

***Knowing God in the Real World***

**by Jon Paulien (Pacific Press, 2000)**

**Chapter Three**

***Keeping the Faith***

The previous chapters address how, and on what grounds, people get right with God. They provide a basis for establishing a relationship with God. In this chapter we will look into the ongoing process of developing and maintaining a relationship with God. If we desire to lead secular people into a relationship with God, it is imperative that we have a relationship with God ourselves. But this cannot be taken for granted, even in Adventist churches.

One of the unforgettable moments of my life was the time I was visiting with a pastor who worked in a conference outside North America. For a while I had great difficulty believing what he was telling me. He was telling me that in his conference back home the number one topic of discussion, when the ministers got together privately, was whether or not God exists! I'm not talking about just any group of ministers, priests or rabbis. These were Seventh-day Adventist ministers working in a Seventh-day Adventist conference in good and regular

standing! I share this not to poke fun or vent my horror, but simply to point out that maintaining a living walk with God in the midst of a secular, technological age is no easy matter. The reality is that we have never faced a time in our history when Seventh-day Adventists have been more insecure about their faith in God, or more insecure about being Seventh-day Adventists.

### **A Time of Spiritual Crisis**

Now if you've been in the church for forty or fifty years you might not have experienced this insecurity as much as my generation and those that follow. This insecurity afflicts those that grew up in the turmoil of the 60s, and their children. My generation is not necessarily more perverse or more lax in passing on the fundamentals than earlier generations. But many things that had been handed down as certainties proved to be questionable in fact. Some "truths" seemed to be less about God's will and more about keeping certain people in power. Too many things that had made sense in the past turned out to be setups when viewed in the present. As a result, my generation felt betrayed, and as a result, felt compelled to lay everything open to question. This has had positive as well as negative results. In this chapter the focus is on the negatives and some suggested remedies.

The above experience was, of course, not limited to Seventh-day Adventists. The latter half of the twentieth century was a time of convulsive change in every aspect of life. The advent of computer technology and the Internet fundamentally changed the way people think and reason. The speed and complexity of life accelerated rapidly. Nothing seemed stable anymore. Jobs were downsized the minute your salary became comfortable. Families seemed to lose the key to stability and permanence. Where you lived became subject to chance more than intention. As a

result, extended families were ripped apart.

At a time when the foundations of everyday life seemed to be collapsing with exponential speed, churches and other religious institutions were shaken with devastating force by two great spiritual realities. The first major reality was the general dominance of secular culture, first in the Western world, and increasingly in the developing world as well. Secular thinking undermined the institutions of religion at just the time when spiritual stability was most needed. The supernatural seemed increasingly distant from reality. Conflicting interpretations of reality seemed to discredit all claims to absolute truth. Expressions of faith were shoved to the margins of consciousness as the five senses became the arbiters of truth.

A second major reality has shaken the confidence of today's generations in Seventh-day Adventist faith. Toward the very end of the century, secularism was joined and partially replaced by an amorphous, feel-good spirituality known to many as New Age thinking. New Age spirituality spoke much about God and was even affirming of the idea of prophetic "channels." At the same time it manifested little interest in the prophetic insights of the Bible or the kinds of doctrinal concerns that had energized Seventh-day Adventist faith in the past. The moral basis for Seventh-day Adventist standards was trivialized. In a real sense, New Age spirituality was the perfect complement of secular philosophy. Although spiritual in tone, it was no more friendly toward religious institutions or doctrinal convictions than secularity has been. So it is not surprising that Seventh-day Adventists have never been more insecure about what they believe or how that belief should translate into everyday life and practice.

## The Process of Secular Drift

These larger trends suggest to me that the little anecdote about a conference in a far away place is probably not that far from where many of us live. If we do not consciously and intentionally cultivate a relationship with God, we will inevitably drift into secular or New Age modes of thinking. The drift into secular types of thinking doesn't happen overnight. People don't just wake up one morning and decide that they don't believe any more or that the teachings of their church don't matter. It usually happens gradually over a period of months or years. It is a process, a "secular drift". The process of secular drift involves several steps.

