

Present Truth in the Real World (1993)

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CHAPTER NINE

CUTTING-EDGE PEOPLE

It clearly takes a special kind of person to reach out to secular people in a meaningful way without crossing the barriers of social propriety. What are the characteristics of such a person? To recall the starting point of this book, I would like to return to the concept of the "two-horizon" person. Every person has their own intellectual and social horizon, a perspective that is unique to them. The greatest need in our church is for two-horizon people, people who are not only comfortable in a traditional Adventist setting, but can also step out and be comfortable in the secular world.

I know of no Seventh-day Adventist that fits that category better than Clifton Davis, the television actor. He was completely at home in the Adventist environment of Andrews University, whether mingling with students and teachers at the seminary, with Adventist administrators at the conference level, or in a local church. Yet he is equally at home in the public setting. I have seen him operate in a restaurant as it gradually dawns on the people around us that it is really him. Soon they started coming over with napkins and date books for autographs and a little conversation. He was sensitive to where each person was coming from, and what they expected from the encounter. It really inspired me to find more ways of making

a difference for Christ on airplanes, and in routine business contacts.

The two-horizon person is the person who can make people feel at ease both in the church and in the world. Certainly any Adventist pastor who wants to work with secular people while pastoring a typical Adventist church will need a two-horizon perspective in order to survive. An independent ministry, like a community church, is a much easier proposition than pastoring an established Seventh-day Adventist church. But if you are working in a context in which secular people will be brought together with traditional Adventist people, you will need a deep sensitivity to both groups. You can not expect to railroad one group in order to accomplish something with the other. Such an approach will simply create a great deal of anger and heartache.

Identify with People

There are at least four qualities that equip a person to be effective in reaching secular people. First of all is the ability to identify with people, to sense where they are coming from. People with this quality are able to get close to others in a hurry, to intuitively put themselves in other people's shoes and see the world through their eyes.

I had a good friend named Joe who was pastoring in the same conference I was in. I always envied Joe's razor-sharp ability to zero in on a person and identify what was going on deep inside. I will never forget the time we were on the paint crew at the conference camp. One Sunday a number of church members came up from the city to help us out for a day. Around ten o'clock this fellow was dropped off at our work-site with the message, "He's here to

help out." Joe immediately says, "Hi. My name's Joe," etc. After a couple of minutes conversation Joe found out that the young man had just come from Yugoslavia. "Oh," he says, "are you here with your family?" "No, no. My sister's still back there." Suddenly Joe turned to him, looked him directly in the eye and said, "You're worried about your sister, aren't you?" Immediately a tear came down the fellow's cheek. Joe continued, "Why don't we pray about her right now?" We all dropped to our knees on the dropcloth and prayed for this guy's sister. He hadn't been in the room five minutes!

Adventists, mirroring the nineteenth-century heritage of the American frontier, tend to be rugged individualists. This individualism is reflected in the proliferation of private interest groups at the fringes of Adventism today. The individualist attitude radiates, "If people see things differently than we do it's their problem." But spiritual outreach across cultural lines requires great sensitivity to other people's ideas and feelings.

If you realize that you have difficulty identifying with people, take it to the Lord. By the Spirit many Christians can become specially "gifted" in order to enhance the spiritual power of their ministry to others. But even those who do not feel "gifted" can learn to identify with people more effectively with a little training and practice. Make it a project to learn from your mistakes. The neat thing about secular people is that they are very forgiving of relational mistakes, if you are honest and genuine. Secular people do not appreciate the kind of person who is "holier than thou". But if you make an honest mistake in relating to a secular person just say, "I really blew that! I don't know why I said that, etc." You will be amazed at how forgiving they can be. They are usually quite willing to teach you how to talk to them if you give them an

honest effort.

Not all of us are as naturally gifted as Joe is, I certainly am not. I have to struggle to put people at ease. But this is one of the most important things that any of us can learn in this life. It is worth making a top priority. As I have repeatedly pointed out, secular ministry is not for everybody. But those who feel the call of God to make a difference in the secular environment will want to sharpen their ability to identify with people and understand the inner drives that motivate their behavior.

