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SERIOUS ABOUT SECULAR SOCIETY? THE CHALLENGE OF SECULARISM FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST MISSION

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On June 11, 1981, the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists appointed a committee to give study to the challenge of secularism for the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. That committee comprising representatives of the General Conference and scholars from Church institutions met at least five times between 1981 and 1983, producing papers and gathering data. Selected working papers were assembled and published under the editorial pen of Humberto Rasi and Fritz Guy.¹ Papers were included by such notables as William G. Johnsson, Jon K. Paulien, Gottfried Oosterwal, Mark A. Finley, J. Robert Spangler, Fritz Guy, and Dan G. Matthews. It appeared that the Church was taking its mission to the secular world seriously.

Unfortunately, since that time, mission to secular society appears to have puttered along, not really continuing the initial impetus that was given in the early eighties. Many appear to have relegated consideration of strategies to reach secular people to the "too difficult" basket, content to concentrate on other places where greater and more immediate success can be experienced. The church does not seem to be giving the appearance of being serious about reaching the secular world.

¹Humberto M. Rasi and Fritz Guy, eds., *Meeting the Secular Mind: Some Adventist Perspectives. Selected Working Papers of the Committee on Secularism of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981-1985* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985).

In view of our emphasis on global mission, this situation cannot continue. The Global Mission program was implemented because it was recognized that we cannot be content to coast along where the going is easy, neglecting those people groups and areas of the world which are more challenging. The secular post-Christian world is one such challenge.

This paper will suggest some reasons why SDAs are struggling with mission to the secular world, with a view to making paradigm shifts which will better facilitate the fulfillment of that mission. The paper will also suggest some practical strategies and approaches that may be used in order to reach secular people with the gospel of Jesus Christ in the setting of the three angels' messages of Rev 14:6-12.

The paper is by no means exhaustive. It should be read as a series of vignettes that suggest perspectives on the issue. It implies that success with secular people is more about foundational attitudes and beliefs about the church and its mission than about any particular activity, as essential as that activity may be.

Why SDAs Struggle with Mission to the Secular

Why do SDAs appear to be struggling in our attempts to reach out to the secular world? Has God given up on these people? Have we given up as well?

Of course we are not alone. Christianity is generally having a tough time in this segment of the world's population. While the nations of Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand have a strong heritage of Christian faith and values, most people in those countries live as though there were no such heritage and as if there was no way in which God could have any influence or impact in the course of history or in their own lives.

Following are some suggestions which, from an SDA perspective, may help to explain why we are having a struggle to reach out to secular people.

1. The World As the Domain of the Devil

Seventh-day Adventists have emphasized that the world is the domain of the devil. We have done so on the basis of what we believe to be sound theological reasoning. The Great Controversy theme in Scripture depicts a cosmic struggle resulting in the devil and the fallen angels being cast to the earth, where they have been active throughout history, and in which they will be confined in isolation and desolation during the millennium after the return of Christ.

The clarion call to "come out" and to "be separate" (2 Cor 6:17) clearly denotes an imperative to separate from the world as the domain of the devil and to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood," "God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9).² The root

²All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.

meaning of the word “sanctification” is separation, albeit for a holy purpose. And this is how it should be. We are responding to the clear biblical imperative. We have no choice but to continue to sound the same call if we are serious about the commission that the Lord has given.

However, herein lies our dilemma. The world which is the domain of the devil was created by God Himself, and in John 3:16 we are told that He loves the world so much that He was willing to come here Himself and risk eternal loss for the sake of eternal gain. What is more, by virtue of creation, the image of God remains in every human being. Those people who have been brought under the power of the devil are still sons and daughters of God for whom He was willing to give His life.

We have rightly emphasized separation, but there is another theme, equally pervasive in the NT. That theme is integration—integration for the sake of the gospel. Paul clearly recognized the imperative of integration when he reminded the Corinthian believers that he had “become all things to all people” so that he “might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22).

The world may be the domain of the devil, but it is still the creation of God, though marred by sin and its effects. And it is still the dwelling place of God. Surely we must believe that when we go into the world in mission we are embarking on God’s mission (*Missio Dei*) and, because it is His mission, that He has gone before us. Surely we believe that when in obedience we go, we meet Him who has gone before us and that together we engage in this great work. Surely we believe that no power is greater than the power of God and that the devil must flee when we work together with God.

