

CHAPTER SEVEN

A LIVING WALK WITH GOD

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Acting Out our Faith

When it comes to maintaining Christian faith in a secular world the concept of "derived seclusion" is critical; finding a regular time and place to be with God in the midst of the secular rat-race. I am reminded of a bumper sticker I saw not too long ago; "God is not dead, I talked to Him last night." Secularism is something that happens when you have drifted away from that walk with God and you begin to believe what your senses tell you instead of what you have known in your experience with God. But without concrete and practical faith-action in the life, the devotional experience can easily become confined to a closet in a person's life leading to a schizophrenic existence where faith impacts on the life

for a short time each day, followed by an essentially secular existence for the rest of one's experience. Doing battle with secular drift calls for more than just the devotional experience, as effective as that may be.

In his book *The Human Puzzle*, David G. Myers confirms what Ellen White taught a hundred years ago; what a person believes may have relatively little impact on how they live. What happens in the devotional life will have little impact on everyday experience, unless accompanied by conscious, corresponding action. When people survey conservative Christian churches, including Adventist churches, they discover that the typical, conservative Christian church may have virtually as much adultery, alcohol problems, drug use, and physical abuse as the non-churched culture, the problems are just less visible in the church setting. The reality is that few pastors are permitted to see below the surface of what is going on in their own churches. This is particularly true of the Adventist setting, because our high behavioral standards make it socially unacceptable to confess sins such as adultery, alcohol, drug use, and the abuse of children or spouse. In the secular environment, such problems are generally out in the open. But in a relatively closed society like the Adventist Church, you tend not to talk about problems, especially not to the pastor who has considerable control over your

continued acceptance in the group. Quite often, therefore, belief in Adventist teaching has relatively little impact on how people live.

In churches where action does not follow from belief, the church's witness is seriously damaged. While pastors and church leaders may not be aware of how little practice may follow from profession in our churches, our secular neighbors are intensely aware of it. Secular people share with relish stories about the foibles of Christians and churches they know. The media are equally searching in their scrutiny. Thus, an Adventism that confines itself largely to doctrine and things of the intellect is doomed to failure in a secular context. Its witness has already been fatally discounted before it occurs.

Although what you believe may have little impact on how you live, how you live has a powerful impact on what you believe. This is another major theme of the crucial chapter "Mind Cure" in the book *Ministry of Healing* (pp. 241-259). The routine actions of daily life have a massive effect on what a person believes and how they feel and think.

Let me illustrate. I have a daughter who is now entering adolescence. Until fairly recently she would, on occasion, pout with a whole heart. She would be sitting at the dinner table and some thing or other struck her wrong. Her whole face and body would twist up

and she would avoid all eye contact. I discovered that I could get her out of the pout with surprising ease. All I had to do was to find a way to get her to smile. In the act of smiling that miserable feeling, the whole attitude of pouting just vanished. I would say, "What's that? You're not smiling, are you? Don't you dare smile! Do I see the corners of your mouth turning up?" I do not know why, but somehow that gets her every time--she cracks up! And when she does, the pout is gone, and she cannot seem to get it back, even if she tries! With my four-year-old the magic words are, "Don't smile, your face might crack!"

Something similar can work with groups of adults as well. If a group you are speaking to has confidence in you, ask them to smile as big and broad a smile as possible. Give them a big smile and invite them to return it. Unless the audience is feeling some resistance toward the speaker, a group smile seems to make everyone feel better almost immediately. This is only an illustration. How we behave has a powerful impact not only on what we feel but on how we think and what we believe.

I know this sounds like manipulation--and to some of you that may be offensive. But I look at it this way, God made us the way He made us. He has set laws into our minds and hearts. Is it a bad thing to consciously choose to live in a way that will assist my walk with

God and resist secular drift? If we know the things we need to do in order to stay close to God, why not do them? The reality is that how you live has a powerful impact on what you believe.

This is why evangelists like to call people up front. There is something about getting out of your seat and walking to the front that nails down a decision in a way that very few other things can do. In mentioning this, I should probably point out, however, that altar calls must not be handled in a way that compromises integrity and free choice. Secular people do not respond well to the traditional call in most instances. One must be careful not to unnecessarily violate social boundaries. So I normally try to find other ways than altar calls to seal decision in the experience of secular people.

