

**BACKSLIDING AND APOSTASY:
A LOCALIZED STUDY IN SUBURBAN NEWCASTLE**

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BACKSLIDING AND APOSTASY:
A LOCALIZED STUDY IN SUBURBAN NEWCASTLE

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NOT FOR CIRCULATION



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INTRODUCTION

The Current Problem

No-one is immune from the problems and pressures of the present age. Christians, as well as other people, can become desperately lonely, deeply hurt, or experience severe financial, family and social pressures. Other Christians become so busy coping with life that they neglect to pray, to study God's Word, and to be alone with God. The result is an inner spiritual weakness and a barren Christian life. Many such people may experience a deep longing for the loving concern and support of fellow Christians and yet be like the psalmist who, with an aching heart felt that "no man cared for my soul" (Ps 142:4).

Whatever the problems and pressures of modern life, it is a fact that many people do not appear to find the solutions within the Christian churches. The exit of the church often seems as wide open as the entrance. One church reported more than 1000 new members in 8 years, yet the net increase of membership for the period was 2.¹ If departures from the church continue at the present rate, there will soon be as many ex-members of the churches as there are members.

The Seventh-day Adventist church is not entirely

¹Donald F. Thomas, "Why They Come and Go," Christianity Today 7 (March 1963): 36-7.

immune from this problem, either. For the period 1975-1980, the apostasy rate for the world field has averaged 29 percent of the increase in membership.¹ This means that for every 100 people who join the church, there are 29 who leave. In the Australasian Division of the church, the apostasy rate was over 36 percent. This figure represents 15,581 people who left the church in that Division alone, over the 5-year period. As serious as these figures are, they do not necessarily reflect the whole picture. If accurate statistics could be obtained regarding the church attendance and religious participation of those who remain in the church, then a more accurate picture of the spiritual condition of the church might be seen.

Blame for the problem of backsliding and apostasy is often aimed in a number of different directions, with very little objective data to back up the claims and little being done to come to grips with a situation which should demand the attention of the entire church. It could appear to some to be a little fatuous to attempt to bring converts into the church while a large number are continually going out the back door. The purpose of this project is not so much to determine who is responsible for the present situation, but rather to study the problem as objectively as possible and attempt to come to some conclusions as to how

¹This data was gathered from figures given in the 114th to 118th editions of "Statistical Report of Seventh-day Adventists," (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, [1975-1980]).

to reduce the number of people who leave the church. Lost sheep and prodigals may not only be lost, they may be saying something about the church from which they are separated. They may perhaps be able to tell the church something it needs to hear about its faith, morality, and community.

The Nature of this Project

This project was an attempt to assess the causes of backsliding from a local church and to implement procedures to reclaim former members. It was not a ready-made and packaged programme. It was the writer's intention, after researching the Bible and other literature on the subject of backsliding and the reclamation of backsliders, to find from a group of such people why they left the church and then to work with the church in designing a ministry plan to reclaim as many former members as possible. In the course of doing this it was hoped to also improve the level of fellowship and concerned love within the church.

The writer was graciously invited to conduct this project in the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist church by its pastor--Glenn Weare. It was agreed that the writer should act in the role of an associate to the pastor, and a consultant to the church, in working for the church's former members. This arrangement had both advantages and disadvantages as far as the implementation of the project was concerned. However, the writer considers that the arrangement was satisfactory and the gracious cooperation of Pastor Weare with the writer's proposals was most helpful.

The project was limited in time by the short period available to the writer during the course of study at Avondale College. It would have been more ideal to have carried out a project such as this over a two-year period in order to prepare the church well and to consolidate the progress made. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the entire project covered only seven months, positive changes could be seen in the perceptions of the church members towards their responsibilities to their former brethren. Encouraging changes were also seen in the attitudes of some of the backsliders who were contacted. Fruitful and continuing relationships have been established and only time will tell whether or not complete restoration to church fellowship will be achieved.

The Evaluation of this Report

The project was evaluated using both oral and written observations supplied by the Hamilton church members, a written assessment by the pastor, and two questionnaires. The first of these, the 'Worship and Fellowship Questionnaire' assessed the member's levels of satisfaction with the worship services and the fellowship of the church, both before and after the formal period of the project. The second, a Programme Evaluation, assessed the member's response to the project itself. The project could also be evaluated by the amount of data gathered in the interviews with the former members. These methods of evaluation were supplemented by the writer's own observations.

The Organization of the Report

Chapter I lays a theological foundation for the whole project by studying the Biblical view of the church as a community and also its views concerning backsliding and apostasy. This provides a number of key insights which need to be taken into consideration in working to reclaim backsliders.

Chapter II presents the views expressed in the writings of Ellen G. White, whom the Seventh-day Adventist Church considers to have made inspired comments on many issues related to the church's life and mission. Her comments on the Biblical view of backsliding and on the church's responsibility towards backsliders are considered in this chapter.

Chapter III considers the views and findings of other writers and studies concerning the causes of backsliding. A section is included which deals with causes which are more specifically related to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Chapter IV discusses various suggestions which have been made for preventing backsliding as well as for reclaiming backsliders to church fellowship. These suggestions could be implemented in any church concerned with the problem of backsliding.

Chapter V describes the steps taken to implement the project and some observations concerning the answers given to the survey of former members.

Chapter VI is an evaluation of the project. It contains an assessment by church members, reflections by the writer and an assessment by the church pastor.

The final chapter contains a summary, a critique of the project, suggestions for further study, and some suggested improvements that the writer feels could be made to the project if it were to be implemented again.

CHAPTER I

BACKSLIDING, APOSTASY AND THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

Introduction

It is clear from a study of Scripture that God never intended Christians to be isolated from one another. Attempts at isolation indicate a wrong concept of the gospel, of worship and of the function of the church. Salvation is not simply something which happens between God and one individual in isolation from other believers.

Neither the Old nor the New Testament sees the individual as separate from the community of the church. A person's salvation comes to him, from one perspective at least, as a member of a group. Believers are knit together in an invisible yet intimate relationship which the Apostle's Creed calls "the communion of saints." Without the fellowship and communion of other Christians our communion with God could tend to make us self-centred in our worship. But Christianity is *family* living. The fact that there are also other people present at church and included as its members is not simply incidental to our relationship with God. Rather it is essential to the basic concepts of worship, church, and being members of the body of Christ. The apostle John informs us that "if we

walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another ..." (1 John 1:7 R.S.V.). It should be noted that our fellowship is not only with God, but with our *brethren*. Fellowship with God exhibits and proves itself by fellowship with other Christians. It can be seen therefore that there is a very real relationship between spirituality and fellowship. Conversely it would appear that between rejection of fellowship and spiritual weakness or backsliding, there is also a close relationship (Heb 10:24-27).

In this chapter it is the purpose to establish a theological base for discussing backsliding and apostasy and for working with backsliders with a view to restoring them to fellowship.

The Church as a Community

The Christian writings of the first century contain a variety of views regarding the meaning and practice of community. However, it is Paul's letters that contain the most detailed application of the concept. It is not that Paul was the first to formulate a Christian idea of community, nor that he treated the subject in a systematic way, that makes his contribution stand apart from all others. Rather, it is simply because in Paul's writings we find the most clearly developed and profound understanding of community in all the early Christian writings.¹

¹Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community (Sydney: Anzea Publishers, 1979), p. 14.

A brief discussion of Paul's understanding of community follows. Although it is by no means a complete or exhaustive treatment, it is to be hoped that it will provide a background for a deeper understanding of the nature of backsliding and apostasy and its significance for both the individual and for the church community as a whole.

Some metaphors for community in the writings of Paul

From the world of agriculture, Paul uses, in describing the church, such terms as a 'field', a 'grafting' (on an olive tree) and a 'planting' which God cultivates in order to produce fruit for His kingdom.¹

Another metaphor is that of 'building'--either an ordinary building or a temple, which Paul sees as a building par excellence.² Collectively, Christians make up the spiritual temple of God, in which resides the Spirit of God.

A more frequently used term is *ekklesia*. Paul's understanding of this term is of a 'gathering' both in a dynamic local sense and also in the sense of a heavenly reality to which all Christians belong.³ Paul thus sees Christians in a common relationship with Christ, not only

¹Rom 11:17-24; 1 Cor 3:9; Eph 3:17; Col 2:7.

²Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:10-14; 1 Cor 14:12; Eph 2:20.

³For a fuller discussion of this point, see Banks, chap. 4.

when they meet together but at all times, wherever they are. Yet it is through gathering together that the community comes into being and is continually recreated. However, if we are to really understand Paul's idea of community, we must turn to other terms.

Body of Christ

It seems that in preference to the above terms, Paul uses the metaphor of a body, with Christ as the Head.¹ This metaphor is the most dominant image used in the New Testament in connection with the Christian Church.² As the body has many and varied organs, each designed to do a particular work and all performing in perfect harmony, so also the members of the church with their different gifts and functions, are to work harmoniously toward one supreme end. This is because the church is Christ's body, standing at His disposal, ruled by Him in all its members. Paul puts it this way:

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:4-5).

Alan Cole in The Body of Christ sees five meanings arising out of Paul's metaphor. These are: man's common dependence on Christ; joint partaking of His Spirit; interdependence on one another; unity in Christ; and

¹Rom 12:4,5; 1 Cor 12:12-31; Eph 1:22; 4:15,16; Col 1:18.

²See Alan Cole, The Body of Christ (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), pp. 11-16.

responsibility for mutual service.¹ This unity in diversity is clearly stated in 1 Cor 12:12: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." Thus, ideally, there is to be a harmonious functioning of the whole body, as Ellen White's comment on this passage stresses:

By a comparison of the church with the human body, the apostle aptly illustrates the close and harmonious relationship that should exist among all members of the church of Christ.²

This then is the meaning of Christian fellowship and community; namely, that believers are not simply an aggregation of individuals, but instead, are members of one indivisible body with every member dependent on the others and all on Christ.

Even though the body metaphor is vital to Paul's thinking with regard to the Christian community, the inadequacy of this organic unity to describe all of the implications within the concept of 'the church' leads Paul to use the language of human, and especially family, relationships. These will now be considered.

Family

According to Robert Banks, "the comparison of the Christian community with a family must be regarded as the

¹Ibid., p. 26.

²Ellen G. White, The Acts of the Apostles (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958), p. 317.

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In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of the concern that the stronger Christian should have for the weaker, who is described not only as "the brother for whom Christ died" but even more personally as 'my brother' for whom he has a direct responsibility (1 Cor 8:11,13). This personal relationship is also reflected in the way Paul refers to fellow workers and members as "our brother" (1 Cor 1:1; 16:12), "a beloved brother"¹ "the faithful and beloved brother,"² and "my brother."³ He not only refers to males but also to females whom he calls "our sister"⁴ and "his mother and mine" (Rom 16:13). The whole of Romans 16 as well as the closing sections of many other Pauline letters indicates the kind of personal family relationships developed by Paul and the churches.

The quality of Paul's relationships is seen in the way he refers to associates as "beloved"⁵ and in the affectionate way he addresses churches. "How I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ," he says to the Philippians (Phil 1:8), while his closing wish to the somewhat recalcitrant Corinthians, is that "my love be with you all" (1 Cor 16:24). Not only does Paul express himself thus, but he also expects members of the various churches to have similar loving relationships with each other. He prays that the Thessalonians will "increase and abound in

¹Eph 6:10; Col 4:7.

²Col 4:9; Phlm 10.

³Phil 2:25; Phlm 7.

⁴Rom 16:2; Phlm 2.

⁵Rom 16:5,8,9,12; Col 4:3.

most significant metaphorical usage of all."¹ It does appear true, that this image reveals the essence of Paul's thinking about community more than any other he uses. His use of the family metaphor is based on the relationship which exists between Christ, the believer, and God. Christians are members of a Divine family whose Father is God.² This has implications for the life of the local communities, for members should see one another as members of a common family. Paul thus gives encouragement to "do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10).

Paul uses several terms in his writings concerning the church which come from family life. Apart from *oikeioi* "household" which was mentioned above (Gal 6:10), he uses terms such as the following:

1. *Oikonomos* , "steward", who is one of the household personnel.³
2. *Hupēretēs* , "servant", illustrates the kind and spirit of behaviour that ought to prevail in the church (1 Cor 4:1).
3. *Adelphoi* , "brethren", is Paul's favourite and most intimate term which describes the relationship which exists between Christians.⁴

¹Banks, p. 63.

²E.g. Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:6; Eph 2:19; 1 Thess 1:1,3; 3:11,13; 2 Thess 1:1.

³1 Cor 4:1,2; 9:17; Eph 3:2; Col 1:25.

⁴Rom 15:14; 1 Cor 15:58; Phil 3:1; etc.

love to one another as we do to you" (1 Thess 3:12). Those at Rome are to "love one another with brotherly affection" (Rom 12:9-10).

Such love is spelled out in 1 Cor 13. The relevance to work for those who have separated themselves from church fellowship is obvious in the phrases, "it does not rejoice at wrong ... love bears all things ... hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." These attitudes of patience, tolerance, humility, and perseverance should result in relationships of real depth as in a truly Christian and intimate family. It can be seen therefore that the metaphor of the family was a vital one to Paul's thinking concerning the Christian community. Closely related to this concept is that of the church as a helping community.

Helping community

It is strange indeed that one of the most vital expressions in the Bible concerning practical Christianity, is often overlooked in our search for propositional truth. The short and seemingly insignificant expression is "one another," a translation of the one Greek word *allēlōn*. This word, in its different forms is found one hundred times in the New Testament and is variously translated as "one another" (76 times), "each other" (2), "themselves" (12), "one the other" (3), "yourselves" (3), "yourselves together" (1), "mutual" (1) and "together" (2). In the majority of these cases it is found with the imperative

mood as part of a command, for example, to "have peace one with another" (Mk 9:50), "love one another" (John 13:34), "be kindly affectioned one to another" (Rom 12:10), "edify one another" (Rom 14:19), "be likeminded one to another" (Rom 15:5), "admonish one another" (Rom 15:14), "care one for another" (1 Cor 12:25), "serve one another" (Gal 5:13), "bear ye one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2), "comfort one another" (1 Thess 4:18), "pray for one another" (James 5:16), "be subject one to another" (1 Pet 5:5) and "have fellowship one with another" (1 John 1:7). The list could go on, but it is obvious that we have here a vital 'relationship' word--one which touches almost every aspect of interpersonal relations within the fellowship of believers in Christ.

It is very clear that God did not intend for us to be isolated Christians. If we try to be, then we have a wrong concept of the gospel, of salvation, of worship and of the function of the church. Salvation is not simply something which happens between God and one individual and affects only that particular person. Neither the Old Testament nor the New, sees the individual as separate and isolated from the community of the church. A person's salvation comes to him, from one perspective at least, as a member of a community.