(1) *Personal, private prayer life is the first thing to go.* The uncertainty plaguing faith in today's world often shows itself first in the area of private prayer. I have been told by more than one pastor's wife their husbands have not prayed in years, except in public. I do not imply an indictment of all Seventh-day Adventist pastors, but I believe that the struggle to maintain one's communication line with God is tougher now than it has ever been. How many of us have a prayer life that is all that it could or should be?

This particular issue is deeply personal. Not even your spouse might know that your personal prayer life is slipping. This step is manifested in that quiet time, all by ourselves, when no one else is looking. This is the place where secular drift usually begins.

(2) *The study life begins to decline.* I know of people who have not prayed for years and yet they continue a routine of study. They might not even go to church, yet they get up on Sabbath mornings and read the *Review*, *Firm Foundation*, or *Spectrum*. They may watch 3ABN on Saturdays instead of football or movies. But over time, without a strong prayer component, interest in spiritual subjects tends to decline, at least with regard to one's personal spirituality.

Where study continues in the absence of prayer, it may be less for one's own spiritual journey than to call in question the spiritual journeys of others.

(3) *Personal lifestyle standards begin to slip.* A change in one's personal lifestyle is usually the first public indicator of secular drift. It must be acknowledged that many questions about the Adventist life style have been raised and discussed. While I cannot settle these issues here, my years of experience as a pastor tell me that when you relax your lifestyle standards in areas where you had strong convictions before, it is often a sign of secular drift.

I would encourage you to think seriously about the changes you make in your lifestyle. Many Adventists sincerely believe that the wearing of a wedding ring is not in harmony with God's will for them personally. While such a belief is not universally shared among Adventists, it is part of a spiritual package that seeks to communicate modesty, simplicity and God-given beauty. When such a person begins to wear a wedding band, is it a deeper way to glorify God? A way to reaffirm a shaky marriage? Or a socially-acceptable way to indulge a love of glitter? I have no question that many Adventists have chosen to wear wedding rings for reasons that strengthen their relationship with God. This paragraph is not directed at them. But my experience as a pastor has also taught me that when a change in lifestyle or standards is combined with a decline in the devotional life it is almost always a sign of secular drift. The change in outward appearance is often the first public signal of a decline in the private spiritual life.

To focus merely on the issue of wedding rings or jewelry here would be to miss the point. When lifelong abstainers start allowing beer or wine in their refrigerators, that is usually a sign of secular drift. When truthful people start bending the truth in service of a good cause, that is

usually a sign of secular drift. When honest people become comfortable cheating on their income tax, that is usually a sign of secular drift. When frugal people start showing more excitement over expensive toys than they do over helping the poor and oppressed, that is usually a sign of secular drift. When modest people begin startling you with their dress selections, that is usually a sign of secular drift.

I must not go on without a note of caution. As much as I believe in the above, I realize that in a closed and dysfunctional church community the observance of outward behavior can be used to do great harm. We drive people away from God when we arbitrarily impose our personal convictions on others who neither understand nor accept them. What I am calling for here is a personal awareness of our own standing with God. If we are aware of the markers of secular drift, we will be less likely to lose our personal connection with God. So the goal of this section is to encourage personal awareness, it is not a call for more people to become “conformity police.”

In an open, truly loving community, gentle, lifestyle confrontation in an atmosphere of acceptance can sometimes help people make commitments to God that they would be unable to make alone. In my experience, however, such communities are rare among Adventists. In most situations it is healthier and more effective to apply the counsels of this chapter to ourselves primarily and not to others.

(4) *Inconsistent church attendance.* The next step in secular drift is the effect it has on attendance at worship. Again, it is rare for a person to move from regular attendance to nonattendance in a short period of time. The fall-off in church attendance may start with something as harmless as a “Winnebago Sabbath,” taking the recreational vehicle and the family

out into nature.

