



# Circuit Riding In the 1990s

A Walla Walla College student finds meaning the old-fashioned way: door-to-door canvassing.

*by Paul Dybdahl*

“IT’S NOT LIKE IT USED TO BE,” HE SAID, SHAKING his head slowly. “People just don’t care about spiritual things anymore. Used to be, you could just hang out a few advertisements for the evangelistic meetings, and people would come flocking in off the streets. Not now. It’s sad, but everyone is so secular—no one cares about religion anymore.”

He was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and his words discouraged me. I had only been working in the area as a literature evangelist for about a week when I happened to knock on his door. I had already been warned about bloodthirsty watchdogs, slamming doors, drunken threats, and “friendly” women—all hazards I must be prepared to face during my summer in the Tri-cities.

Hearing the words “no one cares about religion” from an Adventist pastor did little to lift my spirits. I knew the “Lord’s work” would be tough, but I was beginning to wonder if it

was perhaps impossible.

His comments heightened a concern I’d had ever since I’d come back from being a student missionary. Overseas, it seemed like the gospel was big news. It was different, it was exciting, and it really seemed to reach people. Here in America, I sensed that things were different. I assumed the gospel was old news, and most people were tired of hearing it. The basic Christian message was known by all, I thought. Even our Seventh-day Adventist denomination was fairly visible and well-known. After all, we even had a big, prize-winning float in the Rose Parade. Perhaps it was time to set our sights fully on the last mission frontier—the distant, pagan lands across the seas.

## You’re a Liar

Just down the street from the pastor’s house, I knocked on the door of a house that looked empty—dry lawn, no car in the driveway, curtains and shades pulled. After a long

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wait, the door opened just a couple of inches. One eye glared at me through the crack, then a finger poked out at me. "You're a Mormon," the voice said.

Unaccustomed to this creative greeting, I stuttered for a second and finally came up with a winning response. "I am not," I said.

"Yes you are, and you have been all your life." His voice was rising, and from his tone I felt it safe to assume he didn't feel a deep agape love for Mormons, or for me.

"I am not," I repeated, unable to think of anything else to say.

"And you're a liar," he announced with disgust.

By now I could see both his eyes. This wasn't a particularly positive development, however. "I should just leave," I thought. But he had called me liar, and I had to say something. "If I was Mormon, and had been all my life, wouldn't I be proud of it?" I asked. "Would I be afraid to admit it?"

The door opened.

Half an hour later, I shook Bernard's hand and left him standing on the porch. It must have been hard for him. Thirty-two years old, living alone and taking care of his mom who was helpless with Alzheimers. Before I left, I told him I'd stop by again sometime. "I'm always here," he said.

## Elephant Man

One block away, a Mexican man took my brochure and didn't say a word. "What's in your garage?" I blurted out. I'd noticed a sign by the door that said "Welcome."

His answer was so quiet I didn't understand him.

"Could I see it?" I said. As soon as the strange words came out, I felt like an idiot. The man looked at me as if I was an idiot, too. He closed the door.

As I walked down the walkway toward the

garage, I knew I was blushing. I paused by the "Welcome" sign, unsure if the man would open the door, and hoping he wouldn't. What was inside? Why did I ask to see it?

He did come, and he opened the door. He was a "tax man" and helped low-income individuals with their IRS forms. I went in, looked at his computer and desk, made an "it looks nice" comment and headed for the door, embarrassed to look at his face.

I was outside when he started talking. About prejudice. About being a token minority in a city club. "Since they knew I was an accountant, they wanted me to join—thought I'd do their books for free. My wife and I went to their banquet. We were the only Mexicans there. We sat by ourselves while everyone stared at us—like we were some freak of nature. I felt like the elephant man. I quit. Never told them why. I'll never let that happen to my wife again."

He walked back inside and I followed him. I listened to him talk about how accountants "rip people off" for at least 15 minutes before I finally decided it was time to go. My hand was on the door knob when he mentioned God. I sat down again and didn't get up for over an hour.

"I'm not a religious man," he assured me several times. Then he talked about his struggle with the church of his childhood and his decision that it just wasn't for him. He worried about his son. He knew the world was in bad shape—"going to hell" in his words. There was only one solution that he could see, and just before I left, he shared it with me. "Wouldn't it be neat," he finally said, "if God just decided that things were ugly enough, that there was enough pain, and he just decided to come down here to earth and shake things up a little bit? To set things straight again?"

"Of course," he added, "I don't know much about these things because I'm not a religious man."

## Never Met an Adventist

The phone rang and I heard Shellie on the other end. "Paul?" she said. I thought she sounded nervous. "I'm not sure how to say this. I hope this doesn't seem too personal, but I checked the publisher of those books and found out they're put out by Seventh-day Adventists. I've never met an Adventist before and I'm a little worried. I feel responsible for my kids and only want the best for them. I have a question for you . . ."

My mind was racing. What would it be? What would she want me to explain—Sabbath? sanctuary? state of the dead?

"... I was wondering," she continued, "Who is Jesus to you?"

