

Present Truth in the Real World (1993)

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CHAPTER TEN

THE PRACTICE OF ONE-TO-ONE OUTREACH

Creative Listening

The preceding chapter concludes by putting a finger on what is, perhaps, the greatest Adventist shortcoming in dealing with secular people, our failure to learn and use language and terminology that is meaningful to their experience. How do you learn their language? The same way children learn language, by listening and talking. As we interact regularly with secular people we will learn how to communicate effectively with them.

How does this work in practice? How do you actually get close to a secular person? I know of no better way than what I like to call "creative listening." I define creative listening as the art of asking leading questions, questions that gently and kindly zero in on what really matters in the other person's life. Creative listening is hard for me--I tend to talk too much and I sometimes talk myself right out of a conversation. The goal of creative listening is to sensitively encourage a person to reveal those things that are of greatest concern in their lives at that time. My friend Joe rarely needed more than five questions before he discovered the central area of need in a person's life. I must confess that I wish I was equally gifted in this area.

Creative listening means learning to ask the right question at the right time. We will quickly learn, however, that privacy is a major quality of life issue with secular people. It is easy to overstep the bounds and embarrass yourself by pushing too hard or too fast. Will this happen to you as you reach out to secular people? Absolutely! You will often say the wrong thing and offend people as you search to find what makes them tick. But failure is probably the best way to learn anything. At Greenfield Village, the attendant at Thomas Edison's laboratory told us that it took 3573 attempts to make the first usable light bulb. Along the way someone asked Edison how he felt about his thousands of failed attempts. He replied, "I now know that many ways not to make a light bulb!" Failure is a marvelous path to learning! Certainly the spread of the gospel is worthy of Edison's entrepreneurial spirit.

But it is one thing to experiment on light bulbs and another to experiment on people. Most people are naturally reluctant to overstep the comfort zone of others. Fortunately, as was mentioned earlier, secular people appreciate someone who's honest and open, someone who says, "Oh, I think that was the wrong thing to say," or "Sorry, I blew that one." As long as we do not wear our feelings on our sleeve, communicating with secular people will be a great adventure. In light of what the cross tells us concerning our standing with God, we can learn to place the natural tensions of everyday relationship in their proper perspective.

Someone once objected, however, "Didn't Jesus zero in right to the point with the Rich Young Ruler? He didn't waste time with a lot of fancy listening." That was often true in Jesus' experience. The difference between Jesus and me, however, is that Jesus could read the heart,

I can't yet. To the extent that I can learn to read hearts, it will come as the result of a lengthy two-step process. First, I must remove any barriers that may prevent His Spirit from impressing me regarding others. Second, I need to spend a lot of time in creative listening. The experience with Joe's brandy is the exception, most strangers cannot be understood without much listening.

Nothing in this book is intended to minimize the role of the Spirit in outreach, but we must not forget the point of Chapter One, God does not normally choose to bypass the human process of learning. There is a massive role that is left for us to play in co-operation with God. He has more than one purpose in this. For one thing, as we go through the laborious process of learning how to sense what is in the heart of people on the street, we will learn lessons about ourselves that we could learn no other way. If it were better in the ultimate scheme of things for angels to do the work of outreach, they would gladly do it. But God takes the risk of giving us the task, because it is as crucial to our well-being as it is to those we minister to.

A second purpose of God in allowing us to stumble on in our attempts to reach people is that such listening is a marvelous way to demonstrate Christ-like love. Notice the words of John Stott:

Dialogue is a token of genuine Christian love, because it indicates our steadfast resolve to rid our minds of the prejudices and caricatures which we may entertain about other people; the struggle to listen through their ears and look through their eyes so as to grasp what prevents them from hearing the gospel and seeing Christ, to sympathize with them in all their doubts, fears and hangups.¹

¹Quoted in James F. Engel, Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice (Nashville: Thomas

As any successfully married couple knows, love and listening are two sides of the same coin.