I can relate to the idea of Sabbaths away from public worship because I have taken a few myself. If you are something of a public person within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, dropping in at a little local church on Sabbath can be a draining experience. One day I dropped in on a local church of 20 members. Before I knew it I was doing Sabbath School lesson, preaching the sermon, and holding an “issues seminar” for three hours after the potluck. That evening I visited the shut-ins, and the next day I made hospital calls. My family and I agreed that the next time we were on vacation and we were in the middle of nowhere, we should go off into the wilderness, anywhere but church. In my position, church and vacation don’t always go together.

But you have to be careful with that type of thinking. Skipping church may start at a very innocent level, maybe one Sabbath here, and another there. But then one Sabbath you just don’t feel like getting up and the next thing you know you are making it to church no more than once a month. You discover one day that it’s a lot easier to just stay in bed or do something else. When one’s attendance record reaches this stage it is a major public signal that our walk with God is not what it used to be.

I realize that for Adventists who are deeply engaged in the real world, church these days can become a very uncomfortable place. But while we should never tolerate spiritual or social abuse, I have a challenge for those who are uncomfortable with the “old ways.” Don’t be afraid to embrace the discomfort that church can bring. Discomfort might be a word from God, a path toward personal growth. Discomfort and disturbance are among the ways that God cares for us, breaking through our tendency to become satisfied with wherever we are in our spiritual walk. If

we run at the first sign of discomfort, we may be playing out a scenario of secular drift without realizing it.

(5) *Begin doubting the Bible and the after life.* As secular drift progresses, doubts of all kinds begin to settle in with increasing frequency. You begin to question some of the things you have been taught. You become exercised over the “problem texts” of the Bible. You start challenging the pastor’s sermons, in your mind at least, listening more with a critical ear than a receptive heart. You pick up a Bible and try to read it, but a little voice in the back of your head says something like, “This is just ink on a page. This isn’t some magical answer to all of life’s problems. What are you wasting your time with this for?”

I realize that for some the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression or abuse. Ethnic groups have been told that they are inferior because the Bible says so. Women have been prevented from exercising some of their God-given gifts by well-meaning students of the Bible. Children have been required to “honor their parents” even when those parents were committing criminal acts. For such individuals, a certain amount of doubt may be an important step on the road to spiritual health. To grow spiritually, they may seem to be rejecting the Bible. But they are not rejecting the Bible, they are rejecting false ideas that were wrongly based on the Bible.

More often, however, doubts come as the natural consequence of transgressing personal standards. Let me explain. When you act in a way that violates your conscience, or sin willfully (to put it in other terms), only two paths are open to you. You can repent of that sin or you will change your theology. The approach recommended in the Bible is to confess your sins, repent, and deal with the consequences. Going through this process leads to a sense of God’s acceptance and forgiveness. It puts that sin behind you and restores your relationship with God.

But if you refuse to confess and repent, you will change in your relationship to truth. God has designed us to be uncomfortable violating our personal standards. So if we don't deal with our sins and our compromises in the biblical way, we will end up changing our view of right and wrong, so as to avoid the pangs of conscience. Unconfessed moral violations force us to rationalize and justify our behavior to ourselves and others. Before we know it, our *beliefs* begin to conform to our *practice*. At the root of our deepest doubts about God, therefore, is a personal history of moral failure that has not been dealt with according to biblical teaching. And these kinds of doubts are a major signal of secular drift.

(6) *Growing distrust of religious institutions.* The last step on the path of secular drift is a thorough distrust of all institutions, particularly religious institutions. It is a breakdown in one's loyalty to any kind of institution that stands for God. And this is a natural progression of the previous step. Doubts about the Bible and the things you have been taught in the past move to doubts about the pastor's ideas and the pronouncements of the conference. At its root is a rejection of spiritual authority in all its forms.

Rejection of religious authority within the Seventh-day Adventist Church used to be the unique domain of so-called "liberals." But this is no longer the case. These days, rejection of religious authority is as common in the so-called right wing of the church as it is on the left. Is it possible that secular drift affects the most those who are most certain that they are unaffected by it? Is it possible that this right-wing disrespect for our church, its administrators, and its institutions may be rooted in secular drift? While no earthly institution, not even the Seventh-day Adventist Church, deserves unquestioning subservience, an attitude of disrespect, sarcasm, fault finding and criticism rarely goes hand in hand with a deep and vital relationship with God.