The many "one another" passages in Scripture force the Christian to conclude that the primary function of the church and of being included in its membership is not to

fortify his mind with more 'truth' or to strengthen his faith or to prod him to more witnessing or greater obedience--as important as all these things are. Rather it is in order that the Christian might "have fellowship one with another" and have the place and opportunity for the true Christian graces to be expressed and nurtured in an atmosphere of brotherly love and concern.

The church is therefore a helping community composed of members who are responsible for each other's welfare. Often discussion concerning the subject of the 'priesthood of all believers' centres around the right of individuals to form their own theological views and to be free from ecclesiastical control. However, the real importance of this term is that it relates to the privilege of service rather than of rights. As Hans Kung puts it:

Each is responsible for his fellow-men, called to share in struggles and in his difficulties, called to bear his sins with him and to stand by him in everything. The priesthood of all believers is a fellowship in which each Christian, instead of living for himself, lives before God, for others and is in turn supported by others.¹

The one Christian grace which will enable this ideal of a *helping, fellowshiping community* to become a reality, is love. Only when true love is exercised will the church become the *caring, concerned community* that the "one another" passages indicate it should be. It is significant that,

¹Hans Kung, The Church (London: Search Press, 1971), p. 381.

in Scripture, the words "one another" are linked with the command to love, more than with any other command or advice. For example John says "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (1 John 4:11, R.S.V.). The actual expression of love is thus a concrete evidence that we have experienced God's redemptive grace in Christ. Jesus himself said "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34, N.I.V.).

To love as Jesus loved is a goal no man can reach alone. That kind of love comes only from Him who Himself is love, but it is ultimately a Divine gift made available through faith in Jesus Christ (1 John 4:7).

The Church, the family of God, will always stand in need of a gospel which is proclaimed, not only in words, but also in concrete acts of love to one another within the caring, family fellowship of the community.

Therapeutic community

It is a marvel of God's grace that Jesus Christ has condescended to live in and through the Church, thereby continuing His ministry and work for mankind. The Church is the therapeutic agency which God desires to use to reveal His love and healing power to the world. He has turned to redeemed humanity to perpetuate the incarnational revelation, horizontally out into history. In a world filled with confusion, tension, stress and loneliness, people, *including Christians*, are in desperate need of the love of God and the peace, strength, and healing

which such knowledge and acceptance brings. Counsellors have long recognized the need to show their counselees acceptance and support in order to facilitate understanding, growth and the solving of personal problems.

Similarly, believers are to help one another and bear one another's burdens. When members of the Christian community experience this acceptance and support, they are better able to work on their spiritual problems which, if not solved, may lead to a state of backsliding.

The place of public worship and church attendance in building the community

Public worship is the centre of the whole life of the community. It is only as the community has its distinct centre in its worship that it can and will stand out clearly in the world. In the worship hour there takes place that which does not take place anywhere else. As Karl Barth stated, in Divine Service the community "exchanges its working clothes for its festal attire. It is now an event as community."¹ In the worship service, the community truly comes into visible existence.

Jesus said that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Matt 18:20). This saying has unmistakable reference to the gathering ("synagogue") of the community in public

¹Karl Barth, "The Event of Divine Worship," in Theological Foundations for Ministry, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 333.

worship. The human response to the impulsion of the Word of God calls for something public. The unity of knowledge, faith, love, and hope in the One who is the object of their hope, calls for the unity of confession in community worship. Thus, the lordship of Jesus Christ in His community takes place in Divine Worship. When people worship they will recognize that they are those who are gathered by Him as their one Lord, and regard and receive one another as brothers.

Christians gather also that they may be united, strengthened, and preserved to live in a hostile world. It is a time to pray with one another. The Lord's Prayer demands that it should find its true and proper form in the prayer of the assembled community; in the united calling upon God as "Our Father." Barth states:

The 'We' of this prayer is the We to which the Lord attaches Himself with His people. The We in which He does this is the We of the community. And the We of the community has its concrete form in its coming together.¹

This is why Christian prayer demands that it should be the prayer of the assembled community as well as the prayer of individuals.

We have already seen that the church is likened in Scripture to a body which consists of members who know, love, pray for, encourage, exhort, teach, and minister to each other. Thus when Christians attempt to live and grow

¹Ibid., p. 341.

on their own, they are out of God's will. He has placed each one in the body and expects them to grow there; not forsaking or ignoring the other members. The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear:

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.¹

It can be seen therefore, why church attendance has long been regarded as an indication of one's spiritual condition. Unless it is due to extenuating circumstances such as sickness or problems with transport, continued absence from the Sabbath worship services must normally be seen as a sign of some degree of spiritual malady. Furthermore, by continued absence from worship, the individual member separates himself from the sources of spiritual nurture and cuts himself off from fellowship with the rest of the Christian family. It is no wonder that such action usually results in a state of complete backsliding.

It is extremely important to the health of the Christian community, that members sense their worth as participants in the family of God and be encouraged to join regularly in community worship and service.

Seeing the church as a family and as a helping, therapeutic, worshipping community will help us to be aware of the responsibility we have for each other's welfare.

¹Heb 10:24,25. See also Rom 12; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4.

Also it will make us alert to prevent conditions which may encourage any member of the community to backslide.

The Biblical View of Backsliding and Apostasy

The word "apostasy" does not appear in many English versions of the Bible. In the Septuagint, the Greek word *apostasía* is used several times and refers to rebellion against God.¹ In the New Testament the same word is used twice, although the concept of apostasy is referred to many times by the use of related words.² It is a continual danger to the church and repeated warnings are made concerning it.³ Its nature is made clear: falling "from the faith" (1 Tim 4:1) and from "the living God" (Heb 3:12). It increases in times of special trial (Matt 24:9,10), and is encouraged by false teachers (Gal 2:4), who seduce believers from the purity of the Word with "another gospel."⁴

Heb 6:4-6 shows that the sin of apostasy is a grim possibility among professed Christians who have enjoyed Christian fellowship and engaged in Christian witness. It is almost impossible to be restored from this kind of defection. The writer to the Hebrews is concerned that some may prove to be hypocrites and enemies of Christ and, by turning their backs on the light they have known, show

¹E.g., Josh 22:22; 2 Chr 29:19.

²E.g., Acts 21:21; 2 Thess 2:3.

³2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Pet 3:17.

⁴Gal 1:6-8; 2 Tim 4:3,4; 2 Pet 2:1,2; Jude 3,4.

that they do not in fact belong to God's people at all.¹

2 Pet 2:20-22 also seems to indicate that it is virtually impossible for such persons to be restored to Christian fellowship. Lapsed Christians are in a worse state than if they had never heard and accepted the gospel. However does this mean that there is no hope of reconversion?

Most probably, both passages are referring to the "deliberate and open-eyed spurning of God's gift "² which, while continued, would make restoration impossible. If the persons attitude changed however, it would be possible for his status before God to also change. If this were not the case, then it would render meaningless all of God's pleas for the rebellious to return to Him.³ Michael Green comments:

To call darkness light, to call bondage liberty, is unforgivable sin; unforgivable not because God is unwilling to forgive, but because the man who persists in such self-delusion refuses to accept the forgiveness which God patiently proffers to rebels.⁴

¹P. E. Hughes, "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy," Westminster Theological Journal 35 (Winter 1973): 137-155.

²J. N. D. Kelly, A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969), p. 348.

³See subsection "God's attitude to backsliders," pp. 26-27.

⁴Michael Green, The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude: An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale Press, 1968), p. 119.

The word "backslider" is only found in Prov 14:14 in the King James Version of the Bible, and basically means 'to go back.'¹

The Hebrew words which are translated as "backsliding," are however found more frequently. Three words derived from the one Hebrew root (*shûb*) are applied to the concept of backsliding.² These are 1) *shōbab* "backsliding," "apostate,"³ 2) *shobeb* "backsliding,"⁴ and 3) *m^eshūba* "backsliding," "disloyalty," "faithlessness."⁵ This last noun is used in Hos 14:4 to indicate that Israel may still be cured from its dangerous condition. The term "backsliding" is a prophetic term, which describes Israel's infidelity to Yahweh and basically means "back turning" or "turning away."⁶ It is this concept which concerns us in the scope of this paper. The relationship between backsliding and that of apostasy is one of degree. Apostasy is also a "turning back," but as it is usually used, referred to a more complete state of rebellion against God,

¹Francis Brown, S. R. Dower, and Charles A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament. (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1952), s.v. "sug."

²Victor P. Hamilton, "*shûb*," Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:909-910.

³Jer 3:14, 22; Isa 57:17.

⁴Jer 31:22; 49:4; Mic 2:4.

⁵Jer 3:6, 8, 11; Hos 11:7; 14:4, etc.

⁶Vernon H. Kooy, "Backsliding," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:339.

The word "backslider" or "backsliding" is quite Biblical and aptly describes the condition of returning to a state of sin or spiritual lethargy from one of fellowship with God in the church community. This condition has plagued God's people ever since He called a people to follow Him. In Hosea 6:16 God vividly portrays Israel's waywardness: "For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer." We will now summarize briefly the Bible view with regard to this condition.

The serious condition of backsliders

Backsliding is always presented in Scripture as a serious condition. It is likened to spiritual adultery and invokes the curse of God.¹ Backsliders are not pleasing to God and face being rejected entirely.² They are in bondage and in a worse condition than if they had never accepted the gospel.³

Some causes for backsliding

Various causes for backsliding are described in Scripture. Briefly these are as follows:

1. Prosperity and times of abundance which lead to a false sense of security in self-sufficiency (Deut 8:12,14)

¹Jer 3:8, cf. 17:5.

²Luke 12:9; Heb 10:38.

³Luke 11:26; Gal 4:9; 2 Pet 2:20,21.

2. Involvement in false religions and idolatry
(Jer 3:6,8)
3. Marriage and close involvement with non-believers
(1 Kgs 11:2,4; 2 Cor 6:14-17)
4. Sinful environment which leads men to lose their love for God and for purity (Matt 24:12)
5. Times of temptation and discouragement because of persecution and tribulations (Matt 13:21; Luke 8:12,13; 12:1-12)
6. Preoccupation with the cares and burdens of life
(Luke 8:14; 21:34)
7. Love of the world and its pleasures (Luke 8:14; 2 Tim 4:10)
8. Lack of firm grounding in the Word and a superficial religious experience (Luke 8:13)
9. Apparent delay in the Second Advent which results in a loss of faith (Luke 12:45; 2 Pet 3:4)
10. Offence given by the words or actions of other believers (Mk 9:42; 1 Cor 8:9-13)

In the parables of Luke 15, we can observe three basic principles with regard to the process of backsliding:

1. Some, like the lost sheep, do not necessarily deliberately *choose* to backslide, but due to a gradual wandering away from God and towards the world and its attractions, discover too late that they are in a lost condition

2. Others, like the lost coin, do not choose to be

lost, but because of the neglect of others or their own withdrawal from active participation, they find themselves separated from the community of believers

3. Some, like the Prodigal son, act out of deliberate and wilful rebellion against God and His church

It is clear therefore that there are many different causes of and motives for backsliding.¹

God's attitude to backsliders

Despite the rebellion and serious condition of backsliders, God does not easily give them up. God's plaintive plea through His prophet Jeremiah illustrates well the loving and tender concern He still has for the wayward:

Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger forever ... Turn, O backsliding children saith the Lord; for I am married unto you: and I will take you ... and I will bring you to Zion (Jer 3:12-14).

Ezekiel records God's loving concern as a shepherd, who will both "search my sheep, and seek them out" and who will "deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered" and "bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick" (Ezekiel 34:11,12,16).

Hosea records a similar sentiment where God says, "I will

¹The parables of Luke 15 also illustrate the two basic ways in which people are recovered to the community; some come back of their own initiative, but compelled by conviction from the Holy Spirit, while others need to be sought out and brought back by ministry of others.

heal their backsliding"(Hosea 14:4).

One of the most well-known passages which clearly shows God's attitude to those who have turned away from Him, is recorded by Isaiah:

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:7).

In the New Testament, examples of God's love for sinners and backsliders as seen in the parables and in the life and teachings of Jesus are so numerous and well known that we need not take the time to discuss them here.¹ Sufficient evidence has been given to indicate clearly that God does not immediately reject those who turn away from Him or His church. Rather, His heart of love and concern is ever searching out the lost in order to bring them back into a saving relationship with Himself.

The Church and the problem of backsliding

The problem of backsliding is not a new one, as has already been seen, and Scriptural guidelines have been given to direct the church in dealing with the problem. These counsels deal with disciplining wayward members, reclaiming those who have left the community and nurturing present members in order to prevent them backsliding.

If a member falls unwittingly into a course of action harmful to himself, the church is to restore him

¹E.g., Luke 5:29-32; 15:1-24; 18:13,14 etc.

"in the spirit of meekness" (Gal 6:1). The strong of the church are to "bear the infirmities of the weak" and receive them "as Christ also received unto the glory of God" (Rom 15:1,7).

Even when discipline needs to be taken, it is to be carried out in accordance with strict procedures given by Christ himself, and have as its purpose the ultimate restoration and salvation of the offender.¹

Prevention is always better than a *cure* and this is certainly true with regard to the problem of backsliding. Many people are won to the church every year, but a large number are also lost to the church. The whole church community, and especially the pastors, are responsible for not only *winning* people into membership, but also for *keeping* them.

The great commission of Matthew 28:20 is a command for both evangelism and conservation. The responsibility of the church for nurturing the converts it brings into fellowship grows out of the fact that such ones are but "babes in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1). If this is so, then these "babes" must be nurtured, planned for, cared for and sacrificed for. Converts have a right to expect that the church will give them adequate instruction and care. Thus Peter instructed the elders to "feed the flock of God" (1 Pet 5:2). The convert, in order to be maintained

¹Matt 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5:3-5.

spiritually and retained within the faith, must find warm fellowship as well as instruction, within the church (cf. Rom 15:1,7). Yet, too often once a person is in the church, the task is thought to be finished.

Jesus told his disciples, "I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16). It is important to bring forth fruit, but it is equally important that the fruit remain. Obviously, the church must never neglect the responsibility to evangelize. He declared the purpose of Jesus in calling his first disciples was that they should become "fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). He himself was a seeking Saviour. He said, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Thus, the church must never cease from the "seeking." On the other hand, it cannot neglect its task of shepherding those who are joined to the community of faith. The same Jesus, who first said to his disciples, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19), later said, "Feed my sheep" (John 16:17). Fishermen must become shepherds also. Both of these roles, in relation to the work for backsliders, are seen in the words of Yahweh as given by Jeremiah in Jer 23:3,4 (R.S.V.):

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says the Lord.

Jesus provides the perfect pattern of both fisherman and shepherd. He was able to say, "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name which thou hast given me: and I guarded them and not one of them is perished, but the son of perdition" (John 17:12 R.S.V.).