Apparently even Bible writers like John did a great deal of listening before writing down what God had shared with them. For example, although God's word creates the world in the Old Testament, nowhere is "The Word" ever described as a divine person. Yet just such a figure was a prominent part of Greek philosophy. In Platonic thought "The Word" was a divine person who created and sustained the world, and now serves as the mediator between God and humanity. So when John 1 talks about "the Word made flesh" it was as if John was proclaiming to the Greeks, "This 'Word' whom you worship I declare unto you, it is Jesus Christ!" John had learned, under the guidance of the Spirit, how to present the gospel effectively to the Greeks by careful attention to the way they thought about God.

Students of Revelation, therefore, will be quite interested to discover that Hekate, the most popular goddess of Asia Minor in the first century, was described in language much like the Revelator's description of Christ in Rev 1. She was called the first and the last, the beginning and the end. She held the keys of heaven and hell, and was able to reveal to people what went on in those places. To the Greeks of Asia Minor, John offered a Jesus that met their deepest longings in language that was meaningful to them. Even if we suppose that God was the source of the connections, it reminds us that the gospel can only be heard when it comes in context! As human beings we become familiar with people's context by listening!

Nelson, 1979), p. 60.

The Point of Contact

Creative listening, therefore, is the starting point for outreach to a secular world.

Whether you are seeking out individuals or want to hold evangelistic meetings in an area, there is no better way to begin the process than through listening. What are we looking for as we are listening? We are trying to discover the felt needs that open that person to input from others at that point in his or her experience. What are the needs that motivate that person's search for truth and self-betterment? Where is that person hurting, what problems stimulate a desire for something better?

There can be, of course, a difference between genuine needs and felt needs. Every person has needs that they are not aware of, the greatest of all human needs, of course, is to know Christ. But most people are not aware of their need for Christ, and they would deny their need for the Gospel. So the starting point must be to aim at the felt needs. This approach is in harmony with a very basic human characteristic. James Engel points out, in the book Contemporary Christian Communication, that **every human being has a built-in barrier against persuasion**. Human beings have a natural aversion to changing their minds. And it is a good aversion. If we didn't have it, we would all change religions every day. We would all believe the last thing we were told. There are people who do not have a very strong barrier against persuasion, you have met some no doubt. They jump from one idea to the next and never quite settle on anything. They are known as credulous or easily duped.

The average person, however, has a strong barrier against persuasion. They do not

lightly change their minds on any topic. When somebody else comes along with an idea that is radically different than what they believe, what happens? A psychological brick wall goes up. And the more you pound against that wall, the more it is reinforced. But there is a way around those "brick walls," it is to approach people in the area of their felt needs. A felt need is a point in that person's life where they are open to instruction. Students of world mission call this felt need the point of contact, that point in a person or a group's experience where an aspect of the gospel intersects with conscious needs and interests.

Let me illustrate. Not long ago, my biggest felt need was to learn how you get babies that like a warm feeling in their pants to do what they are supposed to do in the place in which they are supposed to do it. That was a real felt need in my life for a time. We tried all kinds of angles yet a particular child seemed to prefer to do it his way. At that point I was wide open to anyone with a suggestion I had not heard before, no matter how crazy the suggestion sounded at first! All a person had to do was say, "I had a kid just like that and here's what worked for us." I would be all ears. I gave that person my full and immediate attention. And no matter how nutty the idea, my wife and I tried it at least once, because we felt a huge need to resolve that problem. We were definitely interested in fresh and creative ideas on the subject.

If someone had come to me at that time (someone did) and asserted, "The Beast of Revelation is Ronald Wilson Reagan who has six letters in each of his three names," I would be quite resistant to that. It made no sense to me in the light of what I know about Revelation. And furthermore I had no interest in that person's opinion. (So there!) But someone

approaching at a point of felt need gets a much more positive reaction. The barrier against persuasion comes down immediately. Secular people are no different. When you approach them at the point of their felt needs they are wide open to instruction. They are searching for information on that very point.

I am reminded of the blood pressure screening/food sharing van ministry in New York City that most Adventists are now familiar with. Back in the 1970s people coming onto a van to get their blood pressure checked were invited on a registration sheet to check if they were interested in studying the Bible. One out of 20 or 21 would do so. When people were asked in a soft-sell way if they would like to receive Bible studies, the ratio jumped immediately to one out of three! Some time after this the van team noticed that even higher percentages of people seemed interested in material on how to manage stress. Would Bible study guides on how to manage stress in one's life meet a felt need in New York City?

