

“I . . . hope . . . we can continue to find space not to evangelize and convert, but to examine and grow.”¹ What about you? Would you agree with this statement? Let me read it for you again and you can give it a little more thought. **“I . . . hope . . . we can continue to find space not to evangelize and convert, but to examine and grow.”**

I came across this quote about a month ago. As I've shared with you before, I find myself frequenting various Blogs on the internet from time to time. I don't spend an inordinate amount of time on these sites, but every once in a while I visit a few different sites that promote Christian, and even more specifically, Adventist dialogue. For the most part, the people who post on these blogs have a burden to see the Seventh-day Adventist church grow. Quite often, on the other hand, some people are a little more critical—unhealthfully so—of the church and want to tear down those things we hold very dearly.

So I try to keep up-to-date with the conversation that is going on across the spectrum of Adventist thought. And this one site, in particular, always has engaging conversation and provides me with a venue to lovingly disagree with people who seem to be going in a different direction than I would feel comfortable with. And I came across this post, read the article, and when I came to this point in it, a red-flag went up in my mind. I said, “Hold on! Wait a minute! What is this?”

So I left a comment about the article, asking the individual to clarify what he or she meant.

Didn't Jesus give us a commission to evangelize and convert, after all? Not surprisingly, the

¹ http://spectrummagazine.org/collegiate/2007/12/16/shattering_preconceived_notions_and_stereotypes

response to my question was a little alarming. In many circles, people start to feel uncomfortable when we talk about evangelizing and converting. **“Who are we to say that we have the truth?”** many will ask. **“Our purpose as Christians is not to tell people what we know, but engage them in conversation so that we can learn together,”** is pretty much how one person responded.

But what shocked me the most was this response, which I shared with some of you last Sabbath. I’m going to quote the young man who made the comment. Listen to what he said, **“The idea that Protestants were to convert souls is a relatively recent idea. For almost two thousand years, most interpreters read the Great Commission as only spoken to the disciples. It is only as the age of exploring gave way to inchoate globalization in the 1890s that global mission became a biblical doctrine. Fueled by colonialism -- where people and production mixed -- missions became the free market for religion, a way to expand, brand, and band together.”**²

Did you catch what he said? By the way, the person who shared this response was a classmate of mine in college and he’s a good guy, but that doesn’t diminish the crazy idea that he set forth. It’s a little bit of revisionist history that he shared. You know what that means, don’t you? He has looked back at history and pretty much revised what truly happened. The craziest statement of all, which I called him on, was: **“For almost two thousand years, most interpreters read the Great Commission as only spoken to the disciples.”** This implies, of course, that the Great Commission that Jesus shared—you know, the one where He says that we are to make disciples of people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is not relevant to us. It was simply for the disciples! We are not commissioned to go out and make disciples, like we

² Ibid.

have thought all along. No, “most” interpreters have understood for 2000 years that this command was only directed towards the disciples who were present at that time.

Don’t tell that to Paul, however, who made it his life mission to evangelize and convert the world—even though he wasn’t there on that Jerusalem hill when Jesus shared these words. Don’t tell that to all the other scores of missionaries in the first 200 years of the Christian church, who gave their lives for the sake of spreading the gospel.

I asked my friend, of course, who, exactly, were these “interpreters” that have interpreted Jesus’ commission this way, but there was no response.

But the question nonetheless comes home to our consciences: **Is the Great Gospel Commission irrelevant today? Have we, living in the 21st century, been called by God to preach, teach, disciple, convert, baptize, souls who are hungry for the gospel?**

And, even more significant: **Is Jesus’ Great Commission relevant to *you*?** Or were His words simply some good piece of advice that He shared with His disciples, hoping that they would share the Gospel with others whenever they felt like it?

What do *you* think? Or, more appropriately, in light of this Gospel commission, it doesn’t really matter what you think: **how do you *act*?**

I would like to invite you to open the pages of your Bibles to the second book of the New Testament. We are going to look at a story that we're all familiar with, perhaps even a little too familiar, in fact. It is found in **Mark 2**. Please open the pages of your Bibles there.

We read Mark's account, "**And again he entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house.**" You remember Capernaum, of course. Much like our story two weeks ago, where Jesus fed the 5000 in a grassy place near Bethsaida, Capernaum was on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. It is the place where Jesus took up residents, and, interestingly, Mark tells us that Jesus was in "**the house.**" However, in the original language, the article "**the**" is not present and we would actually literally read that He was "**in house.**" But some other translations do a better job and simply say that Jesus was "**at home.**"

Jesus didn't have His own home, of course, but He often stayed with Peter, who evidently lived in Capernaum. We learned a few weeks ago that Peter was originally from Bethsaida, but he has apparently moved to Capernaum. So this is precisely where Jesus finds Himself in this story. He is at Peter's house.

