Serious About Secular Society? The Challenge of Secularism in the Twenty-first Century

By Barry Oliver

Christianity is having a tough time in sharing its good news with that segment of the world's population that is loosely referred to as the secularized West. While the nations of Europe, North America, and Australasia have a strong heritage of Christian faith, most people in these regions live as though they had no such heritage, and as if there were no ways in which God could have any impact on the course of history or on their own lives.

Following are some broad brush stroke perspectives which may help to explain some of the reasons why Christians are having a struggle to reach out to secular people and just a few suggestions that can help.



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The World: The Domain of the Devil

Conservative Christians have emphasized that the world is the domain of the devil. This is how it should be and is a response to the clear teaching of the Bible. There is no choice but to continue to proclaim this simple truth if Christians are serious about the commission that the Lord has given.

However, Christians are faced with a serious dilemma. This world, which is rightly described as the domain of the devil was created by God himself, and John 3:16 says that God loved 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 those for whom Jesus was willing to give his life.

While Christians have rightly emphasized separation from the world, they may have given too little attention to the New Testament theme of integration in the world for the sake of the gos-

pel. 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 win some" (1 Cor 9:22 NRSV throughout unless indicated otherwise).

The world may be the domain of the devil, but it is still the creation of God, though marred by sin and it effects. Surely God's people believe that when they go into the world in mission they are embarking on God's mission (*Missio Dei*). Surely they believe that when in obedience they go, they meet him who has gone before them and together engage in this great work. Surely they believe that no power is greater than the power of God and that the devil must flee when they work together with God.

Can Christians be content to shun the secular world because they believe it to be the domain of the devil? How long will Christians fail to realize that it is in that very arena that the power and grace of God must be demonstrated as the great victories of good over evil are witnessed? How long will Christians remain content to let the devil maintain the ascendancy over any territory that rightly belongs to God?

A Narrow Definition of Mission

One of the reasons for the success of the spread of the gospel has been our consistent emphasis on Christ's commission to the church to preach the gospel to every "nation, kindred, tongue, and people" (Rev 14:6). By the grace of God may the church never lose this emphasis.

But I am compelled to urge that a new look be given at what may well be too narrow a definition of mission when it comes to reaching secular people. I contend that in order to reach the secular world effectively Christians need to commence with a much broader view of how to go about accomplishing the work God has given. A comprehensive definition of mission that is more than simply "preaching the message" is needed.

Earlier this century Ellen White gave Adventists a simple but profound insight:

> 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" (1905:143).

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, sympathizing, and winning their confidence—were as much a part of his comprehensive strategy as was the invitation to follow him. Many elements of such a comprehensive understanding of mission could

be listed. Briefly we will allude to four.

Fellowship

When God conducted the greatest evangelistic campaign of the ages, he did so as Immanuel God with us. He chose incarnation (fellowship) as the first essential element of his method (Phil 2:5-11). Christ's method was to be one with the people. 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, Simon Peter, etc. He did not remain distant or aloof. Christ's method is our model.

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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 (Luke 22:24-27). So important was service 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).

Unselfish service is still acknowledged as a very powerful moral good in secular society. People will take notice of those 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.

Justice

Closely allied to service is the biblical concept of justice. Read your Bible with an eye for the calls for such things as the need to relieve the oppressed, care for the downtrodden, sustain those who are in poverty, grief, or disadvantaged in general. Take, for example a well-known text in Mic 6:6-8 (NIV):

> 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 (emphasis mine).

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 (e.g., Isa 1:15-18; Amos 5:21-24; Ps 146:5-10).

Christ powerfully reaffirmed the same imperative:

> Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. 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 (Matt 23:23-24 NIV, emphasis mine).

Christ calls his people individually and corporately to strive for justice—not for themselves, but for those who deserve it—the oppressed, the fatherless, the widow, the lost. In the context of mercy and faithfulness Christians will be more like Christ if they "desire their good" in a practical way rather than if they preach the gospel in a theoretical, irrelevant manner that makes it impossible for a person to hear what is being said.

Proclamation

The climactic event in mission occurs when the invitation is given and accepted to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. 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).

This more comprehensive definition of mission challenges the church to consider how it 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 an invitation can be made and where it can be understood and accepted Christians must do as Christ did—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 the church to do that, both individually and corporately.

Struggle With an Incarnational Paradigm for Mission

The earliest major issue that was debated by the New Testament 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 Chris-

tian. Apparently, despite the decision, the church continued to struggle with the issue for some time.

Today, the church is called to answer a complimentary question that 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 also be the struggle of the contemporary church to address and answer this difficult question.

Christ as Savior and Lord. And so it should be because to do so is biblical.

But in so doing Christians 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 and make disciples. Go to every nation, and tribe and language and people. There is no option but to incarnate in the world for the sake of the world, and for the sake of the gospel—just like Jesus.

Perhaps an incarnational paradigm of mission as described in such powerful and compelling language by Paul in Phil 2:5-8 has not been sufficiently explored nor implemented. 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

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Why is this so? Because many Christians have emphasized a centripetal rather than a centrifugal theology of mission. Christians 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. The importance of obedience, sanctification, and separation have been stressed as has an insistence on a lifestyle and ethic that is appropriate for one who honors

himself (2 Cor 5:17-19). The world is the object of the plan of salvation (John 3:16) and is to be the object of the church's activity. The world is to be the recipient of God's gift of grace and the church is the channel for that gift.

