

PART TWO

KEEPING FAITH IN A SECULAR WORLD

CHAPTER FIVE

NOT FOR EVERYONE

From *Present Truth in the Real World*

By Jon Paulien

Biblical Examples

Our look at the impact of a secular society on Adventist faith forces us to take a careful look at the issue of how one maintains faith in a secular world. How do you maintain a strong relationship with God when your neighbors, yours friends, and your family are all pursuing lives directed primarily by secular interests? Although there was no such thing as a full-fledged secular environment anywhere on earth in Biblical times, the narratives of how several biblical figures responded to radical faith challenges may help us develop an answer to the above question.

Daniel attended the "University of Babylon," and became Prime Minister in the Babylonian court. The culture and religion of the Babylonian court was not only totally foreign to Daniel, it was also extremely hostile. In Prophets and Kings, pages 479-490, Ellen White has some fascinating suggestions on how Daniel maintained his faith in that challenging situation. A similar situation to Daniel's is that of Joseph in Egypt. The basic circumstances are the same. Joseph stands alone in a foreign court. Patriarchs and Prophets, pages 213-223, wrestles with how Joseph maintained his faith in prison as well as in Pharaoh's court.

Ellen G. White cites Enoch (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pages 84-89) as a particularly interesting example of how to respond to challenges to one's faith. Enoch spent half his time in the mountains and the other half in the valleys and cities. What was he doing in the mountains? He was recharging his spiritual batteries so that he could come out and deal effectively with the everyday world. He repeated this cycle over and over again. We noticed in Part One that people who travel a lot and live public lives are far more likely to be secular than those who live stationary, secluded lives. Since being a hermit is not a live option for most of us, it becomes necessary for public people to carve out periods of seclusion where

they can become re-centered on God. Enoch was creating what I like to call "derived seclusion." He was a public person in the valleys; he was standing alone for God in a very godless age. He found it needful from time to time to separate himself from that society to restore his spiritual vision. Enoch moved back and forth between two ages. He was a person who was able to live in two different horizons at the same time. In his particular case it was a mountain horizon and a valley horizon. In his double life Enoch becomes a model for secular ministry.

Radical Conservatism

At the risk of being misunderstood I will try to put a label on Enoch's style of ministry. The ideal philosophy of life for those interested in reaching secular people for Christ is what I call "radical conservatism." I realize that the term "radical" may offend some people, but I use it for lack of a better word to describe the kinds of steps inspiration suggests are necessary in order for us to reach out to other cultures. Radical-conservatism sounds like an absolute contradiction in terms, doesn't it? Actually the Bible is full of apparent contradictions in which both parts of the equation are true and necessary. For

example, Christ is 100% human, yet He is also 100% Divine. In terms of pure logic that is an impossibility, but it is true because the Bible clearly teaches both sides of the equation. We're saved by faith apart from works, yet we're not saved without works. For centuries logical people have tried without success to resolve this tension in the Scriptures, but without logical success. If you concentrate on faith, you may find yourself overlooking some passage on works. If you concentrate on getting your performance act together, you may find yourself boasting more in your accomplishment than in what Christ has done for you. Life is filled with constant battles of this kind.

It is certain that such battles will only escalate when you seek to reach out to secular people. The only way that a committed Seventh-day Adventist can effectively function in the secular world is through a lifestyle of radical conservatism. The radical has to do with how we reach out to secular people; the conservative has to do with how we maintain our faith in the course of that outreach. This part of the book focuses on the conservative part, how to conserve and even build up faith in a secular environment. The next part explores the radical aspect, how to effectively reach people who find your world to be totally incomprehensible.

At this point we need to return to 1 Corinthians 9 because that is the key Biblical text for our topic. Paul was an example of a radical-conservative. The radical part comes in verses 19-23.

"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."

No doubt it was statements like this that got Paul in a lot of trouble from time to time (cf. Acts 21:17-21; 2 Cor 1,2; 2 Pet 3:16). And I must admit the implications of this passage are as challenging to me as they may be to you.