Standing on the corner of 47th Street and 6th Avenue is an experience you will get nowhere else on earth. There are subways rumbling under you, buses roaring beside you, planes overhead, buildings seventy stories high by the dozen in all directions; within a stone's throw from where you stand 50,000 people are active and operating, seemingly shouldering past you all at once. Within 50 miles are more than twenty million! The energy of Mid-town Manhattan is incredible. But along with that adrenalin surge comes stress. By the end of the day you are exhausted! To make it worse, you go to bed and your mind is spinning all the more. You are all keyed up. Stress is, therefore, the number one felt need of people in New

York City (and in many other parts of North America these days as well!).

Bible lessons on how to manage stress were developed entitled Power to Cope. The percentage of people accepting Bible Studies skyrocketed as soon as the lessons were available. Now 85-87% were accepting and continue to accept lessons; Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, it did not seem to matter. People were told, "We have a free set of Bible study guides on how to cope with stress, are you interested?" They were just grabbing them, sometimes grabbing extra ones for all their friends. One day on Wall Street there was a major felt need. Perhaps it was one of those days with a major downswing, but on that day 242 people came on the van in front of the Stock Exchange and every single one accepted Bible studies. 242 out of 242. It must have been a very bad day on Wall Street. But that is what happens when you meet felt needs, the barrier against persuasion is gone. And that is the key to opening up secular people to the gospel, finding a felt need and speaking directly to that felt need.

It is appropriate, in the light of Part Two of this book, to mention that the leaders of the van ministry always insist that the key to the successes of the program are due more than anything else to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to prayer and the prayer-filled lives of the people serving on the vans. Thus, the two key points of this book are clearly illustrated by the van ministry. Ministry to secular people will only succeed in an atmosphere of God's presence and power, on the one hand, and of sensitivity to people's needs on the other. Prayer without an understanding of method will work wonders. But even more powerful is a ministry that combines prayer with intelligent sensitivity to how secular people can be best

approached. Prayer is the constant in the van ministry. But when prayer was combined with the skillful personal invitation, and with lessons that met felt needs, interest increased from one in twenty to 85% and more!

Frankly, however, the felt need principle makes a Christian's life more complex because secular people are as diverse as snowflakes. Talk to twenty secular people and you will discover twenty different felt needs that you have never met in quite that form before. Without a fresh and creative approach, the situation may appear hopeless. But although the attempt will have its ups and downs, it is a great adventure that will enrich the life of everyone who thrives on adventure.

Door to Door Listening

How does the felt need principle operate on a large scale? How do you do this as a church? I would suggest what I call door to door listening. We approach people door to door for a wide variety of reasons. Why not door to door listening? A simple way to accomplish this is to target a specific geographical area or a particular socio-economic segment of the target area. Andrews University can, if needed, provide demographic breakdowns according to the zip codes in your area. (The address Institute of Church Ministry is found in the bibliography at the end of this book.) Create a short survey that attempts to discover what particular felt needs are abundant in the target community. As early returns from the survey come in, it is important to modify the survey itself on the basis of the feed-back. As areas of interest emerge, the local church or group can assess which of the felt needs they are in a position to address.

A group of us once did this in the South Bronx. No doubt you have heard about the South Bronx. It is a part of New York City that looks a lot like Berlin in 1945. We were taking the survey on a block that had garbage in the street, broken glass in the empty lots, burnt-out buildings, and a few high-rises that were hanging together by a thread. We went down that street taking surveys of what the felt needs of that community were. The author of the questionnaire developed an interesting set of questions including, "Do you feel good about the condition of this block?" 100% of the people said "no." They did not feel good about the way the neighborhood was. The next question was "If someone would take the lead in cleaning up the block, would you help?" To my amazement 90% said "yes" in an area known for apathy.