Conclusion

The church, if it is to be true to Scripture and to its Lord, cannot treat the subject of backsliding with indifference. Backsliders are in a serious and dangerous position. Yet, God loves and pleads with them still and the church must do the same. Every possible effort must be made to go after such of their brethren who have turned away from the rest of the church family. They are to be loved, pled with, and if possible, restored "in the spirit of meekness" (Gal 6:1). Not only that, but the church has to take seriously its responsibility as a caring, concerned, family community to nurture and support its membership in order that backsliding may be prevented. To do otherwise would be to deny its Lord.

CHAPTER II

THE VIEW EXPRESSED IN THE WRITINGS OF ELLEN WHITE

Introduction

The conclusions reached so far from a study of the relevant Biblical material are also supported in the writings of Ellen G. White. She has, throughout her works, written extensively on this subject, although it is not treated in any systematic way. The following section of this paper will attempt to draw together, and summarize her major concerns with regard to the reasons for backsliding and apostasy, God's attitude towards backsliders, and the attitude and responsibility of the church in dealing with the problem of backsliding.

Reasons for Backsliding and Apostasy

White recognizes that the reasons for members backsliding can be directed to three different sources. Behind it all it is *Satan* who is seen as diligently working to draw people away from God and into apostasy.¹ From a human standpoint however, the blame can be largely placed either upon the *backslider* himself or the *church* and its members. It is interesting to note that even though blame often falls

¹Ellen G. White, Testimonies to Ministers (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1923), p. 163.

upon the latter, the majority of White's comments which use the terms "backslider" or "backsliding" seem to lay the major responsibility upon the individual backslider himself.

The backslider

One letter, written to a backslidden woman, points out some reasons for her condition which are typical of those commonly referred to in White's writings.¹

The business and cares of your new position claimed your time and attention, and your duty to God was not considered....The deceitfulness of riches turned you from your purposes. Cares increased upon you....You have forgotten the claims of God upon you....Your faith and simple trust in God began to wane as soon as means flowed into you ... your backsliding was gradual. You ceased the morning and evening devotions because it was not always convenient....Your house became a prayerless house. Your business was made primary....When your condition in life began to improve, you said: "As soon as I can get me a home, I will then donate to the cause of God." But when you had a home you saw so many improvements to make ... that you forgot the Lord. You were seeking friendship with the world, and separating further and further from God.²

In this quotation, several factors detrimental to spiritual health and leading to backsliding can be seen:

1. The increasing preoccupation with business and worldly cares
2. Increasing affluence leading to self sufficiency and the forgetting of God
3. The neglect of the time for prayer and devotions

¹E. G. White, Testimonies to the Church 9 Vols. (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 2:268-88.

²Ibid., pp. 278-83.

4. A seeking after conformity with the life and standards of the world

Besides these factors, several more could be added from White's other writings:

5. An unwillingness to overcome character defects or to forsake known sin

Ellen White has stated that "unless . . . defects of character are overcome, these defects will overcome those who possess them, and they will fall into error, apostasy and open sin."¹

6. The continual neglect to follow the light which God has given²

This factor, especially in connection with an uncontrolled or lustful appetite, is claimed by White to be the *real* but often concealed reason behind many so-called "causes" of backsliding. Writing concerning one such case, she says:

He has assigned his want of interest in the truth to other causes than the true one in order to cover his own weak purpose and the real cause of his backsliding from God, which was uncontrolled appetite.³

7. The dislike of being confronted with one's sinful habits

Speaking of such people who constantly bear accusing conscience, White says that they are 'self condemned.'⁴ Such people, on hearing subjects which prick their consciences

¹Ibid., 5:537.

²Ibid., 2:627.

³Ibid., 4:31.

⁴Ibid., 1:548.

"feel grieved and injured" and eventually "they forsake the assembling of themselves together, for then their consciences are not so disturbed,"¹

8. A failure to "watch and pray"² and to work for others³

It can be seen from this brief summary, that in many cases the blame for an individual's backsliding rests solely on the individual himself. As was mentioned earlier, however, in certain cases White directs a large share of the blame to the church and its members. Some of these major factors which encourage backsliding will now be outlined.

The Church

1. Hypocrisy and spiritual weakness of other members
This especially affects new converts and often leads to discouragement and backsliding.⁴

2. Unconfessed wrongs and wounding of sensitive souls⁵
In urging that there be a revival of the first love, White challenges the church to take responsibility for their part in turning people away. To redress the wrongs made, they are to "search out the ones you have driven away, bind up by confession the wounds you have made."⁶

3. A critical, unloving attitude on the part of church members

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 2:283.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 6:371.

⁵Ibid., 5:612.

⁶Ibid.

White condemns the "heartless, cold, unsympathetic and censorious" and urges instead the "spirit of meekness, gentleness and tender love."¹

4. Poor quality sermons

At one time White wrote that "the sermons preached by some of our ministers will have to be much more powerful or many backsliders will carry a tame pointless message, which lulls people to sleep."² In many places she blames poor lifeless sermons for the spiritual weakness of churches.³

5. Indifference and lack of pastoral concern on the part of the church; especially the ministers

Condemned are those who are "surrounded with backsliders and sinners, and yet feel no burden for their souls."⁴

It has been shown then, that even though it is Satan who is involved in all cases of backsliding, some are due more to the fault of the backslider himself, while others are largely the result of the attitude and actions of the church and its membership.

Because this paper is largely addressed to people within the church and to the problem of the relationship of the church to backsliding, emphasis must be given to White's concerns in this area. First, however, some notice should

¹Ibid., p. 613.

²Ibid., 8:36,37.

³A brief glance at the Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1962) under subjects of 'sermons' and 'preaching', will confirm this.

⁴White, Testimonies, 2:506.

be taken of what she has said concerning God's attitude to backsliders.

God's Attitudes Towards Backsliders

In this area, as in those already noted, White reflects a viewpoint in harmony with that seen in Scripture.

God is pictured as One who is pleading with His backslidden people.¹ Even though the whole church may be seen as backslidden, it is not a hopeless case, for "the backslidden church may yet buy the gold of faith and love, may yet have the white robe of the righteousness of Christ . . ."² God has not turned backsliders over to Satan but bears with them, "even during obdurate apostasy. . . . His hand is stretched out still."³ He is shown as One who is willing to "hear and forgive" in time of apostasy and who will "graciously pardon and heal"⁵ the backslider who returns to Him.

Counsels to the Church Concerning Backsliders

The attitude of the church towards backsliders

The imagery of the shepherd and the lost sheep from

¹Ellen G. White, "Contemplate Christ's Perfection, Not Man's Imperfection," The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, August 15, 1893, p. 513.

²Ellen G. White, "The Obedient Approved of God," Review and Herald, August 28, 1894, p. 545.

³Ellen G. White to Brethren in Responsible Positions, Letter 94, 1899. Ellen G. White Research Centre.

⁴White, Prophets and Kings (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917), p. 334.

⁵White, Testimonies 1:431.

Luke 15 occurs frequently in the writings of Ellen White. Especially is this when she is discussing the attitude of the church towards backsliders. Such people are not to be regarded as "cut off from the mercy of God" nor "despised or neglected by (their) former brethren" but rather, are to be treated as "one of the lost sheep that Christ is still seeking to bring to His fold."¹ In describing this attitude she says:

God's servants should manifest that deep interest that Christ brings to view as the care of the shepherd for the lost sheep; they should follow the example given by Christ and exercise the same compassion and gentleness, and the same tender, pitying love that He has exercised toward us.²

Rather than judging, condemning, or expressing unnecessary censure, members are to "weep over the erring and those who have backslidden from God."³ Criticizing some who had wrongly treated a certain backslider, White wrote:

You felt that the sheep had done a great wrong in leaving the fold and instead of rejoicing that he had returned you were anxious to make him feel that he should be very sorry for leaving, and should come back first according to your ideas.⁴

Frequently, members are urged to deal with backsliders tenderly and with pity, because of the infinite value of the soul.⁵ Says White:

¹Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1890), p. 441.

²White, Testimonies 3:186-87.

³Ibid., 3:188.

⁴Ibid., 2:219.

⁵White, Desire of Ages p. 440.

Its worth can be estimated only by the price paid to ransom it. Calvary! Calvary! Calvary! will explain the true worth of the soul.¹

Thus neglect of the duty to try and "restore those who are in error and sin"² is extremely serious. In fact, "for evils that we might have checked, we are just as responsible as if we were guilty of the act ourselves."³

White was critical of those who engaged in gossip rather than in sincere sorrow over a backslider, and who

... cared not enough to unbend from their dignity and pride and make special efforts to help him to the light. They....said: 'We will not go after him; let him come to us.'⁴

Instead, self denying efforts are to be made to save the lost; and if this is done, "many who have strayed from the fold will come back to follow the great Shepherd."⁵

The work of the church for backsliders

White challenges both ministers and lay members to greater concern and effort on behalf of backsliders, in order to win them back into church fellowship. Especially condemnatory are her remarks concerning ministers who are "surrounded with backsliders and sinners, and yet feel no burden for their souls."⁶ Such men are to pick up the neglected work of "warning sinners, of weeping over them and pleading with them."⁷ (Emphasis mine) They are to give up

¹White, Testimonies 3:188.

²White, Desire of Ages p. 441.

³Ibid.

⁴White, Testimonies 2:218.

⁵Ibid., 6:401.

⁶Ibid., 2:506.

⁷Ibid.

their dignity and pride, and go after backsliders; *weeping* over them, *praying* for them and *imploring* them "to be faithful to God and the truth, and to abide with the church."¹ White especially reacted against the attitude which said, "If he wants to go, let him go."² Instead, ministers are urged to "*hunt up* the backsliders, those who once knew what religion was, and give them the message of mercy."³ (Emphasis mine) God will work mightily with those who do this.⁴ It should be noted that it is not scolding or condemnation, but rather "the story of Christ's love [which] will touch a chord in their hearts."⁵

Although she insists that ministers are to do their part, White also stresses the fact that God requires His church as a whole to sense their responsibility in this regard.⁶ Especially is she concerned that *preventative* action be taken to prevent new converts from quickly forming the ranks of the backsliders:

God requires His church to *nurse* those who are young in faith and experience, to *go* to them, not for the purpose of gossiping with them, but to *pray*, to *speak into* them words that are "like apples of gold in pictures of silver."⁷ (Emphasis mine)

White is consistently sensitive to the fact that new converts need special care. She is also aware that

¹Ibid., 3:219.

²Ibid.

³Ellen G. White, Counsels on Health (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1923), p. 533.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 534.

⁶White, Testimonies 4:69.

⁷Ibid.

preventing their backsliding before it occurs, is the greatest work that can be done for them. The church is to patiently and tenderly deal with these people; looking after them with "watchful attention, help and encouragement."¹

These new believers "need to be *educated* in regard to their duties, to be kindly dealt with, to be led along, and to be visited and prayed with"² (Emphasis mine). They need to be taught how to work for others, for in doing this their own spirituality is strengthened; while a neglect of such work leads to spiritual feebleness.³

Conclusion

It has been shown that the writings of Ellen White come to similar conclusions and express the same concern about the problem of backsliding as do the Scriptures. Both the backslider himself and the church must share blame for the problem. While backsliding is a serious condition, yet God still loves and pleads with His wayward children, ever seeking them out and offering pardon and restoration. This same attitude is to be seen in the church, where concern and love for the straying members of the church family should lead to sacrificial effort for their restoration. This work, which is the responsibility of both ministers and lay

¹Ibid., 4:68.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 7:18,19.

members, involves such things as visiting, praying for, pleading with, and weeping over the backslider, reminding him of Christ's love and mercy and of the love and concern of the church family for his salvation. Especially important in preventing backsliding, is the continued visiting and encouraging of the new converts. This should be combined with a program of education designed to help them mature spiritually and to direct them into active work for others.

Up to this point, the Scriptural position, along with that found in the writings of Ellen White, have been summarized. Notice will now be taken of what other studies and writers have concluded on this subject.

CHAPTER III

THE VIEWS AND FINDINGS OF OTHER WRITERS CONCERNING THE CAUSATIVE FACTORS IN BACKSLIDING

Introduction

There is usually no one, single cause for all backsliding and apostasy. It is more likely that in combination, a variety of factors form a powerful force to either prevent believers from growing spiritually (which often leads to a state of backsliding)--or to cause them to disassociate themselves and withdraw from church fellowship.

Some, like the prodigal son of Luke 15, consciously make the choice either to leave the church or to act in such a way that the church has no option but to eventually annul their membership. The church can perhaps do little by way of preventing the occurrence of such cases. However this chapter will attempt to discover: (1) the main reasons why most people leave the church, and (2) in what ways the church is responsible--either in what it has done or in what it has neglected to do.

In the past comparatively little has been done, at least in a comprehensive way, to determine why people leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹ Since commencing this

¹One volume which has proved helpful is, Fordyce W. Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep (Nashville: Southern

project, however, there has come to the writer's attention the results of at least two major surveys made in recent years, together with many other opinions based on experience and research, by various writers in denominational publications. These findings and opinions will now be discussed, as will those of a number of other Christian writers.

North American Division Study

A recent study by Gottfreid Oosterwal was conducted in North America among people who had stopped attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹ Oosterwal concluded that the ten most basic reasons given by these people for leaving the church were (summarized and in relative order of significance):

1. The church's high standard of Christian living
55% of those interviewed preferred to leave the church rather than be hypocrites because they did not live according to its standards.

2. No growth after baptism
Very little (if any) prayer life, Bible study or active involvement in the mission of the church, led about one half of the people to just "drift away."

3. No fellowship
25% of the respondents had no close association with

Publishing Association, 1965). Although not written from a scholarly point of view it is the most comprehensive work, dealing with the problem of backsliding, which has been published within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

¹Gottfried Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons for Apostasy in the S.D.A. Church in North America," paper presented at Avondale Summer School, Cooranbong, N.S.W. January 1981. (Mimeographed.)

3. No fellowship

25% of the respondents had no close association with other church members. Especially was this the case with new converts and those who had transferred their membership from another church.

4. Disappointment with the church and its members

Many left with frustration or hurt feelings, while others felt that they had been rejected or discriminated against.

5. Premature baptism

This was a strong factor among people from an Adventist background. 25% indicated they just followed others, while another 25% were baptised because of parents and relatives. In the group as a whole, one out of six said they never had any conversion experience.

6. Lack of contact with pastors and church officers.

The absence of post-baptismal visitation was cited by many as a contributing factor to their backsliding. The visits came after the people had already left the church.

7. Poor preaching and church services

Many thought the sermons were boring, irrelevant or incomprehensible, while the church services were criticized for lack of opportunity for congregational participation.

8. Outside pressure

Peer, family, work or financial pressures were a significant factor to a small number.

9. Doctrinal disagreement

This factor ranked very low. Also, only a few had joined any other denomination.