The one time in a secular person's life when you can make that kind of an appeal is when they attend a baptism. I am not sure how to explain that. But after baptizing people, I like to say something like, "Well, you've all seen what just happened; if you have never been baptized you may be thinking, 'My, I'd like to do that. I'd like to be fully devoted to God.' I'm not talking about baptizing you tomorrow or next week. But you'd like to learn what baptism means and what Christian life is all about. If you feel that way this morning would

you just stand for a minute?" I remember one time I made such an appeal and nineteen people stood up, half of whom I'd never seen before. I had sensed that it was a non-threatening situation. It was part of a whole context in which the call was perceived as appropriate. And people were standing up that had just walked into the church for the first time! There is something about standing up at such times that solidifies a decision. It has to do with acting out our faith, even the first glimmer of faith.

The strongest safeguard against secularism--and even a secular psychologist will tell you this if you ask--is a seven day a week religion. It is a faith that impacts in some way on every moment of every day of our lives. I was somewhat amused to discover that on many of the Caribbean islands, Adventists are known as "Seven Days." When I arrived for a campmeeting in the Bahamas, the newspaper declared, "Speaker arrives for Seven Days Conference." I wish that were not just a misunderstanding but a statement of reality! Adventism cannot afford to be isolated in the closet of our experience; to be effective in a secular world, it must affect the whole of our experience in this world.

When we talk about Seven-day-a Week Adventism we are talking about practicing the Seventh-day Adventist life-style. Now I realize that this gets us into something that is a little

bit controversial. Many people have different opinions of what it means to live as a Seventh-day Adventist. But the point I want to make with absolute clarity is that without some kind of consistent practice of faith, secular drift is inevitable in one form or another.

With all of its perceived flaws, however, the Adventist life-style that has been handed down to us is a superb example of a seven-day religion. When we shop for clothes, what are we doing? We are asking ourselves questions such as, "What impact will this clothing have on my witness for Christ? Will it aid or hinder my mission in life?" When we shop for groceries we spend a lot of time reading labels. Why? Because we do not want to put into our bodies things that will clog up our minds and render us less fit for the difficult task of honoring God in all we do, say or think. As a result, when we shop for clothing or groceries, we are constantly being reminded of God's claim on our life.

When I make up the family budget each month, guess what is on top of the list? Tithes and offerings. Everything that a Seventh-day Adventist does in life is potentially tied in with God in some way or another. And rightly handled, this is a tremendous asset to faith in a secular world. I am not trying to tell you exactly what form the Adventist lifestyle should take in your particular case. But frankly, Adventism without consistent daily practice is not

going to be maintained effectively in a secular world.

There are dangers in two extremes. A rigid lifestyle without a living relationship with God is drudgery. A devotional life without practice is also doomed to fail. What is happening now in many families is that we have grandparents who believe in Adventism and practice the lifestyle. Then there are children who either believe without practice or practice the lifestyle without a clear understanding of what it means. The grandchildren often just throw the whole thing out. What we need most desperately is to restore the unity of Adventist faith; not only holding certain ideas about God, and about Scripture, but including a whole-hearted practice in lifelong response to what Christ has done for us.

This whole-hearted style of life is no denial of justification by faith--it simply recognizes that when Christ offers the gift, He also makes a claim. The great rallying cry of the first century Christian church was, "Jesus is Lord." To modernize that terminology a bit results in something like, "Jesus is the Boss". When a first-century Christian said, "Jesus is Lord," he or she meant, "He has the right to tell me what to do, how to live." The relationship between justification and lordship is most effectively illustrated by a story Jesus told His disciples. In Matt 18:23-35 a king forgives his servant a debt of 10,000 talents (perhaps 10

billion dollars in inflated currency!). It is assumed in the story that the servant would gladly respond by forgiving his fellow servant a debt of a mere 100 day's wages. The story is a parable of divine and human forgiveness. What God does for us becomes a model for how we should treat one another. A balanced, living faith includes both devotion and action. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone!

