

PART ONE

THE CHALLENGE OF A SECULAR WORLD

CHAPTER ONE

God's Style of Communication

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A World in Change

Growing up Adventist isn't what it used to be back in the Sixties. Back then most Adventists preferred to avoid contact with the world unless such contact took place on Adventist terms. By contrast, in recent years Adventists have held such high-profile positions as governor of Hawaii, Deputy Assistant to the American Secretary of State, head of the Social Security Administration, starting pitcher on a major-league baseball team, Hollywood actor, conductor of a major symphony orchestra, head of state in at least two countries in the so-called third world, and head of an anti-communist guerilla army. It is a reasonable possibility that by the year 2000 a major country in the South Pacific will be predominantly Seventh-day Adventist. A sizable percentage of the members of congress and several governors in that

country are SDAs (Recently in fact, the opposition party leader and the governor in one province were elders in the same church!).

These are exciting and fearful times to be an Adventist. Many of the old rules don't seem to work the way they used to. Many Adventists are trying things we never used to try. The people that I've just alluded to know by experience that maintaining a distinctly Adventist faith in a high-profile position is no simple matter. Almost every moment of every day brings the challenge of balancing one's convictions as a Seventh-day Adventist with one's responsibilities to the job. It is certainly a big challenge to be a starting pitcher on a major league team, even if your contract *does* say that you will be given Sabbath off whenever possible!

The challenge of being Adventist in a secular world is not limited to well-known personalities. It involves learning how to get along with neighbors and even relatives--brothers, sisters, parents, children and grandchildren--who don't look at the world the way you do. Although they might live right next door, Adventism can be as strange and foreign to them as though you've just walked off a spaceship.

The Two Horizons

But is that really our problem? Shouldn't we just present the message as we know and appreciate it and if they don't like it, it's just too bad? Life might seem easier that way, but inspiration suggests that the Gospel is not heard until it comes to people within their own context. "Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity." (DA 34) People need to be addressed in a language with which they are familiar. The gospel must come to people in context. The reason the Adventist message is going like wildfire in places like New Guinea, the Philippines, Kenya, and parts of the Caribbean, is that Adventism as we normally express it is exactly what those people are looking for. But in other places the same message seems to fall flat.

I was sitting on the living-room couch in a split-level home. To my left were three or four stairs going up into the bedroom section of the house. The family three-year-old was trying to push a full-size baby carriage down the stairs. In the carriage was a gigantic stuffed animal of some sort. Halfway down the stairs the carriage tips, the animal falls out, tumbles down, and lies there in a heap on the ground. She takes care of the carriage, goes down the stairs, picks up the beast and comforts it.

I figured it was time for a comment, so I said, "I see you helped him out." To which she replied, "Oh no, he fell out all by himself!" Now what was happening here? We were speaking the same language, simple basic English, and yet we were not communicating at all. And that happens more often than we realize when we're dealing with secular people.

Such miscommunication can be embarrassing in the extreme. A missionary couple went upriver into the interior of New Guinea and attempted to reach a group of tree-dwellers who had had no previous contact with the outside world. The couple built a little dwelling in the area between several villages, ministered to the people's medical needs, and tried to understand their language and customs. Many of the people settled around them and seemed to appreciate what they were trying to do.

When they had reached a working knowledge of the language, the husband felt that it was time to attempt a presentation of the gospel. He went to the "longhouse" of one of the villages and told the story of Jesus. And he did it well. But the people showed little interest in the story of Jesus. They didn't much care what "the greatest Spirit" had done for some far-off tribe (the Jews) in a far-away land. The biblical message did not seem to apply to them in any way that they could understand until the missionary came to the story of how Judas

betrayed Jesus. Suddenly their full attention was riveted on him. They began to signal understanding and appreciation. It became clear that the hero of the story for them was not Jesus, but Judas!

Did the missionary tell the story wrong? No. The problem was that in this particular culture, the highest level of respect was reserved for the person who had the intestinal fortitude to betray his best friend. When the tree people heard the Gospel story, they were impressed with a man who could keep close company with a powerful figure like Jesus for three years, sharing his food, traveling together and finally betraying him all by himself without any of the other disciples ever suspecting! Such treachery exceeded all the examples they had honored through the years.