10. High mobility

Transfers, especially if frequent, often led people to drift away from the church.

This study concurs with what has been pointed out earlier; namely, that there are many different reasons for backsliding and that some of these are the responsibility of the individual himself, while others are the fault of the church.

South American Division Study

Because of concern over the matter of backsliding, the Ministerial Association of the South American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists initiated the Good Shepherd Plan.¹ The first phase of the project was carried out in 1975 and consisted of a widescale visitation programme to interview approximately one thousand backslidden members. The survey revealed that very few left the church because of lack of belief in, or understanding of, the doctrines. 85% of those interviewed believed that they had received sufficient instruction before baptism, and 90% had not joined any other church. Of the various reasons given for leaving the church, the four main ones were:

1. Not enough good human relations within the church
(member with member and pastor with member)
2. Lack of fellowship and involvement within the church
3. Lack of adequate spiritual food through deficiency
in sermons

¹Ministerial Association of the South American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Good Shepherd Plan," unpublished report, n.d. (Mimeographed.) Hereinafter referred to as "Good Shepherd Plan."

4. The absence of assistance in time of crisis (marriage, study and problems related to work on the Sabbath day, etc.) ¹

The findings of this research are seen to be broadly similar to what was found in the North American study previously cited ²

The Views and Findings of Other Writers

In studying the views and findings of others, the writer has found that on the whole, they concur with conclusions reached in the two studies discussed so far. The conclusions reached by these other writers will, however, be outlined below in order to see more clearly where there is the greatest concurrence from among all sources and also in order to see any additional conclusions which were not mentioned in the previous studies.

The writer has also found that, basically, there was no major difference between the conclusions reached by Seventh-day Adventist writers and those of other churches. The conclusions of both groups will therefore be combined, while a short, separate section will be given over to outlining any reasons for backsliding which are largely distinctive to former members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. The conclusions as to the major causative factors in backsliding could be grouped under several major headings which will now be discussed.

¹Ibid. ²Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons for Apostasy."

Relational issues concerning the lack of care, concern, and offers of fellowship by church members.

Research by Oosterwal indicates that issues concerning 'care' and 'community' are some of the most significant factors in patterns of church growth.¹ Conversely, according to research by Louis Nielsen in Michigan, increased apostasy rates seem to be directly related to the *lack* of care and concern for one another by church members.² It has been found that just as a significant number of people tend to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church out of a sense of belonging, rather than because of the doctrines, so many also leave the church when they no longer feel loved and cared for by the church community.³ A similar pattern has been seen in research done in other denominations. Warren Hartman (1976) surveyed a group of ex-Methodists and concluded:

The most frequently mentioned reason in their list was their failure to feel that they were accepted, loved or wanted. They felt that they did not belong.⁴

Another Methodist study conducted by Donald L. Metz

¹ Gottfried Oosterwal, Patterns of S.D.A. Church Growth in America (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1976).

² Louis C. Nielsen, "Disassociation: An Investigation into the Contributing Factors of Backsliding and Separation from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Michigan" (D.Min. project, Andrews University, 1977).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Warren Hartman, quoted in Dean R. Hoge and David. A. Roozen, Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978 (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979), p. 64.

(1965), concluded that the leading criticism of those interviewed was lack of personal contacts in the church.¹

John S. Savage (1976) in a similar study concluded:

Each of the 23 persons interviewed in the non-active group, indicated that no one from the church had ever come to find out why they were losing interest or had dropped out. It reinforced their belief that *no one cared*, or that they were not missed.² (*Italics mine.*)

A Presbyterian study (1976) demonstrated that *lack of warmth and friendship* were the leading indicators of why people left the church.³

The conclusions of these studies are confirmed by other writers also. A recent letter to the editor of a church publication, described the experience of returning to church after a two-year absence. The letter said, in part:

I have gone to services two weekends now, and not one person has welcomed me into the house of God or helped me feel at home. I walked away from the church feeling rejected by the members of God's family ... I longed for someone to welcome me back....⁴

Aileen Andres Sox, assistant editor of the same magazine, responded in a subsequent issue.⁵ She reported some of the responses other readers had made to the original letter. Some examples, which indicate that the problem is widespread are as follows:

¹Ibid., p. 66. ²Ibid., p. 65. ³Ibid.

⁴"Felt Rejected", Adventist Review, 12 February 1980, p. 2.

⁵Aileen Andres Sox, "Lonely in Church?" Adventist Review, 9 April 1980, pp. 8-10.

I go to church and sit alone....

I have introduced myself to many people, trying to get acquainted.....but it doesn't seem to help much.

I have had the same experience.....there are many lonely hearts under smiling faces.¹

Sox, in commenting on these letters, observed:

It seems that a person who goes to church seeking help, who has the greatest need to be acknowledged by someone, is the one who is left out.²

Relationships then, are often a vital factor in whether or not a person is comfortable in being a member of a particular church. Good relationships are very much dependent on good communication. In fact, most people will not maintain a relationship where they feel they are constantly ignored. According to Norman Wegmeyer, just as some people quit groups or committees because they can't stand the insult of not being heard, so many have left the church because they have felt that no one listened to them.³

Sox in her article discusses some of the causes of such problems. These could be summarized as follows:

1. Some churches are too large for people to know who is a well-established member and who is not
2. People are too busy to make the time and effort to really integrate new members and make them feel at home
3. Many are unsure about how to reach out to others

¹Ibid., pp. 8-9.

²Ibid., p. 9.

³Norman E. Wegmeyer, The Art of Christian Relationships (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), p. 32.

4. There is a tendency for members to forget how they felt when they were "the new boy on the block "¹

Carl S. Dudley also focuses on the problem, when he describes entry into closely knit churches as being "like eating a loaf of ethnic bread, its inner texture promises to be sweet and delicious if we manage to break through the solid crust."² Even though the problem is probably worse with larger more impersonal congregations, the problem can also exist in small churches. The basic obstacle to acceptance of new members in a small church is the satisfaction of the members with their present position. Dudley claims that "small-church members unconsciously feel that they cannot absorb new members without changing the fabric of the group."³ Lyle E. Schaller claims that as the church is already larger than the ideal size for caring groups, members can feel that receiving new people would mean losing the intimacy and sense of belonging which they now experience.⁴ To overcome this problem, according to Dudley, the members must be motivated to want to grow and to "sacrifice the satisfaction of being a small church."⁵ Not all small churches would have this problem, of course.

¹Sox, p. 9.

²Carl S. Dudley, Making the Small Church Effective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 43.

³Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁴Lyle E. Schaller, "Looking at the Small Church: A Frame of Reference," Christian Ministry, July 1977, p. 7.

⁵Dudley, p. 51.

The writer feels however, that it may be a significant factor in some small, established, and non-growing congregations.

The conclusion appears to be that the more people sense the care and concern of the church community, the more active will be their attendance and participation. On the other hand, if loving care and community are lacking, people tend to withdraw and drop out. Although the studies just referred to are based in North America, the writer believes that they are dealing with universal human needs, independent of both time and place.

Unfortunate experiences with the Church

This factor is closely related to the one above.

As S. L. Dombrosky says, "Many people are out of the church today....because they have been hurt."¹ As Detamore says:

Many are out because of things that we as evangelists, pastors, conference presidents, conference treasurers, college presidents, church elders, and deacons have done or said to them.²

He also mentions cases such as where a person feels cheated in business by a person who now holds church office, or where a child has been "unfairly" expelled from church school.³

Although these assessments are often excuses, they

¹S. L. Dombrosky, "That Your Fruit May Remain," Ministry, July 1964, p. 33.

²Detamore, p. 11.

³Ibid., pp. 51-52.

can still be very influential in keeping a person away from church.

Hypocrisy and inconsistency of church members

A response given in a recent study on the Seventh-day Adventist family, reflects why some people, especially new members with high expectations, turn from the church. The respondent commented:

I have come to feel that I had a stronger faith before I became an Adventist. I admit I've done my part in the backsliding, but I feel it's partly due to the conflict between what I believe ought to be and what Adventists are doing.¹

Inconsistency and hypocrisy can be discerned as a failure to either live up to the teachings and standards of the church, or to show the love and concern for others which the church preaches so much about. As Wegmeyer says it is unfortunate that "too often the words are about love, while the actions of a congregation display selfishness, self-centredness even hate."² James Conway, in discussing the way some people become dissillusioned with the church, refers to a typical scene:

He saw a church speaking about forgiveness, love, and acceptance, but he didn't experience any of that. So, dissillusioned, he quietly walked away....and out into the night in a different direction.³

¹Charles C. Crider and Robert C. Kistler, The Seventh-day Adventist Family: an Imperical Study (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1979), p. 239.

²Wegmeyer, p. 40.

³James Conway, Men in Mid-Life Crisis (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook, 1978), p. 174.

A weak commitment which results in no spiritual growth

In discussing the importance of having a strong personal commitment to Christ and His church, C. Stacey Woods claims that too much dependence upon a Christian environment of family and friends can lead to a profession of faith on the initial and continuing basis of environment, without there being a personal, born-again experience.¹ In such cases, baptism and church membership can follow as natural 'steps' which provide the key to full acceptance by the group. Woods points out that there is nothing hypocritical or dishonest about this. However he says, "the great question in such a decision is the primary motive--is it group acceptance or the urgent desire for salvation from sin?"² When removed from the environment or when problems and discouragements arise, it is easy for such a person to drift out of the church.

Whatever the reason and background, a lack of commitment to Christ and interest in spiritual things is seen by many to be a major cause of backsliding. Such people according to Fordyce Detamore, "believe the doctrines, but want the world more--for the present."³ Charles Kemp gives as one reason why some leave the church, the fact that

¹C. Stacey Woods, "Why Some Christians Shipwreck," Ministry, April 1975, p. 41.

²Ibid.

³Detamore, p. 49.

they "do not want to give up their way of life, and they do not want to be challenged to a life of service."¹ According to psychologist, Gary Collins, this creates a spiral effect where the person becomes less and less able to halt the downward progress of his spirituality and thus spiritual problems are left to grow. They eventually lead to backsliding completely. Says Collins:

When spiritual problems are left unchecked they can lead to compromising behaviour, an increasing tendency to miss worship services and personal devotions, spiritual naïveté, a decreasing sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading and control, hypocrisy and phoniness, a boredom with religious activities and a greater tendency to self reliance.²

The Church seen as not meeting the real needs of life

According to several writers, many people stay away from church because they feel it is irrelevant to the needs and issues with which they are struggling.³ Says Donald F. Thomas:

Many fall away from our ranks because we program our training sessions and organize our churches for everything but a realistic witness in daily experience.⁴

According to Wayne Judd, people stay away from

¹Charles F. Kemp. "Why People go to Church and Why They do Not go to Church," Pastoral Psychology 17 (February 1966): 55.

²Gary R. Collins, Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1980), pp. 437, 48.

³Kemp, p. 55; Dean M. Kelly, "Growing Churches Meet People's Needs for Ultimate Meaning in Their Lives." Christian Century 91 (1 May, 1975): 478-9.

⁴Donald F. Thomas, "The Church's Back Door: Why They Come and Go," Christianity Today 7 (15 March 1963): 37.

church because it "doesn't meet their needs."¹ He claims that if "preachers preach about matters utterly unrelated to everyday life" and if "religion is seen as a threat to real happiness," then people simply will not usually continue to attend church.²

Poor church services and sermons

This factor is closely related to No. 5 above. If church services are formal and lifeless, boring or perceived as irrelevant, then people will tend to lose interest in them.³ This is particularly an important factor in turning young people away from the church.⁴ According to one study, the cause of dissatisfaction is seen in the fact that people are not hearing the Word of God and being convicted by it. They hear sociological and psychological insights or proof-texts, but not God's Word.⁵

Family division over religion

This factor appears to keep many people away from church. Detamore calls it the "biggest single cause of backsliding."⁶ As Kemp observes:

¹Wayne Judd, "Won't Go To Church," Signs of the Times (U.S.A.), December 1977, p. 28.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ila Zbaraschuk, "Why Young Adventists Leave the Church--Part I," Insight, 11 September 1973, pp. 12-13.

⁵D. G. Bloesch, "Why People are Leaving the Church," Religion in Life 38, (Spring 1969): 92-101.

⁶Detamore, p. 38.

Two people who are unable to come to some common agreement about their religious affiliation often find that one, or even both, drop out of the church. It is difficult to maintain church loyalties when a family is divided over where the loyalty shall be.¹

Even when two or more people in a family are members of the same denomination, trouble can arise and one member be led into backsliding by the spiritual weakness of another family member. Crider and Kistler note the comments of one respondent who indicated that this was a factor in her backsliding:

While much is said about marrying a non-Adventist, very little counsel is given about being "unequally yoked" together with someone whose name is on the church books.²

Crider and Kistler also found another closely related factor. In their study they came to the conclusion that general unhappiness and failure in the family were linked with backsliding.³ There was revealed a real need for more active efforts to strengthen family life amongst the church's members.⁴

A busy lifestyle

There is a great competition for time in our world today. Kemp states that some people do not continue to attend church because they are too busy.⁵ Especially is

¹Kemp, p. 55.

²Crider and Kistler, p. 239.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Kemp, p. 55.

this so with business and professional people whose life is often so crowded with business and social activities that the church gets crowded out.¹ *New-found prosperity* is another related factor which tends to draw people away from church.² Detamore notes that young mothers who face the problems of a hectic time caring for their babies before and during church, often begin to neglect church attendance at these times. By the time the children have grown a little older and quieter, the regular habit of church attendance has been broken. Probably, as Kemp observes, none of these groups of people "mean to neglect the church; they simply don't find time for it."³

Guilt and feelings of unworthiness and failure

Some people do not continue to go to church because they feel unworthy or have a sense of guilt.⁴ If such a person has done wrong, he feels that he cannot pray or take part in worship. Closely related, is a sense of failure in not being able to achieve the expected level of spiritual attainment after years of trying. Conway notes that this is a problem which especially affects those in mid-life:

Over the years I have watched scores of people in mid-life quietly slip out the back door of the church. Each one felt that he was a failure--morally and spiritually--and most of all emotionally. He had been taught all his life that being a Christian would

¹Ibid.

²Detamore, p. 31.

³Kemp, p. 55.

⁴Ibid.

guarantee that no problem would ever defeat him. When the mid-life crisis hit, he was literally falsttened as if in a boxing match.¹

This would indicate that the teaching of unrealistic expectations regarding members' spiritual attainments and the church's lack of preparing its members for such crisis times, are possible factors in why some backslide.

Specific Factors in Backsliding Unique to Seventh-day Adventists

Although there are probably many other factors involved in why people backslide, those that have been mentioned so far are generally the main ones found by various writers and researchers. Besides these, brief mention could be made of some factors which are especially appropriate to backsliding in the Seventh-day Adventist church. These are as follows:

1. Factors relating to morality and temperance

Detamore finds that many backsliders have suffered a moral breakdown after marriage or have been unwed parents.² Others become, or continue to be, victims of habits such as smoking and drinking alcohol.³

2. Intolerance of church standards

According to Detamore, church standards are the "most common sore spots with a backslider."⁴

¹Conway, p. 174.