Paul offers in this passage a strategy for winning more souls, for reaching more kinds of people. Why does Paul do it? "For the sake of the Gospel," "to win all the more," as many souls as possible. Anyway, you look at it, it is a radical strategy. I wish Paul were here so I could ask him in modern terms, "Paul, what did you mean about 'being all things to everybody?' How does a Seventh-day Adventist Christian relate to such a text in the contemporary world?"

As I was discussing this text in class one day a student raised his hand. His name was Clifton Davis, a converted Hollywood actor whom I grew to appreciate a great deal as a human being. When I acknowledged his signal, he said, "I just went to visit one of my old friends in California. You have to understand that in much of Hollywood society, drugs function in much the same way that coffee does elsewhere in American society. It sets the context for relationship, it fuels the conversation. So this friend invites me to join him in the back room behind his operation. Like so many times before he offered me a reefer

(marijuana cigarette). Would Paul have advised me to take it? What does 'all things to everyone' really mean? You have to understand that to refuse an offer like that, given our past relationship, was to set up a serious barrier between us. Would Paul have accepted?"

(Clifton hadn't.)

My purpose in mentioning this story is to illustrate how following Paul's counsel will sometimes put the Christian in delicate circumstances. Given the spiritual danger that lurks everywhere in the secular world, why would a Christian place himself or herself in even greater danger in the attempt to reach out to others trapped in that secular way of life? Paul's answer is clear: "I do all these things for the sake of the Gospel." 1 Cor 9:19-23. The gospel is the message that Jesus Christ did not remain in the isolation of His comfortable heavenly neighborhood, waiting for us to rescue ourselves. He came down, became one of us, reached out to us in our own world, a world that was hostile to everything He stood for. He thereby did for us what we could never have done for ourselves. When Paul acts "for the sake of the gospel," he seeks to bring to the lost the great blessings which Christ had brought to him. In light of the great salvation he had already received, he is compelled to go. Thus, in 1 Cor 9 he calls on Christians to follow his example of reaching out to the lost

in "radical" ways.

I use the term "radical conservatism" because it illustrates well the tension that outreach to secular society creates in the life of a true Christian. On the one hand is the critical need, through faith, devotions, and a consistent Christian lifestyle, to get our own spiritual house in order. A settled focus in that direction often attracts the label "conservative" or "right wing." On the other hand, when we go out to do secular ministry we will inevitably be facing difficult choices, visiting places, and doing things that might make conservative Christians uncomfortable. It is hard to do that without being labeled "liberal" or "left wing." I illustrate this tension by means of the term "radical conservatism."

It is inevitable that the person seeking to minister to secular people within an Adventist context will be misunderstood. An excellent example is the television ministry "Faith for Today" which produces the Adventist program Lifestyle Magazine. Faith for Today has great difficulty raising funds from Adventists because the program is aimed not at the Adventist audience, but at a more secular audience. Lifestyle Magazine seeks to approach secular people where they are. In so doing, however, Faith for Today often finds it difficult not to alienate its own financial support base.

The conservative reaction against secular ministry must, however, be taken seriously.

The crucial point of this section of the book is that reaching out to people in the secular environment is an activity that can place the Christian at risk. I must level with you on this point, and I intend to level with you throughout this book. Ministry in a secular context is dangerous to your spiritual health. Because of this I must make clear at this point: it is not for everybody. Not every Christian should seek to make a major difference for Christ in radical ministry to a secular world. Many Adventists had better stay "in house" for their soul's sake and leave it at that. Why bother to write this book then? Because thousands of SDAs have felt the call to make a difference in the secular world, to make a difference among secular friends, neighbors, and family. And because the Bible makes clear that it needs to be done.