Incidentally, archaeologists have discovered a house in ancient Capernaum that is believed to have been Peter's house. How they know that this is Peter's exact house, I am not sure, but you can go over to the Holy Land today and see the place where this story is believed to have taken place. One of the reasons they believe that this was his house, by the way, is because they have found evidence of a church built on this precise location, that dates to the fifth century. Such a

church would have been placed on this site as a way to memorialize some significant biblical and historical event or location. Thus, archaeologists conclude that this was Peter's house.

Nevertheless, Jesus finds Himself there at Peter's home. Previously we are told that, once again, He has tried to escape the crowds. They are just following Him everywhere and He can hardly get a free moment for Himself. Ultimately, Jesus finds Himself surrounded by a huge crowd in the privacy of Peter's home. Can you imagine what it would be like to have people knocking on your door all the time, trying to weasel their way into your home! This is precisely what Jesus encountered all the time. He was there, in Peter's home, yet the crowds broke the doors down and gathered around Jesus. He couldn't get any peace and quiet.

Fortunately, as was always the case, Jesus felt compassion and started preaching to the crowd. Mark says that He "**preached the word**" to them. Isn't it refreshing when someone simply preaches "**the word**"? That's what Jesus did! No gimmicks. No charades. He just preached the word to His audience.

And then, all of a sudden—imagine this scene—Jesus is standing there in the middle of Peter's house, and He sees a man being lowered down through the roof. Talk about bringing the house down! He looks up, and there are these four men on the roof, peering down, with rope in hand, slowly lowering this man to Jesus' side.

I don't know how they got there. None of the Gospel writers tells us. But the crowd was so large that they couldn't even get through the doorway. I don't know about you, but at that, I probably

would have shrugged my shoulders and said, “**Oh, well. I guess we’re not going to be able to get our friend to Jesus.**” That was the furthest thing from these four men’s mind, though. In the shadows of defeat, these four men put their heads together, tossed ideas around, and someone came up with the ingenious plan to climb up to the top of the roof of the house, break open the roof, and lower their paralytic friend down by ropes.

And then the plan was set in motion. Somehow they climbed up there and started breaking open that roof. In those days, the roofs would have been made out of wooden branches and covered with earth, strong enough to hold these guys, I guess. I would think that has they tried to bust open that roof, dirt and sticks would have been falling from the sky, hitting people as they tried to listen to Jesus. More than one person, I’m sure, looked up to that roof, curious to see what was going on. A few people probably thought, “**Oh, great. Nice time to fix the roof.**”

But then the opening became large enough for these men to lower their friend through it. And somehow, some way—and I have no idea how—these four men dragged their friend to the top of that roof. Here was a man who couldn’t even walk, yet somehow they dragged him to the top of that roof. Could you imagine being a bystander, and looking over to see this unlikely event taking place?

Of course, probably just as hard, they had to slowly let him down to the ground, right where Jesus was standing.

And what does Mark say Jesus' response was? "**When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven you.'**" Oh, to be able to read the mind of Christ when He saw those four men lowering their friend! He must have been blown away by their perseverance. Quite simply, these four men were willing to go to any length to bring their friend to Christ.

And Christ honored their faith, didn't He? Mark tells us that when He saw *their* faith, He told the paralytic that His sins were forgiven. The perseverance, the stick-to-itiveness that they displayed, paid off. They literally brought down the house, just so they could bring their friend to Jesus.

A few years ago, when I first graduated from college and I was pastoring in Vermont, I wanted some good reading material. So I e-mailed one of my college professors and asked him if he could recommend a book or two, and his immediate response was to read a book called, *A Passion for Souls*. It is one of the best biographies on the great evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. It's a pretty thick book and, three years later, I'm still reading it!

Dwight L. Moody was, of course, one of the greatest evangelists in the history of America. He didn't only bring about revival in America, though, he also tore across Britain, preaching the gospel to the masses there. One of his greatest frustrations, however, was the apathy in which many professed Christians neglected to share the gospel. And, in this process, he wrote something that caught my eye that I thought was incredibly appropriate, especially when reflecting upon the current spiritual climate of the Seventh-day Adventist church today.

Listen carefully to what Moody wrote: “**The Master’s heart [is pierced] with unutterable grief, . . . not [over] the world’s iniquity, but the Church’s indifference.**”³ Did you catch that? What grieves the heart of God more than anything else is the indifference that His people display. This is clearly seen in the message to the Laodicean church! God’s people are lukewarm and it is breaking His heart.

Have we become indifferent, friends? Have we lost our passion for souls? How God must weep when our passion does not match *His* passion.

But here we see four nameless heroes. We don’t know who they were, where they came from—we don’t know anything about them. The only mention of them in all of scripture is that they went to a pretty crazy extreme, just so their friend could be brought to Jesus. And Christ honored their faith.

