

# **Present Truth in the Real World**

By Jon Paulien

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **An Adventist Problem**

#### **Diminishing Returns**

Given all that has been said in the first chapter one might still legitimately ask the question, "Do Adventists need to study this topic? Surely a church growing as rapidly as the Seventh-day Adventist Church doesn't need an overhaul of its evangelistic methods." This is the point at which reality can become quite painful. I want to make it clear, therefore, that I write this book as a committed member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I love this church--it's not just because I work for it, it is my life. It has brought Christ to me. Nothing in this chapter is intended to tear down or discourage. But we must also live in reality. And the reality is that although Harvest 90 was tremendously successful in many places (there were a total of two and a half million baptisms around the world from 1985-1990), it is not the whole story. We need to hear the whole story.

Reaching the world with the gospel involves two different types of approach. One of these is growing the church; increasing the number of members. Bringing the gospel to the world is a sizable task. It requires an "army" of considerable size. Growing the church as rapidly as possible helps to build such an army. We have been quite successful at growing the church. As I write, our membership is approaching seven million around the world. But we have been far less successful at the other type of approach; reaching the unreached, approaching people effectively who have never heard the gospel. The very strategies that may help to grow the church may cause us to neglect people groups that are resistant to the gospel because they seem to require much effort with little evident result.

In the area of reaching the unreached we're having, at best, limited success. Adventist work is growing rapidly in parts of the less-developed world, and in some immigrant sub-cultures in North America. But we are making very little impact on the vast majority of people in this world. While Adventist work is exploding in countries like New Guinea, the Philippines, and Jamaica, there are also thirty-one countries like Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan where there are few Adventists, if any, and no organized body of believers.

There are 17,000 distinct groups of people in the world who have never heard the story of salvation, who have no Bible, no church, and no Christians witnessing among them. There are 2300 groups of more than a million people each that do not have a single Adventist among them, much less an active congregation. While "Global Mission" is beginning to focus our attention on this reality, the work has only begun.

Although the United States is nominally a Christian nation, Adventist work is growing in only a few population segments. For example, during one year that I pastored in New York City, I held meetings 3-4 nights a week for virtually the whole year. I was targeting white males in particular and was thrilled to baptize about twelve with God's help. Then I got on the phone with a friend of mine, who was a pastor in a neighboring church in the Northeastern Conference, which specializes in ministry to African-Americans. I had helped him that summer with a three-week tent effort that resulted in the baptism of eighty-three people. When he found out that I worked all year to baptize just twelve he jokingly said, "What's wrong with you?" Was something wrong with me? Perhaps not. After all, I had helped him with his tent effort as well. I began to share with him how groups of people are

not equally receptive to the gospel. Suddenly, it became real quiet at the other end of the line.

He said, "I just realized something."

I said, "What's that?"

He replied, "I just realized that we baptized 83 people and not a single one is an American."

I said, "You see, you're beginning to face the same problems in your community. It's just easier to ignore the problem as long as you still have some receptive groups joining the church."

It doesn't matter if a person is black, Hispanic, or Asian, after a generation or two in New York City, a decent income, and a nice home in the suburbs, he or she is as impervious to the Gospel as any white person in North America. This is underlined by the results of a study of Hispanic evangelism in Southern California. The Hispanic element of the church there doubled every three to four years through the seventies. The study sought to discover what methods might be of general application. Instead it was discovered that over a twenty-year period not a single third or fourth generation Hispanic was baptized, unless they were

already married to an Adventist or had some other connection with the church. The Church was baptizing only immigrants and the children of immigrants. It is, therefore, clear that even in some of the most receptive sectors of society, our impact is surprisingly limited.

That impact is, of course, even more limited in other sectors. A recent evangelistic innovation that has garnered some success is Revelation Seminars. A massive attempt was made, therefore, to reach large numbers of people in a suburb of a major city. The suburb had a population of 60,000 and an average income of \$100,000 a year, it was a prototype "Yuppie" neighborhood. A hundred thousand dollars was spent on advertising and 40 pastors were brought in to hold Revelation Seminars on nearly every block! The result? A combined total of eight people showed up the first night!