Can SDAs shun the secular world because we believe it to be the domain of the devil? For how long will we fail to wake up and realize that it is in that very arena that the power and grace of God must be demonstrated as we witness the great victories of good over evil? For how long are we going to remain content to let the devil maintain the ascendancy over any territory that rightly belongs to God?

2. A Narrow Definition of Mission

One of the reasons for the success and growth of the SDA Church has been our consistent emphasis on Christ’s commission to the Church to preach the gospel to every “nation and language and tribe and people” (Rev 14:6). By the grace of God may we never lose this emphasis.

But I am compelled to urge SDAs to relook at what may well be too narrow a definition of mission when it comes to reaching secular people, many of whom are post-Christian. I contend that in order to reach the secular 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 definition of mission that is more than simply “preaching the message.”

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 Savior 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."³

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—mingling, sympathizing, and winning their confidence—were as much a part of His comprehensive evangelistic strategy as was the invitation to follow Him. If you take nothing else from this paper, I want you to remember that this method—Christ's method—alone will give the success that apparently has eluded 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 SDA Christian to relate to the neighborhood, the workplace, the school, the extended family, and the society at large, and, as the Holy Spirit works, to convert that casual relationship into a saving relationship.

Many years of pastoral, evangelistic, teaching, and administrative experience have taught me that there are four primary elements of a comprehensive definition of our mission. Our willingness to take these four aspects of our mission seriously holds the key to the success of the church, particularly in secular societies.

a. 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 as diverse as Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, Levi Matthew, the Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus, the Roman centurion, and Simon Peter.

To His followers He says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19); "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news" (Mark 16:15). In His prayer to His Father in John 17:15,18, He said, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. . . . As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

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. When God conducted the greatest evangelistic campaign of the ages, He did so as

³Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 143.

Immanuel—God with us. He chose incarnation (fellowship) as the first essential element of His method (Phil 2:5-11). Christ's method is our model.

b. Service

The second aspect of our evangelistic approach to the secular world should be 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. In Luke 22:27 Jesus declared, "I am among you as one who serves."

Service should both precede and follow 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).

Secular people are touched by unselfish service. Unselfish service is still acknowledged as a very powerful moral good in secular 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 recognize the person who delivers a premature "sermon" as such.

Are SDAs perceived to be unselfish, humble, genuine and caring? Are we known by our non-SDA neighbors and friends as people who are 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 in secular societies.

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 these 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 will only be taken seriously when we each find our personal service niche.

c. Justice

Closely allied to service is the biblical concept of justice. Have you ever read your Bible with an eye for calls to relieve the oppressed, care for the downtrodden, and 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 such areas.

Take, for example, a well known text in Mic 6:6-8 (NIV, emphasis supplied):

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.

The calls for acting with justice on the part of God's people are repeated by almost all the major and minor prophets of the OT. Notice the words of Isa 1:15-18 NIV:

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."

Notice particularly the context of the often-used text which begins, "Come now, let us reason together." There are very strong imperatives in the texts which precede it—imperatives to act with justice, which God's people in OT times neglected to their own peril.

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

"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), and 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.

d. Proclamation

The climactic event in mission occurs when the invitation is given and accepted to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Proclamation of the gospel has always been right at the pinnacle of evangelistic endeavor for SDAs. Nothing that has been said here can in any way lead us to think that there is any 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 good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will 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:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (5:24)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (14:6)

By looking at a more comprehensive definition of mission, however, we have been considering how we can prepare a secular 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 people, 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 corporately.

What has been needed and what will always be needed is for every SDA Christian to act 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.

3. Struggle with an Incarnational Paradigm for Mission

The earliest major issue that was debated by the NT church was the question of whether or not a Gentile had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. Peter and Paul strongly disagreed on the matter. The Jerusalem Conference, as recorded in Acts 15, was called to debate the issue. A decision was reached that a Gentile did not need to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. Apparently, despite the decision, the church continued to struggle with the issue for some time.

