5.5 Mission

Jesus' Method of Mission

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Introduction

As Seventh-day Adventists we have really done very well in taking the gospel to all the world—haven't we? When we consider that this Church had its beginnings just one hundred and fifty years ago with a small handful of bitterly disappointed people, today's Church with its significant presence in just about every country of the world is quite incredible. Witness our fine institutions—hospitals, schools, universities, publishing houses, etc—of which we can be justly proud. Listen to the stories of evangelistic endeavour from Shanghai to Sydney; Manilla to Mexico City. We are good at telling each other about our successes and have always adopted a very optimistic attitude to the growth of our Church and its presence in the world.

But there is an insidious danger in the very optimism that is so important to the ongoing missionary enterprise in the Church. The danger is that we will begin to convince ourselves that we have just about done everything that there is to do and that all that remains is to "batten down the hatches," and ride out the storm until Christ returns.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While we thank God for the growth that has taken place, a huge challenge remains for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we need to ask ourselves, what has happened to the tremendous sense of mission that characterised the young Seventh-day Adventist Church in the first decade of this century? How can the gospel be presented so that it appeals to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Secularists and the thousands of diverse people groups scattered across the globe, or to your neighbours in your home town? At least two thirds of the people living on planet earth as you read this page have no knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ, nor of God's plan of salvation which was meant to include them.

What do you think?

1. We have said that we must have a wholistic view of the mission of the Church. In your perception, how can the Adventist Church better practice this wholistic view of mission?
2. How will a wholistic view of mission be applied in your particular cultural and socio-logical setting?

And yet many of us appear to be content to sit by as disinterested spectators, acting as though we were observing nothing more important than a Sunday afternoon football match. Sometimes it even seems that the football match is more important!

Now, just in case you are about to turn off and flip the page to another chapter in this book, let me assure you that I'm not into guilt trips myself, nor am I recommending that you get involved in one either. If you ask my three sons they will quickly assure you that I have

been known to enjoy the odd hour or two watching the football myself! But the fact remains that we Adventists need to take a long hard look at what we are about, and why.

God's Comprehensive Mission

I would like to suggest to you that in order to reach the world effectively we need to commence with a much broader view of how we can go about accomplishing the work we believe God has given us. We need a comprehensive view of mission which is more than simply "preaching the message."

No longer is it possible to assume that people are able to hear our message if we use methods which worked very well when there was a higher consciousness of Christian values and norms in society. That may be all right in some areas. But, particularly in the secularised nations of Australia, New Zealand, North America and Western Europe, for example, we need to commence our interaction with people much "further back" in the decision-making process, and we need to broaden our approach.[491]

Earlier this century Ellen White gave the Church some profound counsel about the method of our approach to people. She said:

> Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me."[492]

Notice that he "mingled," "desired their good," "showed His sympathy," "ministered to their needs," and "won their confidence" **before** he asked them to follow him. These actions on his part—the mingling, sympathising, and winning their confidence—were as much a part of his evangelistic strategy as was the invitation to follow him. If you take nothing else with you from this chapter, I want you to remember that this method—Christ's method—alone will give the success that apparently has elluded the Church for so long in so many places. This kind of evangelism does not depend heavily on fine institutions. Rather, its success depends on the ability of each Christian to relate to the neighbourhood, the workplace, the school, the extended family, the society at large and, as the Holy Spirit works, to convert that casual relationship into a saving relationship.

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In order to make what we are saying crystal clear I want you to consider four aspects of our missionary method. These four aspects have been derived from the statement by Ellen White quoted above. Many years of pastoral, missionary, and teaching experience have taught me that our ability to take these four aspects of our mission seriously holds the key to the success of the Church.

1. Fellowship

The first aspect of Christ's evangelistic method was to "mingle" with the people. Christ's method of approach was not the method of a John the Baptist, as good as that method may have been. In contrast to John, Christ did not call the people to the desert. Rather, he went to the people. He was one with them. His high ethical standards did not prevent him from going to where they were. He reached people so diverse as Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, Levi Matthew, The Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus, The Roman Centurion, Simon Peter, etc.

To us he says:

- "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).
- "Go into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15).
- "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. … As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17: 15, 18).

Jesus in his words and deeds is our model for all mission. John 1:14 tells us that he came to dwell with us as one of us. He did not remain distant or aloof. His incarnation was God's method of evangelising the world. When God conducted the greatest evangelistic campaign of the ages, he chose incarnation (fellowship) as his method (Phil 2:5-11). That method must be our model. While we are to remain committed to the Lord and his message, we can not distance ourselves from the very world we are to reach with that message.

Studies confirm the importance of fellowship in joining the Church. In 1976, Dr Gottfried Oosterwal published the results of his research which indicated that around 70% of people joining the Adventist Church in North America cited the influence of neighbours, friends and relatives as the single most important influence in them joining the Church.

More recently, Dr Alwyn Salom has conducted some similar research in three conferences in Australia. His results are remarkably similar to those of Dr Oosterwal. Dr Salom asks:

> What were the immediate influences (in addition to the Holy Spirit) that led people to join the Adventist Church during this five-year period [1985-1990]? Far and away the most dominant factor cited was the influence of Adventist Church members who were friends, relatives, neighbours or acquaintances of the new convert. In three separate areas of the study this fact surfaced consistently.
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> When asked to identify the various factors that influenced them to join the church, 72 percent of the respondents identified the influence of their Adventist "network" of friends, neighbours, relatives and acquaintances as being primary in leading them to become members of the church.[493]

Fellowship must be a very powerful aspect of our evangelistic method.

2. Service

The second aspect of our evangelistic approach to the world in which we live is service. There is no doubt that Jesus' ministry was a ministry of service. His mission was motivated by his desire to meet the needs of the diverse groups of people that he encountered.