Have you come to the place, friend, where you would be willing to do *anything* so that a friend or a loved one could be brought to Jesus?

There are obstacles that we all face, I know. When I was out in Washington state, doing my Field School of Evangelism out there, the evangelist liked to joke about some of these excuses that come up when talk about evangelism. It takes a lot of time and energy to bring someone to Christ, after all. And the cost! If you want to hold an effective evangelistic series—and, please rest assured, this sermon is not primarily about public evangelism, but about bringing God’s children to the cross—it will cost thousands of dollars. Who’s going to pay for that?

³ Lyle W. Dorsett, *A Passion for Souls* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997), 219, 220.

As this Evangelist would say over and over again, though: who paid for repairs the new roof in this story? Someone was left with the bill! I don't know if these four men got permission before they started tearing it apart, or what, but the story doesn't tell us what happened after that. I'm sure someone worried about that, but the Bible doesn't put a price tag on a soul, doesn't it?

It was the same Dwight L. Moody who said, **“Remember the value of one soul!”** You can't put a price tag on someone coming to Christ! It is invaluable.

“But pastor,” someone says, **“You are taking this story out of context. This man simply came for physical healing. How can you make a whole sermon on bringing someone to Christ?”** When the man was lowered to Jesus' feet, and Christ laid his eyes on the man, what was Christ's response? He didn't tell the man to get up and walk, He informed Him that His **“sins were forgiven.”** Ellen White even talks about how this man's physical ailment was the result of His personal sinful choices. What the man needed was spiritual healing. What he needed to know was that Jesus had a heart full of forgiveness.

And it was all made possible by the perseverance of his four friends who had a burden, indeed, a passion, for bringing their friend to Christ.

And what about you? **“The Master's heart [is pierced] with unutterable grief, . . . not [over] the world's iniquity, but the Church's indifference.”** Are those words true of us?

Did these four men take the great Gospel Commission seriously, even if they weren't around to hear it? Of course they did! And that is precisely the point, friends. Those who are touched with Christ's heart cannot help but have a burden to bring people to Christ. If there is a hope that is burning within me, I won't need to have someone *command* me to lead a person to Christ—I will naturally want to share Christ with them. I love the words of those early apostles in the book of Acts when they cried out, “**For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.**” You couldn't shut them up! Christ's heart was their heart; His compassion their compassion.

We naturally want to share the Good News with others.

Is that true of you? If not, perhaps you do not appreciate the Good News yourself. Good news that is truly appreciated motivates a person to share it with others.

Please notice a very important point, though, friends. We don't know for sure how these four men knew the paralytic, we can only assume that they had some level of friendship with him before this incident. In other words, these four men weren't total strangers to this paralytic. To be completely honest with you, I am not one who is completely comfortable with going up to a stranger and asking about the condition of their soul. There may be a time and place for that, as the Spirit impresses one's heart, but I find that people are not very likely to listen to a stranger.

It may happen, but not usually—especially in this day and age when the general public is very skeptical about Christianity. It is a lot easier to bring a friend to Christ, then to bring a stranger to

Christ. And, certainly, we all have people who we know who we could make this a passion! Why don't we start with them?

As I suggested last Sabbath, why not start by simply saying, "**I am going to invite one non-Adventist person over my house for a meal sometime.**" That is something that is non-threatening and you don't have to be ready with a Bible study. It is just being friendly.

"**But I don't know anyone who is non-Adventist.**" That is a scary reality, one that can be true of a lot of us. I am willing to bet, though, that you have *one* friend who is a non-Adventist. And, if not, why not make a friend who isn't a non-Adventist? It would be healthy on many levels.

Even if you only have *one* individual who you know, you can start with that one individual. And as you foster a relationship with that person, that person will be able to open up doors to meet and build relationships with others who are not of the same faith. And on and on it goes. Christ's love compels us to share that Good News with a dying world, friend. Are you willing to go to any length to bring someone to Christ?

Indeed, these four men were. It reminds me of another man who did the same. He was willing to go even further, though. Do you remember what Paul wrote in **Romans 9**? He literally said that he wished that he could be cursed and cut off from God for the sake of his brothers and countrymen. He was willing to go to hell for his loved ones! Talk about love! Talk about a heart that has a passion for souls.

There was another Man, of course, who was willing to do the same. We cannot talk about burdening yourself with the eternal salvation of a loved one unless we talk about the Man who burdened Himself with the eternal salvation of mankind. This Man didn't go to a roof for His friends, though—He went to Calvary. It wasn't only that He was willing to go to Hell, our Savior really, truly, did go to Hell for our eternal salvation. All, so He could bring us to heavenly places, to sit at the foot of His Father.