²Detamore, pp. 43-46, 39.

²Ibid., p. 44.

⁴Ibid., p. 80.

3. Financial reasons

Financial pressures sometimes lead people to either work so hard during the week that they are too tired to attend church, or else to succumb to the temptation to work on the Sabbath day.¹

Others become discouraged because of past debt to God (tithes) or to man, which they feel they can never redeem.

4. Changing location

Detamore calls "gypsy backsliders" those who, because of high mobility and frequent transferring from one locality to another, drift out of the church.² Even a single change in location can result in backsliding, if the member does not soon transfer his membership and become a participating member of the church in his new home area.

5. Rapid and superficial church growth through public evangelism

Although the writer has frequently heard people mention this factor as a reason for much of the backsliding from the church, the claim appears to need some qualification. Detamore concludes that few people become backsliders because they were poorly indoctrinated.³ Furthermore, evidence does not seem to necessarily support the fears that rapid church growth through a vigorous evangelism

¹Ibid., pp. 42-43.

²Ibid., pp. 57-58.

³Detamore, p. 10.

programme lead to superficial membership and an increased apostasy rate.¹ J. W. Zackrison reports the results of recent evangelism in the Inter-American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.² In 1972, a major evangelistic thrust was launched, which resulted in an unprecedented influx of converts. There was a 46 percent increase in baptisms over the previous year. Before 1972, the over-all growth rate of the Division averaged 6.6 percent a year, while the apostasy rate compared with yearly baptisms, was 26 percent. Between 1972 and 1976 however, the growth rate rose to an average of 9 percent while the apostasy rate dropped to 18 percent. Zackrison concludes that a strong emphasis on evangelism and rapid church growth have not increased the apostasy rate.³ Rather, it has dropped. This appears to be largely the result of active involvement by the church members and new converts themselves in winning others. Zackrison believes that as more laymen become involved in soul winning outreach, "their own spiritual experiences will be deepened and the causes of apostasy will be reduced."⁴

Specific Factors Applying to Seventh-day Adventist Youth

It has been estimated that approximately 50 percent

¹John Fowler, "Caring for New Converts," Ministry, April 1979, p. 4.

²J. W. Zackrison, "Apostasies Drop in Inter-America," Review and Herald, 6 January 1977, p. 3.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

of the church's young people leave the church.¹ Studies have shown that in general there is a declining tendency for college students and other young people to be religious and that religious defection is apparently a part of general dissatisfaction with what society has to offer.² However there are other more specific reasons given by young Seventh-day Adventist's as to why they leave the church. Since this question has been comprehensively discussed by others,³ brief conclusions only will be made here. The major factors found to be influencing young people to leave the church are as follows:

1. Hypocrisy on the part of adult members and Christian teachers

Harvey Cox claims that "hypocrisy--not unbelief--is really the major problem of our time."⁴ Dudley found no other factor as strongly related to teen-age rejection of religion than this.⁵ He comments:

¹Zbaraschuk, p. 14.

²R. T. Wuthnow and C. Y. Glock, "Religious Loyalty, Defection, and Experimentation Among College Youth," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 12 (June 1973): 157-180.

³For a comprehensive coverage of this subject, see Roger L. Dudley, Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to About it (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978).

⁴Harvey Cox, quoted in T. R. Torkelsen, "Sick of Hypocrisy," Signs of the Times (U.S.A.), March 1970, p. 4.

⁵Ibid., p. 80.

Youth look at parents and religious leaders and see them very concerned with certain outward measures of value to which they attempt to force the youth to conform, but seldom see real personal godliness expressed in love and care for people.¹

The study by Zbaraschuk came to a similar conclusion.² Dudley claims that young people are rejecting religion "because they can't stomach the way it wears on their elders."³

2. An apparent over-emphasis on certain aspects of Christianity to the neglect of other essentials Zbaraschuk⁴ and Dudley⁵ both found that the church's seeming emphasis on organization, establishment, and certain "nonessentials" to the neglect of genuine Christian living, turned many young people away from the church. In surveying 159 students, to try and find out why young people turn away from the church, Susan Berger found that two out of three felt the church "puts too much emphasis on 'doctrine' and not enough on the love of God."⁶ One student wrote: "I'm sick of the overemphasis on the superficial. Many church members do not care what a young person is inside; they're hung up on how long he wears his hair."⁷ However, even

¹Ibid., p. 77.

²Zbaraschuk, p. 12.

³R. Dudley, p. 85.

⁴Ibid.

⁵R. Dudley, p. 77.

⁶Quoted in Roberta J. Moore, "What Adventist Students are Saying About Their Church," Insight, 2 March 1971, p. 8.

⁷Ibid., p. 9.

though the majority thought the church overemphasises doctrine, many said that the thing they like most about the church is its basic beliefs.¹

3. A lack of understanding and concern on the part of adult members

Some young people are turned away when they sense an impersonal, non-caring attitude on the part of older members.² Others feel that older members do not understand them and are critical of them, and this results in a blurred idea of Christianity.³

4. The quality of sermons

In a survey measuring religious alienation, Dudley found that the factor eliciting most alienation was the poor quality of preaching.⁴ Young people felt that the sermon is too often "directed at the long ago and far away and does not come to grips with life at the level on which they are living it."⁵ In Zbaraschuk's study, one youth said that "sermons which sound like reruns" were a real problem for many young people.⁶

5. Other reasons

Although the above factors are the main reasons

¹Ibid., p. 8.

²R. Dudley, p. 77.

³Moore, p. 9.

⁴R. Dudley, p. 22.

⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁶Zbaraschuk, p. 14.

given by young people for their leaving the church, Dudley also mentions others such as: (a) brought into membership without personal conversion, (b) little opportunity to think and act for themselves, (c) didn't find religion made a difference in their lives, (d) didn't find religion relevant to perceived needs, and (e) harsh disciplinary methods used at some church schools and colleges.¹ Dudley notes that no one gave doctrinal reasons for leaving the church.²

CONCLUSION

It has been shown from a survey of the major studies concerning backsliding and of the views of various writers on the subject, that there are a large variety of factors involved. The motivations for all forms of behaviour are mixed, complex, and interrelated. There are, however, some common reasons for backsliding and these have been grouped and briefly discussed. As was found in the earlier sections on the views of Scripture and of Ellen G. White, the responsibility for backsliding rests sometimes on the church and in other instances, on the individual backslider himself.

¹R. Dudley, p. 77.

²Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

PREVENTION AND RECLAMATION IN DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF BACKSLIDING

Introduction

The exit of the church often seems as wide open as the entrance. Despite sizeable baptisms, the net increase for some churches is very small. Although the church and its members cannot be blamed for every case of backsliding and apostasy, yet it must bear some of the responsibility and be willing to make every effort to make amends. The principle factors causing people to backslide have already been noted. This chapter will now turn to the work of *prevention* and *reclamation* in dealing with the problem of backsliding.

Suggestions For Preventing Backsliding

Many suggestions have been made by various writers as to what the church can do to help prevent people from backsliding. These will now be summarized and presented with only brief explanatory comments. These suggestions apply to both young and older members.

1. More post-baptism care and pastoral visitation
Because conversion is an "ongoing process"¹ with

¹Fowler, p. 4.

baptism simply marking the formal beginning of the experience, often more loving and patient work for individuals is needed *after* baptism than before.¹ Fowler points out that evangelism needs to be seen in terms of making disciples rather than just getting decisions for baptism and that this work is to be a continued work by the whole church.² E. E. Cleveland stresses the need to nurture new members by a visitation programme carried out by both pastor and visitation groups set up within the church.³ He reports how that converts have felt 'let down' when the constant pre-baptismal visitation ceased just at the time it was needed most. According to Cleveland, "this is our Achille's heel. Close this gap and we will staunch the flow of apostates."⁴ Oosterwal⁵ suggests the organization of a strong visitation programme with elders and deacons visiting regularly the members assigned to them. S. L. Dombrosky claims personal contact does more than any other one thing to keep members in the church.⁶

2. Provide guardians and small groups for fellowship and instruction

Fowler sees the basic needs of new converts as

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³E. E. Cleveland, "Close That Door," Ministry, August 1961, p. 18.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4.

⁶S. L. Dombrosky, "That Your Fruit May Remain," Ministry, July, 1964, p. 33.

fellowship and instruction.¹ The first of these needs could be supplied by utilizing the "spiritual guardian" concept, where a member or a church family take on the responsibility of caring for a new convert. Under this plan, sometimes called the "buddy system,"² those appointed keep in touch with the new member, invite him home for meals, encourage him to attend church meetings, and arrange for transport if necessary. The need for instruction could also be fulfilled by this plan if the guardian was able to conduct regular follow-up Bible studies with the new convert. Otherwise it would be possible for this to be achieved through taking a Bible correspondence course.³ Both needs could be met by making the Sabbath School class the basic evangelistic and nurturing unit of the church.⁴ Fellowship, instruction, and experience in witnessing could all be provided in this way. Oosterwal recommends the development and implementation of "small groups to foster fellowship, Bible study, and prayer."⁵

3. Provide acceptance and personal concern

The attitude of acceptance, is "the cornerstone for

¹Fowler, p. 4.

²Dombrosky, p. 33.

³Ibid.

⁴Fowler, p. 4.

⁵Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4.

the building of trust," according to Philip A. Anderson.¹ It is to "hear and feel and understand ... without scorning, ignoring, reflecting, or condemning ..."² The first service owed to a fellow member is the service of listening to him, says James Hanson.³ There are many in any church who are hoping to find someone who will listen to them, but often people are busy talking when they should be listening.⁴ Such listening, with an open heart and mind, "feels the grief, the loneliness, the despair, the hurt, the doubts of that person"⁵ and will not cause him to turn away from the church to have his needs met. In order to make new members welcome Sox suggests that members of longer standing should (a) smile, (b) give a friendly welcome and make newcomers feel welcome, (c) involve them in the life of the church and (d) organize hospitality teams to provide lunch either at the church or in member's homes.⁶ Dombrosky recommends regular Sabbath dinners for the sake of all members but especially for new members.⁷

When a newcomer joins a church he needs to be adopted into the 'family' and made a participating, loved,

¹Philip A. Anderson, Church Meetings That Matter (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1965), p. 34.

²Ibid.

³James Hanson, What is the Church? (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 82.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Anderson, p. 29.

⁶Sox, p. 9.

⁷Dombrosky, p. 33.

and accepted member.¹ Newcomers "cannot work their way into the family to achieve belonging," says Carl Dudley, so the church must make a conscious effort to assimilate and integrate the new members. This can be achieved by sharing the church history with them, by social evenings of fellowship and by sharing all the privileges and responsibilities of membership.²

4. Provide regular social activities

Carl Dudley suggests that a certain number of regular events and activities--such as annual 'homecomings', picnics, fund raisers and special days are necessary in order to maintain the identity and group feeling of the congregation. He says:

The identity of the congregation is reconfirmed in the rhythms of worship ... The meetings may be called for a variety of purposes, but the regularity of participation provides the basic satisfaction for the membership. Meetings are a way of keeping in touch with those who are present, and keeping up with those who are not there.³

Dudley claims that regular and annual events can "confirm the adoption of new members into the church family, and ... into the flow of congregational life."⁴ Oosterwal⁵ also stresses the need for fellowship activities, as does Roger Dudley,⁶ especially for young people.

¹C. Dudley, p. 55.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 115.

⁴Ibid., p. 119.

⁵"Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4. ⁶R. Dudley, p. 23.

5. Involve new members in the work of the church

A number of writers have suggested that new members need to be given work in and for the church. For example, Zackrison and the Good Shepherd Plan emphasise the importance of involving all members in soul winning work in order to strengthen their spiritual experience, while Oosterwal urges the encouragement of more lay participation in the church services. Roger Dudley suggests that youth "should be given a larger share of responsibility in the operation of the church" and that their ideas should be solicited. Training and guidance needs to be given so that they can assume more leadership roles.¹

6. Provide stimulating church services and sermons

The Good Shepherd Plan suggests a campaign to revive the true spirit of worship and adoration and the giving of real spiritual food during the worship hour so that members can experience an authentic communion with God.² Detamore challenges the church to make the services more spiritual, doing away with promotions and drives for funds during the worship hour.³ Cree Sandefur believes that the proper use of the worship service is an important solution to the problem of backsliding. "Is it possible" he

¹Zackrison, p. 3; Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4; R. Dudley, p. 23.

²"Good Shepherd Plan," phase 2, 'Prevention.'

³Detamore, p. 89.

asks, "that we are losing altogether too many of our members because the ownership service is filled with mediocrity?"¹ He suggests that the order of service, the message from God's Word and the music, must be so dynamic that:

... souls will go forth from that service challenged, thrilled, inspired, condemned and encouraged to the extent they will know the church is their strength, their refuge, their greatest source of joy, and their only avenue of security.²

Oosterwal believes that ministers must do more to "strengthen the teaching and preaching ministry" and to show the "relevance of doctrines to life."³ Dudley agrees, and on behalf of youth suggests that sermons should be carefully planned so as to be more interesting and relevant, even allowing for more input from the youth in sermon preparation.⁴

7. Further suggestions

Various other suggestions have been made to help prevent the problem of backsliding. These are as follows:

a) Simplify and adapt the present system of transfer of membership so that the initiative for transfer letters does not have to come from the members alone. This would

¹Cree Sandefur, "How to Reduce Apostasies," Ministry, April 1964, p. 22.

²Ibid., p. 21

³"Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4.

⁴R. Dudley, p. 23.

tend to prevent many cases of drifting away from church during times of transfer of location.¹

b) Check membership records and watch for absentees. Then by prayer and visitation seek to prevent the absence from becoming permanent. This may be one of the most effective ways to prevent backsliding.²

c) Encourage members to show openness and honesty and a willingness to acknowledge mistakes. This is especially important in helping young people who want sincerity, fairness and openness. Youth are not usually turned off by the mistakes and failures of adults, provided that the adult is willing to admit them.³

d) Do not crush members who make mistakes by publicising their faults and neglecting to follow the counsel given by Christ in dealing with erring members (Matthew 18: 15-19). Do all that is possible to save such people *within* the church.⁴

Suggestions for Reclaiming Backsliders

Various suggestions which have been made regarding

¹Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4, and "Good Shepherd Plan," phase 2, "Prevention."

²G. R. Nash, "The Challenge of Absenteeism," Ministry, October 1964, pp. 38, 41. See also Oosterwal, "Ten Basic Reasons," p. 4.

³R. Dudley, p. 78.