Not only is the Seventh-day Adventist life-style one of the best ways to maintain faith in a secular world, it offers a major side benefit as well, self-discipline. Self-discipline is something that is rarely seen these days. Couch potatoes would love to be Michael Jordan or Joe Montana. But few realize what such athletes have to go through to attain that kind of excellence in their chosen field. Paul argues in 1 Cor 9 that our chosen field is worthy of a similar discipline. The Seventh-day Adventist life-style was designed to enable people to function as peak-performance Christians. If you wish to make a mark for Christ in the contest of life, a disciplined life is the only way to go.

I am not suggesting a miserable, spoilsport lifestyle. To deny oneself the lesser things in life helps to guarantee that the greater things will get their proper attention. Take family budgeting as an example. Somebody once said that the cost-of-living is whatever you make

plus ten percent! Most people find that ridiculous assertion to be true! Everyone gets used to whatever their income is and then wants just a little bit more. Now most people do not find it necessary to budget--when the money runs out, the party is over. But when you do that your money goes to whatever comes up next. ***The whole point about budgeting is that you make sure that the important things get cared for first.*** I have known people who would buy twelve boxes of Valentine candy before paying the rent and then be unable to pay it. They would then go to family and friends and say, "If you don't help me out--they'll throw me out on the street." And this pattern often repeats itself month after month after month.

Discipline means putting things that really matter first. Do you really want a roof over your head? You had better pay the rent first. Do you really want to eat? You better buy groceries before you take that trip to Hawaii. So it is with spiritual things. The main point of the Adventist life-style is to make sure that the most important matters in life get the greatest attention. And that involves discipline.

While we are on this subject let me make a point about lifestyle witnessing. If we expect to reach secular people, the Adventist life-style must be presented as a life-style of principle rather than just precept. Secular people are not looking for a list of rules with a

dotted line on the bottom for their signature of blind compliance. They want to understand the reason behind lifestyle standards. "Why do you want me to do these things? Why is it that you don't want people to wear jewelry?" If there is no good reason for a standard, why have it? If there are sound reasons, why are they not clearer to contemporary people? Standards need to make sense to secular people. When we are dealing with them, we will have the challenge of defending the Adventist life-style as a viable principle. I think that on the whole it can be defended, but perhaps on slightly different grounds than we may have used in the past.

Secular people will point out to you, for example, that people who drink socially tend to live three years longer than people who don't, all other things being equal. Well that should not be a surprise. Adventists are often known for being a little uptight. And a drink now and then does relax you some. But that does not impress me. Although often overlooked, Ellen White met such challenges on the basis of principle already in passages like 5T 354-361. She does not argue there that alcohol is to be avoided because the Bible explicitly says so. She rather argues scientifically. For one thing, no one knows who the alcoholic is. Social drinking, all other things being equal, may have a slight relaxant effect on a person's

life. But alcoholism has a devastating impact on a person's life and on that of everyone who is close to them. But suppose you are a skilled social drinker, gaining all those supposed health benefits. Ellen White is still not impressed. She says that if you are an elder in the church and you are drinking socially, you influence others to take a positive attitude toward alcohol. If those you influence become alcoholics, who is responsible? An option some might consider would be to keep one's social drinking secret from the church, but that introduces an element of deception and inauthenticity to one's Christian walk. To profess one thing and to live another is not a spiritually healthy existence.

A further consideration in regard to alcohol is research that indicates that every drink destroys some brain cells. I don't know about you, but I cannot afford to lose any brain cells. A fourth reason for avoiding alcohol is that alcohol tends to affect most immediately the seat of the will. But if you want to keep faith in a secular world, your will has to be charged up and ready to go twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I believe that when we rightly understand the genius behind the Seventh-day Adventist life-style, when we see it undergirded by common sense and based on reasonable principles, it can be sold to secular people. Secular people are not going to buy into something because we said so; or even at

first because the Bible said so. They want to know, "Does it make sense? Is this really the way I want to live?"