Secular ministry can be a very frightening thing. Every day in the secular world you are faced with unpleasant choices. And they are rarely easy choices. I absolutely hate coffee; the few times in my life when I--whether by accident or knowingly--have drunk some coffee, I got a headache almost instantly and it stayed with me in each case for a long time. So, I don't touch the stuff by choice--anytime, anyplace. However, I also realize that

coffee has become the fuel of secular relationships. And I know that at times refusing a cup of coffee has created a barrier in a relationship that I was never fully able to overcome. I have met people who are more skilled than I am at declining things so graciously that it doesn't seem to cause any trouble, but even they confess that knowing what to do in such situations is always a challenge. Life is simplest when we can choose between good and evil. But in the secular world we are more often faced with choices between two evils or two goods. Such times require tough and courageous decisions.

A rather scary Biblical example is the story of Esther. Please do not confuse Esther with Daniel. The circumstances were similar, but their responses were quite different. While I can understand that you sometimes have to alter Biblical stories a little to protect the innocent, I am a little disappointed that I had to read the book of Esther in the Hebrew before I realized that she didn't become queen as the result of a beauty contest. The Hebrew clearly says that on her contest date she left the house of the virgins to see the king. The next morning instead of going back to the house of the virgins, she goes to the house of the concubines. Do you follow what was going on there? Esther earned the queenship by a one night stand with the king--she was better than anybody else in bed. She was

probably beautiful also, but the king could have determined that without spending the night.

Did she maintain all the standards of the "church" while living as the queen?

Definitely not. How do we know? Mordecai had commanded her not to reveal her faith to anyone in the court. And the king is surprised to learn many years later that she was a Jew. You could not practice the Jewish lifestyle in the court of Persia without being known any more than Daniel could. You would eat differently, as Daniel did. You would live differently. You would keep the Sabbath. Esther wasn't keeping Sabbaths, she wasn't eating as a Jew eats. In a practical sense she had given up the faith. But perhaps the most troubling thing about it is that there is not a word in the book of Esther that condemns her for doing so. Instead, she is described as being in the place where God wanted her to be when the time was right. I don't know how this affects you, but it was some pretty heavy stuff the first time I noticed these things.

Now I am certainly not writing this book in order to tell everyone to go out and do what Esther did. Please don't misunderstand me. The opposite is the case. The point I am making here is that God sometimes has agendas that we don't fully understand. Many

SDAs are very critical of Clifton Davis for returning to Hollywood, and exposing himself to the dangers there. But when I see the example of Esther, I have to confess that sometimes God is bigger than we are, and more tolerant than we are. And God can sometimes use methods that we couldn't use to reach people that we couldn't reach. I find all this most challenging in my own experience. I am a very conservative Adventist by nature--I don't even let my daughters play with Barbie dolls although all their friends do. That's conservative, wouldn't you say? There are reasons. Research indicates that an obsession with Barbie dolls in childhood is probably tied in with low self-esteem in teen-age girls, after all nobody is anatomically constructed quite like Barbie. Kids growing up with Barbie as an ideal have trouble being satisfied with the "imperfections" of their own bodies. And that can create other problems in later life. I believe that everyone that God made is beautiful in at least some way. I protest at anything that makes us rebel against the way God made us.

I'm a conservative guy. My family does not have a television in the house, we haven't had one for the nearly twenty years my wife and I have been married. I am probably going to ridiculous lengths to make this point because I don't want to be understood as destroying

the foundations of Adventism, that is the opposite of what I intend. But we Adventists need to broaden our vision, we need to understand that God is BIGGER than our narrow horizon. And that God can use people, and use methods, that we would not even dream of at times. In 1 Cor 9 Paul is outlining something very, very radical. We must be extremely careful in the implementation of his counsel. But Part Three of this book offers some tested ideas on how to implement Paul's counsel within an Adventist context and with the result of reaching greater numbers of people.

The purpose of this part of the book, however, is not to understand the radical part of Paul's counsel, but to get at the kinds of conservative attitudes and practices that are mandatory to the success of secular outreach. It is spiritually dangerous to read 1 Cor 9:19-23 out of context. In verses 24-27 Paul makes it crystal clear that secular ministry is as dangerous to spirituality as anything gets. Verse 24-25:

"Don't you know that those who run in the stadium all run,
 but only one gets the prize.
 So, run, that you might attain.
 But, everyone who strives athletically,
 exercises self-control.
 Athletes do it to receive a perishable crown
 but we are striving for a crown that will never fade."