⁴Detamore, p. 46.

the reclaiming of backsliders, can be grouped into two categories: one dealing with general methods and approaches, and the other with the actual personal contact with the backslider in a visit or interview. In whatever is done for, or said to, backsliders, a necessary attitude on the part of the pastor or church member is one of love and acceptance. As Roger Dudley says:

To really care about people and prize them for their intrinsic worth, in spite of the faults that they may have and the mistakes they may make, is an attitude that is very rare indeed. Yet nothing else will do so much to melt hostility and break down walls ... Love really works. Love is the only thing that really works.¹

Although Dudley is referring especially to working for young people who have left the church, the writer believes that the principle he enunciates applies to work for all backsliders. Even working for those who have been affected by fights over heresy, Detamore has found that "kindness and love rather than doctrinal argumentation" were more effective than anything else in winning back these people into church fellowship.² The communication of the fact that the church really cares for these people, is most vital.³

Methods and approaches

Some suggestions which have been made are summarized briefly as follows:

¹R. Dudley, p. 127.

²Detamore, p. 106.

³Audray R. Johnson, "Do We Care?," Ministry, May 1970, p. 41.

1. Be persistent in locating and following up all names gathered from church records, friends, family, Bible schools, church school, leads and literature evangelists. Don't give up until the person is contacted and visited.¹

2. Communicate the fact that the backslider is still considered part of the 'family.' This could be partly achieved by putting him on the mailing list for any church newsletters, by appointing people to write to each person individually, and by sending greeting cards for birthdays and special holidays.²

3. Send subscriptions of official church magazines to all backsliders.³

4. Appoint someone of similar age and type, who is a vibrant christian, to visit and befriend the backslider.⁴ Zbaraschuk found that the greatest single factor in reclaiming young Adventists, was "other Adventists ... who are young themselves and who talk of Jesus Christ from first-hand knowledge."⁵

¹Detamore, pp. 15-23.

²Johnson, p. 41, and Detamore, p. 86.

³Detamore, p. 86. Examples of these in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are; Signs of the Times, Advent Review, and Australasian Record.

⁴Detamore, p. 84.

⁵Zbaraschuk, "Why Young Adventists Leave the Church-- Part II," Insight 25 September 1973, p. 16.

5. Conduct a series of evangelistic meetings in conjunction with a vigorous visitation programme.¹

6. Initiate a strong social and spiritual activities programme (especially for youth) and invite the backsliders to come.

The personal contact with the backslider

Detamore, in his book Seeking His Lost Sheep, outlines a number of practical suggestions for meeting and helping backsliders. These have been summarized and adapted by the writer as follows:

1. Begin by establishing a friendly rapport; ask questions about their welfare and activities and be sincerely interested
2. Convince them that you and the church love them and long for their return
3. Discuss their feelings about returning to church and discover any hindrances; if they are procrastinating, express concern
4. Talk faith and the promises of God--especially to those who are worried about financial problems or the loss of their job, should they return to church
5. Offer to help solve personal problems which appear

¹"Good Shepherd Plan," phase 2, 'Prevention.'

to obstruct their return. For example, provide transport if necessary or arrange for baby-sitting and other assistance for young mothers who need a helping hand at home or at church.

6. Listen kindly to complaints or criticism of the church. Try to understand, if he feels bitter, and don't argue. If we admit some guilt and accept our share of the blame, we have taken the first big step toward reclaiming the lost.

7. If the backslider attacks someone in the church who may have hurt him, do not defend the member. This may only place you in the position of an enemy. Rather, assure them of your concern and love and encourage them to focus on Christ and His truth, rather than on people.

8. Do not argue about church standards and doctrines or pressure them into Bible studies; share instead your own experience with Jesus.

9. Capitalize on the presence of children in the family. The arrival of children in a home and the consequent sense of responsibility for their future is one of the most forceful levers in influencing backsliders to return to church.

10. Don't make the initial visit too long. Invite them to church without demanding a promise. Where possible, offer prayer and then leave, assuring them that you really care about their return.

11. Use coming events and church functions as an excuse to return.

Conclusion

It has been shown that just as there are many reasons why people leave the church, so there are many ways in which the church can attempt to deal with the problem in a positive way. The church can do a great deal toward providing better care of its members and other measures designed to help *prevent* backsliding. There is also much that the church and its members can do in a practical way to *reclaim* its former members. Suggestions from a number of writers have been discussed, with the hope that there will be created within the church a greater awareness of the problem, as well as of the many possibilities for preventing it and reversing some of its devastating effects on the growth of the church.

CHAPTER V

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

This project was an attempt to (1) develop a method of approach to former church members to assess the causes of backsliding, especially in connection with the Hamilton church in New South Wales, (2) raise fellowship/awareness levels in the church toward those on the perimeter of church life, and (3) cooperate with the local church in designing a ministry plan for both preventing backsliding and reclaiming those already backslidden. Rather than bring a ready-made programme to the church, it was the writer's intention to bring to a local congregation an *awareness* of the problem of backsliding and to assist it in initiating a programme suitable to its own situation and needs.

The method used to record this project is not strictly chronological. This is in order that concepts and procedures which belong naturally together can be grouped in this way to highlight the over-all direction of the project. A generally chronological pattern will be followed as much as possible however.

The period taken for this project was from April 1,

1981, to October 24, 1981. The month of April was taken to negotiate with the local conference administration, the church pastor and the church itself concerning their acceptance and support of the project. This period has been called "Entry." Thus the entire period covered by this report is less than seven months.

A brief summary of the composition and reputation of the Hamilton church may be appropriate at this point. For many years Hamilton has been largely a church of middle aged and elderly people. Many of its younger people had either left the church or had moved away to other areas for work or education. At this time, and continuing to some extent until the present, there had been a certain amount of unspoken 'rivalry' between Hamilton and another Seventh-day Adventist church in the area. Each church had tended to keep to itself and discouraged its young people from becoming too involved with the youth of the other church. One outcome of this was that Hamilton lost many of its younger member to other churches in the area. The overall result of all these factors was that Hamilton became regarded, to a certain extent, as a cold, unfriendly church. In recent years, quite a number of young families have moved back into the area, become established in various businesses, and joined the church again. Because of the number of professional people who worship at Hamilton, it is regarded as having a fairly sophisticated membership and at the time the writer began attending, it still had a

reputation for being comparatively cold and unfriendly.¹

Hamilton church, being the oldest in the Newcastle area has been regarded by many as the central or city church of the district and has tended to draw its membership from a widely scattered area. This, together with the fact that many of the able-bodied members are kept very busy involved in their businesses and professions, has made it more difficult for members to establish close fellowship ties with one another. It has also been found by the writer to be a hindrance to obtain the full cooperation of the elders in a programme of visitation among the church's backsliders.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a step-by-step conceptual account of the implementation of the project. It is not necessary to recount every detail of what happened, but a general outline and some observations will be given. There are four basic phases involved: entry, preparation of the church, implementation, and review.

Step I: Entry

The steps which the writer took in entry to the Hamilton church took a period of one month, and involved three stages. The *first* was with Pastor Glenn Weare--who was pleased to accept the writer's proposal to carry out

¹This information was supplied by the church pastor, an elder and several other church members in informal discussions.

the project in connection with the Hamilton church. The *second* was with the local Conference President and the newly appointed Conference co-ordinator for work among backsliders. These men also gave approval to my project, provided that I did not overlap the visitation work being done by the co-ordinator. The *third* stage was with the church--with the writer being accepted as an unofficial associate pastor whose main work was for the backslidden members. This proved to be a satisfactory arrangement with the writer being accepted by most members as a pastor in the church, without in any way detracting from the position and recognized authority of Pastor Weare. The relationship between Pastor Weare and the writer proved to be mutually supportive and was facilitated by this initial period of negotiation with both the pastor and his church.

During this period the writer clearly explained the purpose of the project and the importance of the work for backsliders. This was done in sermons, during the lay activities period between the church service and Sabbath school, in a church board meeting, and in informal discussions with individual church members. Many members expressed to the writer their hopes concerning the success of the programme in winning back people to the church. A *Missing-Member Information Questionnaire*¹ was given out during one of the lay activities periods in order to gather names and

¹See appendix I.

information concerning people whom church members knew had backslidden. The information gained from this questionnaire, together with that supplied by the church clerk formed the basis of the list of names which the writer used in his visitation programme.

Step II: Preparation of the Church

While the writer was establishing his entry and relationship to the church, he drew up a simple *Worship and Fellowship Questionnaire*¹ which was given before the church service on May 2 and again near the end of the project on October 10. The purpose of this basic instrument was: (1) to help measure the degree of intimate fellowship within the church which was enjoyed by the members, both before and after the period covered by the project, (2) to create an awareness of the need for improvement in this area, and (3) to solicit member's suggestions for improving both the level of fellowship within the church and the degree of satisfaction gained from the preaching and worship services.²

When the first questionnaire was given, sixty-four people responded. The most significant results gained from this questionnaire showed that: (1) the degree to which members had close relationships with other members was quite low, (2) approximately sixty-seven percent of the members

¹See appendix II.

²See appendix III for a summary and comparison of answers given in the two questionnaires.

felt fellowship levels were either very poor or in need of improvement, and (3) thirty-three percent regarded the sermons as in need of improvement. Various suggestions were made concerning sermon topics which would be helpful and Pastor Weare and the writer took these into consideration in planning the sermons for the remainder of the period. Suggestions were also offered on ways to improve fellowship within the church.

As a result of the needs revealed in this questionnaire, the officers and members of the church were encouraged to show more friendliness to one another and especially to visitors and new members. The writer was pleased to note that in Sabbath School especially, a new emphasis was subsequently given to making visitors feel welcome, with welcome badges being given to them and their names being read out to the congregation. Another result, was that the writer, with the co-operation of Pastor Weare planned to conduct two special seminar days devoted to considering topics designed to improve the church's life and fellowship levels and its sense of mission--especially on behalf of backsliders.

The first of these special days was held on July 11 and focussed on *church life and interpersonal relationships*. The morning service consisted of a short sermon by the writer on the "one another" passages of Scripture, followed by a communion service conducted by both Pastor Weare and the writer. At the conclusion of this service, ten people

gave their testimonies of thanks and praise to God and a sweet spirit generally prevailed. A fellowship dinner was then held before commencing the afternoon seminar.

At the seminar, the results of the first *questionnaire on worship and fellowship* were shared with the church in order to underline the need for such stress on improving fellowship and interpersonal relationships within the church. Pastor Weare then spoke, outlining the need members have for each other, and of the importance of being willing to take off the 'masks' which prevent openness and close fellowship. The writer spoke on the subject of "Man in the Image of God." In this section, he proposed that relationships are the essence of the "image of God" and to restore this "image," relationships between God and man, and man and his fellowman, must be healed. He also stressed that one must develop a healthy self image in order to be able to have healthy acceptance of others and better communicate with them.

Following this presentation, those present were divided into groups to discuss two questions related to the task of removing barriers to communication within the church.¹ Subsequent to this seminar, frequent reference was made, in church service periods, of the need to communicate more and to work to restore broken relationships amongst both present and former members.

¹See appendix IV for questions and responses given.

The second of the planned special days was held the following week-July 18, and focussed on *Church Life and Ministry*. The sermon in the morning discussed Christ as the suffering *servant* who exemplified the true role of the church and its members. In the afternoon seminar the writer spoke on the role of the church in the world, the roles of the laity and clergy, and the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Pastor Weare then spoke on ways and methods of sharing one's faith, which was followed by the contribution of ideas from ten others who were present. This programme was received well and many members commented regarding the new appreciation they had gained regarding their responsibilities and privileges as church members. A church fellowship tea and social evening concluded the day.

Step III: Survey of Former Members

During the period covered by Stage II, in which an attempt was being made to prepare the church to work for and accept backsliders, the writer prepared a *Survey for Former Members*.¹ The conducting of this survey was considered the central crux of this entire project. Its basic purpose was twofold: (1) to test a survey instrument for its usefulness in contacting and, hopefully, helping backsliders, and (2) to discover the reasons why people left Hamilton church while noting any similarities or differences

¹See appendix V.

from the reasons discussed in chapters I-III of this paper.

In July, after initiating plans for the survey, the writer's attention was drawn to a letter published in a church magazine.¹ This letter, written by a backslidden church member, suggested the carrying out of a plan similar to that already begun by the writer. It is mentioned here because it expresses well the purpose of this project.

The writer says:

Has any church pastor compiled a full list of all the people in his district who have left the church, and merely *asked* them why? What I had in mind was to skip the sermon, the plea to come back, and even the prayer at this stage... What you are after is facts. You are not just picking on one person. You are making a survey. You are not asking the person to divulge anything he doesn't want to... Be very judicious with your questions and curb your irresistable urge to smother the person with help and advice.

In a valid comment concerning the outcome of such a survey, the writer of the letter went on to say:

Do not despair if no one comes back to church. You have given the person a chance to talk. He may realize that his reason for leaving is invalid. He will certainly think. He will appreciate the fact that no pressure at all was applied. You may come up with some wonderful answers for keeping more people from leaving.²

These words summarize well the main objective of the *Survey for Former Members*.

Because quite a number of the backsliders from Hamilton church were already being contacted by the

¹Quoted in Robert H. Parr, "A Cry in the Night," Ministry, November 1975, p. 25.

²Ibid.

conference co-ordinator, these people were not counted among those to be visited in this project. Twenty-seven names were eventually assigned to be surveyed. In an attempt to involve others in the visitation programme, the writer asked the church pastor and three elders to each visit at least one backslider with the survey. Seven of the names were distributed in this way and brief instruction was given to the elders on guidelines for approaching these people. Unfortunately, despite much prompting on the part of the writer, only two of these seven names had been contacted at the time of writing. Each of the men who had not fulfilled their task seemed to be quite willing to make the visit but the pressure of business and other duties was allowed to crowd out the time necessary. This was one aspect of the implementation of the project which was a little disappointing to the writer. Of the remaining names available, the writer was only able to make contact with fifteen of them as the other five people had either gone overseas, or to other parts of Australia, or were unable to be traced.

In approaching the people, the writer explained that the survey was part of a project being carried out with the approval of the Theology department at Avondale College. Mention was made of the fact that the church was anxious to find out why people stop attending church and where the church may have erred, in order that something might be done to improve the way the church cares for its members. The answers given to the survey questions

are recorded in appendix VI.

Reflections upon the survey

The writer found the use of the survey in approaching backsliders to be most helpful in gaining entrance to their homes and in facilitating the expression of their feelings and attitudes toward the church. Although the number of people surveyed is insufficient for any real statistical conclusions and although the answers given may be subjective and somewhat 'coloured' by emotional attitudes, yet the following general observations can be made with regard to responses given to certain key areas covered by the survey:

1. The majority of respondents to the survey considered that they had been adequately instructed before baptism. This could suggest that this is not a major factor in backsliding. However, the fact that more than one-third answered 'no' or 'undecided' to this question would indicate that more thought could be given to assuring that candidates for baptism are adequately prepared.