"I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:24-27).

Service comes before proclamation. Jesus served before he preached. He continued to serve after he preached. Service was the ongoing focus of his ministry and mission. So important was it to Jesus' ministry that he declared that Simon Peter could have no part with him unless he willingly acknowledged Jesus' service (John 13:8-9).

All people are touched by unselfish service. One only has to consider the Australian community reaction to a person such as eye specialist and humanitarian Professor Fred Hollows, to realise that unselfish service is still acknowledged as a very powerful moral good in our society. People in the street will listen to people whom they perceive to be unselfish, humble, genuine, and caring. In fact, people who do not see themselves as "religious" will usually be more willing to acknowledge such people as genuine Christians than they will be willing to recognise the person who delivers a "sermon."

Are Seventh-day Adventists perceived to be unselfish, humble, genuine and caring? Or are we considered by most to belong on the lunatic fringe? Are you known by your non-

Seventh-day Adventist neighbours and friends as someone who is genuinely interested in them? Or are we considered to be unapproachable, holier-than-thou, out of touch with the real world and therefore having nothing to say which in any way is relevant to the struggles of life? These are questions we cannot ignore if we want to be serious about our evangelistic work.

While we can be justly proud of the very fine service institutions that we have established over the years and while we must continue to nurture and support those institutions because of the unique and vital role that they play in our interface with the community, we cannot claim to be serious about the quality of our service if we leave the job to them. Seventh-day Adventists can only be taken seriously in our society when we each find our personal service niche.

3. Justice

Closely allied to service is the biblical concept of justice. Have you ever read your Bible and noticed such things as the call to relieve the oppressed, care for the downtrodden, sustain those who are in poverty, grief, or disadvantage in general? If you do, you will be startled by the repeated calls for the Christian to be responsible in these areas. Take, for example a well known text in Micah 6:6-8:

> With what shall I come before the Lord
> and bow down before the exalted God?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousand rivers of oil?
> Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression
> the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
> He has showed you, O man, what is good.
> And what does the Lord require of you?
> *To act justly* and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (NIV)

The calls for just action on the part of God's people are repeated by almost all the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament. Notice the words of Isa 1:15-18:

> When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you;
> even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.
> Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean.
> Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!
> Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.
> Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.
> "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD.
> "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
> though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." (NIV)

Notice particularly the context of the often-used text that begins "Come now let us reason together." There is a very strong imperative in the texts which precede it—an imperative which God's people in Old Testament times neglected to their own peril.

But calls for acting justly are not confined to the Old Testament. Christ's words and actions repeat the same imperative. Notice a familiar passage in Matt 23:23-24 (NIV):

> Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—**justice, mercy and faithfulness**. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

We have read this text repeatedly. We have learned from it that Jesus supported the tithing principle. Rightly so. But have we failed to understand the focus of Jesus' message in this text? He is calling his church to act justly. He is calling his people individually to strive for justice—not for themselves, but for those who deserve it—the oppressed (Isa 58:6-12, Jer 7:1-8), the fatherless (Hos 14:3, Mal 3:5, Jas 1:27), the widow (Zech 7:10), the lost (Matt 25:31-46). In the context of mercy and faithfulness we will be more like Christ if we "desire their good" in a practical way than if we preach the gospel in a theoretical, irrelevant manner that makes it impossible for a person to hear what we are saying.

How much more successful will we be in our evangelistic endeavours if we approach our world from the perspective and example of Jesus himself. This may take some careful rethinking, but we all agree that we must do something revolutionary if we are to take the gospel to our own neighbours and friends.

4. Proclamation

The climactic event in mission occurs when the invitation is given and accepted to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Proclamation of the gospel has always been right at the pinnacle of evangelistic endeavour for Seventh-day Adventists. Nothing that is said in this chapter can in any way lead us to think that there is any other substitute for the proclamation of the gospel or that there is any other gospel that has to be proclaimed. It is a simple formula which says that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness unto all nations then shall the end come" (Matt 24:14).

As important as are fellowship, service, and justice, no one will be in the kingdom who has intentionally neglected the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ. Taking the gospel to the world calls the Church to communicate in word as well as in deed the specific good news about the crucified and risen Lord. This message has content. It must be communicated verbally. The Bible, God's word, is the source and authority for that message. There must be a point in the evangelistic process where there is a specific call for commitment to Christ. Notice Jesus' own words:

- John 14:6: I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me
- John 5:24: I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes on him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned: he has crossed over from death to life
- John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life

By looking at a more comprehensive definition of mission, however, we have been considering how we can prepare a person to hear and accept this specific call for commitment. It should be obvious that in order to arrive at the place where we can make that invitation and where it can be understood and accepted we must do as Christ did. We must first mingle, desire the good of our friends and neighbours, show sympathy for them, meet their needs, and win their confidence. Finding and implementing strategies which give attention to fellowship, service and justice will enable us to do that, both individually and as a Church.

In the past we have tended to depend on direct proclamation as the only aspect of evangelism. That may have been all right when society was largely Christian. But that is no longer the case. We cannot make the basic assumptions that may have once been possible particularly in secularised or non-Christian areas of the world). What has been needed and what will always be needed is every Seventh-day Adventist Christian acting as Christ in the

world. Then our institutional methods will better complement our personal interface with the world in order to bring the world to Christ

Conclusion

In this chapter I have asked you to consider Jesus' method of mission. I have asked you to do that in the light of the needs of the world in which we live. Ellen White was bold enough to say that "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people." But we have been too slow to believe. We have often failed to look seriously at the way in which Jesus worked and to take him as our model.

If we are serious about the commission Christ has given us and if we are serious about reaching the world in which we live then we need to have a comprehensive approach which, under the leading of the Holy Spirit will bring success.

Again I repeat:

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