

Present Truth in the Real World (1993)

By Jon Paulien

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
AND NOW, SOME GOOD NEWS

I must close with some good news about the role of the church in a secular world. A number of trends suggest that better days for outreach to secular people are arriving. There is a growing backlash against secularism in the world today. People seem less concerned with appearances and the trappings of success than with self-fulfillment. Many are giving up raises and promotions for a simpler life with more time for human relationships.

There was a time when sociologists felt that secularization was an unstoppable process that would continue until all religion in the world was forever banished from human consciousness. That is now understood to have been naive. Secularization seems to be a self-limiting phenomenon. Whenever it reaches a certain point, an inevitable backlash against it sets in. It is clear, not only in the former Soviet Bloc, but also in first-world areas like Western Europe and North America, that secular people have an increasing interest in the supernatural and in the development of the spiritual side of human life.

The search for a supernatural experience has taken some bizarre turns with the New Age and the influx of Eastern religions, but faith is an increasingly acceptable stance with

secular people. Although the secular search for faith continues to exhibit barriers toward established Christianity, faith-talk in a proper social context is more welcome than it used to be. (See *Newsweek*, 17 December 1990, 50-56 for a most interesting article on baby boomers and the church.) The explosive growth of strange cults illustrates the incredible power associated with meeting people's felt needs. How much better it would be if meeting felt needs led to an appreciation of the true gospel!

According to surveys, half of the unchurched in America would be open to the "right kind" of invitation to attend church, and 75 percent would be willing to send their children. It seems that few people are unchurched by choice. The biggest reason why people drop out is that they moved and never got around to finding a church in their new neighborhood.

Even more interesting is the fact that the majority of Americans brought up in irreligious homes are now members of some church. And half of the unchurched people admit that they think about their need to go to church at least once a week. These facts indicate that the unchurched are not nearly as hardened as is generally assumed, but can be reached in caring ways that are sensitive to the hurts and the irritations that they have experienced in their relation with churches and church people. Even small steps in the direction of making churches more user-friendly to secular people may be amply rewarded. It appears that a high-tech society, where artificial voices tell you to press whole series of buttons before you can contact a human being, has created an intense hunger for social and spiritual relationships.

Another sign that things are moving in a positive direction is that, while many mainline denominations decline, evangelical churches that are not excessively hidebound by traditional

ways of doing things are growing rapidly in all sectors of society (see *User-Friendly Churches*, by George Barna, which is listed in the bibliography). A stunning example of this is the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago. The church was started by a young pastor named Bill Hybels, who was driven by an experience he had had as a teenager in high school. His best friend was a totally secular person. One day the secular friend's girlfriend left him, and he was devastated. In agony he came to Bill and said, "Bill, I want to go to church with you." He was suddenly open to church because of this tragedy in his life.

So Bill took him to church, a Dutch Reformed Church. Dutch Reformed churches were molded from the very same kind of culture that most Adventist churches were-- straight-laced, quiet as a mouse, traditional, everything taking place formally and in order. That is not wrong in itself, but it does not usually appeal to secular people. The two were not in church for five minutes before Hybels sensed that he had made a big mistake. For the first time he saw the church service through the eyes of someone who was hurting and searching for God. And there was nothing there for his friend. For three weeks after that the friend avoided him. Finally, young Hybels cornered him and asked, "Look, what's going on? Why are you avoiding me?"

The friend said, "You know, I've always been friends with you, and I always thought you were a pretty cool guy. But I have to be honest with you. What you guys do in church is just not normal." He had been so stunned by the church experience, he no longer knew whether Bill was normal enough to be his friend. And Hybels vowed that one day he would start a church where people like his friend could feel comfortable, where they would not be so turned off by the peripherals that they could not find Christ.

A few years later he and a group of youth went to the most affluent suburb of Chicago and started knocking on doors, saying, “Do you go to church?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Thank you very much. Keep it up. Goodbye.”