Was that block begging for a doctrinal crusade? Or was the ideal starting point a call for a person with a Christ-like heart to move into that block and get involved? Such a person could encourage the people to galvanize the resources there; to clean up the empty lot, to plant flowers, to provide security, etc. It could be done. Most people are afraid to take the lead. But if someone took the lead people would follow. To meet a felt need like this would create a great deal of interest in what else the church has to offer. There are physical dangers in such a response, of course, but that need not be a major barrier. God has programmed some people in a way that they don't get excited about tasks unless there is a measure of risk or adventure associated with them. Regardless of the type of neighborhood, when you take surveys door-to-door you are looking for fertile fields, looking for people who are open to the kinds of things the church is able to offer. And when felt needs emerge, the Spirit will move believing hearts to

take action!

Patience

Patience is necessary when working with secular people. To move from a totally secular environment into a traditional Adventist environment is not going to happen in two or three weeks. In my experience it averages about two years. What we are talking about here is long-term commitment and this may be more appropriate to elders than to pastors in some circumstances. The key people who develop a relationship with a secular person need to be around when he or she goes all the way with Christ.

I remember one couple that I baptized. I officiated at their wedding and then baptized them a year later. On the day of their baptism the members were shocked, they thought that they were already members of the church. They had been out Ingathering, they came to all the work-bees, they went to all the prayer meetings--they were at everything. They were as active and involved in the church as anyone could be. But it was two years before they were comfortable in making a total commitment to Christ in the context of the Adventist Church. They insisted, "We want to know what we're getting into first. We plan to become Seventh-day Adventists but we are going to become Seventh-day Adventists when we understand all of what that means."

In dealing with secular people there will be rough times along the way. One day the husband, who worked for IBM, came up to me with an issue of Spectrum magazine. He asked, "Does this have anything to do with Adventism?" In it were some articles about the Davenport

fiasco and similar problems in the church. My heart was sinking fast! I just sat down with him and said, "Look, this church is not perfect. Administrators make mistakes, churches make mistakes, people and pastors make mistakes. If you're looking for perfection, you're looking in the wrong place. You can't find it on this planet. But there's one thing I like about being an Adventist with all of the shortcomings," I told him, "and that is that we are encouraged to keep growing in our understanding of truth, however long it takes. We are not content to settle down with tradition." The husband's response was, "Yeah, that doesn't bother me."

Now you may think I fudged just a little, but I do believe what I said there in principle. I am a Seventh-day Adventist because I believe that we as a people are open to clearer expressions of truth. We are not as a people willing to settle into the rut of tradition. Maybe you don't think we are really open to change, or maybe you are satisfied with where things are. I believe, however, that God has a lot more that He wants to reveal to us. The path of truth is like a shining light getting brighter and brighter until it reaches the ultimate goal. And we are not there yet. If we refuse to grow in grace and in understanding we may find ourselves left behind as God turns to others.

This was also the time known to some as the "Ford crisis." It was a very traumatic time to be a pastor. When the youth caught wind of some of these things, they demanded a meeting to learn what was going on. I did the democratic thing and allowed them to set the agenda and bring all their friends. In retrospect, that was quite stupid. When meeting time came not only were all the fifteen non-churched people that I was working with sitting in the

front row, but thirty Adventists that I had never seen before had come from other churches.

And a couple of conference officials had come as well!

The questions were not only specific, but came thick and fast so that there was no time to work through the issues from a Biblical perspective. I could only give a short answer and go on. What was interesting to me is that not one of those secular people was the least bit disturbed about the issues raised at that meeting. They said, "It's neat the way people in your church are so open and willing to discuss the problems. This is the kind of place I want to be." What I did not have the heart to tell them then was that the Conference President got twelve threatening phone calls from the unknown Adventists in that meeting. They did not know me, and had no context for understanding what I was saying, they just did not like what was happening.

The conference president got the phone and said, "You had some kind of meeting there Sabbath, didn't you?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "I got all kinds of phone calls, some people are pretty upset."

"Yeah, I guess I had some people there that don't know me very well. I guess airing some of those things was not particularly thrilling to them."

The president responded, "I have always had confidence in you. Let me suggest that you not have any more meetings like that."

My response was, "Don't worry. I have no plans to do something like that ever again."

