Present Truth in the Real World (1993)

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HOW TWO MODELS CAN COEXIST

What can you do if your local church has no burden for secular people, and there is no possibility of an alternative church setting? If attempts to educate the local leadership on how secular people respond and think have failed, the solution is to form a "subculture" within the church, or to put it another way, to open a door into that church for secular people. If the worship service is not "user-friendly" to secular people, they need to be introduced to another type of church setting first.

This insight first came to me as I was addressing this subject at a conference camp meeting. The conference president became quite excited over the kind of people who were attending the seminar. In particular, he mentioned a non-Christian husband who had been resisting the church's attention for years, but when his wife told him about my seminar on meeting the secular mind-set, he eagerly attended. The president had been working with the man for years and was thrilled to see him showing some interest. The next day that husband, along with his wife and another couple, came to me and said, "I need to talk to you. I appreciate what you have been saying, but I have a problem. I believe in everything your church teaches, but I can't stand the church itself.

What do I do?" By "church" he meant the local congregation. As he spoke to me, the other three nodded their heads approvingly. Since I run into this all the time, I said, "It seems as if you have a least three people here who understand you. Are there others?"

"Oh, yeah. There are ten to twelve others whom I can relate to pretty well. But the church as a whole-I just can't stand it."

"What you need to do is form a subculture," I said.

"A what culture?"

My answer to him is my answer to loyal Adventists with the same problem. There are churches where the corporate personality is such that it cannot work effectively with secular people. In such cases, those who carry a burden for lost secular people need to form a subculture within the church.

A subculture is a setting in which a particular class of people who belong to the church or are interested in the church but don't quite fit socially or politically can get the spiritual uplift they need. It's a halfway house, if you wish. A subculture aimed at the secular mindset would intentionally avoid the minor irritations that drive secular people away from churches. Such a subculture can take many forms. It could be a Sabbath School class, a prayer group, a home Bible-study group, or even a social club.

So I said to these two couples, "You need a subculture, a place where you can have your needs met. If the church service is not meeting your needs, instead of agitating and dividing the church, find a time and place every week you get together and feed your souls from Scripture.

Ideally, of course, the pastor would be consulted and involved to some degree in each subculture functioning within the church, so that unnecessary misunderstandings would not develop.

When I was pastoring in New York City, I had five or six subcultural groups in my church. The motivating principle for one group was family life; another was raising children. In one case we had a group looking into UFOs! Other groups at one time or another included a men's class on how to understand and treat women, a group on personal finances, another on gifts of the Spirit, and several studying various books of the Bible. The main purpose of these subcultures was getting people who had common interests together so that their spiritual and social needs could be met in a way that was rarely possible in the setting of the whole body. In my church the makeup of these subcultures tended to be half members and half secular people. And the members who attended these groups were usually the fringe people who had never been fully at home in the larger church. They ate up these subcultures with joy. Some tried to attend them all! And they rejoiced at bonds they were developing with otherwise unchurched people.

By means of these subcultures, we were able to provide a door to the church for people who wouldn't have felt at home in the church otherwise. Sometimes these secular people would come for two or three years and indicate no interest in the church. I waited, because I knew that one day many of them would sidle up to me and say, "By the way, how do you join this church, anyway?" That was my signal that the testing truth had been passed. What is the testing truth for secular people? Whether or not there is a God, and whether or not it matters. Adventists often think of the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and tithing as testing truths for people. But secular people are rarely worried about such things. The great testing truth for

them is *whether there is a God and whether God matters in their lives*. When secular people become convinced that they have met God in your church, they are wide open. I usually responded to their request about joining the church with, "Got some time Tuesday night? I'll drop by and talk to you about it." I brought the baptismal vows, read them through, and offered to study any areas in which they were unclear or unprepared to make a commitment. Usually, by that point, they were ready for anything.

Every church needs to have a door through which secular people can enter and find their unique needs met. That door could be a special kind of worship service once a month or even once a quarter. It could be a second service at another time, like Sunday morning or Wednesday or Friday evening. It could take the form of small-group seminars or discussions. But every church whose primary mission is not outreach to the unchurched needs to provide other ways in which secular people can be integrated and grown into Adventist ways of thinking. It's like providing -a "half-way house". Ultimately, of course, secular people should be encouraged to attend the Sabbath-morning worship service, whether or not it feeds them, because the body needs to get together and worship on a regular basis. Secular people need to be there because they are a part of the body. But the subculture may always remain the place where their primary spiritual needs are met.

Does allowing for a variety of spiritual experiences and expressions in a church lead to social and doctrinal chaos? It need not. Although there is only *one* gospel, it can and must be expressed in a variety of ways. Have you ever wondered why there are four Gospels in the New Testament when there was only one Jesus? I believe there is a very simple reason for it. The Lord Himself realized that there was no one presentation of the gospel that would meet all

minds and all needs. It takes a variety of approaches to reach everyone. No single approach will ever be sufficient.

Madison Avenue is well aware of this. Did you know that Colgate, Close-Up, and Ultra-Brite toothpastes are all made up with essentially the same ingredients? But they are not marketed the same way. Colgate emphasizes MFP-maximum fluoride protection. Who is interested in that? The "health nuts," people who are concerned about the health of their teeth. They delight in a toothpaste that will keep them out of the dentist's chair. Close-Up and Ultra-Brite have the same amount of fluoride, but the people who buy them are not interested in fluoride. Close-Up is marketed to people who like to get "close up", romantic types who are concerned about their breath. So Close-Up emphasizes the breath-freshening qualities of the toothpaste. Colgate has those too. But the people who buy Colgate are less interested in getting close up than they are in the health of their teeth. Ultra-Brite is for the vain types who are concerned about their appearance and like to have bright and shiny teeth. Madison Avenue has discovered that the people who buy Colgate would never dream of buying Close-Up. And the people who buy Ultra-Brite have no interest in the others. The three toothpastes are identical. But each one is ***marketed*** to a different class of people.

I think we should learn something from that. There is only one gospel. There is only one Jesus Christ. But there are many types of people, and Christ relates to each type in their own place and in their own time. Our greatest need may be to learn how to take this one gospel that we all believe in and present it to unique people in a way that meets their felt needs. Adventists with a passion for secular and unchurched people need to get together with others who share their passion and begin to brainstorm a little bit. What can we do differently in our church?

What are the groups in our community that we are not reaching? Are we truly open as a church to new directions, or would a subculture be the way to start?

This book has been intended, not as a specific agenda for every situation, but as a large overview of the existing situation, with suggestions in broad strokes regarding things that can make a difference in a local church. The specifics of implementation will need to be worked out on a church-by-church basis.