One thing that should be clear by now is that the same life practices which maintain a Christian's faith in a secular world provide the kind of spiritual setting into which secular people can be attracted to come. We cannot ask them to give up what we have not given up. Neither can we expect them to experience what we ourselves have never experienced. Outreach to secular people begins with outreach to the secular mindset in our churches and above all in our own hearts.

To Share is to Keep

A devotional walk with God and its consequences in every day life are two key factors in maintaining faith in a secular world. There is at least one more. In order to keep our faith it is necessary to share it. This is not only true for today, but has always been a fact of spiritual life. In the Old Testament context the key to bringing the power of God into the lives of His people was to recite over and over the things that God had done for them in their past history.

Consider the plight of King Jehoshaphat. According to 2 Chr 20 he was under attack

by the armies of three whole nations. As we would expect, he called his council together. But instead of developing a military or diplomatic strategy, he led them in prayer. Now how would you and I pray in that situation? Wouldn't we probably succumb to abject and pitiful pleading? Instead Jehoshaphat said, "Lord, you brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; you brought us through the wilderness. And when we got to the promised land as You promised us, there were hostile nations all around. You told us to leave them alone, and now they're coming against us. You took care of us then. You can do it again. Our eyes are upon You."

As Jehoshaphat was recounting the acts of God, instead of pleading abjectly in a desperate situation, the power of the Exodus experience was manifested again. Instead of a battle, the enemy armies were taken care of by the choir. They sang a song and blew them right out of town. The power of God that divided the Red Sea and fed them in the wilderness returned to them in response to Jehoshaphat's retelling of the Exodus. So there is something about reciting what God has done for you in the past that brings the power of God back into your life. And if you regularly experience the power of God in your life, secularism can have no influence over you.

Expression deepens impression. Talk faith and you will have more faith. Ellen White expresses this idea forcefully in *Ministry of Healing* pages 251-253:

It is a law of nature that our thoughts and feelings are encouraged and strengthened as we give them utterance. While words express thoughts, it is also true that thoughts follow words. If we would give more expression to our faith, rejoice more in the blessings that we know we have,--the great mercy and love of God,--we should have more faith and greater joy. No tongue can express, no finite mind can conceive, the blessing that results from appreciating the goodness and love of God.

Can you remember a time when you shared your personal testimony with a friend or even a stranger? You told of the helplessness of your human condition, but you also shared the excitement and joy that came with the discovery that if no one else in the universe had sinned Christ would still have died for you personally. Whenever the cross of Christ is uplifted the Holy Spirit presses the claim of the cross home with power to whoever is listening. And that same power spills back to the one who testifies. Can you remember how the act of sharing your faith confirmed your own faith? It was like campmeeting all over again. I am rarely so confident and secure in my walk with God as I am when I share what He has done for me with others. The power of God's original working in my life is renewed in the retelling. This can even be true of preaching. Many a preacher has entered the pulpit

discouraged and left it on fire! Share faith and you will have more faith.

If these things are so why do we witness as little as we do? One would expect that something as stimulating to faith as sharing it would be a centerpiece on our schedules. But a major deterrent to sharing faith in a secular world is that we sense that the way we reach out to others outside our faith circle often oversteps the boundaries of social propriety. When we think of witness, we think of badgering people, and intruding into their lives. The golden rule comes into effect here. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I have spoken to hundreds of Adventists whose conscience bothers them concerning the way they attempt to share their faith. The end result is miserable. Many Adventists feel guilty when they witness and guilty if they don't. That is no way to live.

We can be freed to witness again when we find out that true witness has two basic foundation principles that prevent us from overstepping the boundaries of social propriety. The first principle is that before you can get a person to listen to you, you have to put them at ease. They need to be comfortable first. To rail at somebody on a street corner may cause the opposite of what we intend in a secular environment. Can you remember the last time you were confronted by a person who repeatedly told you what to do and put you down by

highlighting their own superior understanding? Did you feel at ease in that person's presence? Did you feel like listening any further to what that person had to say? Did you want to become like him or her? Putting people at ease means to avoid the attitude of a superior. It is not necessary to put people down or to nag them in order to share one's faith. Putting people at ease means relating to them in such a way that they are comfortable in one's presence. Putting people at ease means investing more time in listening than in talking, at least at first. Jesus certainly had that ability, for prostitutes and sinners loved to be around him. Witnessing in this way can be very difficult for Adventists in a secular world.