Next door, “Do you go to church?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Why not?” They noted all the reasons people gave for staying away from church. Then they asked, “What kind of church would make you willing to try again?”

Together they designed a church that avoids the little irritations that unnecessarily turn off secular people. With little signals such as architecture, drama, and choice of music, they tell seekers that they understand the struggles of contemporary life, and that the gospel to be preached can make all the difference in the 1990s. Contrary to what most Adventists would expect, Willow Creek offers no soft religion. In order to be accepted as a member, you must attend faithfully for a year, become involved in a small group, and have a clearly identifiable ministry! This is no easy way to join a church! You have to be making a difference for Christ in your world before you can become a member of that church. And the standard is high; the elders of the church spend more time dealing with adultery than any other issue. Yet the average weekend attendance is more than fifteen thousand. And the offerings total more than \$200,000 a week. They baptize a thousand people a year, 65 percent of them from unchurched, secular backgrounds.

The best-known part of the “Willow Creek strategy” is what they call a “Seeker’s Service.” In addition to their regular worship service for believers, they offer a service especially designed for secular people. It is attractive and contemporary, so that secular people do not feel that they must enter a time warp in order to become a Christian. The little offensive things that needlessly turn people away are eliminated, opening the way for them to be challenged by the centrality of the gospel rather than by peripherals that they would perceive as meaningless without a prior acceptance of the gospel.

But the secret of Willow Creek’s success is not so much the strategy as the sense of God’s presence that one experiences there. You find yourself in the midst of a people for whom God is living and powerful. Adventists know how to talk *about* God, and *about* the Bible. But secular people who decide to join a church don’t want another secular intellectual philosophy. They join because they have experienced the presence of a living God there.

It is not my purpose to extol Willow Creek as *the* model for Christianity or for Adventism at the turn of the millennium. The pastors of Willow Creek themselves warn that such single-mindedness would be a mistake. For one thing, we live in a diverse world where few strategies target more than a very narrow audience. For all its success with secular people, Willow Creek is making as little inroad into the African-American community as the Adventist Church is currently making in the Caucasian-American community. A person attending services at Willow Creek will also learn relatively little about doctrine or Bible prophecy. This means that Adventists cannot limit themselves to Willow Creek’s approach. Nevertheless, Willow Creek’s success demonstrates that the basic thesis of this book will work. A church that combines

practical spirituality with a sensitivity to the secular mind can reach secular people in large numbers. Secular ministry *does* work.

For all its shortcoming, the goal of this book is the fulfilling of Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. In that passage Jesus commands His followers to go into all the world and seek disciples from every people group, including those of a secular mind-set. But it is not to be a human effort alone. It is the authority of Jesus (verse 18) that provides the power to make disciples. And Jesus promises that His presence (verse 20) will be with His followers as they go out to make disciples. To attempt, therefore, to carry out the strategy of this book without the spiritual component would be to fail entirely. On the other hand, 1 Corinthians 9 makes clear that to make no attempt to understand and approach these people groups in all of their God-given variety is to minimize the results that would otherwise be possible. Although the challenges of secular ministry are great, the basic mandate is clear. A genuine walk with God, combined with a strategy that is sensitive to the world in which we live, has the potential to make a mighty impact on this planet.

We are living at the turn of the ages. This is not so because an arbitrary number (A.D. 2000) is coming up. Rather, it is so because society is going through changes more wrenching than any that have been seen for hundreds of years. We are moving from the Industrial Age into the Information Age. History tells us that in times of wrenching change, people feel lost and nothing works right. Events and the growth of knowledge accelerate with frightening speed. Time seems to rush by out of control. People are adrift in a maelstrom of change. But history also tells us that societies like this can be uniquely open to a word from the Lord.

Although it would be more comfortable to retreat as we anticipate the battles ahead, the One who is on our side is bigger than the challenges that face us. Let us, therefore, be bold and seize the day!