

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BASIC NEEDS OF SECULAR PEOPLE

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How can we share our faith in a secular world? How can we communicate with secular people in an effective way? How do we get past the many barriers that secular people erect in order to protect themselves against the unwanted influence of religion? A good place to start is to deal with secular people the same way that Jesus dealt with people. And that is to meet them at the point of felt need, that place in their life where they are searching for something better than they have now.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me."

MH 143

What is most interesting in this quotation is the fact that Jesus left the direct spiritual appeal to last in a series of five steps. He spent time with people, "mingling" in conversation, showing sympathy, meeting their needs, and winning their confidence before He felt comfortable challenging them with His unique mission. His method is still the best method. In

this section of the book we will try to put flesh on these suggestive hints by exploring some proven ways to meet secular people at the point of felt need and move them into an acknowledgement of their real need for the gospel.

In this chapter we begin by examining the basic felt needs of secular people that come the closest to a direct spiritual interest and thus provide excellent openings for spiritual input. We will notice as we explore these felt needs, the extent to which Adventism may attract or repel those who sense needs such as these.

(1) A Need for Commitment

Secular people in a high-tech world generally feel a need for commitment to an issue or a person that is clearly greater than themselves. Although secular people may lack a commitment to any kind of organized religion, they nevertheless sense the need to commit themselves to something that transcends the ordinary in their existence. People cannot be satisfied with an endless round of routine tasks. Meaning must come from outside the ordinary.

People may seek to meet that need by a commitment to the Los Angeles Lakers, the Washington Redskins, or the good old USA in the Gulf War. The fate of a sports team may seem rather trivial as the center of one's life, but such attachments function as symbols directed toward a far more significant need, the need to be committed to something that is bigger than oneself. A far less trivial substitute for faith than athletics or even political concerns is the recent revival of interest in ecology. More and more people are committing themselves to recycling and reducing consumption so as not to overburden the environment. Protecting our planet is certainly a major and worthy concern, but even there I believe that people are

searching for something bigger than ecology.

Adventism is uniquely positioned to make a difference here. We can present the greatest Person and the greatest issues that anyone could possibly commit themselves to. The environment of the entire universe for all eternity is at stake in the work of the gospel. This makes sharing our faith one of the most meaningful tasks anyone could undertake. We can meet this need as we learn how to communicate the difference that Jesus makes in real, contemporary terms that touch base with life as it really is experienced today. We can meet this need as we learn how to tie in the issues of the Great Controversy to the kinds of issues that most people are talking about on a day to day basis.

(2) Release from Guilt

While secular people may feel uncomfortable with the term "guilt" in light of its Judeo-Christian associations, they will recognize the need for release from the failure to live up to their own expectations. Most persons, whether or not they know anything about the Ten Commandments, have a sense that they are not living up to what they expect from themselves, much less the standards that might be held up to them from outside. In fact, when Catholics drop out of church to pursue secular interests the thing they often miss the most about the church is the sense of release and forgiveness that came as a result of their participation in the confessional. Even non-religious people need release from the sense of failure--the failure to achieve their hopes, their dreams, and their best intentions.

It is a fact of life that we inwardly expect of ourselves at least as much as we expect of

other people. If I point my finger at you and say "You shouldn't do that", what am I saying to myself? "Well, if I can pontificate about it, it certainly isn't right for me." And secular people often have a very strong sense of obligation, a strong sense of where they want to be in life. The failure to achieve that leaves a sense of brokenness that cries out to be fixed. Many may deny that brokenness, or drown it in alcohol, drugs, or promiscuity, but that brokenness can ultimately be fixed only at the cross. As Adventists we need to ask the hard question of whether we truly understand and appreciate the cross. Until we do, we cannot meet this deep need, not only of secular people, but of all human beings. As we ourselves become forgiven people, we are enabled to minister forgiveness to others. On the other hand, it is impossible for an unforgiven person to be truly forgiving.

(3) Genuine Relationships

Secular people today have an urgent need for genuine relationships. They long for real relationships with real people who care enough to be honest as well as loyal. People today live noisy and distracted lives. They are rushing here and there and relationships tend to be increasingly superficial. A committed Christian who is willing to enter into sensitive and authentic relationship with a selected number of secular people will find open arms waiting. As society becomes increasingly high-tech the need for genuine relationships will increase. There will be a corresponding need for the caring touch, not so much physical as emotional and social.

The church has a tremendous opportunity here to reach out to struggling, hurting, secular people. Many have avoided church because of the perception that church people are

inauthentic and superficial, and thus incapable of meeting their deep relational needs. But as a high-tech society makes it more difficult to maintain meaningful relationships, people are becoming open to a wider variety of options in their search for genuine relationship.

Many people deeply regret the loss of the extended family, where several generations along with cousins, aunts, and nephews all live in the same community and come together on a regular basis. These days brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents are scattered all over the country, often all over the world. North American life is increasingly transient, with people moving wherever jobs or housing opportunities may take them. The church has the potential for providing a sense of extended family for those torn away from their own families of birth. A "welcome wagon" ministry targeting new arrivals to a community, for example, is one way to make contact with secular people, allowing them to consider the role the church could play in their lives. A loving Creator longs to use His people to reach out to a secular world with a loving and a caring touch that the Holy Spirit can use to activate the even deeper need for the kind of relationship that only God can provide.

(4) Cosmic Philosophy

Although they may not always be conscious of the fact, secular people have a need for a cosmic philosophy. Or to put it in contemporary terms, they sense a need for social and cosmic interconnectedness. Human beings need to know that everything somehow fits together, that they belong to a meaningful and ordered universe. Adventists may not be conscious of this need because we often take our awareness of cosmic issues in the universe for granted. Just

think what life would be like if you had no idea where you came from, no idea how the world is going to end, no idea what the universe beyond the telescope is like.

