

Is Evangelism Preventing Church Growth?

BY WILLIAM F. NOEL

It is ultimately ironic that the tool that brings the most new members into the Seventh-day Adventist Church is also the very thing that prevents the Church from growing faster.

Say the word *evangelism* and the concept that comes into almost every Adventist's mind is public meetings with dynamic orators who expound about Bible prophecies and proof texts in the hope of baptisms within a few weeks. Indeed, we have adopted this concept so exclusively that any other effort aimed at sharing God's love is regarded as mere ministry to be scorned.

So how effective is evangelism at bringing people into the Church? We often take comfort in the fact that the Church in North America is growing at about the same percentage rate as the population. Still, when you compare real numbers you get a very different picture. Each time one person joins the Church in North America, the combined populations of the United States and Canada grow by forty-six!

So it should be no surprise that surveys done every few years measuring the public's awareness about the Seventh-day Adventist Church show the public's knowledge about us shrinking. We used to be known as Bible-believing vegetarians who helped people quit smoking. Today, we're so unknown that we're somewhere beyond socially obscure and racing toward totally irrelevant. So describing our evangelistic efforts as "effective" is giving new definition to absurdity.

Why is the Church not growing faster? Because of the misconceptions we've developed

about soul winning and evangelism, in particular.

Let's give "evangelism" a Bible-based definition. Only one person in the New Testament, Philip in Caesarea, is described as being an evangelist (Acts 21:7). Only one, Timothy, is told to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5).

Our best model of an evangelist is the Apostle Paul. Trace his missionary journeys in Acts and you have a travelogue through the countries around the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Along the way, he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, baptized new believers, and raised up churches. When Paul established a church, he taught the members to discover and use their spiritual gifts to build up the church and to depend on the Holy Spirit to guide it. Sometimes he came back to visit and work. He also wrote letters to them, fourteen of which we have preserved as books in the New Testament.

How our concepts of evangelism and how the Church is to function have changed! Here are some of our more popular misconceptions and explanations of how they contrast with Scripture.

Preaching is the only way to share the gospel.

Romans 12:14 asks, "how shall they hear without a preacher?" We interpret this passage as asking how anyone can hear the gospel unless they are told in powerful oratory laced with proof texts from someone who has been to the seminary and employed by the conference! Contrast that with the root Greek word *kairuso*, which means to proclaim, announce, or

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tell. Preaching is nothing more than using your own words to tell someone else what God has done for you.

Powerful oratory and proof texts may convince someone that what they have been shown is correct. Still, it is the least persuasive tool for making believers for Jesus. Many times, I've had someone finish a Bible study or come out of an evangelistic meeting and say, "Yes, I see what the Bible teaches. But that's not what my family believes, so I don't believe it, either."

Far more persuasive than sermons or proof texts is the simple testimony of a person who says, "This is what God has done for me." There is so much power in testimony that Revelation 12:11 describes those who overcome the dragon as doing it "by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony." That's because hearing what God has done for you builds hope in my heart that God will do the same for me. Then when I see God act, I believe and want to tell someone else what God has done for me.

It was to create belief that Jesus performed so many miracles and why he promised his followers that they would do even greater things than he did (John 14:12).

Public meetings are the only method God wants us to use to win souls. Jesus never preached what we would call a formal sermon. His famous Sermon on the Mount followed none of our traditional preaching models. Instead, he was an interactive teacher. People were drawn to his teaching because of the power in the miracles he performed and because he taught with authority (Matt. 7:29) that sprang from knowing both Scripture and the Heavenly Father.

The crowd that heard Peter in the Temple courtyard the day after Pentecost was not there because he had mass-mailed handbills covered with prophetic beasts to every home in and around Jerusalem. Peter was there because he was a faithful Jew and his words were a testimony from his own experience with Jesus. Thousands believed because of the power that accompanied his testimony.