Jesus was the greatest evangelist who ever lived. He went to Hell for one soul. Indeed, as Paul writes, **“For the love of Christ compels us because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”**

You see, Jesus looked up at those four men who were lowering their friend and He marveled because He saw a reflection of Himself in them. They were willing to go to any extreme to show the value of one person. Jesus did the same as He went to Calvary. And you know what? That kind of love compels me?

Is the great Gospel Commission still relevant today? How can it not be when Christ's love has laid hold of my heart and I desperately want to share that with others?

I want to end with a story. As I shared with those of you who were at our mid-week service this past Wednesday, my dad grew up in a poor family in Eastern Canada. The last of six children, he had an older brother who was pretty close in age. Growing up, they would often be at each

other's throats, just about beating one another up. I always took comfort, actually, that whenever my brother and I would get into fights around my grandmother, she would always say that we were nothing compared to her two sons! Of course, she would still give us an earful!

For the first few years of my dad's life, his father didn't attend church. But eventually, he was baptized, lost his job, and moved the family from New Brunswick, down to Stoneham, Massachusetts, where he worked at the Adventist hospital. A few of the children, my dad one of them, went through the Adventist school system in Stoneham. My uncle Dick did as well, and both he and my dad were terrors! Through high school and college, my uncle and dad played a lot of hockey, and they were infamous on the ice for being both good and mischievous—my uncle more so on both accounts.

Eventually my father grew out of it! Unfortunately, growing up, my uncle Dick didn't receive the greatest picture of God, and along about the time that my dad got married, Dick stopped attending church. By this time, he was living in Florida, as well as two of my aunts. The oldest one in the family was still living in Massachusetts, while my other uncle moved back to Canada, where he still resides today.

Sadly, my uncle Dick's life started slowly spiraling downward. His lifestyle was one that was contrary to God's design. He got married, had three kids, divorced, got married again, had two kids, divorced, got married a third time and had another kid. Unfortunately, that is pretty typical for people whose lives have wandered from God.

And, of course, this took its toll on the family. His relationship with a few of his kids suffered as a result and he is living with regrets over that, as we speak. At three o'clock this afternoon, Pacific Time, there will be a memorial service in California for his 34-year-old daughter who dropped dead about a month ago with heart failure. She just dropped dead for some inexplicable reason.

Over the years, as well, he made millions of dollars on different business ventures. The problem is, he also lost millions on these ventures as well. His life had no real direction or purpose.

As you can imagine, his siblings have been burdened for him. My other uncle, who lives in Canada, is not an Adventist, either, so the four other siblings have been burdened by their two brothers. As you can imagine, the four of them spend many long hours in prayer, doing all they can to try to bring their loved ones to Christ.

In particular, my aunt, who lives close to my uncle Dick, would always invite him to church. She would remind Him of God's love, and remind him over and over again how much she loved him. She would share books with him, and do all that she could to place herself in a position to bring her brother to Christ.

My father, though a long ways away, has spent a lot of energy, burdened over the condition of his brother. He, too, has spent many hours in prayer. In the past, he has had conversations with him about the gospel. Unfortunately, as I eluded to earlier, although my dad's family was a good family, sometimes a true understanding of the gospel is not presented to the kids, and they suffer

as a result. They don't quite understand God's love. So over the years, my dad has tried to put a lot of time in explaining the true picture of the gospel to his brother. He was hoping to simply plant seeds.

About three months ago, when I was in Washington state, I got a phone call from my dad. I won't ever forget it. He said to me, **"I just got a phone call from uncle Dick. He told me that he was 'home' and he didn't want to miss out on heaven."** My dad and he talked for about an hour and a half. Many tears were shed on both ends. My uncle Dick realized that the Lord was calling out to him and, for the first time in about 35 years, he went to church two Sabbaths later. It hasn't been easy, of course, but my aunts and dad have been there, every step of the way, trying to lead their loved one back to Christ.

And what about you? Are you willing to do anything to bring a loved one—a husband, a wife, a child, a friend—to Christ?

Just before my grandmother passed away, she was on her death bed and unable to talk. The only way she could communicate was by writing. Just before she died, she asked for a piece of paper to write something on. And, in the messy scribbling that she could conjure up, she wrote the words, **"I hope all be in heaven, and dad with us. Love Mum."** And a few minutes later, she drew her last breath.

There was another Person, of course, whose lips uttered the same thing right before He drew His final breath. He wanted nothing more than for all of us to be in heaven with Him with His—and

our—Dad. He went to Calvary to achieve that goal, will we follow Him to do the same with our friends, neighbors and loved ones?

In a very real way, Jesus brought down the whole house for us, didn't He? He emptied out all of heaven for us! How can we be indifferent in the light of that? Christ went all the way for us, how far will you go for Him? And how far will you go to bring a loved one to Him?

“The Master’s heart [is pierced] with unutterable grief, . . . not [over] the world’s iniquity, but the Church’s indifference.”