3. All of this should be a convincing argument to return to our original covenant: the whole Bible is our only creed, not selected items debated and voted at a General Conference Session. The church can ill afford another GC Session like San Antonio. What the Lord has done for his people is the good news that will fuel our evangelism into the unquenchable blaze that culminates in the second coming. Every Adventist, whether dead or alive, could say amen to that. 🙌

¹ Cited here from Appendix 1 of Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America*, revised edition (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), p. 191.

² “Covenant, Church,” *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1861; reprinted in the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996) p. 416.

³ Inevitably, the analysis of the 2015 statement also involves at least some attention to previous Adventist statements of belief: 1872, 1931, and 1980.

⁴ Numbers 21 describes how Israel conquered the Canaanite king of Arad, Sihon an Amorite king, the Amorites in Jazer, and Og king of Bashan.

⁵ Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamra, reflecting life in Canaan about 1400 BCE, document the existence of Anath, the female consort of Baal. The Elephantine Papyri, reflecting Jewish life in Egypt about 400 BCE, document the presence of a Jewish temple on the island of Yeb where Anath-Yahu, a female deity (Yahweh’s wife) was worshiped.

⁶ “Good news! Good news! ring throughout the world! ‘For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ This lesson is one of the greatest importance to every soul that lives; for the terms of salvation are here laid out in distinct lines. If one had no other text in the Bible, this alone would be a guide for the soul.” *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923), p. 370.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 638.

⁸ “Covenant, Church,” *ibid*.

⁹ Land, *ibid*.

¹⁰ *Review and Herald*, Nov. 20, 1883, p. 733.

¹¹ Cited from Land, pp. 200-207.

¹² See pp. V-VI of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, second edition (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005). The preamble of the 1980 statement, allowing for the revision of our statement of beliefs, now takes center stage and becomes the rationale for adding the new statement of belief. The actual reason for the additional statement is implied by the

opening sentences of No. 11 (Growing in Christ): “By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom.” What is not stated explicitly, however, is that church leaders in Africa had urgently requested a more explicit statement on Christ’s victory over the demonic powers because of the lingering belief in demon worship that haunts the believers even after they have become Adventist Christians.

¹³ No changes were made in the wording to the following statements: The Remnant and Its Mission (No. 13), Unity in the Body of Christ (No. 14), Baptism (No. 15), The Lord’s Supper (No. 16), Death and Resurrection (No. 26), The Millennium and the End of Sin (No. 27), and The New Earth (No. 28).

¹⁴ In the 2015 edition of our fundamental beliefs, only one of the statements includes a biblical passage within the prose description (No. 8, The Great Controversy). By contrast the nonbinding 1872 statement included no biblical references at all for seven of the 25 statements. Otherwise, seven contained in-text citations, eight had end-of-statement references, and three more included both in-text and end-of-statement references.

¹⁵ <https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/>

¹⁶ Not all of the video presenters were named, but those who were offered a remarkable variety of Adventist voices: John Bradshaw, Cindi Tutsch, John Brunt, Chris Oberg, and Tim Gillespie.

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Johnston *continued from page 15*

we have and the messages we send. How do we look from the outside?

These questions are not for the local church alone, but for the global church as well. How are we perceived? Do secular people see us as fair, transparent, financially responsible, organizationally efficient, and culturally engaged? Or do they think we cover up our problems, waste money on bureaucracy, obfuscate financial information, coerce each other with policy, and navel-gaze to the point of irrelevance? If the world is going to hate us, let them hate us because of the gospel, not because of our immorality and self-obsession.

The type of work it will take for us to turn this around is more demanding than what we’ve been doing. It’s easier to come up with new methods or refine old ones, but new methods don’t seem to be working. It’s harder to self-reflect on how our own self-centeredness could be damaging our gospel witness, but it’s infinitely more fruitful.

We’ve been looking for superficial solutions to heart problems. God can change our heart problems and bring people into our churches. First, we need to repent. We need to repent of our self-satisfaction and plead for the will to make more than just a gesture of caring for our community. We need to seek understanding, listen to the unchurched with sympathy and humility, allow them to inform our ignorance, and see what the gospel speaks into not only their lives, but also our own.

Repentant Evangelism

If we repent, we may find joy in our evangelism that we have not previously known. We will not only learn to share the gospel with people different from

ourselves, but we will come to know the gospel with a richness that was not there before. We will see things we never saw. We will discover creativity and passion that has thus far eluded us. We will encounter truth in ways that are new and fresh. We will find ourselves in churches that are welcoming, honest, and full of spiritual growth. Perhaps then we would find that our programs were never the problem. Our problem was perspective.

I would love to be able to end this article by saying that we can do this, and it’s not really that difficult. But that would imply that the problem is superficial. If we are failing in the gospel commission, could it be that what we need is not a better approach, but repentance? Perhaps we should stop examining our approach and start examining ourselves, asking if we have stumbled because of our own self-satisfaction, and find the will to make the hard calls and tough changes necessary to become useful tools in the hands of the great Evangelist. Perhaps then we would realize that our programs were never the problem. Perhaps what we need is to repent. 🙏

Sahlin *continued from page 11*

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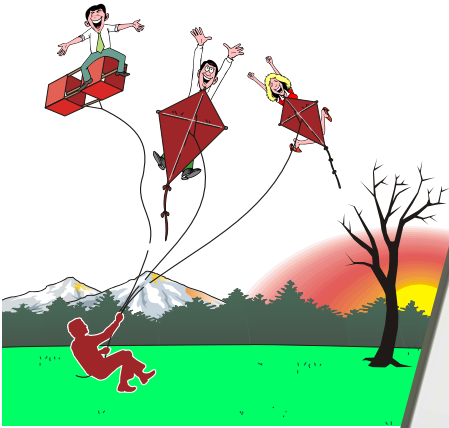
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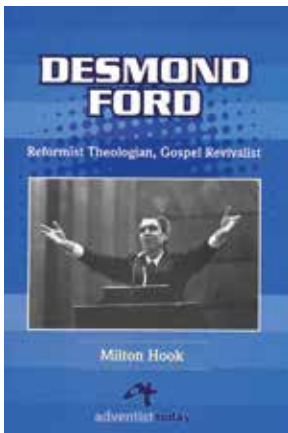
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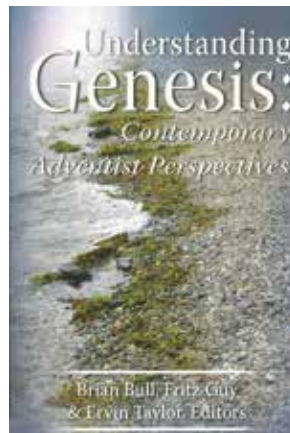
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