Now the perishable crown Paul was talking about was the laurel wreath that was placed over the heads of the winners at the Olympics--it was the ancient version of a gold medal. "All these athletes," Paul is saying, "are knocking themselves silly for a gold medal. That is all they will get. But the Christian is striving for a medal that will never tarnish--a medal that will last for eternity." What is Paul's point? If athletes can exercise self-control to such an extent for a gold medal, what should we, who are looking for an eternal crown, be doing to make sure of our own salvation? So alongside the radical Paul places the conservative. You cannot separate the two or secular ministry will not work.

Paul presses the point home in verses 26-27:

"Therefore,
 I run,
 but not uncertainly.
 I box,
 but not as one who is beating the air.
 So I give my body a black-eye
 and make it my slave,
 lest having preached to others
 I myself should become disqualified
 for the prize."

Paul must have enjoyed sports, for they often illustrated his points. In this case he is

running and boxing, but he isn't just shadow-boxing or running in circles, it all has a purpose. In his outreach to the world of his day Paul became "all things to everybody"--a very radical concept. He realized, however, that it was a dangerous thing to do. He realized that evangelism is a two-way street. You not only share, but you also learn. When you are dealing with secular people, there is a lot of give and take and you will be changed by it. Though you may never drink a cup of coffee, you will still be changed by continual encounters with secular people for evangelistic purposes. Paul recognized that and said it was essential that those who go out to minister in this way see to their own house, their own body, and their own soul. They need to go into rigorous training, much as Olympic athletes do.

Two Models of Ministry

On account of the dangers in secular ministry it is not surprising that the Bible describes two major models of ministry. Secular-type ministry is not for everyone. There are many people whose soul is at too great a risk to try it. If you are one of those people, read what I have written here, try to understand what's going on, but do not feel obligated

to go out and do exactly what Paul did. Certainly not what Esther did!

The two Biblical models for ministry can be found in Matt 5:13-16. Verse 14 uses a figure of speech to describe the model of ministry with which Adventists are most familiar:

"You are the light of the world; a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid." A hilltop city is very visible, it is beautiful, and people are attracted to it: "Let's go visit that place. Let's see what's going on there." The city draws people in, its presence is an attracting factor.

This metaphor of ministry is sometimes called the "fortress model." This is the typical Adventist model of outreach. Just as the lighted cities on the hillsides around the Sea of Galilee functioned as beacons guiding those fishing on the lake at night, the Adventist church has functioned as a prophetic beacon to society. A fortress-city has walls around it to protect those who are inside from the dangers outside. Every so often, the inhabitants of such a city may send out the army to conduct a "crusade." They open the gates quickly, rush out to snatch up a few captives, bring them back in through the gate and slam the door. That is the fortress model of ministry.

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church has, in the past, tended to focus mainly on the fortress model, Jesus offers more than one model of ministry. The other model opens

up new dimensions of outreach to those who have felt like round pegs in a square hole in some of the more traditional approaches. Notice the text:

"You are the salt of the earth.
 But, if the salt has become tasteless,
 how will it be salted again?
 It is not good for anything anymore
 but just to be thrown out
 and trampled under foot by people."
 Matt 5:13

"You are the salt of the earth." What kind of ministry model is this? How does salt do its ministry? It mingles with the food and disappears. It becomes part of the crowd, so to speak. But as a result of that ministry, what happens? The food tastes better. The salt has an effect upon the whole. It is a quiet ministry, an infiltration ministry. But the "salt model" of ministry takes one outside the walls of protection. Matt 5:13, therefore, underlines the same message as 1 Corinthians 9. If the salt becomes tasteless it will no longer function as salt. It can no longer accomplish anything by infiltration.