## The Antidote to Secular Drift

What can be done to counteract the devastating spiritual effects of secular drift? How can we maintain faith in a secular, new-age world? The solution is not to take up a defensive posture, where we live in fear and suspicion. Instead we need to aggressively seize the reality of God's kingdom, which is alive and well in the midst of this secular, new age world. The key is not to plot some kind of escape, but to proactively take hold of what God has already provided in Christ. According to the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is already here, in the midst of this reality (See my book What the Bible Says About the End-Time, pp. 75-83, for more on the NT perspective). Through the Holy Spirit we can have a walk with God that is real in a world that questions its very reality.

How do we do that in practice? The place to start is in the devotional life. As we suggested earlier, it is an emerging weakness in the personal, devotional life that constitutes the first two steps on the road of secular drift. We need to slow down, to reflect, and become attentive to His presence. The clearest message about God that most secular people will ever see is the one that they read in the life of some Christian they know. It would be a rare thing for us to lead a secular person into a living walk with God if we ourselves do not have one.

I grew up in New York City, one of the citadels of secularism. I've spent much of my adult life in higher education. Even serving as a church pastor for nine years did not shelter me from the corrosive effect of secular drift. Pastors often spend their lives running from one thing to another, from one idea to another; from one situation to another; from one emergency to another. And when you are dealing with spiritual things every day, a few secular thoughts may come to feel like a healthy break from the grind.

I have, therefore, put together a few ideas that have emerged out of the crucible of my life. They are offered not as a cut-and-dried formula for everyone to follow. Instead, they are offered as a smorgasbord from which you can choose whatever seems appropriate to your - circumstances. I have learned that four major things are necessary to prevent secular drift and to assure a vital relationship with God in a secular world: study, prayer, action, and witness.

Relationships are built on mutual communication. This involves listening and talking. We learn about the other person through listening, and we share our inner selves through speaking about the things that matter to us. But a difficulty arises when it comes to our relationship with God. How do you talk to someone you cannot hear, see, or touch? How do you listen to someone you cannot hear, see, or touch? The talking to God part is not so strange. We can do that in prayer. But how do we listen to a God whose voice we cannot hear?

## **I: The Study Life**

The place where we can most clearly hear the voice of God today is in His written Word. So a foundational step toward a living relationship with God begins with serious time in the study of God's word and in other writings of high spiritual value, such as those of Ellen White. But not everything in the Bible is of devotional benefit. The selections we make for study, therefore, may be as important as the amount of time we invest in that study. In the following I want to help you avoid some of the mistakes I have made in seeking a closer walk with God.

*1) What we study must be relevant to everyday life.* The choice we make of devotional materials should be sensitive to what is currently going on in our lives. If what you need at this point in time is recovery from alcohol abuse or from a painful past, "twelve-step literature" may

be the best devotional reading for you right now. On the other hand, if your deepest need is for a better understanding of the Bible, then devotional commentaries, such as the Bible Amplifier Series, may be just the ticket. The devotional life should address the basic issues that you are wrestling with right now. Otherwise it is not likely to affect your life. It will simply be an isolated pocket in the middle of nowhere.

*2) Devotional study needs to focus on the person of Jesus.* Since Jesus is the one through whom God has interacted most plainly with the human race, a focus on the person of Jesus is crucial for human beings who want to know God. In your choice of reading materials, highlight those that help you to understand Jesus better. In the Bible, the four gospels and many of Paul's letters have a preferred place in devotional study. In the writings of Ellen White there are books, such as Desire of Ages and Steps to Christ, which were designed for becoming better acquainted with God in the person of Jesus.

Some parts of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy may not be conducive to a growing devotional experience with God. 1 Chronicles, for example, is inspired but it's not on the "recommend reading" list for the devotional life. The endless lists of genealogies and officers of David's court are useful to archaeologists and others interested in the names and historical sequences that are part of the context in which the Bible was written. But they are not well-suited to our devotional needs. Likewise, a book like Ellen White's Counsels on Diets and Foods may be extremely valuable for its purpose, but it does not always focus on the relationship with Jesus. A thorough knowledge of which foods are good or bad may be of great importance, but it does not necessarily bring us closer to Jesus.