In the year 2000 the SDA Church is called to answer a complementary question which has crucial implications for the accomplishment of our mission. To what extent does a "Jew" have to become a "Gentile" in order to lead the Gentile to Christian faith? Just as the struggle of the early Jewish Christians was intense and at times heated, so will be the struggle of contemporary SDAs to address and answer this difficult question. Indeed I believe it will be one of the weighty issues for the Adventist Church as we enter this new millennium.

Why is this so? It is so because we have emphasized a centripetal rather than a centrifugal theology of mission. We have, in obedience to God, called the people of God out of the world to come and see what great things God can do for His people. We have stressed the importance of obedience, sanctification, and separation. We have insisted on a lifestyle and ethic that is appropriate for one who honors Christ as Savior and Lord. And so it should be, because to do so is biblical.

But in so doing we may have failed to realize that there is another imperative in the writings of Holy Writ. That imperative is to infiltrate the world. "Go into all the world." "Go therefore and make disciples." "[Go] to every nation and tribe and language and people." We have no option but to incarnate ourselves in the world for the sake of the world, and for the sake of the gospel, just like Jesus.

We have not sufficiently explored nor implemented an incarnational paradigm of mission as described in powerful and compelling language by Paul:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of
death—
even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

God's ministry through the church is done in the world just as Christ's ministry in His incarnation was done in the world. God is at work in the world. If He were not at work in the world the ministry of the church on behalf of the world would be futile. He is at work reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:17-19). The world is the object of the plan of salvation (John 3:16). It is to be the object of the church's activity. It is to be the recipient of God's gift of grace. The church is the channel for that gift.

4. Struggle with the Revelation/Inspiration Process

Perhaps one reason why we struggle with the incarnational paradigm for mission is that we struggle with our understanding of God's self-revelation through the process of inspiration. While it is true that when it comes to revelation and inspiration there will always remain for us elements of mystery and a lack of understanding, it is clear that God did not choose to remain isolated, separated, and hidden from His creation, despite the ravages of sin. Rather He chose to take a risk and submit the eternal gospel to the variants of time, culture, language, personality, education, and so forth, and to work through the prophet in order to communicate Himself to man.

Our doctrine of inspiration tells us that through the words, images, and customs of man God communicated Himself, the gospel, and His intention to save. He decided what He wanted to communicate, but He did not obliterate the language, personality, or culture of the chosen instrument. Each biblical writer used his faculties freely but did not distort the divine message or intent.

Then, when "the Word became flesh"—the climax of God's self-communication—the same process occurred. Christ became little, weak, poor, vulnerable—a first-century Palestinian Jew who experienced pain, hunger, and exposure. Yet when He became one of us, He did not cease to be Himself. He remained forever the eternal Word—God Himself—yet incarnated in human form. Christ's incarnation enabled Him to identify with us in our humanity while at the same time He retained His identity as God (John 1:1-3).

5. Evangelistic Practice

We cannot assume that secular people are able to grasp our message just because we use methods which have worked very well when there is a consciousness and recognition of Christian values and norms in a society. Most of our evangelistic strategies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assumed such. The fact that increasingly we have recognized the need to contextualize our message in Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and animistic contexts indicates that we are moving away from the presupposition that governed our missionary and evangelistic endeavor for so long.

In a secular context we need to commence our interaction with people much earlier in what James Engel has described as the decision-making process.⁴ Like Jesus, we need to meet them where they are and utilize strategies and methods that render the gospel hearable for them. If we fail to do this, we may as well be talking a foreign language. Rather than facilitating the work of the Holy Spirit, we will be inhibiting His work.

6. Ecclesiocentric rather than Theocentric Focus

Seventh-day Adventists take very seriously our conviction that we have been commissioned by God to proclaim the everlasting gospel in the setting of the three angels' messages of Rev 14. First and foremost, the imperative of those messages is to "fear God and give him glory" (v. 7). While we acknowledge this imperative, too often our evangelistic agenda is cluttered with other important issues and doctrines that are more focused on making people SDAs than on giving glory to God. As such, our evangelistic focus is too often ecclesiocentric rather than theocentric.

