

# Adventist Evangelism

A CONVERT'S CRITIQUE

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As a product of the Adventist evangelistic process, I have been interested in observing it and the way it presents the church to the world. In the course of assisting with the details of some formal evangelistic endeavors, I have seen large amounts of time and money expended, far out of proportion to the relatively small results. And today, evangelistic programs are still being planned and promoted with the same zeal and with the usual high investment — although, despite some attractive innovations, they are not bringing about the desired acceleration in results.

What is the remedy for the evangelistic plight of the church? Should the church continue the same evangelistic format, but with broadened scope and heightened intensity? Or should it reduce coverage and concentrate on improving the quality of the approach and techniques of persuasion? Or should it just maintain the present program? Or should it find some other solution?

This plight and these possible courses of action in response to the plight are much like those of modern businessmen who, faced similarly, drastically update their programs of persuasion, replace the old programs with new ones and/or make some changes in personnel.

The purpose of this article is to focus attention on a few areas that require changes and to offer some constructive suggestions. This, I fear, means venturing as a tiger among some sacred cows. But I am convinced that in evangelism, as in any other enterprise, there comes a time when a critical assessment of progress must be made and new procedures proposed to make the enterprise more productive.

If Adventist evangelism is to be truly successful, a long-range preparatory program must be developed, including a wide range of factors. Many of these factors have their locus in what may be termed the "image" of the church. In the drama of evangelism, this image is a subtle protagonist which can assist or impede the process of religious conversion. The church must be seen as attractive and desirable, so that it will be recognized as leading to the ultimate way of physical and spiritual life.

Many of the people who attend evangelistic meetings have preconceived notions, based on many factors, concerning the desirability of uniting with the church. And these notions cannot really be changed by the zeal and persuasive talents of the most effective evangelist, or by the impact of a powerful sermon, although they can be forced for the moment into a secondary position. As a result, only a fraction of those who believe the Adventist message will decide to join the church; the others will defer their decision until their apprehension about the church is dispelled.

One aspect of improving the church's image is to make it more widely known. As a recent *Review and Herald* editorial stated: "Every Seventh-day Adventist should be deeply concerned over the fact that millions of people in the world are entirely unaware of the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist church."<sup>1</sup> The same editorial offers three suggestions: that each church member mention his church affiliation whenever it is appropriate; that every church institution study ways to reveal its Adventist identity; and that every evangelistic program be clearly designated as Adventist.

But, as the editorial noted in its conclusion, there is some risk in establishing a clear image of the church, because the spotlight will then be focused on beliefs and personal lives that may not yet be ready for sharp public scrutiny. The church must so order its affairs, therefore, that it will become widely known by the high quality of its members' faith and by their devotion to their mission in the world.

In general, the image of the church is gradually improving, and it is attaining an appreciable measure of recognition in the world, although much remains to be done in reporting church news to the press, radio, and television. Church leaders, educators, and scholars are being listened to and quoted — an indication that the image of the church is moving in the right direction. However, there are some unsatisfactory characteristics that require further attention.

*Religious exclusivism.* Early Adventism placed great emphasis on the

concept of the "remnant church," neglecting the concept of the entire communion of those who are in Christ, the whole "ecclesia." As a result, there was an unintentional religious intolerance and hostility toward other Christians and especially toward other churches. These un-Christian attitudes, which to a degree remain, must be corrected by education within the church and by cooperative work with other Christians, so that they will no longer be a part of the Adventist image.

*Legalism.* An erroneous connotation of "salvation by works" is conveyed by the avowal that Adventists are "commandment keepers." It is true that the divine law is woven into the whole of Adventist theology in such a way that it is met on every hand; but this is to be expected, since Adventists extol and emphasize this law. But often there is an unfortunate hint of "keeping the law" in connection with the Sabbath and health practices. Here again, the church must influence attitudes at all levels so that it will be seen as "living" its beliefs rather than "keeping" them.

*Biased journalism.* The image of the church is greatly affected by its publications, through which many people, in the quiet of their homes, first discover the position of the church not only on various Christian doctrines but also on world events, major social problems, and current ideas in science and philosophy. By their content and tone, these publications can encourage and promote faith, providing a base on which evangelism can build. But in this intellectual and sophisticated age, material that is biased, unbalanced, and overbearing, and that belittles or rejects offhandedly all opposing views, is unacceptable to readers who want to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. One area in which Adventist publications have been noticeably slanted is that of the origin of the earth. But current material (such as Ritland's book, *A Search for Meaning in Nature*,<sup>2</sup> and Coffin's article, "Creation and Evidence from Science,"<sup>3</sup>) exhibits a remarkable advance in intellectual honesty and is a compliment to the church.