*3) Devotional reading cannot be rushed.* Devotional reading should be recreational. Try

to arrange matters in such a way that you don't have to set an alarm or limit the time you spend. Rushed devotionals can do more harm than good. I used to pick up the Bible, Great Controversy or Desire of Ages and challenge myself to read as many pages as I could in an hour. Before long it became a contest. I was motivated by secular goals more than my desire to know Jesus better.

When it comes to devotional reading, take your time. It would be better to spend a whole hour on one text and thoroughly explore what that text has to say than to read page after page but experience minimal impact on your life. The pace of life has been accelerating for more than a generation now. In our technological age, we desperately need to learn how to slow down, to reflect, and to take stock of our lives. We need to let our racing hearts cruise down to idle for a while, and just commune with God. If we don't take time to reflect, we may find ourselves further and further from a personal relationship with God even in the midst of direct service for Him.

*4) Develop a devotional journal.* One of the most important insights in my life has been the old adage, "paper remembers, people forget." When I was younger and my mind was less cluttered than it is now, it seemed I could remember everything that mattered. But things have changed. Information flies by in such huge quantities that important things are continually falling through the cracks if I don't write them down. I find that some of the most important spiritual insights flash by and then fade into forgetfulness. In today's world I can't afford to let God be crowded out, even by a multitude of good things.

Not only does paper remember the things I forget, the act of writing also seems to implant things more deeply into my mind. "Expression deepens impression." I say things in my mind as I prepare to write. I see the words I am writing. I feel the pen and the pressure on the paper. I

am bringing a variety of learning modes into play. This helps what I write become a more permanent part of who I am as a person. Not only that, the process of writing seems to draw out thoughts and feelings that had been hidden from me before.

I believe, therefore, that one of the best ways to develop a closer walk with God is to journal, to write down the insights you gain from reading the Bible or other spiritual books. Don't write down just any spiritual insight. For your devotional journal only write down those insights that impact deeply on your soul. If you write down everything, the journal may become too cluttered to be helpful. The best devotional book you will ever read is the one you write for yourself. No two human beings are alike. A power-packed collection of insights that have moved you in the past will be a powerful resource to maintain and restore your relationship with God in the future.

One day I spent 45 minutes reading a spiritual book. It filled my heart so much, that I had to make notes on the experience. Not finding something to write with I reached for my notebook computer and sat down. For more than an hour, I found myself typing down the insights the Lord gave me that morning. Most of those would be forever forgotten if I hadn't done that. Whether you use paper and pen or the computer to journal important spiritual insights, the emerging "book of insight," your very own book of devotional reflections, will be a powerful tool that God can use to become more real in your life.

*5) Develop a reflective diary.* Through a "book of insight," in which we record the special concepts that encourage us in our relationship with God, we enhance our ability to "listen" to God's word. But there is another way that journaling can enhance our ability to listen. A second approach to journaling is the reflective diary. I call it my "book of experience."

It seems that most of the spiritual giants throughout history kept spiritual diaries. Ellen G. White did, and so did Luther, Wesley, and many others. What do we find when we read those spiritual diaries? There people reveal their inner struggles. They unveil a sense that God communicated with them directly in one way or another. They chart their progress through life's challenges.

What I like to do is get a blank journal page in front of me and ask the Lord questions like, "How do you feel about the way I treated my son yesterday? My wife? What are some ways that I can improve the class I'm teaching? How can I find a way to reconcile these two colleagues who are estranged?" Then I begin to write and let the writing take me wherever it will. Often I will find myself in places I hadn't planned to go, but to which God was clearly leading me. Sometimes I come to the realization that I talk too much in small groups, or fail to express caring to my students, or expect too much from my children. I may have been ignoring someone who really needed me. Sometimes I just total up my reflections on the last day or the last week. It's sort of like keeping score. I can detect trends in the course of my walk with God that I would miss if I did not take the time to reflect in this way.