Some Practical Suggestions for Reaching the Secular

The Church cannot remain satisfied that it is being faithful to the Lord and His commission to us if it continues to neglect the secular world. Rather, it must see mission to the secular world as an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to perform the kind of miracles that we read of in the Acts of the Apostles. There may be chaos in the lives of many people, but chaos leads to a longing for good news—and we have good news. There may appear to be emptiness in the hearts of secular people, but a longing for the transcendent will always triumph over nihilism. When everything else breaks down, a vacuum of meaning develops which can be fertile ground for the gospel.

⁴For an insightful discussion of the decision-making process see James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communication* (Nashville: Nelson, 1979), 63-87.

How then should we reach out to secular people? Following are some practical suggestions which supplement the attitudes implied above. I invite each person to consider what God would have us be and what He would have us do in order to reach these people. Along the way, we may just need to be prepared to stretch our comfort zones—like Paul (he became all things to all people for the sake of the gospel), and like Jesus (identification without loss of identity).

1. “Go . . . and Make Disciples”:⁵ Incarnational Mission

In order to be incarnational in a secular context there are many things we can do:

a. *We may need to start our interaction otherwise than with objective truth.*

With secular people we need to show how Christianity meets their deepest needs. This does not mean that we give up our commitment to objective truth. It means that we must work back to it from another starting point. Alister McGrath has suggested two primary factors apart from the work of the Holy Spirit that will work to woo the secular person. The first he calls the “attractiveness” of God.⁶ He has detailed this attractiveness in terms of the ability of God to satisfy the deepest fundamental needs of the individual; the overwhelming love of God demonstrated in Christ’s death; and the stability and purpose which we can have as faith in God develops within. In contrast the secular relativist can have no such stability or purpose.

The other factor McGrath has labeled as “the relevance of Christianity to life.” He has pointed out that all human beings need a basis for morality; they need to have a framework to make sense of experience; and they need a vision to guide and inspire people.⁷

b. We need to remember that most people learn through a narrative/inductive approach rather than through a propositional/deductive approach.

⁵Matt 28:19.

⁶Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1992), 226-27.

⁷Ibid.

Peter Corney has said it well:

Post-modern people are less linear in their approach to communication and knowledge than the previous generation. Less deductive, more inductive. Less word-oriented, more visual. Less cerebral, more experiential. Less propositional, more story-related. . . .

The questions in their minds will be "Does it work?" and "How will it affect my life?" After an event or service they are more likely to ask "What did you experience?" than "What did you learn?" This does not mean rationality has been abandoned—it simply no longer stands alone; it has been expanded to include experience. The subjective has invaded the objective. This also means that the *context* in which we preach . . . will be as important as the *content*.⁸

- c. *We should cultivate relationships with secular people.*
- d. *We need to express ourselves with humility, maintaining an emphasis on servanthood and Christ's Lordship.*
- e. *We must ensure that an incarnational hermeneutic and practice does not rob the text of its objective meaning, history, and truth.*

2. "When I [Christ] Am Lifted Up":⁹ Theocentric Mission

All ministry is God's ministry. It is His intention and by His initiative that the world is saved (2 Cor 5:18,19). His activity in the world, according to the contingency plan that was developed "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:19-20) is a ministry of reconciliation. Christ came as the supreme revelation of the person and character of God in order to facilitate that ministry (Heb 1:1-2). He came not to introduce His own brand of ministry, but in order to do the will of the Father (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38). Those who have been created new in Christ Jesus are called by virtue of that creative act to participate with God in that ministry (2 Cor 5:17-21).

God is the sending God (John 20:21; Gal 4:4,6), the giving God (John 3:16), the serving God (Luke 22:27), the loving God (1 John 4:7-11), and the calling God (Acts 16:10). The world does not in the first instance set the agenda for ministry. It is set by the Trinity and then brought to bear on the needs of the world.

But God is more than He who sets the agenda. God is also the focus of our ministry in the world. I cannot help but wonder what would happen if we took more seriously the priority of the very message we believe we are to proclaim to the world and put God first. Jesus made it very plain that if He were lifted up He

⁸Peter Corney, "Have You Got the Right Address? Post-Modernism and the Gospel," *Grid*, Spring 1995, 2.