#### GAPS IN THE PERSUASION PROCESS

Besides acquiring an improved image, the church can increase the effectiveness of its evangelism by attending to two particular weaknesses in its present methods of persuasion.

*Too much too fast.* Present evangelistic programs attempt to outline as many facets of Adventist faith as time will permit, apparently in the hope that potential members of the church will assimilate and accept them with a minimum of reasoning and practically no discussion. The ineffectiveness of this strategy is evident when one considers the thousands who have been

exposed to Adventism but have turned away unpersuaded even though many of them had follow-up coaching.

The reason for this ineffectiveness is that, for most people, Adventism has an overabundance of new and complex data to be taken in and assimilated, mentally and spiritually. That is, there is too much information and too little learning. This evaluation is supported by an editorial comment in *Christianity Today*: "If we want to make evangelistic efforts more productive, it might be well to take so-called learning problems into wider account. . . . Evangelical strategy is perhaps too often keyed to disseminating messages; thought processes, where learning problems occur, are neglected. Sheer data taken in through the senses do not necessarily persuade."<sup>4</sup>

*Emphasis on doctrinal differences.* Christians visiting an Adventist evangelistic meeting for the first time must be puzzled by the disproportionate amount of time given to unfamiliar beliefs and variations of basic Christian doctrine. This emphasis is maintained despite the fact that Adventists have nineteen major beliefs in common with most other Protestant churches, twelve that are shared by some Protestants and disputed by others, and only five that are really distinctive.<sup>5</sup>

It would appear that the present evangelistic strategy overlooks the possibility, or probability, that many of the visitors do not have a sufficiently solid foundation in basic Christianity to accept intelligently the more advanced and expanded views of Adventism. I firmly believe that visitors attend evangelistic meetings primarily to hear the basic gospel preached, for inspiration and renewed faith. It is only then, as a by-product of this presentation of the gospel, that they are assured of the authenticity of the church's views and conditioned to listen to and accept new concepts.

The first goal of Adventist evangelism must be to establish common ground with historic Christianity, showing that Adventism is a truly Christian faith and not a cult or sect in the derogatory sense in which it is occasionally labeled.

Evangelism approached through common Christian belief has more value than is usually recognized. C. S. Lewis concluded early in his life that "when all is said (and truly said) about the divisions of Christendom, there remains, by God's mercy, an enormous common ground."<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, in all his efforts to convince unbelievers of the correctness of Christianity, he endeavored to stay on that "enormous common ground." If the popularity of his writings is any gauge of his evangelistic success, he was indeed successful. I believe that Adventist evangelism can profitably follow his example and stay more on the common ground of Christian belief than it has heretofore.

If the church's goal is to emphasize its doctrinal differences with other Christians, its present strategy in public evangelism is preeminently successful. But if the goal (obviously the case) is to attract potential members, then only basic Christian doctrines should be presented as a pathway to genuine religious conversion. Then, after conversion, other doctrines can be explained — from the pulpit, in Sabbath school, or in private study, depending on the desires and the progress of the individuals involved.

In other words, it would be a more successful evangelistic strategy to focus on the central doctrines of Christian faith until the process of conversion has been experienced. Only then should the significantly Adventist beliefs come into view: the Sabbath as the "seal of God," the work of the investigative judgment in heaven, the role of the prophetic gift in the church, and the proclamation of the "three angels' messages" of Revelation fourteen. And in presenting these doctrines, the evangelist must make a careful choice of material, to avoid overwhelming potential members with volumes of ideas and information that they cannot comprehend.

#### CLOSING THE GAPS

Since the first function of evangelism is to lead people through the process of conversion, the church should include in its evangelistic program an effort to remove the intellectual as well as the spiritual stumbling blocks that keep potential members from having a mature faith.

The church received wise counsel from Walter R. Beach when he wrote: "The everlasting gospel must be made more winsome and attractive. The skills of evangelism must be sharpened and perfected." There seems to be no doubt that he had in mind the expertise of Paul in using careful, philosophical reasoning, for he added: "While decrying certain pagan philosophies, the apostle Paul himself was philosophical in his treatment of cosmic aspects of God's reconciling work and the resurrection. He was decrying, not learning or philosophy as such, but a certain twist in the treatment of them."<sup>7</sup>

By unfortunately misinterpreting Paul, members of the church have been traditionally cautious in regard to philosophy and reason. Although reason is not a substitute for Christian faith, nor is it able to produce Christian faith, it can remove many stumbling blocks on the pathway to faith. Therefore reason should be used to its fullest in evangelism. Many of the barriers to religion are intellectual and can be removed only by intellectual means. When all of the facts are in, an individual uses his ability to reason in choosing a religious faith.