The Lord uses that reflective time to teach me the value of listening to Him. When I go back and read these reflections later on, they continue to be relevant. I've learned that if I don't keep score of my life and my behaviors, I tend to make the same errors over and over again. So keeping a reflective diary, or a book of experience, can play an extremely important role in our relationship with Jesus.

## II: A Life of Prayer

When it comes to relationship with God, talking to Him in prayer seems much more straightforward than listening to someone you can't hear. Nevertheless, personal prayer life is the greatest challenge that most Christians face in life. Time and again people set out to improve their prayer life only to feel as if they have been shot down in flames. I have had the experience of failure in prayer many times. But over the years I have learned a number of things that have greatly helped me. I share them here in the hope that your next attempt to upgrade your own prayer life will be more successful than before.

*1) Any which way you can.* There is no single right way to pray. Some people will tell you that the only appropriate bodily position for prayer is on your knees with eyes closed and hands folded. And, to be honest, that's the way I do it myself more often than not. But the prayers of the Bible do not portray any kind of exclusiveness with regarding to the bodily position for prayer. People described in the Bible prayed standing up, on their knees, and flat on their faces. They prayed with the eyes open and with the eyes shut. They prayed with hands folded or with hands outstretched in the air. More important than particular bodily posture is to connect with God.

Being aware of this has important consequences. For example, whenever I pray silently with my eyes closed, my mind tends to wander. I close my eyes to pray and fifteen minutes later I find myself wandering in some other county. I usually have no idea how I got there. I was just in some kind of mental drift. I find it most helpful when praying, therefore, to keep my eyes open and to focus them on some object in the room, like the pattern in a carpet or a couch. To focus my eyes helps me to focus my mind as well. I wonder how many people struggle in prayer

simply because they don't know that God doesn't mind if we keep our eyes open when we pray, what matters is that our minds are focused on Him.

*2) Finding a focus through the journaling process.* Another way to focus my mind is through the writing process. But this time, instead of recording insights about the Bible or about my own experience, the writing is directed to God Himself. Have you ever written a prayer to God? It's like writing a letter to Him. It can be a wonderful experience. I find that when I take the time to carefully shape the wording of a prayer or letter to God, the prayer becomes so much more meaningful. The whole process of writing helps to draw out of me what I really want to say to God, things I may not have brought to consciousness any other way.

A "book of prayer" is the place where your God-directed thoughts gain focus and are recorded to be read again another day. If you are into computers you might want to think of the prayer process along the lines of email. The "book of experience" records what you think God wants to say to you about your relationship. The "book of prayer" records what you want to say to God. As our experience with email teaches us, writing is a marvelous way to develop relationships even though we may not be physically together. And social scientists have noticed an interesting feature of email. People somehow feel safer in email than they do in any other type of communication. They are willing to say things that they would never put in a formal letter or say to someone's face. So this can be an effective way to be more authentic with God in prayer.

If the concept of a "book of prayer" seems a bit unorthodox to you, just remember that the vast majority of the Psalms are written prayers. What was good for the saints of old can still play a role in our relationship with God today! This is an aspect of "old-time religion" that many

traditionalists have forgotten.

*3) Let prayer go to the core.* It is easy in prayer to pay a hurried visit to the missionaries and the colporteurs and fail to dig out the depths of who you are and how your relationship with God is going that day. One reason that prayer may seem irrelevant to everyday life is that the crucial elements of everyday life are not brought forward to God while in the attitude of prayer. Discuss with God the very things that your journal has revealed are of utmost concern to you at a given time. Share with Him the events of the previous day. Share your concerns about the implications of those events.

Prayer becomes truly meaningful when we are willing to open ourselves to God, to discuss the things that matter most to us, to share our deepest thoughts with Him. If prayer is not the place when you can share the things you wouldn't even tell your spouse, whom are you going to tell? Personal prayer may be our best chance to share with Somebody who knows and cares and accepts us just the way we are. We can safely talk to God about the things that we wouldn't dare tell another human being, not even a counselor sworn to secrecy. After all, nothing we could say will shock or surprise God. He already knows, and He loves us just the same. It is safe to open even our darkest depths to Him.