The Struggle to Understand God's Self-Revelation Through the Process of Inspiration

Perhaps one reason for the struggle with the incarnational paradigm for mission is because of a weak 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 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, etc., and to work through prophets in order to communicate himself to humanity.

The doctrine of inspiration tells us that God communicated himself, the gospel, and his intention to save, through the words, images, and customs of people. He decided what he wanted to communicate, but he did not obliterate the language, personality, or culture of the chosen instrument. Prophets used their 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 our humanity while at the same time he retaining his identity as God (John 1:1-3).

Evangelistic Practice

It cannot be assumed that secular people are able to hear the message if the same methods that may work very well when there is a consciousness and recognition of Christian values and norms in a society are used for secular people. Most evangelistic strategies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assumed that the same approaches were appropriate for all. The fact that the need to contextualize the message in Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and animistic contexts indicates a move away from the presupposition that governed missionary and evangelistic endeavors for so long.

In a secular context Christians' interaction with secular people must begin much earlier in what James Engel long ago

described as the decision-making process (1979:63-87). Like Jesus, Christians need to meet people where they are and utilize strategies and methods that render the gospel hearable for them. Failure to do this may be viewed as talking in a foreign language. Rather than facilitating the work of the Holy Spirit such an approach will inhibit God's work.

Some Practical Suggestions for Reaching Secular People

The church cannot remain satisfied that it is being faithful to the Lord and his commission to us if it continues to rely upon presuppositions, attitudes, and methods which may work well in some contexts and at the same time be content to neglect secular people. Rather the church must see mission to secular people as an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to perform the same kind of miracles that we read about in Acts of the Apostles. There may be chaos in the lives of many people, but remember that 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 remember that a longing for the transcendent will always triumph over nihilism. When everything else breaks down, a vacuum of meaning remains which can be fertile ground for the gospel.

How then should secular people be reached? Following are some practical suggestions. I invite you 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 (who identified with people without losing his essential identity as God).

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"Going, make disciples:" Incarnational Mission

In order to be incarnational in a secular context there are many things that can be done.

1. *Start interaction with other than objective truth.* Secular people need to know how Christianity meets their deepest needs. This does not mean a reduction of commitment to objective truth. It means that

meeting people's needs is a starting point that leads to objective truth. Alastair 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." 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 have a need for a basis for morality, a need to have a framework to make sense of experience, and a need for a vision to guide and inspire us as individuals (McGrath 1992:226-227).

2. *Use a narrative/inductive approach rather than a propositional/deductive approach.* Australian 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* (1995:2).

3. *Cultivate relationships with secular people.*

4. *Express ourselves with humility while maintaining an emphasis on servanthood and Christ's Lordship.*

5. *Ensure that an incarnational hermeneutic and practice does not rob the text of its objective meaning, history, and truth.*

"If Christ be lifted up:" Theo-Centric 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," is a ministry of reconciliation (Luke 11:50; Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8). 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 (Mark 1:2; Luke 9:2; Rom 10:15), the giving God (John 3:16), the serving God (Luke 22:27), the loving God (John 3:16; 1 John 4:11-21), and the calling God (Acts 16:10). The world does not 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 the one who sets the agenda. God is also the focus of our ministry in the world. What would happen if Christian witnesses took more seriously the priority of the very message they proclaim to the world and put God first? Jesus made it very plain that if he were lifted up he would draw all people to him. This includes secular people. At a time when most secular people are suspicious of institutions, especially those with a religious/Christian flavor it would be wise to consider seriously the words of Jesus himself and the manner in which the church is to share the message of the three angels.

"The Lord added to the church:" The Congregation as Mission

While this article 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. 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 out in the world.

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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 in such a way so that our paths intersect with a seeker—the congregation must be intentional about planning and resourcing 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.

"Seek first the kingdom of God:" Values Transmission

Mission to secular people is not primarily information transmission. While information will be shared in the form of propositional truth, it must be realized that when reaching out to secular people there needs to be more focus on values transmission than on simply sharing information. Secular people rarely ask the question 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 ultimate meaning cannot be derived from their secular scale of values.

Merton Strommen has suggested some of the following elements that contribute to a values-transmission approach to witness and evangelism (1993:21-46).

Commitment

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

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Authenticity

Aside from a lack of commitment I believe nothing is as destructive to our witness as a lack of authenticity. Secular people are particularly suspicious of people whom they perceive not to be authentic. 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. The importance of authenticity cannot be over emphasized.

Modeling

This is not a new idea. 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 life by the values espoused.

Personal Witness

Values transmission is best accomplished for most people at 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 evil, and inspire in them particular values, values are almost always caught rather than taught.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that nothing is impossible for God. Secular people were also created by God. He loves them so much that he incarnated himself in Jesus Christ in order to live and to die for them—just like us. If this is so—and it is—the church cannot relegate mission to the secular world to the "too hard" basket. Rather, it must begin to believe Jesus when he promised that "this gospel of the kingdom will go to *all* the world, for a witness unto *all* nations."

While there may be some reasons why the church appears to be struggling with these issues at stake, it is time to overcome some of the supposed theological, historical, and sociological roadblocks and move out of our comfort zones in order to see and experience what great things God can do. Never think or say impossible. With God, nothing is impossible.

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