*The reality of a personal God.* For many individuals the greatest barrier to a mature faith is the fact that they have not yet found a God big enough for their needs — a God who can account for life and command their respect and worship, the kind of God whose personal attributes were manifested in Jesus the Christ. As a result, these individuals find it difficult to make an eternal commitment of themselves to God.

As J. B. Phillips said, "It is obviously impossible for an adult to worship the conception of God that exists in the mind of a child of Sunday-school age, unless he is prepared to deny his own experience of life." In the traditional evangelistic process, too little time and effort have been allotted to developing a concept of an adequate God as the center of our hope. (Excellent material in this area is provided by Phillips's own book, *Your God Is Too Small*,<sup>8</sup> and by Jack W. Provonsa's article, "God's Personality."<sup>9</sup>)

*Biblical history.* In this century the Bible has acquired a remarkable reputation for its accurate historical content. This fact gives the evangelist an opportunity to remove the stigma of "myth" so frequently associated with it. The importance of biblical history is evident in the light of this statement by Edward Heppenstall: "In the development of history, God has unfolded his plan of redemption. There is nothing subjective or mystical about this. The facts of revelation are the facts of history. That revelation occurred in history is basic to the nature of the Christian faith. Historical reliability as it relates to the locus of revelation is essential. God came to man. God wrought out the divine redemption in history. This is where revelation took place. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'"<sup>10</sup>

Although the historicity of the Bible is rarely presented and emphasized in Adventist evangelism, it should be given high priority in any such endeavor. Its testimony is potent.

*Science and Scripture.* Adventism is at a crucial point aptly described by Emil Brunner: "The church is faced with the task of so formulating its hope that it does not confront man with the choice: either science or faith."<sup>11</sup> A major challenge to the church is the need to present a convincing explanation of the origin of life as outlined in the Genesis story. It is at this point that the church either attracts or repels many young intellectuals. If it maintains a pro-creation, anti-science position, the majority of modern minds are immediately lost. If it updates its approach and takes a pro-creation, pro-science position, there will be fewer evangelistic dropouts.

Evangelists in general have not been able to transcend the fundamentalist controversy of science vs. theology. This is because they are trained as ministers, not scientists, and also because they usually interpret literally the

Bible's pre-scientific statements about the physical world — forgetting that these are "truths . . . couched in the words of men" and instead interpreting the statements as God's own words.

As noted in recent *Review and Herald* editorials, new translations of the Bible have necessitated new alternative interpretations of its metaphysical implications. It might be that recent conclusions of earth science, based in part on radioactive dating and fossil strata, will evoke alternative interpretations of biblical statements concerning the physical world. As Bernard Ramm observes, it "may cost the church a severe struggle to give up one interpretation and adopt another . . . but no real evil need be apprehended."<sup>13</sup>

Galileo and Copernicus caused earlier churchmen to rethink and update some of their interpretations of the Bible. So the current work of Adventist scientists may result in an updating of the evangelistic presentation of the relation of science and Scripture, particularly in regard to the origin of life on earth.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The foregoing suggestions are based on the firm conviction that Seventh-day Adventist evangelism is far from the success it should be, considering its large expenditures of time and money. The program might be more effective if the image of the church is made more attractive, if evangelistic meetings cover less material, and if the subjects presented are better suited to the needs of those who attend.

On the basis of personal experience and many observations, I believe that Adventist evangelism should first of all be established on the "enormous common ground" of Protestant Christianity. The array of Adventist doctrines normally presented is not central to the gospel message; and frequently such presentations bewilder, overwhelm, and weary many potential members. These distinctive Adventist beliefs are *not* unimportant; they fill out the gospel message. But they are not necessary to the immediate purpose of persuading individuals to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and they can be deferred until after the process of conversion.

This line of discussion is not to seek the change or deletion of any Adventist doctrine; it is only to suggest that Adventist evangelism might be more effective with a more selective content in a quantity that can be assimilated and accepted. The church might well experiment with these suggestions to discover if they would in fact make its evangelistic program more successful.

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