Creative Witness

The second quality that sets two-horizon people apart is the ability to offer a fresh and creative witness when the circumstances demand it. A canned or pre-packaged approach is limited in its impact to those who are interested in what that particular kind of can contains. Examples of a canned approach would be a set of Bible lessons that is given to everyone regardless of background or interests, or an evangelistic series that is identical in every community regardless of its ethnic or social setting. With secular people it is necessary to "wing it" a lot more than most of us are accustomed to. Fresh and creative witness means to be able to say something that you have never said anywhere else before because the situation requires it. Obviously, the only way we can do this is to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can impress you in particular circumstances to offer the right word at the right time much as Jesus did while He was here on earth.

I can remember an occasion where the Spirit helped me to "wing it" in an effective way.

There was a lady in my church who had been an Adventist for a long time. She married a man who had no background in Adventism whatsoever, and she did little to enlighten him during the courtship period. She was in her 50s and he was somewhat older. Sometime after the marriage she requested that I visit and meet her husband. They lived in a lovely mountainous area about 100 miles from my urban church. I thought, "Well, let me make a nice day of it and refresh myself in the countryside as I go up for the visit."

As I approached the area it was raining, foggy, and cloudy. I reached their lakeside home, parked the car, and got out. There on the lawn was one of these big yard umbrellas, and there was Joe, the husband (no relation to Joe the pastor), with two of his friends, drinking hard liquor in the rain. I thought to myself, "Pastor, this is going to be one of those days!" The Adventist wife was nowhere to be seen, so I went over and sat down at the table. I introduced myself as the pastor of the wife's church, etc. "Yes, we've been expecting you." Joe immediately picked up the bottle of brandy that was on the table, handed it to me and said, "Have a drink, pastor."

This was the moment of truth for our relationship. To mishandle this moment could put an end to any hope of reaching this man. And I often blow such opportunities; I have a difficult time handling people right. But on this occasion, I believe the Lord put words in my mouth. Although I had never met the man, I took the bottle of brandy, looked at it, and said, "Oh, that's good brandy. But, I'm interested in something a little stronger right now."

I had his full attention. He leaned forward and said, "Something stronger than brandy?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'd like the strongest drink in the world."

He said, "What's that?"

I said, "It's a drink that is so strong, it'll float battleships. I'd like a glass of water."

Joe was on the lawn, rolling around with laughter. He was laughing so hard that it took about fifteen minutes to get him back together again. We were friends from that moment on. A little while later we had dinner together, along with his wife and the two neighbors. When the dinner was over, I said, "You know, I need to be going back but Joe, would you mind if I prayed for you before I go?" Now I would not make such an offer in every circumstance, but I felt impressed that this was the right thing to do on this occasion. Joe said, "Sure." And I began to pray for him, for his neighbors, and his family. In the middle of the prayer, I heard a noise. It was a cross between panting and sniffing. I might as well admit it, I peeked. And Joe was just sobbing and sobbing. When I finished the prayer, he continued sobbing for a half-hour. No one had ever prayed for him. And shortly after that he began coming to church in spite of the distance.

Let me be very honest with you, I don't have successes like this all the time. In fact I might be shooting 20-30% at best. But on that one occasion a fresh and creative witness reached a person who had never been touched before. Fresh and creative? I would never have dreamed that a joke about alcohol would be the way into a person's heart. But if the Spirit is with you and your heart is sensitive to people, you can often sense the right word at the right time, even when you do not know the people very well. I think that is the way Jesus would have handled it. He went to many kinds of parties. And sinners were never embarrassed by His presence. He had found a way to make them feel at home and, at the same time, maintain

those limits that were necessary to His own spiritual experience. Fresh and creative witness means a willingness when necessary to approach people and issues from an entirely different angle than you have ever tried before.

Biblical Knowledge

A third quality that is absolutely essential in the person who desires to witness effectively to secular people is to know the Bible well. This is a tough one. It certainly does not happen overnight. But a thorough knowledge of the content of the Bible is critical. Secular people ask questions that you have never dreamed of. They almost never ask the questions that are found in the typical set of Bible lessons. When secular people see a bumper sticker that says "Jesus is the Answer", they respond, "What was the question?" They are not asking Christian types of questions.