How does one present the Gospel to people like that? The local culture honored and revered behavior that was directly contrary to the gospel. The missionary's presentation of the gospel had been clear, powerful and convincing from the couple's perspective, but to the tree-dwellers the gospel story confirmed their own hideous practices. The gospel is not understood unless it comes to people in context. But where in that culture was there any useful analogy to the story of redemption?

Shortly after the couple's attempt to share the gospel, war broke out between two of the tribes they had been working with. The couple did their best to intervene in the conflict but to no avail. Finally, in frustration, they told the people that they would have to leave and go to other tribes who would not betray and kill each other. Because the people did not want to lose the economic benefits that came with the couple's presence (better axes, knives, mirrors, medicine, etc.) they promised to make peace. But how could anyone trust a peace pledge in an environment that glorified treachery?

The treacherous culture did, however, allow for an impressive and effective peace ceremony. Warriors from the two tribes faced each other in a clearing in the forest. A leading man from each tribe, in anguish and trembling, selected one of his own treasured baby boys and brought him to the most trusted man on the other side. Both babies and names were exchanged. Each member of the tribe that was willing to make peace came and laid their hands on the baby. Each baby became the "peace child." The tribe loved and guarded their peace child for as long as that child lived, they knew that they were safe from attack by the other tribe. Why? Because the other tribe would be afraid to harm one of their own. And after all, any man who would give his own son to his enemies was a man who could be trusted.

As long as the peace child lived, the two tribes would be at peace with one another. Following the peace child ceremony, all the members of both tribes exchanged gifts and names so that each person was considered a full member of the other tribe.

The couple observed all that had happened, and asked many questions. Here was the redemptive analogy they had been looking for. Now they could try to present the gospel once more. This time they told about how there was war between heaven and earth. But God so loved the world that He sent a "peace child." He gave His Son to the human "tribe". He lived among us. And because He died, was raised again, and lives forever, God has declared "peace" with the human race and every tribe and every nation that is willing to accept that "peace child" into their tribe can be at peace with God too. And while peace among the Sawi people lasted only as long as the peace child lived, permanent peace was available in Jesus, because He now lives forever. God was now on their side. He gives them new names to celebrate their new characters. As a result of this and other presentations that appealed effectively to the people in terms of their own cultural context, many of the tree-dwellers accepted Christ.

Communication happens something like this. Every person on this earth has what can be called "a horizon". In a physical sense, the horizon of each person in a room is the

four walls and the ceiling, with a bit of a view out the windows. That person's horizon is limited by the room in which they are. In a valley the horizon is limited by the trees and hills, etc. In flat country one can see even further. But if you can get on a mountain peak, your horizon expands further still.

Every human being has another kind of horizon. A horizon of the intellect, of the emotions, of experience. Our knowledge and experience tends to be limited by schooling, geography and family background. When we encounter another human being, it is at the points of common interest and common understanding that we can communicate most effectively. The chief value of education is that it is the intellectual equivalent of climbing a mountain. The more education you receive, the broader your horizon, and the greater your potential for influence on others in this world. You become able to communicate particular thoughts in a variety of different forms and expressions. What counts is not the form you choose to use but whether the intended meaning is clearly understood by the hearer.

A major purpose of this book is to broaden the reader's horizon to include an understanding of the horizon or world view of secular people. In dealing with the secular environment, Adventists face a problem similar to that of the couple in New Guinea. In

interacting with secularized people, we often encounter world views so distinct from ours that there is little or no meaningful interaction. What must take place at such times in order for communication to happen? One of the two individuals seeking to communicate must broaden their horizon so as to include the other. Whose responsibility should it be to broaden horizons in a witnessing context? "Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity." (DA 34) This statement suggests to me that some Adventists, at least, need to learn how to speak to secular people. As Emil Brunner has said, "The church nowadays speaks . . . primarily to 'heathen.'"¹ If that is the case, we need to learn how to talk to heathen.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Many Christians, however, object to the idea that secular people need to be met on their terms. "Isn't it the Holy Spirit's role to bridge the gap between people? Doesn't the Bible say that it isn't by might or by power but 'by My Spirit, says the Lord?'" The Holy Spirit

¹Quoted in Donald Bloesch, The Christian Witness in a Secular Age (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968), p.45.

is, of course, essential to all effective outreach work. To attempt to carry out any of the suggestions in this book without the guidance and support of the Spirit would be absolute foolishness. (Part Two will focus in detail on the spiritual component of outreach to secular people.) Not only does the Holy Spirit aid Christians in sharing their faith, He is also quite capable of communicating directly to any human being regardless of background! Rom 1:18-20, however, indicates that although the Spirit's work is universal, it is generally quite limited in content. Scripture and experience suggest that, as a rule, the Holy Spirit does not function as a substitute for human effort (Rom 10:14).