For Adventists the whole Great Controversy scheme is a great organizing principle for one's personal concept of the universe and one's place in that universe. The average person looks out at the sky and has little or no idea what is going on out there. It is an empty void. All that is known is what can be perceived on earth by means of the five senses. What we call "eschatology," a cosmic philosophy that brings the whole universe into the equation, is foreign to most people. At appropriate times, this sense of place in the larger scheme of things can be quite meaningful in a secular context.

(5) Unorganized Religion

Thus far this examination of the basic needs of secular people has proven to be quite encouraging for Adventist mission. Each of the first four needs can be answered by means of the resources found within our faith. In fact, as regards the first and fourth needs, there is no Christian group that is better positioned to make a difference in the secular world, provided we take the time and trouble to learn how to communicate these insights in a relevant way. The fifth need of secular people, however, is far more challenging to us. In harmony with the prevailing suspicion of authority in general comes a corresponding suspicion directed toward religious authority in particular. Secular people, therefore, tend to be opposed to what they often call "organized" religion. They fear coercion and the manipulation of their lives, sensing, perhaps, that religious coercion is the most vexing of assaults upon personal liberties. When

secular people come to faith, therefore, they prefer to be involved in religious contexts where they are allowed considerable freedom and choice in the way they think and live. They like to be "involved" in the process by which they become converted.

We might as well be honest. Few Christian churches are more tightly organized and controlled than the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In my experience, structures and procedures that we often take for granted prove to be quite troubling as former secular people come in contact with them in a new-found Christian walk with us. We encourage people to become educated, for example, but then expect them to think only outside their involvement with the organized church. Fresh and creative ideas are frequently met with "We never did it that way before," or "Ellen White says," whether she did in fact say it or not. It is not surprising that anti-organization-type secular people are often open to the nonsense of the New Age since New Age is, perhaps, the very epitome of unorganized religion.

The situation is not hopeless, however. I sense a rising openness among SDA administrators to create more caring structures and interactions in relation to the local church. In an appendix to this book I will briefly share some ideas that may help reduce the barriers that secular people perceive as they encounter our organization. I have personally been able to blunt the negative impact of our organizational structure on secular people by an appeal to our church's history. After all we ourselves started out as an anti-establishment church. We broke ranks with all the other churches because they failed to follow the Bible, so our roots are in the radical reformation.

Perhaps we can recapture some of the radical spirit of our Adventist pioneers without losing all the positive benefits that competent organization can provide. Such an argument will come across lame, however, if you are not genuinely open to change yourself. If a local church is comfortable only with the ways they've done things in the past, secular people will not stay long because that is exactly the kind of attitude they have been trying to avoid in their previous indifference to religion. This is an area that will require a great deal of sensitivity, both for Adventists who are comfortable in the church and for those outside that we might seek to attract. Helping former secular people discover and utilize their spiritual gifts is one way to demonstrate that there is plenty of room in God's house for individuality and creativity.

Another area of some advantage to Adventism is the secular attitude toward the Bible. A major barrier to reaching a secular person with the gospel is the mistaken ideas about the Bible that they have picked up. If you can disabuse them of these false ideas, they'll often be open to you. Many secular people think that the Bible teaches such unpalatable ideas as everlasting burning hell, child abuse, the subjugation of women and minorities, and administration by absolute fiat (as in the Papacy). In the past Adventists also left established churches because the conventional religious wisdom didn't jibe with what we found in the Bible. When secular people find out that the Bible isn't anything like they have been told, they are often quite open to its instruction.

(6) Life-style Direction

Secular people these days are earnestly seeking direction for their lifestyles. The

number one selling category of books today is self-help; self-help for plumbing, self-help for home-repairs, self-help for marriage, self-help for potty-training, etc. The big concern of most young people today is that they do not know what to do with their lives. The amazing openness of secular people to the bizarre absurdities of the New Age Movement certainly indicates an openness to help from any direction, provided it touches base directly with felt needs, and speaks a language that is familiar and meaningful.

Frankly, there is no faith anywhere that offers more direction for people's lifestyle than does the Adventist faith. We offer suggestions for almost every area of life. I suspect that we do not always present it in a way that is effective or meaningful, but there is much there that would be of great interest in the secular context. As was mentioned in the previous section, if we can learn to think through and present lifestyle guidelines from a principled and logical perspective rather than as rigid rules we have much that will be attractive to the average person on the street. But if we are not careful it is always possible to present these things in a way that will cause the secular person to see all the red flags of "organized religion" in our approach.

Conclusion

This brief look at some of the basic felt needs of secular people indicates that Seventh-day Adventists have a marvelous opportunity to make major inroads into the secular community. In three of the six areas, we have a contribution to make that in some ways exceeds that of any other Christian group. In spite of this we have made little or no impact in

the secular world. This book is aimed at showing why this is so and offering suggestions to turn the situation around.

It would seem that the best approach for SDAs who wish to reach secular people, would be to aim at the felt needs in the area of lifestyle, with particular emphasis on health, stress management, personal finance, and time management. There is already much material available on these matters. These materials can be intelligently utilized by SDAs in two ways; as windows to help us understand how to communicate with the secular world on these subjects, and as sources of credible scientific support for the things we hold dear. However, we have a unique niche in this area in that we can integrate the help that people receive in specific areas into a comprehensive worldview (Great Controversy/cosmic eschatology) that will provide unity and meaning to every area of people's lives. This has been the strength of Adventism in each previous generation. We have a unified message with a unified worldview. If we can learn to express our convictions in up-to-date language, we may be surprised at the kind of people who will be anxious to become involved.