2. The lack or infrequency of post-baptismal visits by either pastors or other church officers was noted by all who were surveyed. Even those who had received some visits, stressed that it was only *very* occasionally. Only two people had received a visit since they stopped attending church. These facts highlight the importance of pastoral

visitation and the need for ministers and church officers (especially elders, deacons and deaconesses) to plan a systematic visitation program. They also reveal that very little is generally done by way of visitation and follow-up to reclaim members who have stopped attending church services and functions.

3. Those surveyed had been influenced to join the church by a wide variety of factors, although the greatest single influence was the family. The work of the minister both as a pastor and as an evangelist was also significant.

4. Almost all had attended church for quite a number of years before they left. This fact, together with those noted previously (nos 1-3), appears to contradict a popular view that the majority of backsliders are the result of hasty evangelistic campaigns and that they quickly leave the church. At least this is not the case at Hamilton. It would seem that lack of pastoral care was a greater factor in backsliding than was evangelistic pressure for hasty baptisms.

5. No one left the church over serious doctrinal disagreement and none had joined any other church. Only three felt that church standards were too high. This would indicate that relational issues, rather than doctrinal ones had the most impact in influencing people to leave the church. The writer wonders, in view of the current theological issue within the Seventh-day Adventist Church,

whether doctrinal issues may not become a more significant factor in the future.

6. In this survey, attendance at church school, or the lack of it, did not appear to be a significant factor in whether or not a person left the church in adulthood. The part played by church-school attendance in keeping youth in the church at least until they become adults, was not able to be measured by this survey.

7. Although some claimed they had maintained a regular devotional life and had tried to influence others to join the church, the majority had not done so. This was possibly to be expected and highlights the importance of encouraging church members to practice regular devotional habits and to share their faith with others in order to maintain their own spiritual health.

8. Approximately one half of those surveyed had not felt accepted into the fellowship of the church as a 'family' member. Although the writer expected this number to be higher than it was, it nevertheless emphasizes the importance of improving this aspect of church life. Several people mentioned that they felt the church was cold and critical, unfriendly and that members kept to their own small circle of friends. Others mentioned the need for more church social activities - a point also stressed by many regular members in the church *Worship and Fellowship Questionnaire*.

9. A majority felt that the church sermons were either dull and boring or else a mixture of good and bad. Although no one mentioned this as the major factor in causing them to backslide, yet many perceived it as contributing to their general dissatisfaction and spiritual weakness. It was mentioned that the sermons need to be made more relevant and interesting.

10. Financial or business pressures were only mentioned on the survey sheet by three people, although in conversation several others admitted they became so busy with their work, that church and devotional life was crowded out. It may be necessary for pastors to stress more the importance of right priorities and values in determining one's lifestyle.

11. Hypocrisy of church members and disenchantment with the lack of difference between them and the non-members, influenced the thinking of several people. The need for consistency, with more piety and practical godliness, is seen to be *vital* not only in winning new members but also in holding members in the church.

Other factors besides those noted above, can be seen from a study of appendix VI. However, the writer has emphasized those which he feels are most relevant and which were mentioned by a significant number of the people surveyed.

Step IV: Review

Keeping in mind the relatively small number of people interviewed, the findings from the survey basically confirm what has been discussed in earlier chapters concerning the reasons for backsliding. The writer sees no major differences between what others have found and those brought to light in the Hamilton survey. Clearly there is a wide variety of factors involved and some are the fault of the backslider himself, while others are the responsibility of the church.

It is to be expected that some of the responses given by the backsliders themselves would reflect a certain amount of bias and subjectivity resulting in a distorted view of why they left the church. In order to minimize the effect of this, the writer approached the church board to ask them for their views on why these individuals no longer attended church. At the meeting, the head elder suggested that in case there were reasons which might cause embarrassment to other members, it would be best to allow time for individuals to approach the writer privately. This was agreed upon and a period of two weeks was allocated for the purpose. Only one member actually spoke to the writer in this time to give his views concerning two of the backsliders.

In one case, the church member's assessment coincided with that given by the backslider himself and

concerned an allegedly dishonest business dealing by a retired minister who was a member of the Hamilton church. The writer subsequently spoke with this minister who denied the allegation and said that there must have been a misunderstanding. He agreed to approach the backslider concerned in order to straighten the matter out. This he did but subsequent visits by the writer to the backslider revealed that a harmonious settlement of the problem was not able to be achieved and the former member was still resentful. In the other case mentioned by the church member, the reason he gave differed from that given by the person surveyed, but he agreed that several factors were most likely involved.

As a footnote to the above process, the writer noted the disturbing fact that in many cases the church members had no idea as to why certain ones had left the church, and whether or not any attempt had ever been made to reclaim them.

In order to share with the church members the findings of the survey, the writer conducted a seminar on the subject of backsliding, on September 5. After a short presentation discussing the Biblical view of backsliding and the reasons given for backsliding by former Hamilton church members (without mentioning names), those present were divided into groups of six persons to discuss topics such as: (1) how to improve the level of fellowship within the church, (2) what social activities should be

included in the church programme, and (3) suggestions for reclaiming missing members. This seminar was a valuable experience for all concerned and a number of suggestions and recommendations were made which were subsequently passed on to the church board for consideration.¹ This was done at the board meeting the following week. Three definite decisions were made at this meeting. These were:

1. Invite all backsliders to a special *visitor's day*.

A small sub-committee consisting of the church pastor, the head elder, the Sabbath School leader, and the writer were appointed to lay plans for this programme which was to be held on October 24. Invitation cards were later printed and given to members to invite friends and former members.

2. Three elders were appointed to begin regular visitation for the most promising prospects among the backsliders. They were to offer the church publication, *The Australasian Record*, together with a church bulletin or newsletter, at each visit and look for opportunities to invite the people back to church.

3. A series of evangelistic and revival meetings to be conducted by Pastor Weare, was planned for March 1982. This was especially for the purpose of reclaiming backsliders. A strong visitation programme was to be conducted concurrently.

In later discussions with Pastor Weare and the

¹See appendix VII.

head elder, it was agreed that at the next elders' meeting, one of the elders be permanently assigned to assist the pastor in co-ordinating the church's work for its former members.

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The fact that the Hamilton church voted to make definite plans for the future to carry on a work for backsliders, is some indication of the value of the programme as perceived by the church members.

The writer recognizes that his project has had its weaknesses as well as its strengths. He will therefore now turn to a brief evaluation of the project. This evaluation - both on the part of the writer and the church members - cannot help but be subjective and "unscientific." However, it is an attempt to make some assessment of the value for the future of such a project.

CHAPTER VI

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

In this evaluation, use will be made of information supplied by Hamilton church members in a *Programme Evaluation Questionnaire*¹ as well as in informal discussions, on assessment by the church pastor, and the writer's own observations.

Assessment by Church Members

On October 10, a written assessment of the project, as it affected the church, was made by a comparatively small number of church members. These people were selected by the writer because they had attended at least two out of the three afternoon seminars which had been held earlier in the course of the project. Unfortunately, because many of these people were away on a weekend camp at the time, the number available to take part in the evaluation was relatively small. In retrospect, the writer feels that the questionnaire (apart from the first two questions relating to the seminars) should have been given to all of the members. In this way a more reliable evaluation could be gained of the project as a whole.

¹See appendix VIII.

According to the responses given in the questionnaire, the seminars were generally considered helpful, and most would like to have had more of them. All sensed at least some change in their understanding of the church and approximately half of the people felt that their understanding of their role as a lay member had changed. Several people mentioned an increased awareness of their responsibility to take an active part in the life and mission of the church.

Three-quarters of the respondents admitted to being more aware of the problem of backsliding in the church than they had been previously, and about the same number felt that there was, in the church, a greater concern for former members than before. However several believed that nothing much had changed. Everyone wished to see the emphasis on working for backsliders continued and made a regular part of the church's activities.

There were several suggestions made by the members for improving a similar project in the future. Two people felt that more church members should be involved in the visitation of backsliders. Another two people urged that more encouragement be given to members to attend the seminars and become involved in the programme. One person believed that there ought to be more and better social programmes for the church and that backsliders be invited to attend these functions. Another concluded that the

church should do more to insure that people don't leave the church in the first place.

It would appear from the above observations as well as from comments made by members to the writer, that the project has increased the church's awareness of the problem of backsliding. It has also resulted in an increased awareness of the need for the church to be constantly on the alert to follow up members who begin to absent themselves from the worship services. As one elder commented, "I never used to even think about who was missing from church, but now I'm constantly asking myself 'Where is that person this week? I wonder what the problem is?'"

The project has also increased the sense of fellowship within the church, as well as the church's awareness of the need to improve. This can be seen by a comparison of the results obtained from the *Worship and Fellowship Questionnaire* which were completed at the beginning and the end of the project.¹

Assessment by the Pastor

The following assessment of the project was written by Pastor Glenn Weare, the Hamilton church pastor:

I would like to evaluate Pr. Neil Watts' project in relation to backsliders in the Hamilton Church in two ways. Firstly, in relation to the actual non-attending members themselves and secondly, in relation to the development within the church, of attitudes toward these people.

¹See appendix 3.

I personally feel that the survey approach has, on the whole, been a most helpful means of facilitating frank discussions on the real causes of withdrawing from Church fellowship. The only opposition to this approach has come from a few people who would probably have been antagonized by any kind of approach.

While none of the backsliders have yet returned to Church, a number of very fruitful contacts have been made. I am sure that we will see some of these people in attendance at a number of programmes we have planned for the next few months. There is no question, either, that a greater awareness has been created within the Hamilton church, of how easy it is for people to slip out of Church fellowship without being noticed until it is too late, and of the importance of a greater warmth in church fellowship.

I personally have been most grateful that Pr. Watts has been able to be associated with Hamilton Church on this project. The programme as a whole has¹ strengthened many aspects of our church's life.

The pastor's report supports both the concept and usefulness of a survey approach in contacting backsliders, and the value of the total project for the church itself. It should be recognized that Pastor Weare gave full support to the writer and that any credit for the success of the programme should be shared by him.

Conclusion

The project has proved successful in discovering why people have left the Hamilton church and in creating a greater concern for backsliders among the church members themselves. Positive plans have been made to implement and continue a programme designed to help alleviate the

¹Glenn Weare, Letter to Dr. Eoin Giller, Director of the Church and Ministry Department at Avondale College, October 11, 1981.



backslider problem. A final assessment as to the value of the project in reclaiming former members to church fellowship cannot be made at this stage. It was unavoidable for example, that the special *visitor's day* programme be held after the final date for the completion of this project.¹ However, from discussions with the backsliders themselves, the writer believes that a number of them are now more favourable disposed toward returning to church. Several have indicated a willingness to attend the programme on October 24. The writer has found that the use of the survey approach has enabled easy entrance to the backsliders' homes and an excellent opportunity for fruitful dialogue.

* * * *

A formal conclusion to this report will now be given.

¹The elders' delay in visiting the names assigned to them, together with the pressure of other studies, under which the writer worked, resulted in a long delay in compiling the relevant information needed for the implementation of the second phase of the project. For example, discussion with the church board concerning ways to reclaim former members had to be delayed so long, that several ideas which the writer had hoped to experiment with, were not able to be carried out.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This project was an attempt to discover why people leave the church and to assist a local church to prepare itself for the work of reclaiming its former members.

During the seven months covered by the project, a number of backsliders were interviewed resulting in some encouraging prospects for future follow-up work. A broad variety of reasons for backsliding were discovered which, on the whole, supported the conclusions of earlier researchers and writers. Besides this, some significant growth in understanding and fellowship took place within the church itself.

The writer recognizes that possibly other factors besides the project had an influence upon the lives of the Hamilton church members during this period. However the project does appear to have played a significant part in the changes of attitude which took place. There was more emphasis given to making people feel welcome in the church and to improving the level of close fellowship among the members, together with a greater awareness of the church's responsibilities towards backsliders. Members also felt

more satisfied with the worship services than they were at the beginning of the project.

Critique

The writer has learned much from the study given to this project and from its implementation in the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist church. Valuable information has been obtained and cordial relationships with former members has been established, and there is evidence that the church members are better prepared to deal with the problem of backsliding in their midst.

The writer believes that the involvement of church members in working for their former brethren and the establishment of a permanent position of an elder responsible for co-ordinating work for backsliders, will prove to be most helpful.

One insight gained by the writer was the realization that in many cases the church members did not know *why* particular individuals left the church, where they were or whether any attempt had ever been made to reclaim them. The writer believes that pastors and churches need to be much more vigilant in caring for their weaker brethren. Someone, preferably the pastor needs to be kept aware of crisis times in the lives of members so that appropriate support and encouragement can be given.

Another insight gained by the writer is that for someone to adequately carry out a project such as this, he

needs to be the full-time pastor of the church and have more than just seven months at his disposal. It was found too difficult to accomplish everything which the writer wanted to get done because of the following factors:

1. The writer was unable to be "on the spot" and full time at the work
2. He did not carry the same influence to motivate members to faithfully and promptly carry out their responsibilities in connection with the project; on the whole however, the members were most co-operative
3. His interests and programmes sometimes had to compete with those of the local pastor and the church
4. The actual length of time available for the project was far too short to accomplish the best results
5. A full time study load did not allow the writer to put as much time into the project as he felt he needed to
6. The distance between the writer's home and the Hamilton area (45 kilometers), meant that much time was spent in unproductive travelling

One suggestion the writer would offer as a result of his experience at Hamilton church is that every pastor, together with his church officers, give more study and attention to the problem of backsliding in their local church. Over the years there has been much talk about this problem, and many ideas and plans (such as the Guardianship Plan) have been suggested in order to retain members in the church and to help them grow spiritually. It may be,

however, that many churches have never really tried out any of these suggestions. It is the writer's view that every church would benefit from a study of (1) the reasons why people leave the church (as outlined in chapter 3), (2) how to prevent backsliding, and (3) how to go about reclaiming backsliders (see chapter 4).

Suggestions for Further Study

It would be helpful if others were to conduct a similar project with a larger number of people involved and over a longer period of time. This would enable more statistical data to be gathered and a greater opportunity to test the effectiveness of a project such as this.

There is also much that could be done to more fully extract the significance of the results gained in this study. For example a follow-up study might concentrate on showing the significance of one factor in backsliding, such as marriage with a person not of the same faith.

It could also be valuable for someone to try to determine how many people leave the church because of discouragement brought about by an inadequate understanding of the gospel of salvation by grace.

It could also be helpful for some other student to survey a large number of experienced ministers and evangelists to discover what they have found to be the main causes of backsliding and any suggestions they have found helpful in reclaiming backsliders to the fellowship of the

church. It would be interesting, for example to find out how many backsliders are reclaimed largely through the influence of public evangelistic or revival meetings. The writer, together with Detamore and others have found that quite a number of these people attend such meetings and rejoin the church. Statistical evidence to either support this view or to disprove it would be valuable.