⁹John 12:32.

would draw all people to Himself. This includes secular men and women. At a time when most secular people are suspicious of institutions, especially those with a religious or Christian flavor, we would be wise to consider seriously the words of Jesus Himself and the manner in which we share the messages of the Three Angels.

3. “The Lord Added to the Church”:¹⁰ The Congregation As Mission

While this paper has stressed the necessity of the centrifugal force in mission, and while it is true that the church must go out into the world in obedience to Christ, it is also true that the world must be invited and welcomed into the church. This welcome has two necessary components. First, the world must be prepared by the church to join the church. Seventh-day Adventists believe that a careful period of instruction is necessary before a person is ready for baptism and entry into the church. We have generally done comparatively well in that regard.

But we have not done so well with the second component. Not only must the world be prepared for the church, but the church must be prepared for the world. It is when the congregation is able to welcome the world and wrap it into the fellowship of believers in such a way that healing and growth forms a continuum, that, in a special sense, the congregation fulfills its mission. In this sense there is a centripetal function in mission, but it is a centripetal function which stresses the necessity to seek and save the lost through appropriate incarnational attitudes and perspectives within the community of believers as well as in the world.

Another major aspect of the congregation as mission is the manner in which the congregation engages the world. While there must always be a certain element of the haphazard in the interaction of the believer with the world—one never knows when the Holy Spirit is going to lead us in such a way that our paths intersect with a seeker—the congregation must be intentional about planning and providing the resources for a process which will provide opportunities for its members to interact with the world. In order to reach secular people, process should have priority over event. A single event will not usually be sufficient. The congregation must provide a variety of options which will facilitate the movement toward faith on the part of the secular person.

4. “Seek First the Kingdom of God”:¹¹ Values Transmission

Mission to secular people is not primarily information transmission. While information will be shared in the form of propositional truth, and while SDAs must ensure that they preserve the God-given truth that is our heritage and forms a strong foundation for our hope, we must realize that when reaching out to secular

¹⁰Acts 2:47 KJV.

¹¹Matt 6:33 NKJV.

people we need to be more focused on values transmission than on simply sharing information. Secular people rarely ask, "What is truth?" Their first question generally is "Where is meaning?" Their interest will be aroused when their scale of values is challenged to the extent that they are led to realize that ultimate meaning cannot be derived from their secular scale of values.

Merton Strommen has suggested the following elements that contribute to a values-transmission approach to witnessing and evangelism:¹²

a. Commitment

It goes without saying that commitment to the Lord and to the message of faith and hope is foundational if we are to communicate values.

b. Authenticity

Aside from a lack of commitment, I believe that nothing is as destructive to our witness as a lack of authenticity. Secular people are particularly suspicious of people whom they perceive to be unauthentic. They are disillusioned with the church for that very reason. They lack trust. They are so accustomed to having their trust shattered that if they sense any hint of sham, there is an immediate and total loss of any opportunity to share values. I cannot overemphasize the importance of authenticity.

c. Modeling

There is nothing new here. To be an example of an authentic Christian has always been recognized as a powerful force for good. All people, secular or otherwise, are moved by the witness of one who lives his or her life by the values espoused.

d. Personal Witness

Values transmission is best accomplished for most people on the person-to-person level. While history reveals some striking examples of leaders who were able to move their people en masse, both for good and for bad, and inspire in them particular values, values are almost always caught rather than taught.

¹²Merton P. Strommen, "Communicating Values," in *Perspectives on Values*, ed. V. Bailey Gillespie (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1993), 21-46.

Conclusion

Far from prompting despair, this paper has suggested that nothing is impossible for our God. Secular people are God's children—people just like us. He loves them so much that He incarnated Himself in the person of Jesus Christ in order to live and to die for them—people just like us. If this is so—and it is—the SDA Church cannot relegate mission to the secular world to the “too difficult” basket. Rather, we must begin to believe Jesus when He promised that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in *all* the world, as a witness to *all* the nations” (Matt 24: 14, emphasis supplied).

While there may be some reasons why the church appears to be struggling with the issues at stake, it is time that we overcame some of our supposed theological, historical, and sociological roadblocks and stretched our comfort zones in order to see and experience what great things our God can do. We cannot think or speak of impossibility. With God, nothing is impossible.