Contact was made with the marketing department at Andrews University in an attempt to figure out what went wrong. With help from the Donnelly Marketing Corporation it was discovered that there are 47 socio-economic groups in North America; from the richest of the rich to the poorest of the poor. Everyone belongs to one of those 47 groups--Madison Avenue has you pegged. If they can put one of these 47 labels on you, they can tell you what kind of car you drive, what kind of toothpaste you use, even the foods that you prefer for

breakfast. It's uncanny--but they can do that. That's how much we are like sheep. But the most interesting discovery for our purposes was that among those 47 socio-economic groups, only four or five Anglo clusters respond significantly to Revelation seminars (another five to seven minority clusters also respond well). Out of the 60,000 people in that suburban community only twelve fit into one of those four or five groups. Eight out of twelve is a tremendous response to advertising!

It is not my intention to criticize traditional methods of evangelism. Most have functioned as long as they did because they were very effective. In fact, quite recently a massive effort involving some 60 Revelation Seminars in Seattle, Washington, a highly secular metropolis, drew almost 3000 people. Methods that are working with a given target audience should not be abandoned in the process of targeting other audiences. If what you are currently doing is effective, continue with it.

But in North America we are clearly facing a very serious barrier to reaching most segments of our society with the gospel. And that barrier is a problem of horizons. There are people out there who are not responding to the Adventist message the way most

Americans used to respond. There are people for whom what we have to say does not relate to life as they currently experience it, we just don't seem to make sense.

### **Mistargeting the Message**

A further reason that Adventists have difficulty reaching secular people is the way we present our message. For example, the centerpoint of many traditional Adventist evangelistic series is the Sabbath-Sunday issue. I have seen the issue placed as early as the close of the very first week. That strategy has been effective in many places. But what kind of signal does it send to the secular person? "These people are into issues that are totally irrelevant." The issue is certainly not irrelevant in the eyes of God or of those who are in Christ. But to secular people there couldn't be a more irrelevant issue than whether Saturday or Sunday is the right day to go to church. They aren't even sure why anyone would go to church at all, so a debate over the right day to go to church sends a signal to the secular community that the meetings are not worthy of their time and attention.

Adventists are also quite interested in what took place in the year 1844 AD. But secular people very much live in the here and now. If you hold meetings on the significance of what

happened in 1844, they will consider it quite irrelevant. Again, the issue is not irrelevant in itself, but it is certainly is not relevant to where these people are. The message that we're used to giving appeals to an increasingly limited audience.

Lest this appear totally heretical, it is necessary to remember a little lady named Ellen White, who at the Minneapolis General Conference in 1888 warned Adventists not to be afraid of "present truth." What did she mean by "present truth"? Present truth is that aspect of truth which is particularly relevant at a given time and place. The reason I have written this book is because I believe that within the Seventh-day Adventist belief system there is much that is "present truth," messages that can communicate with power to secular people. Messages that can get a whole community excited. We need to better understand what those messages are. (In the first chapter of Part Three I will make some suggestions of areas where Adventist belief is uniquely well positioned to make an impact in the secular world.) But while our message system may contain elements that appeal to secular people, it is not self-evident in most places.

I do not want to be misunderstood. Traditional Adventist evangelism is built on a long tradition and I certainly do not suggest abandoning it. There are many types of people



in the world. In parts of the third world and some immigrant cultures in North America, 19th-Century themes and approaches are working just fine. They should be continued. But in so doing we need to realize that we are inadvertently targeting certain types of people and ignoring others. Without realizing it we may be telling secular people that they are not welcome among us, that our message is not relevant to them. Where it is clear that large segments of a population remain unreached, approaches more compatible with the mindset of the intended audience need to be tried. This book is not a plea to abandon traditional methods but to supplement them with new approaches that will welcome those who are not appealed to by the time-honored approaches of past and present.