That is what radical conservatism is all about. The radical means being scattered out there, mingling with the people where they are. Adventists are not like that by nature. We prefer the other model of ministry that Jesus talks about in verse 14. There is nothing

wrong with the fortress model. It is a valid option, according to Jesus. Both fortress-city and salt models are valid--both of them are needed. I'd like to suggest that "finishing the work" outlined by Jesus' Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) involves two tasks. One of those tasks is growing the church, because it is only as the church grows that it can develop the work force necessary to go out and reach the unreached. The SDA Church has now grown to nearly seven million in numbers, larger than the combined military of both the United States and the former Soviet Union. Growing the church has progressed significantly. But the other task which must be done is reaching the unreached. It is not enough simply to grow a big church, the gospel must go to all the world as a witness to all nations (Matt 24:14).

What adds complexity to the issue is the fact that the two models of ministry can work against each other at times. An outreach activity that effectively brings in people from certain sectors of society may completely stymie outreach to another sector. Let me illustrate. Church growth theory suggests that it is crucial to get everyone's name and address at the door, make sure you welcome them publicly, then make sure you visit them Sunday night right after their first visit to the church service. That is church growth theory.

And it works well, for example, for people who are already Christians. A good growth program will usually attract Christians from other churches to your church. And there is nothing wrong with that. A little competition makes everyone better. But, as we saw previously, these very things that may help grow a church can turn off the secular people who might come.

I remember a quiet, sweet lady in New York City who came out month after month to every outreach meeting our church held. Everything that I had been taught suggested that I needed to get into her home as quickly as possible. Something in the way she carried herself, however, signaled to me that this was not a good idea. But after some six to eight months, I developed a serious case of ministerial guilt for not visiting her in her home. It was time to do what I had been taught was right, even though I retained the nagging suspicion that in this case it was not right. I parked my car near the neat duplex where she lived. Although every light was on in the apartment where she lived, there was no answer to my repeated ringing of the bell. She never came to another meeting. I had violated an unwritten code of secular privacy. It was one of God's first signals to me that there was more than one right way to do ministry.

Paul and James are good examples of these two models of ministry. Paul tried to be "all things to all people." James, on the other hand, stayed in Jerusalem and kept the fortress together. He boasted to Paul about the thousands of Jews in Jerusalem who were observing the law instead of doing all the radical things that Paul seemed to advocate. "You know, Paul, people around here are wondering if you're still a Christian. What are you going to do to put a stop to these rumors about you?" (see Acts 21:17-25)

It is seriously inaccurate to suggest that life in the early church was paradise compared to today. As I told my wife after our first and only visit to Hawaii recently, "One thing is for sure, there's no place on earth called Paradise." Hawaii is a beautiful place, but no place could live up to the incredible expectations that people have when they go there. It gets cold there occasionally and the surf isn't always great. And sometimes the fish bite you (at least it happened to me) and you get scratched by the coral under the sea. There is no place on earth called Paradise! In my opinion Paradise is being wherever God wants you to be and making the most of it.

So it was with the early church. Paul and James had real disagreements. If one reads Acts 21 carefully in the original language it becomes clear that when Paul paid his last

visit to Jerusalem he was welcomed gladly by only a handful of people. These were probably the remnants of Stephen's ministry as described in Acts 6. But the vast majority of believers in Jerusalem were hostile to Paul or at least suspicious of his intentions. In Acts 16 and Gal 2 we find that even among the apostles there were tensions. In Gal 2 Paul and James decided to shake hands and go their separate ways. "You do ministry your way and I'll do it my way." It may be that we ought to make similar kinds of agreements today. "You have a 'fortress-style ministry,' the Lord is calling me to a 'salt-style ministry.' I need you to pray for me and you need me to pray for you; I will encourage you and you can encourage me."

One can find a similar contrast in ministry styles between Jesus and John the Baptist. John the Baptist lived out in the wilderness. He had nobody to preach to unless they were somehow drawn to him. Jesus worked on a different basis. He lived, at least for a while, in Capernaum, He mingled with the people, He went from city to city, He met them where they were.