## Pistons and Spark Plugs

Bob was in the driveway, working on his car and wouldn't even take the brochure I offered him. I took it back and asked about his car. This is always a dangerous question for me to ask because I know cars about as well as an Eskimo knows camels. I must have sounded pretty knowledgeable, because Bob shared many deep, automotive secrets with me.

After 10 minutes on pistons and spark plugs, Bob changed the subject to religion. He didn't go to church anymore and seemed to feel pretty guilty about it. He wanted to go, but it was hard for him after what happened to his friend.

"He was the best man you could have ever known," Bob said. "He worked hard, took care of his family—he'd give you the shirt off his back. A good, good man. Best friend I ever had. He was killed in a car accident. They wouldn't let him be buried in the church cemetery because he'd never been baptized."

Bob was looking at the ground now and talking very slowly. After a long pause, he said, "I know I'm a sinner, and I don't under-

stand God very well, but I don't think God would want us to act like that. I don't think God would keep him out. It just doesn't seem right to me."

## Wimps

I met Julie and Todd one evening while knocking on doors in a low-income apartment complex. They were young and had just moved from San Francisco. They didn't have any kids yet, but both wanted to plan ahead and get some story books.

While we were looking at the books, we were hearing strange noises from outside—it seemed like a fight—and it was getting louder by the minute. Finally we heard a woman's scream that made us all jump up and look outside.

The neighbor man was chasing his wife across the parking lot, swinging a tire iron at her wildly. Someone must have given the police advance warning because several patrol cars were already pulling up to the curb. Within a couple of minutes, the neighbor man had been disarmed and things had quieted down. Julie and I just sat down again while Todd went outside to watch.

When he had gone, Julie turned to me. "I know from the books that you're an Adventist," she said. I used to be an Adventist too. Todd never has been—he had a bad experience with the church a long time ago."

Julie needed help. "I want to come back to church," she said. "Todd? Well, I pray about him a lot. He believes the doctrines, but he's worried about the people. He just needs someone to do things with and be his friend, but he has this idea that men in the church are wimps. He likes to go out and shoot his gun. He likes to hunt and fish—stuff like that."

She looked at me hopefully. "Is there anyone who would do those things with him?" she asked. "Are there any fishermen in the church?"

## Where's Daddy?

She looked exhausted, but I held out the Bible Adventure Video brochure. She read the first few words and laughed. "Looks like something I need," she said.

"Are you joking?" I asked.

"No."

"So you need the videos?" I was getting excited.

"No, I need Jesus."

It all came tumbling out. She said her husband was running around. He told her he didn't really love her anymore, but loved someone else. The three kids were wondering where Daddy was all the time, and she didn't have a good answer. She didn't have anyone to talk to, and she didn't have much hope. "I think it's over," she said.

I stood on the step and couldn't think of much to say. She stopped, and was embarrassed—like she suddenly realized she was talking to a salesman and a stranger. Did she ever pray? I asked. No. Would she mind if I prayed for her and her family? She seemed surprised that we could talk to God right there—that a prayer didn't have to be memorized. When we were finished it was quiet. She looked in my eyes, said thank you, and went back into her house crying.

## Scared but Hopeful

The house was cluttered and the two old ladies were cooking breakfast. Still, they invited me in. "He's not feeling too well," one said, "but you can go see him in the living room." I had no idea who "he" was, but I went around the corner and saw him sitting on the couch in his pajamas, reading the paper. He patted the couch next to him, and started talking as I sat down.

He was in the middle of chemotherapy treatment and wasn't feeling very good. Like

most elderly people, he gave a rather lengthy and detailed report of his present health. He still had pain from the surgery.

"They took both of them out weeks ago," he whispered with a helpless look in his eyes, "and things still haven't healed up. I called the doctor a few days ago and asked him about it, and do you know what he said? 'Don't worry.' Don't worry! What kind of answer is that?"

In the kitchen I could hear the two ladies arguing. They couldn't agree on whether I was a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon.

Finally, he asked me what I was selling. I told him I was sharing information about Christian books, and he didn't have to buy any if he didn't want to. He smiled.

"I'm a Christian, too," he said. During his thirties, he had been a traveling revival preacher in the South. "Nothing as thrilling as seeing a sinner come to the Lord," he said, smoothing the paper on his lap with a shaking hand. His weak voice started to falter as he told me of a certain hard-drinking, lawless railroad man who "gave his heart to the Lord" as a result of his preaching. "God is so good," he kept murmuring.

He knew he would probably die from the cancer. "I'm scared, but I'm ready. I have a hope for something better." I listened as he quoted his favorite Scripture passages—passages of promise and comfort, of heaven and healing.

Before I left, I asked if he would pray for me. He nodded yes. It was a prayer I'll never forget—the prayer of a dying revival preacher for a discouraged young man. I felt as if I was being lifted into the very throne room of Almighty God. He prayed in King James language, and his voice grew strong as he called down all the blessings of heaven upon me. He had forgotten my name, but I didn't mind because throughout the prayer he referred to me as "friend."

I shook his knobby hand and left him slumped in his pajamas, a now crumpled newspaper on his lap. This time, the tears were in my eyes.