### **The Medium is the Message**

A further barrier placed in the way of secular people is the group-oriented approach of public meetings. The group approach is very efficient in terms of time and energy and has served us well for many years. But secular people are rarely reached in groups, they are usually reached best in one-to-one settings. This should not surprise us. A study of Lake Union SDA Churches by Gottfried Oosterwal (published in 1976) indicated that 85-90% of

all baptisms come primarily as a result of personal contact with a relative, friend, or pastor. Public meetings, Adventist media, literature, and journals are considered, by those baptized, to play a significant role in less than one out of four cases. Secular people in particular are even less likely to respond to a group-oriented approach. Thus, we cannot expect *It is Written* or *Voice of Prophecy* to reach secular people by themselves. Significant impact in the secular world is largely the result of personal effort.

When it comes to spiritual things secular people tend also to avoid the lecture approach. They prefer to question and explore and ask troubling questions. They aren't the kind of people that come to you and say, "What does your church believe? Give me a list of beliefs and I'll sign the line at the bottom." When secular people decide to become Seventh-day Adventists, they prefer to have a part in their conversion. They want to negotiate their way into the faith. They may say, "Well, all right, this is what you're saying, but would it be OK if I express it this way?" Or they may say, "Is it OK if I don't see this item as all that critical to my personal walk with God?" They want to own their faith.

I'll never forget a lovely couple that I baptized in New York City. Just before their scheduled baptism they looked nervous and said, "You know, you've been really great in

working with us and stuff, but there's something that really bothers us and we don't know quite how to tell you."

I said, "Well, what is it? Come on, you can tell me."

They said, "These baptismal vows, we read them and we believe all these things, but, you gotta understand, all of our relatives are going to be there and if you read these things just the way they're written, they're going to think we've moved to outer space or something! Do you think you could, maybe, rewrite them a little bit?"

I didn't tell my President or my board about this, but the Lord impressed me to go home and do just that. I wrote that the Seventh-day Adventist message is based on two great insights: how to relate to God, and how to relate to others. In terms of relating to God, I talked about what Christ had done for us and how, as a result, we gladly serve Him with all of our hearts. If He asks us to worship on Sabbath, we worship on Sabbath. If He asks us to tithe, we tithe. If He asks us to live healthfully, we consider it a fun way to respond to what God has done for us.

I continued by saying that we also respond to Christ's marvelous work for us by living lives of principle in our relations with others. Such principles as modesty, economy, and faithfulness illustrate the self-sacrificing love of Christ to the world. As I shared these re-focused vows that Sabbath morning, I kept a close eye on some dear old German ladies that had been members for sixty years, anticipating the worst. And after the service was over, I saw this one lady coming right toward me, just the one I was expecting! As I braced myself she said to me, "Pastor, I've been in this church 60 years and I've never heard vows like that before. That's the first time in my whole life that I've really understood why I'm a Seventh-day Adventist!" And I said, "Praise God." (And thanked Him privately also.)

Now I'm not suggesting that you should redo the vows for every occasion. And if you do, be careful that you get them right! My point is that when secular people come in, they want to have a part in their conversion. They like to discuss and negotiate, which is a different ball game than we're accustomed to. Such a process certainly happens more effectively on a one-to-one basis than in a large crowd. Adventists tend to be lecture-oriented but secular people are more responsive when someone takes the time to listen.

## **Signals We Don't Mean to Send**

Another problematic area for reaching people of a secular mindset is worship. Though it may sound harsh to write it, the typical Seventh-day Adventist worship service invites a secular person not to come back. Did you ever bring a neighbor on visitor's day in your church only to wish you hadn't?

Allow me to illustrate the problem. Let us say that you have a nice home in a nice neighborhood, but your neighbors move away and new neighbors move in. They seem to be decent people. Your kids become friends and as a result you get involved together in some community activities. So you're a bit shocked the day you find out that they're Buddhists.

Some time later your neighbor comes over and says, "You know, you guys are really great neighbors. We've never had neighbors like you. We really appreciate that. My wife and I were thinking that there's something you need to know. Something that's really central in our lives and that is our faith. And we were just wondering, would you be willing to come with us to the Buddhist temple next weekend?" And, of course, being a good Christian you say, "Well, sure, sure, I'll be happy to." But your spouse's reaction later on is, "You promised WHO? WHAT? NO WAY!"