Let me share with you some things I learned from this experience. For one thing, there is a dark side to the open forum style. It is not realistic to expect that things will always go perfectly. It helps, however, to target your audience carefully whenever possible. As we noticed in Part One, church growth and reaching the unreached are two different processes. Meetings that attract and interest secular people may be very distressing to some of your own church people. That is simply a reality. I know that when I speak to an Adventist audience I speak differently than when I know I'm speaking to a secular audience. When an Adventist wonders why I said something in an unfamiliar way I say, "Listen, I'm talking to them, not you. But if you have any problems, just ask me and I will be happy to share it with you in your language."

It certainly helps in such a situation if the Adventists in the audience know you personally and have confidence in your ministry. Another way to handle the problem is to limit the audience by careful targeting. The meeting that got me in trouble had a hybrid target that attracted a mixed audience. Since the two audiences would each respond positively to a completely different approach, it left me with the task of deciding which to offend, and I decided that the church members would have to be the ones to handle it if necessary. A certain amount of flak is unavoidable in secular ministry, if Paul's experience is any guide!

Another lesson I have learned about open forum concerns dealing with Adventist "hot potatoes." When you are discussing Biblical "hot potatoes" it is best to take the Word and work things through carefully with people who have questions. Stick to the Word and say only what

is in the Word and neither right nor left wing will trouble you much. Let the Word of God gradually transform people's thinking. Elevate the discussion by using Biblical language instead of buying into the language of the debate. On hot issues such as the nature of Christ and the order of salvation, people may use unbiblical concepts or even Biblical terms in a way that they are not used in the Bible. Unless you have time to lay out the full Biblical perspective, the best open forum answer may be, "I have problems with both sides on that issue, but each is trying to protect something that is true, so learn wherever you can, but don't believe everything you hear or see in print. When we have time, we can take a closer look at that issue." At that time I might point out a Bible text that well illustrates the Biblical tension between both sides of the question, and then go back to my central topic.

The lesson from my unhappy meeting that is most pertinent to our purpose is that secular people, rather than being turned off by the fact that the church isn't perfect, are usually excited by the fact that we are willing to openly acknowledge and discuss our imperfections. They say, "At least you guys don't think that you have all the answers." There was a time when Adventists thought that the only effective way to do evangelism and witnessing was by having absolute confidence in the rightness of one's convictions. People would be swayed by the certitude of the one who was presenting the gospel to them. And that is true for a lot of people, including some secular people of the blue-collar variety. Many types of people are still looking for someone to tell them exactly what they need to do. But that approach usually backfires with more-educated secular types.

Mass media advertising has led to a situation where educated secular people have difficulty believing anything that is offered in the public square. Propaganda is not interested in truth, only in persuasion. Thus in the secular environment, when an individual makes a strong statement about the certainty of his or her belief that statement is automatically suspect. Basic to reaching the secular mind, therefore, is an attitude of honesty and openness to discovery. Secular people are attracted to those who are willing to admit that their understanding of truth is subject to limitation and distortion. The open forum setting is actually much more persuasive for them than an assertive lecture. Through listening and dialoguing, we show respect for the viewpoint of others and encourage a similar respect in return. Such an approach will require patience, however, as secular people do not normally experience rapid conversions to Christian faith.

Educated white-collar secular people are not usually looking for the "true church." What they are delighted to find, however, is a community that is fully devoted to an open, honest, and continuing search for truth. Those who know God's Word will not avoid giving that impression, for we know that we see through a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:12), and that our knowledge of truth will continue to grow until the end (Prov 4:18).

Conclusion

This "how-to" chapter has been necessarily sketchy and suggestive, outlining only basic principles. Many will want specific ideas on how to approach secular people effectively. Since the best book I have ever read on the subject, James Engel's Contemporary Christian

Communications, is now out of print, I share some of the most helpful suggestions in that book in an appendix chapter at the end of this book. Particularly useful is Engel's chart on the Spiritual Decision Process. This chart helps the creative listener to pinpoint the level of spiritual interest in another person. Those interested in further "how to" ideas on personal witnessing, therefore, are directed to the appendix.