Most of our traditional Bible lesson sets were designed to persuade people who already know Christ and are familiar with their Bibles. Secular people find it difficult to relate to that kind of Biblical knowledge. To know the Bible well is to be prepared so that when the off-the-wall question comes, you can reorient your Biblical knowledge in relation to the question and provide an answer from Scripture that transcends anything you knew before. That may seem an impossible task but you must not allow the enormity of the task to slow you down. If you have no idea how to answer just say, "That was a great question! Hey, do you mind if I go home and think about it for awhile? A question as good as that deserves a solid answer. Give me a little time and I'll get back to you." As we noted earlier, secular people are a lot more

forgiving than we might have reason to expect. They do not expect you to have all the answer at the tip of your fingers, in fact they may become suspicious to the extent that you imply that you do!

My favorite style of evangelism is what I called "Open Forum." Open forum style permits people to interrupt anytime to ask questions or offer comments. It is not a great deal different than the Donahue or Oprah Winfrey shows on television. Secular people found the open forum style entertaining as well as challenging. They would say, "This is better than television. I would come here every night of the week." Apparently the give and take of intellectual debate remains the object of tremendous interest. The challenge of open forum, of course, is that you never know what you are going to face so you had better know your Bible and be sensitive to the Spirit's guidance. I remember a Jewish lady who would regularly blurt out, "I don't believe that!" I would respond, "You don't believe it? Why not?" I would let her talk a little bit, then I would say, "What do you think of this text here?" It was amazing how this style built rapport with a fairly secular audience. But in an open forum setting the lack of a thorough knowledge of the Biblical material will often leave you speechless.

Common Language

The fourth quality that characterizes Christians who successfully interact with the secular environment is the use of basic, everyday language in outreach efforts. There is a language that is common to all who speak English, the kind of language used in magazines like Newsweek or in the daily newspaper. These media utilize a basic 8,000-10,000 words that

communicate to virtually everyone whether or not they can read or write. On the contrary we Adventists often use our own "in-house" language which communicates accurately only among us.

Just imagine a secular person visiting an Adventist church for the first time. Up on the platform is a person doing a special feature on Investment. What will the secular person be thinking? "Hey, these people must be into stocks and bonds, I bet they're loaded. Someone else then gets up and says, "You know, I'll never forget the day I finally saw the light." Light? What light? A Bud Lite?

The reality is that most Adventists who are educated and who work in white collar jobs know how to talk to secular people on a day-to-day basis. The problem is that we tend to segregate that language to the secular part of our lives and switch to a different language whenever we want to express our spiritual needs and concerns. Adventists should challenge each other to express spiritual feelings in everyday language within the church so that it will become second nature when we reach outside to others.

As a pastor in New York City, one of the intellectual capitals of the secular world, I went out of my way to screen my sermons with this in mind. I would ask myself at every step, "What sense would this language make to somebody coming in off the street? How can I make it as basic and clear as possible without giving up content? I gradually learned that you can talk about complex things without using complex language. It takes time to learn. I remember with much regret the time a Lutheran couple came to my church and I prepared a sermon on the law "just for them." I had not made it to the ten minute mark of the sermon before I realized that I had totally blown it, but I did not know what to do to redeem the situation. They never came back. It has taken years for me to learn the use common language, and then it took a few more years to start overcoming the impact of Ph.D. studies on my vocabulary. But the more we learn to use the language that all people have in common, the wider the impact that we can make on

a diverse audience. Both the intellectual and the illiterate are included by the same message.

Conclusion

The four qualities described briefly above require both involvement with the Holy Spirit and much effort and experience. It is not necessary, however, to master all these areas before one can begin reaching out to secular people. The good news is that God enables those that He calls. If you feel called to develop an outreach to secular people, I invite you to commit yourself before God to get the training and experience that will make a difference in the quality of your efforts. The very best training, however, lies in the doing.