*4) Allow God to answer your prayers.* Another helpful strategy is giving God the opportunity to answer your prayers. It is easy to rush through a prayer list and then bounce to our feet and move on with the day, never expecting that God might respond in some way. We say, "Lord, I am in a hurry today. Got to get ready for work but there are missionaries and colporteurs out there that need some help. Well, got to run now, good bye."

I encourage you to try this the next time you are in the attitude of prayer. Have some

paper and a pen in front of you and when you are done with your prayer, take up the pen and wait. Write down whatever comes to your mind. Some of it may be silly or irrelevant. It has certainly been the case with me. But on some days, God just about scheduled my whole life! In the quietness of that moment He has brought to mind people that I need to visit or call.

I shared this idea in class one day at the Seminary. A student from Canada was moved to try it that night. After prayer he had the repeated feeling that a certain woman in Canada needed to be contacted. Since his wife was in Canada at the time, not far from where the woman lived, he decided to call his wife and ask her to contact the woman for him. The next day his wife called back and said that she had been unable to get through. He urged his wife to keep trying. He felt strongly that the Lord had some reason why she needed to be called at that time. The wife called once more. This time the woman answered. Her response was stunning. “A week ago my husband died and I just got home from the doctor who told me that I have cancer. I’ve been sitting here by the phone wondering if anybody cared.” My Canadian student now has no doubts that God can still communicate with His people today!

*5) An emphasis on thankfulness.* Glenn Coon, one of my all-time favorite preachers, used to emphasize Neh 8:10: “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” He believed the secret of spiritual power is the joy that comes from a spirit of thankfulness and praise. It is impossible to be sad for long when you are continually reciting the ways in which God has blessed and enriched your life. My experience over the years has clearly confirmed Coon’s insight.

While Coon’s strategy sounds simplistic and corny, it really works. He suggested spending a little time each morning writing down ten things that you are thankful for. During the course of the day, each of these items can become the focal point of brief prayers. “Thank you

Lord for the air.” “Thank you Lord for the cat (or dog).” “Thank you Lord for the red roses.” Very down-to-earth, practical stuff. This kind of prayer gets right down to the very basics of life. It brings a sense of God’s concern for every detail of life. And the amazing thing is, that as we thank the Lord for specific actions that have affected our lives, an incredible sense of confidence and joy takes over. You can’t think of anything that you’re thankful for? Get out a dictionary. “Apes,” “apples,” “apricots,” you’ll find plenty of things on every page that you have never thanked God for! And the process is well worth the effort. Nothing can brighten our lives like a spirit of thankfulness and praise.

### **Digression: Finding Time**

How can we find time for study and prayer in the midst of the crushing load of responsibility most of us bear? After all, few people have the time to accomplish all that they expect to accomplish in a day. That means that it is ultimately up to us to decide what is truly worth our time and what is not. When new activities clamor for involvement, it is crucial to realize that you can't add anything to your life without taking something else away.

The problem is that most people prefer not to make such choices. They seek to accomplish everything that is set before them, and it just does not work. Inevitably, either the family or the devotional life, or both, are sacrificed on the altar of indecision. So whenever someone asks me to accept a position or perform a task these days, I ask myself the question, "What activity will this replace? Is this more important or interesting than what I will have to give up in order to do this?" Life is a choice. If we don't choose, time will choose for us. And we will be unhappy with the choice.

All this has large implications for the devotional part of life. Our time with God is often crowded out by the press of lesser concerns. If we don't choose to spend the best part of every day with God, we will inevitably drift in a secular direction. So the first step in enhancing our devotional experience is to choose to make it a front page priority in our lives. The great thing about will power is that it is strengthened by use. Choose to put God first. Say it out loud. Write about it to your friends. Expressing that choice will make the choice stronger. Decide what in your life needs to go if your devotional experience is to grow. Be careful about adding new assignments or responsibilities. In the devotional life, above all other things, we must echo the words of Paul, "This one thing I do, setting all other things aside."