Another area of study could involve someone to follow the progress of the Hamilton church to find out what long-term effects (if any) this project had on the life of the church and its ministry to backsliders.

A final suggestion would be for another student to assess whether or not there is an increasing tendency towards leaving the church because of doctrinal disagreement. If this were shown to be the cause, then a follow-up study could attempt to determine what happens to these people in the long term and whether or not they become active members in another Christian group.

Suggestions for Re-implementation of the Project

As a result of the writer's experience at Hamilton, the following suggestions are made with the intention of using them in his future ministry. Some other person may also find them helpful if he were to conduct a similar project on the subject of backsliding.

1. The writer would plan for a minimum period of one year to prepare and revitalize the church before beginning

the work for backsliders. If this were not done, church support for the project may be lacking and any backsliders who were reclaimed may soon be turned away again.

2. A planned use of the pulpit would add much to the preparation phase of the project.

3. The use of small groups within the church, for prayer meetings, discussions groups, and for fellowship, would probably strengthen the programme by helping to develop better interpersonal relationship among members.

4. Before the visitation phase of the project began, the writer would plan to have elders and others trained and ready to visit backsliders. The material covered in the earlier chapters of this paper could be used in the training sessions.

5. The writer would endeavour to ensure that the survey and visitation phase was carried out in a short space of time, rather than over an extended period, and that special evangelistic or social programmes had been scheduled to coincide with the visitation period. The backsliders could then be invited to these special functions.

6. The writer would plan to check with the church members as to why they thought different individuals left the church *before* visiting the backsliders themselves. If the person had left the church in disgrace or because of shameful circumstances, then it would reduce the possibility of causing hostility or embarrassment if the survey

questions could be slightly modified. For example, the direct question, "Why did you leave the church?" could be replaced by a question such as "How do you feel about the church?" In this way there would be greater opportunity for establishing a helpful relationship with the backslider.

* * * *

The writer realizes that much more could and should be done to make churches the centres of warm and loving Christian fellowship and to take steps to reduce the amount of backsliding. Also much more prayer could be offered on behalf of the wandering members of God's family. However one must be as realistic as was Jesus. According to His own parable of the sower (Matt 13) three of the four groups who harboured the gospel 'seed' eventually dropped out of the Kingdom of God. Even one of Jesus' own disciples betrayed Him, while Paul wrote of Demas who "hath forsaken me, having loved the present world" (2Tim 4:10). When every effort has been made to develop a loving, accepting church and when all possible means have been tried to restore backsliders to the fold of the church, yet people still have the liberty to choose to turn away. Nevertheless, the church ought never to slacken its vigilance or turn its back upon any for who the Saviour still pleads.

APPENDIX I

Missing Member Information

Questionnaire

APPENDIX I

MISSING MEMBER INFORMATION

The Church has a real concern for people who once worshipped with us, but who no longer do so. If you know of anyone in this category who previously attended Hamilton Church, including young people and others who were never actually baptised, would you please fill in the details below.

NAME OF FORMER MEMBER: _____

ADDRESS: _____

TELEPHONE NO.: _____ MARRIED OR SINGLE? _____

APPROXIMATE AGE: _____ DOES HE/SHE HAVE S.D.A. RELATIVES? _____

OCCUPATION: _____

HOW LONG DID HE/SHE COME TO CHURCH? _____

WHEN DID HE/SHE STOP ATTENDING? _____

WHAT WAS THE REASON (IF KNOWN)? _____

HAS HE/SHE BEEN VISITED FOR THE PURPOSE OF INVITING BACK TO CHURCH?

IF SO, BY WHOM? _____

WHAT WAS THE RESPONSE (IF KNOWN)? _____

WHAT IS HIS/HER PRESENT ATTITUDE? _____

WHAT SPECIAL PROBLEMS DOES HE/SHE NOW HAVE WHICH HINDER HIS/HER RETURN
TO CHURCH FELLOWSHIP? _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

APPENDIX II

Worship and Fellowship Questionnaire

APPENDIX II

WORSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

As a basis for the future planning for worship and fellowship within the church we would like your response to the following questions. Place a tick beside your answer.

1. How many Hamilton church members do you know by name?

Almost all
Approx. 75%
Approx. 50%
Approx. 25%
Less than 25%
2. How many members do you have close relationships with and feel you really know as personal friends?

Approx. 75%
Approx. 50%
Approx. 25%
Approx. 10%
Less than 10%
3. Do you feel that the fellowship and "family" atmosphere in our church is

Very warm and friendly
Adequate
In need of improvement
Very poor
4. Do you have any suggestions for improving fellowship within the church?
5. On the whole, how do you feel about the kind of sermons you have generally heard?

(1) They are usually satisfying and very helpful
(2) They need improvement
(3) They are generally of poor quality

If you marked either 2 or 3, please give brief reasons for your answer.

6. List below any subjects you would like to hear presented in the church sermons.

7. How long have you been in regular attendance at Hamilton Church?

30 years or more

20 - 30 years

10 - 20 years

5 - 10 years

1 - 5 years

Less than 1 year

APPENDIX III

Worship and Fellowship Questionnaire Comparison

APPENDIX III

WORSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP QUESTIONNAIREA Comparison

1. How many Hamilton church members do you know by name?	<u>MAY</u>		<u>OCTOBER</u>	
	No.	%	No.	%
Almost all	13	(20.3)	12	(23)
Approx. 75%	13	(20.3)	16	(30.8)
Approx. 50%	6	(9.4)	7	(13.5)
Approx. 25%	6	(9.4)	8	(15.4)
Less than 25%	26	(40.6)	9	(17.3)
2. How many members do you have close relationships with and feel you really know as personal friends?				
Approx. 75%	0		5	(9.6)
Approx. 50%	10	(16.13)	7	(13.5)
Approx. 25%	13	(20.97)	15	(28.8)
Approx. 10%	11	(17.74)	9	(17.3)
Less than 10%	28	(45.16)	16	(30.8)
3. Do you feel that the fellowship and "family" atmosphere in our church is				
Very warm and friendly	10	(15.15)	10	(19.3)
Adequate	12	(18.18)	19	(36.5)
In need of improvement	37	(56.07)	19	(36.5)
Very poor	7	(10.06)	4	(7.7)
4. On the whole, how do you feel about the kind of sermon you have generally heard?				
(1) They are usually satisfying and very helpful	43	(67.19)	40	(77.0)
(2) They need improvement	18	(28.12)	9	(17.3)
(3) They are generally of poor quality	3	(4.69)	3	(5.7)
5. How long have you been in regular attendance at Hamilton Church?				
30 years or more	11	(17.46)	11	(21.2)
20 - 30 years	6	(9.52)	12	(23.0)
10 - 20 years	17	(26.98)	14	(26.9)
5 - 10 years	6	(9.52)	4	(7.7)
1 - 5 years	12	(19.06)	9	(17.3)
Less than 1 year	11	(17.46)	2	(3.9)

APPENDIX IV

Discussion Questions Used in Seminar on
Church Life and Interpersonal Relationships

APPENDIX IV

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS USED IN SEMINAR ON
CHURCH LIFE AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Questions

The two *questions* discussed in groups were:

1. What are some barriers to a closer fellowship in the church?
2. How could the barriers be overcome?

Answers

Suggested *answers* to the *first* question were: (1) lack of time, (2) shyness, (3) personality differences, (4) wide variation in income and social status, (5) age differences, (6) intellectual difference, (7) small "cliques", (8) selfishness, and (9) different interests.

Suggested answers to *second* question were: (1) the sharing of oneself, of time and one's home, (2) fellowship meals, (3) taking time to meet others, especially new people, (4) develop more tolerance of other, (5) true conversion, (6) participation in small groups within the church, and (7) regularly inviting someone home for a meal.

APPENDIX V

Survey of Former Members

1. Were you born into an S.D.A. family? _____
2. What was it that influenced you to become a baptised member?

3. At what age were you baptised? _____
4. Do you feel that you had adequate instruction in church teachings
before being baptised? _____
5. After being baptised did you receive visits from pastors or church
officers? OFTEN OCCASIONALLY NEVER
6. About when did you stop attending church regularly? _____
7. How long had you been in regular attendance up until this time?

8. Have you since joined any other church? _____
9. Did you feel the church standards were TOO HIGH ABOUT RIGHT
TOO LOW?
10. What doctrines, standards or customs of the church displeased you?

11. Did you ever attend S.D.A. Church schools? _____
If so, for how long? _____

12. While still a regular member, did you

- have prayer and Bible study regularly? _____
- actively try to influence others to become S.D.A.'s. _____
- feel accepted and welcome in the church as a "family" member? _____
- hold any church office? _____

13. Did you find the sermons preached were HELPFUL HARD TO
UNDERSTAND DULL AND BORING?

14. Did either (a) increased financial or work pressures on the one hand, or (b) increased prosperity on the other, influence your decision to stop attending church? _____

If so, which influences you most, (a) or (b)? _____

15. Briefly, what was it that made you stop coming to church?

APPENDIX VI

Response to Survey of Former Members

RESPONSES TO SURVEY OF FORMER MEMBERS

1. Were you born into an S.D.A. family?

Yes (5)

No (6)

One parent an S.D.A. (4)

2. What was it that influenced you to become a baptised member?

Family (4)

Spouse (2)

A church pastor (2)

Excepted thing to do (2)

Peer pressure (1)

Evangelistic meetings (2)

Unknown (2)

3. At what age were you baptised?

10-15 (3)

16-20 (6)

21-30 (3)

Unable to remember (3)

4. Do you feel you had adequate instruction in church teachings before being baptised?

Yes (9)

No (3)

Undecided (3)

5. After being baptised, did you receive visits from pastor or church officers?

Note: Number of people responding is recorded in parentheses.

Often
Occasionally (6)
(Several stressed that it was *very* occasional.)
Never (9)

6. About when did you stop attending church regularly?

1-5 yrs ago (4)
6-10 yrs (8)
11-20 yrs (2)
More than 20 yrs (1)

7. How long had you been in regular attendance up until this time?

1-5 yrs (3)
6-10 yrs (5)
11-20 yrs (4)
More than 20 yrs (3)

8. Have you since joined any other church?

No (15)

9. Did you feel the church standards were

Too high (3)
About right (11)
Too low (1)

10. What doctrines, standards or customs of the church displeased you?

Sabbath found to be boring (1)
Use of K.J.V. Bible (1)
Footwashing ritual (1)
Membership cliques (1)
Coercion to take church responsibilities (2)
None in particular (9)

11. Did you ever attend S.D.A. church schools?

All of the time (1)
Some of the time (6)
Never (7)
No answer (1)

12. While still a regular member, did you

(a) have prayer and Bible study regularly?

Yes (6)

No (8)

Unsure (1)

(b) Actively try to influence others to become S.D.A's?

Yes (3)

No (12)

(c) Feel accepted and welcome in the church as a family member?

Yes (7)

No (6)

Partly (2)

(d) hold any church office?

Yes (6)

No (9)

13. Did you find the sermons preached were generally

Helpful (3)

Hard to understand

Dull and boring (5)

A mixture (7)

14. Did either (a) increased financial or work pressures on the one hand, or (b) increased prosperity on the other, influence your decision to stop attending church?

Yes (3) If so which influenced you most? a. (3)

No (12)

15. Briefly what was it that made you stop coming to church?

Answers given were:-

- Didn't enjoy being "pushed" into work I didn't feel willing or able to do."

- Attended various churches and just drifted out."

- Disenchantment with lack of difference between church members and average people. Members were hypocritical.
 - Hypocrisy in the church. People criticize you for some things while they do as bad or worse themselves.
 - Home and marriage tensions.
 - Temporary marriage breakup - caused me to become too ashamed to go to church.
 - I have memories of fussy women judging you by your appearance, friends, family and habits. I prefer a Saturday morning at home - to either study the Bible or to be with someone I love.
 - Hypocrisy of church leaders and lack of pastoral concern. Faithful S.D.A. mother was only ever visited when she was about to die.
 - Had no real interest. Was forced to attend by family who were critical of the church. Also my friends were not interested in religion.
 - Felt as if I was never really accepted by the other members. Also never really understood the teachings of the church.
 - People were cold and unfriendly and kept to their own small circle of friends.
 - Influenced by wife who no longer wished to attend because she felt the church was unfriendly.
 - Due to financial pressures, I accepted a job which entailed work on Sabbath.
 - Marriage to a non-Adventist.
 - Financial pressures led to discouragement.
 - Discouraged when children rebelled.
-

APPENDIX VII

Seminar on Backsliding

APPENDIX VII

SEMINAR ON BACKSLIDING

The following suggestions for improving fellowship within the church, preventing backsliding, and reclaiming backsliders were submitted by the various discussion groups and by the writer himself:

1. Begin the programme of preventing backsliding *before* a person is baptised, by adequately preparing every candidate

There should be evidence of genuine conversion, thorough instruction in all the major teachings of the church, and regular support of the church programme.

2. Carry out a guardianship plan

3. Ensure regular visitation by the pastor or mature members--especially in the first few years

4. Put the name of every member in some Sabbath School class and have the teacher, through his class and its members, be responsible to contact all who do not attend or who attend irregularly

5. Form a special "reclamation" team to support the pastor in working for missing members

The team should have influence with regard to the planning of the church programme, particularly of special meetings and social programmes to which former members could be invited.

6. Alert the church in the new area when a member moves to a new community.

Ensure that contact is made as soon as possible. A printed form, personal letter to the pastor, or a phone call could be used.

7. Integrate new members into the church programme--but do not

'push' them into taking on responsibilities which they do not feel ready for

8. Improve the number and quality of social programmes and invite former members to attend; have frequent Sunday sporting activities

9. Send subscriptions of church magazines to all new members and to backsliders

10. To maintain and revive zeal for the church and its messages and mission in the world, conduct an evangelistic programme - or series of evangelistic Sabbath sermons - every year

11. Conduct a special Visitor's Day programme at least twice a year, and give a personal invitation to all former members to attend

12. Have a rostered group to care for lunch for visitors and new or lonely members

13. In working for backsliders, follow the specific counsel of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 18:14-20

14. Give more opportunity for members to share their testimonies and experiences in church meetings

APPENDIX VIII

Programme Evaluation Questionnaire

APPENDIX VIII

PROGRAMME EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

The Seminars were helpful
 not very helpful
 a waste of time

Should there have been more or less seminars?

Has your perception or understanding of the church changed this year?

Much Some None

Has your understanding of your role as a laymember changed over the past year? If so, how?

Are you more aware of the problem of backsliders now than you were earlier?

Do you sense that in the church there is a greater concern for former members than there was previously?

Do you wish this emphasis on working for our former members to continue and become a regular part of our church's activities?

In what ways do you think the programme could be improved in future?

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