Jesus compared his followers to salt (Matt. 4:13) and said that they would be his witnesses in the farthest parts of the planet (Acts 1:8). This means that we are to go out, mix with the world, and let the Holy Spirit use our testimony about Jesus to change those who hear us. So it makes no sense that our primary evangelistic tool should rely on people coming to us.

The most dangerous thing about the idea that all of us should use the same method for winning souls is that it is a gross declaration of disbelief in Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit to empower us for ministry, each in our own way as he sees fit.

Evangelists work only with the local church. Paul's missionary journeys were spent making new believers and raising up churches where neither had existed before. In contrast, today we depend on evangelists as much to revive dying churches as to bring new members into those congregations. If the Apostle Paul were here today he might occasionally visit an established church—if it was one he started in what we once called a "dark" area.

Only evangelists are gifted by the Holy Spirit to bring people into the Church. How many of us have thrilled to witness the baptisms at the end of a crusade and wished we were the ones who had led people to Jesus and brought them into the Church? If you've felt that, you've felt the calling of the Holy Spirit to get involved in soul-winning activities.

Still, if you're like most believers, you soon discovered you were not gifted to be an evangelist. Misconceptions about evangelism prevented you from discovering your spiritual giftedness and the ministry God designed to become the joy-filled center of your religious experience.

Evangelistic crusades take a terrible toll on gift-based ministries because the entire church becomes focused on supporting the crusade above all else. Anything not seen directly supporting the crusade is discouraged, if not halted. Worst of all, members are taught to depend on the Holy Spirit to work through the evangelist instead of through them.

We shouldn't waste our time with ministries that don't produce baptisms within a few weeks. Jesus spent the majority of his time healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the sorrowing, and doing other things we call "ministries." These ministries were supremely effective at creating trust that led to interest in his teaching, which led hearers to believe in him as their savior. Missing from the Bible account is any record of Jesus baptizing or counting baptisms. So if Jesus didn't count baptisms as the measure of his ministry, why should we?

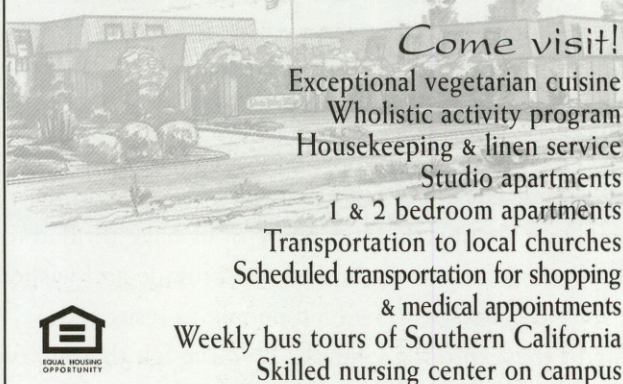
Furthermore, Jesus told his disciples to "go and make

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disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). Baptism is merely a milestone on the path to discipleship. Our greater emphasis should not be on counting how many people we have baptized, but on how many of those we have baptized become disciples who actively create new believers in Jesus.

We have a choice. We can keep doing the same old evangelism the same old way and idling in the illusion of success while getting just enough results to prevent us from experiencing total failure. Or we can step out in faith and discover the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to help us minister in ways that bring greater numbers into the Church than we have ever imagined. If this is to happen, we must get back to the biblical models for evangelism and Holy Spirit-driven ministries that involve every believer. To do this, I propose the following:

1. *Evangelism must be refocused exclusively on making new believers and raising up churches in places that have none. Evangelists should be prohibited from working with any established church unless it is one they established or with the purpose of helping that congregation plant a new congregation.*
2. *The central purpose, focus, and function of the local church must be helping all members discover the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has placed in each of them and then supporting the ministries of these members.*

How can we expect to be truly effective spreading the gospel any other way? ■

Notes and References

1. Calculated by comparing official Seventh-day Adventist Church membership statistics for the North American Division with official census reports for Canada and the United States.

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