### **III. Lifestyle Matters**

If you want to maintain faith in a secular world, you've got to have more than just an interior life. Prayer and study alone are not enough. Without concrete and practical faith-action in the life, the devotional experience can easily become confined to a closet in one's mind. This leads to a schizophrenic existence where faith impacts on the life for a short time each day, followed by an essentially secular existence the rest of the time. 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, physical and sexual abuse, alcohol problems, and drug use as the non-churched culture; the problems are just less visible in the church setting. 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. Our high standards can create an environment where help and healing rarely occur. Quite often, therefore, belief in Adventist teaching has relatively little impact on how people live.

The other way around, fortunately, is very different. How you live has a powerful impact on what you believe. This is a major theme of the chapter in Ministry of Healing called “Mind Cure.” (pp. 240-259) The routine actions of daily life have a massive effect on what people believe and how they feel and think.

That is one of the secrets of the Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle. It compels us to bring God into every detail of our existence. When you’re making out your family budget, what is the first thing you consider? The tithe. God is at the center of your financial life. When you are shopping at the clothing store, what are you thinking about? “If I were to wear this, would it enhance my Christian witness or would it distract from it or contradict it? Would this clothing glorify me or point to what God is doing in my life?” When you are in the grocery store, you are reading labels. Why? Because you don’t want to take into your body things that God wouldn’t approve of. Things that might hinder your effectiveness for Him. Rightly handled, the Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle brings God into all the activities of daily life.

The strongest safeguard against secular drift--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 our worldwide reality! Adventism cannot afford to be isolated in the closet of our experience. To be effective in a secular world, Adventism must affect the whole of our experience in this world.

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. We practice God's lifestyle because we have been accepted by God, not in order to earn His acceptance. Though the apostles were clear that salvation was a gift, 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 first-century Christians said, "Jesus is Lord," they 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 days' wages. There is shock all around when he does not. 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!

So while devotions are vital to a living relationship with God, they will fail in their

purpose unless our walk with God permeates throughout our experience in the real world. Through the Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle we have the opportunity to experience God at the center of every detail of our lives. Through our practice of the faith, our beliefs become stronger and our whole experience is integrated into our walk with God.

#### **IV. Sharing Our Faith Is Not an Option**

Related to putting our faith into daily practice is the importance of sharing our faith with others. In order to keep our faith strong it is necessary to share it. This is not only true for today. It 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 Chronicles 20, he was under attack by the armies of three whole nations. 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 are 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, the power of the Exodus experience was manifested again. Instead of a battle, the enemy armies were dealt with 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. Reciting what God has done for you in the past brings His power back into your life in the present.

Expression deepens impression. Talk faith and you will have more faith. Ellen White expresses this idea forcefully:

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.

Ministry of Healing, pages 251-253

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. You also shared the excitement and joy that came with the discovery that Christ 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? 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.

If these things are so, why do we witness so little? A major deterrent to sharing faith in a secular world is that we sense that witness often oversteps the boundaries of social propriety. When we think of witness, we often 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 they feel guilty if they don't. That is no way to live.

We can be freed to witness again when we find out that true witnessing has two basic principles that prevent us from overstepping the boundaries of social propriety. The first principle: 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. Do you enjoy being with people who repeatedly tell you what to do and put you down by highlighting their own superior understanding? Do they make you feel at ease? Do you feel like listening any further to what they have to say? Would you want to become like them?

Putting people at ease means avoiding the attitude of a superior. Putting people at ease means relating to them in such a way that they are comfortable in one's presence. It 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. We have to "earn" the right to confront others about the central issues in their lives. We earn that right through genuine caring that is more willing to listen than to instruct. It is not necessary to put people down or to nag them in order to share one's faith.

The second principle of true witness is to live an attractive, Christ-centered style of life. Most secular people are looking for something better. When they see people who "have their act together," they find it incredibly attractive, far more attractive than the painted-on smiles of the media. People love to be with others who are at peace with themselves. They like people who listen to them and who don't put them down. 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.

Sharing our faith in the secular world is a major challenge. We need to learn a whole new way of expressing our faith. 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. Keeping the faith in today's world cannot be taken for granted, it is the result of a conscious effort to know God.