Let's take Scripture as an example. Is the Bible based on golden plates that came down out of Heaven? Word for word? No, Scripture was given in the time, place, language, and culture of specific human beings. The knowledge, experience, and background of the Biblical writers was respected. Paul, with his "Ph.D.", expresses God's revelation to him in a different way than does Peter, the fisherman. John writes in simple, clear, almost childlike Greek. On the other hand, the author of Hebrews has the most complex and literary Greek in all the New Testament with the exception of the first four verses of Luke. In Matthew, you have someone who understands the Jewish mind. He continually shows how the life of Jesus fulfills

the Old Testament Scriptures with which the Jews were familiar (see, for example, Matt 1:22,23; 2:5,6,15,17,18). He uses Jewish terms without explanation. Mark, on the other hand, reaches out to the Gentile mind. Jewish terms are explained to his non-Jewish audience (compare, for example, Mark 14:12 with Matt 26:17). The Bible writers constantly keep their audiences in mind. Scripture is an illustration of the fact that God expects us, and is even Himself willing, to reach out to people where they are; to speak their language.

Perhaps even more significant than the unique writing styles of the human authors of Scripture is the fact that God even adjusted the content of visions in order to more effectively communicate to the inspired prophet. The most striking example is in the book of Daniel. There, visions of similar content were given to two people from completely different backgrounds. To Nebuchadnezzar, the heathen king, God portrays the future world empires by means of an idol (Daniel 2)! This Nebuchadnezzar could appreciate, since he saw the nations of the world as bright and shining counterparts of the gods that they worshipped. For Daniel, on the other hand, the nations of the world were like vicious, ravenous beasts who were hurting his people (see chapter 7). God spoke to each of them in language they could understand and appreciate. God meets people where they are.

It is of interest that a century ago, New Testament Greek was thought to be unique. It was quite different from both the classical Greek of Plato and Aristotle and the Greek spoken today. Some scholars thought that the New Testament had been given in some special kind of Greek, perhaps a "heavenly language." Then someone stumbled across an ancient garbage dump in Egypt. It was filled with the remnants of love letters, bills, receipts, and other products of everyday life in the first century. To the shock of many, these papyrus fragments were written in the same language and style as the books of the New Testament! The New Testament was not written in a heavenly language, nor in the cultured language of the traditional elite, but in the everyday language of everyday people. God meets people where they are! The Sacred Word was conditioned by the cultural frailty of human beings.

This is clearly articulated in *Selected Messages, vol 1*, pp. 19-22.

The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. These men were inspired of the Holy Spirit. . . .

The Scriptures were given to men, not in a continuous chain of unbroken utterances, but piece by piece through successive generations, as God in His providence saw **a fitting opportunity** to impress man at sundry times and divers places. . . .

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . .

The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought.

There is an even greater example of how God chooses to meet people where they are. When God Himself came down in human flesh, he did not appear as a twentieth-century African or a medieval Frenchman. He became a Jew, a first-century Jew, living in Palestine, who talked in terms appropriate to the local language and culture, who got dirty, hungry, and tired, who even at times became frustrated, angry, and sad (see Mark 1:40,41; 3:4,5; 6:6; 10:13,14). God didn't choose to send us a Superstar, but one just like ourselves. The incarnation of Jesus demonstrates the depth of God's commitment to meeting human beings where they are in their specific time, place, language, and circumstances.

It is this incarnational principle that motivated Paul in his missionary endeavors. Paul's clearest reflection on the matter, 1 Cor 9:19-23, is also a mandate for secular ministry. Paul tells us that it requires considerable sacrifice to reach out to people who are different. The main reason we have little success with secular people is because we haven't chosen to make that sacrifice.

"Though I am free from everybody,

I make myself everybody's slave,
in order that I might win all the more.

To the Jews,

I become like a Jew

in order that I might win the Jews.

To those who are under the law,

I become like one under the law,

not being myself under the law,

in order that I might win those

who are under the law.