Compare Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was out there in the wilderness, eating raven's food, drinking mountain water. Elisha lived in town. He was as comfortable in a king's

court as in a farmer's dwelling. While Elisha dressed in ordinary clothes, Elijah dressed in a wild-man's outfit. You could say that he had his own unique dress code. It is no coincidence that Adventists often call our mission the delivery of an "Elijah message."

We have a choice, we can say "God has not called us to secular ministry. We have been called to a John the Baptist/James/Elijah type of ministry." That is one option. It is certainly the option most familiar to SDAs. But if God has truly called us to reach all people everywhere, we cannot ignore the need to broaden our approach. It would not be the first time. We started out just ministering to former Adventists, then we broadened it out to include people who had not heard the Millerite message, then we broadened it out to foreign-language speakers in America, and finally J. N. Andrews went over to Europe, and the gospel began to go out to the world on our terms. I wonder if it is not time for the fifth step--to take the Gospel to the world on its own terms, as the missionary couple in New Guinea did, and as Paul outlined it in 1 Cor 9.

Selected Messages, volume 3, pages 231-234 contains statements called to my attention fairly recently by a good friend in the General Conference. Until I read this portion of her writings I had the impression that Ellen White was interested in only one

kind of ministry, the fortress-style. She advocated separation from the world with a special dress code and so forth. As a result, the following passage absolutely shocked me:

"It would be perfectly safe for our youth to enter the colleges of our land if they were converted every day. Now shall professed Christians refuse to associate with the unconverted and seek to have no communication with them? No. They are to be with them, in the world and not of the world. Not to partake of their ways, not to be impressed by them, not to have a heart open to their customs and practices. Their associations are to be for the purpose of drawing others to Christ."

3SM 231

Now that sounds like secular ministry to me. Although several Adventist colleges had already been established at the time this statement was made (1891), she was not talking about Adventist colleges, but about secular campuses. One could rephrase her statement in contemporary terms: "It would be perfectly safe for our youth to enter the secular colleges of our land." Four years later she repeated the call:

"Those who have the Spirit of God, who have the truth wrought into their very beings, should be encouraged to enter colleges and live the truth as Daniel and Paul did."

3SM 233

Perhaps you can now understand the surprise with which I greeted these statements. Selected Adventist youth should be ENCOURAGED to enter secular colleges. She elaborated on this further as published on page 234 of *3 Selected Messages*:

"There are those who after becoming established, rooted, and grounded in the truth should enter these institutions of learning as students. They can keep the living principles of the truth and observe the Sabbath. And yet they will have opportunity to work for the Master by dropping seeds of truth in minds and hearts. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, these seeds will spring up to bear fruit for the glory of God and will result in the saving of souls."

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am a strong believer in Adventist education, I teach at one of our Adventist institutions. I think that our schools are the best place for most Adventist young people. There are selected young people, however, those who have their act together as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, whom she suggests ought to be

encouraged to infiltrate secular campuses for Christ. Such a secular ministry is certainly not for everyone. But that does not mean that selected ones should not be encouraged to go. Ellen White was keenly aware of this dilemma:

"I scarcely dare present this method of labor, for there is danger that those who have no connection with God will place themselves in these schools, and instead of correcting error and diffusing light, will themselves be led astray."

3 SM 234

At the risk of repeating myself, let me say it again, secular ministry may be dangerous to your spiritual health. The last thing I want is for every reader of this book to run out and lose their souls. It is not safe unless the person is spiritually prepared for the ordeal. "There is danger that those who have no connection with God will place themselves in these schools and. . . be led astray." Shall the danger cause us to reject this method of ministry? Notice how Ellen White's statement continues. "But this work must be done and it will be done by those who are led and taught of God." Paul was compelled to do it. Jesus and Elisha were compelled to do it, and many who read this book will be compelled to do it. But before the radical must come the conservative, because if you do not have your act together as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, your attempts to reach secular people will fail. And you may lose your own way in the process. Effective outreach to the secular world must begin in the privacy of one's own walk with God.