Let us suppose that your spouse finally agrees to go through with it. What is going on in your mind as you drive to the temple? No doubt you would express your anxieties to each other. "I wonder what it's going to be like? Do you think they might make us chant, you know, get up and dance around going 'awh-wah-wah.' Wow, that would be embarrassing! I've never chanted before in my whole life. I wouldn't know where to start." Then your spouse says, "What if they take up a collection and offer it to an idol or something. Should we participate or should we just act like it's not happening?" And you add, "What if they have a card at the door to sign, you know, and we get on some kind of Buddhist mailing list? Or a priest comes by Monday night to give us Buddha studies or whatever."

What would your preference be at that moment? To turn around and go home, right? But that would destroy your good relationship with your neighbors so that is not an option. What is the best you could hope for? Wouldn't it be to go in to the temple quietly, sit in a far corner, look around, see what happens, and when the service is over, make a quick and quiet getaway? And hope that nobody noticed you, right? But suppose it doesn't work that way. Right in the middle of the service someone says, "Would all the visitors please stand?" Wouldn't that be embarrassing? There you are in the Buddhist temple, looking like new converts just ripe for the picking, too embarrassed to move.

Can you begin to understand why secular people don't usually feel at home in Adventist churches? What is the first thing we do? As soon as they come in the door, they are expected to sign the guest book or a guest card. One of the big things secular people fear about church is pressure for commitment. They don't want to be cornered into signing something that they might regret later on. They certainly don't want to be embarrassed by being forced to stand up in front of everybody and be the object of attention of a room full of strangers.

Singing a hymn can also be a real barrier. Imagine everyone around you singing at the top of their voices and you have never even heard of the song. There are few things more embarrassing than being in a group that is united in doing one thing and you are unable to participate.

Secular people also intensely dislike manipulation. They fear, for example, being "conned" into give something in the offering plate when they would really prefer not to. Their settled view of churches is, "All they want is my money." Before they know it the plate is coming by, and they feel that all eyes are on them. Not long ago I asked my wife, an Adventist for almost twenty years, why she always put a dollar from her personal "mad-money" in every offering plate, since it had already been tithed, etc., as part of the family's budget. Her

response was that she feared the embarrassment of being seen not placing anything in the plate! If a pastor's wife of long standing is strongly affected by such pressures, how deep an impact the offering ritual must make on those not accustomed to being in church!

If there is one thing above all others that secular people fear in a media-saturated age, it is boredom. Is it realistic to think that a typical Seventh-day Adventist church service would be of much interest to a secular person the first time they walk in? Would it speak to anything of serious concern to them? If the worship services in your church do not hold the attention of your youth, they will bore the secular visitor as well.

The reality is that secular people are almost totally insulated from Christianity. They don't read their Bibles or listen to sermons. They don't read tracts that someone may press into their hands. If they see a bumper sticker that says, "Honk if you love Jesus" they don't feel like praying or repenting. They just say, "There goes another nut with bumper stickers!" They don't watch Christian television unless Jimmy Swaggert is making another spectacular confession. The reality is that secular people, perhaps 70% of Americans, are almost totally insulated from everything that we consider normal. When you really get to know them, you realize they are not at home with these things. I am not suggesting that we have to change



everything before we start to reach out to secular people. But we might as well realize that the typical Adventist worship service will not be attractive to secular people.

But don't take my word for it. If you want to know why secular people are not comfortable in most churches, just ask a few unchurched people why they don't go to church. If they feel free to tell you the truth, their answers will usually fall into one or more of the four categories described above.

I occasionally get to preach in a Congregational church. I search through my notebook of more than a hundred sermons on general topics and find that there aren't very many that I can preach in that church without a lot of revision. As Adventists we have our own in-house language. We have our own special way of reasoning to a conclusion. Just the thought of ten secular people walking in and sitting down in the church would drive the average Adventist pastor to distraction. What do you say? And how do you go about saying it? Seventh-day Adventists are certainly concerned about finishing the work. But if we are serious about it, we will need to learn how to speak to secular people.