To those apart from law,
 I become like one apart from law,
 not being myself apart from the law of God
 but rather under the law of Christ,
 In order that I might gain those who are apart from law.
 To the weak
 I become weak
 in order that I might win the weak.
 I become all things to everybody
 in order that by all possible means I might save some.
 I do all these things for the sake of the Gospel
 in order that I might become a partaker in these things."

1 Cor 9:19-23

Paul gives in this passage a mandate for secular ministry. A mandate for reaching out to other horizons, for learning how to speak to people where they are. And the bonus is that if we are willing to make the necessary sacrifices, there is an excellent chance that many more people will come to Christ than would otherwise do so!

If God is so concerned to meet people where they are, why did Jesus seem to deliberately confuse people in the giving of His parables? (Mark 4:11,12) The answer is that Jesus spoke in parables because of the resistance of the people to His message. The parables were a means of bypassing their defense mechanisms to introduce a seed of truth. In later life when circumstances altered their resistance to Jesus, they might remember the parable and grasp its significance. Thus, it was never Jesus ultimate purpose to be obscure, but in

many cases it was the only way to get through to some people without bringing His whole mission into jeopardy.

To Finish the Work

There is, perhaps, an even greater reason to learn how to reach secular people than that the Scriptures compel us to it. *It may also be the key to finishing the work.* In the book *Desire of Ages*, pages 31-38, there is a chapter entitled, "In the Fulness of the Time". In that chapter the author explains that God spent hundreds of years preparing the world for the coming of Christ. He was working in the Greek world, in the Roman world, and in the Jewish world, preparing people's minds philosophically for the coming of Christ.

This description accords with the realities of history. In all of known human history the era of the most radical religious change occurred in the first millennium B.C. During this period people in general moved from a devotion to what we would call heathen religions (where religion was associated with the land and the forces of nature) to the philosophical or world religions we are familiar with today. All the great religions of today either had their origin between 800-200 B.C. (Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism,

Confucianism, Taoism) or are directly dependant on those that did (Christianity, Islam, Sikhism). These religions displaced the primal religions in all but isolated spots.

Ellen White well describes the restlessness that accompanied this great shift in human relation to God: "At this time the systems of heathenism were losing their hold upon the people. Men were weary of pageant and fable. They longed for a religion that could satisfy the heart" (DA 32). Ellen White was so impressed with the importance of this great shift in human religion that she asserted that some of these great "pagan" religionists and philosophers had received the "spirit of inspiration" from God! (DA 33)

Her statements become exceptionally interesting when one discovers that those who study religion today are finding in the current secularization process an almost exact counterpart to the Hellenization ("making Greek") of the ancient world--the very process that Ellen White was describing in that chapter. Hellenization prepared the way for Jesus by creating a world in which there was one basic language; Greek, and one overriding culture; Hellenism (the culture originating in classical Greece). In such a context, the gospel could spread like wildfire. If secularization is the modern counterpart of Hellenization, could it be God's instrument to prepare the modern world for the second coming? We are told to expect that before Jesus comes the gospel will be preached to all nations (Matt 24:14; Mark

13:10). It would certainly aid that process if all nations were influenced by one basic language and culture. And it's happening. There is one major language in the world today, English. There is one increasingly dominant culture, the secular culture originating in the nations of the so-called First World. Secular culture is sweeping the world through the visual and print media. One of the few countries that has resisted the secular tide fairly successfully is Iran. And there are already signs that Iran's resistance may not last long.

I shared some of these things with a student from Africa. His response was, "This is of no interest to me. It's irrelevant to my situation, that's a Western problem." About six months after he got back to Africa, I received a letter from him. It was one of those letters that I put in a special file I label "Personal Encouragement". I put into that file the kinds of letters you want to read over and over again when you're feeling down. He wrote, "When I got back to my country they made me pastor of the church in the capital city because of my master's degree. I have 26 Ph.D.s in my church and everything you talked about is happening right here. Thank God for Andrews University."

In the so-called third world, the secularization process that has taken us 200 years may take only 20 years. My recent trip to Africa confirmed this suspicion. With television and all the influences of Western media and magazines, etc., secularization is sweeping in so quickly

that third world thought leaders hardly have time to blink. Could this be part of God's plan to finish the work rapidly? If so then the challenge to SDAs is very clear. If we can learn how to reach secular people, we'll soon be able to reach just about anybody if things continue the way they are now. This topic, therefore, is of CRITICAL importance to the Adventist Church today.