Putting people at ease may be a characteristic that is inherited as much as it is learned. I know I find it a more difficult task than some of my friends do. The good news is that we can all improve in the art of putting others at ease, and while some will always be more successful at it than others, training in interpersonal relationships is well worth the effort for any Christian who wants to reach out to secular neighbors, friends, and family.

The second principle of true witness is to live an attractive Christ-centered style of life. Most secular people are looking for something better and when they see a person who "has her act together" they find it incredibly attractive. The funny thing is that most people think

that the TV stars have their act together. Although we know better in our minds, the visual medium is a powerful persuader. The stars smile and look permanently happy and charming, but the reality is that most can't wait to run home and shoot dope or commit suicide because they cannot face their real selves. The attractiveness of television is a fantasy image in a fantasy land.

Far more attractive than the painted-on smiles of the media is a real person in real life who is making it work. People love to be with others who have their act together. They like people who listen to them and who don't put them down. Secular people are open to personal involvement in their lives by loving and lovable Christians who put people at ease and live Christ-like, attractive Christian lives. I am not implying that we need a grit-your-teeth kind of determination to be a Christ-like person. By nature we tell others what to do, put them down, and live mean, selfish lives. Christ-centered witnessing can only result from a life fully devoted to a living and active walk with God.

Putting people at ease and being an attractive person reminds me of one of Ellen White's most humorous statements, found in MH 43-44. "Let not your un-Christlike character misrepresent Jesus. Do not keep the little ones away from Him by your coldness

and harshness. Never give them cause to feel that heaven would not be a pleasant place to them if you were there." That is the opposite of true witnessing; coldness and harshness has a repelling influence rather than an attractive one. I like to think that a good test for the attractiveness of my Christian walk is how children respond to me, both mine and others. Do children enjoy being around me? Or do they tend to shy away fearfully? If you put children at ease, you are probably putting their parents and other adults at ease by the same approach.

Let me illustrate what I mean by boasting about a good friend of mine, Roland Hegstad, the editor of Liberty magazine. The first time Elder Hegstad came into my home and sat down in the living room, I was astonished. Within three minutes all of my kids were in his lap. That told me more about his Christian character than all the articles and sermons I had appreciated through the years. My children immediately sensed that here was a person they could not only trust but who would be fun to be with. That's the way Jesus was--the minute he walked into a room the kids were all mobbing about. The disciples tried to chase them away, but Jesus was having too much fun to permit that!

Speaking of the analogy between working with children and working with secular

people, one of the interesting side benefits of this study for me is a better understanding of how to help our children maintain faith in a secular world. It might be helpful to review briefly some of the most significant conclusions of the Valuegenesis study. The study concluded that there are six characteristics of homes and churches where young people tend to remain in the faith. Three of these characteristics pertain to the family. Families that have interesting family worships, where the parents talk freely about their faith, and that engage the children in helping or service projects in the community, have a far higher rate of retention than families that don't have these three characteristics.

When it comes to the role of the church in keeping young people in the faith three characteristics also emerge. Churches that retain youth have a youth program (Sabbath School and otherwise) that the youth themselves consider interesting. The youth also find such churches to offer a warm and accepting environment. And, finally, those churches are most successful in retaining youth if the youth feel that they have the freedom to question the faith and the things that are going on in the church. It is interesting that the same kinds of things that make our churches hospitable to secular people will also make them hospitable to our own young people.

Sharing our faith in the secular world is a major challenge. We not only need to learn a whole new way of expressing our faith, but we need to learn how to do so without crossing social barriers in ways that can end a relationship. The main point of this chapter, however, is that sharing our faith is important not only because secular people need Christ, but because we also need the spiritual strength and affirmation that comes when we share our faith. Fortunately, although communicating the gospel in a secular world is a great challenge, it can be done. In the next section of the book we will examine the dynamics of outreach to secular people, and explore methods that Adventists are using successfully in a number of places.