

Current Issues in Discipleship

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Introduction

“Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote —Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’” ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked. ‘Come and see,’ said Philip.” (John 1:45-46). Could it be that just as Nathanael found it hard to believe that anything good could come out of a small village, that some would find it difficult to see that anything worthwhile could come out of a large modern city?

The last place this small town kid wanted to go was the big city. To my own misgivings about uninterrupted concrete and racing freeways, were echoed Nathaniel’s misgivings, While these hard realities do exist, the city is also full of an incredible variety of people which provides a very rich context for discipleship. For I believe just as the Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh, “that great city,” so He desires to convert, mature and reproduce His disciples in the great cities of today.

The heart of the book came from my Master’s Thesis from the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. Added to this edited material are two articles which were formerly published in the Adventist Review and other unpublished works.

The first chapter is entitled “The Tale of Two Corners” and deals with my own con-version from devout Catholicism to the Seventh-day Adventist ministry. This auto-biographical sketch provides the context from which the rest of the book is influenced. The second chapter entitled “Agents of Reconciliation” originally appeared as an article in the Adventist Review and is an expression of the principles God has taught me over the years in dealing with difficult situations in the family and church.

The third chapter named “The One Habit of Really Effective Christians” begins the section on discipleship. In this chapter I critique a best selling book by Stephen Covey and look very closely at how the Christian is to correctly use their wills in the struggle with temptation. The next chapter entitled “The Most Misunderstood Concept in Adventism” deals with unhealthy perfectionism which is one of the detours to true discipleship.

“My Father Never Taught Me How to Shave” raises the whole question of mentoring and why training might be so difficult in our individualistic culture. The last essay in this section is entitled “The Disciples’ Dilemma” which was originally published in the Adventist Review. This short work is based on the feeding of the five thousand and how Christ can miraculously aid His hurried, empty-handed disciples today.

“Mission’s New Frontier” begins the section on the emerging reality of urbanism around the world. For the first time in recorded history, more people are living in the cities than in the country. If the church wants to minister to the multitudes then it must find a way to disciple the pilgrims now heading towards the mega-cities now expanding around the globe. The next chapter is entitled “Can Any Good Thing Come Out of Los Angeles?” looks at how the Seventh-day Adventist Church as ebbed and flowed in Los Angeles since the mid-twentieth century. It is hoped that urban areas going through the same process will benefit from this research.

A chapter on the critical and oft-controversial issue of contextualization appears next under the title of “Walking the Tightrope.” In an urban environment there is a constant pull to be maintain an authentic Christian witness on the one hand and be “relevant” on the other. This essay sorts some of the major issues out.

The next two chapters deal with how the Lord used the process of conversion to help Saul overcome the barrier of tradition and Peter to grow beyond his Galilean roots. In the city there are many different types of people which a successful disciple must learn to both love and encourage to grow. Building a united church work with those who are different than us (in both ideas and ethnicity) is perhaps the greatest challenge we face today.

“The 2300 Days Revisited” begins the last section which points to some of the future topics that need to be discussed with the topic of urban discipleship. The 2300 day prophecy of Daniel 8:14 is explored because modern disciples must be clear on the prophetic basis of God’s last day church. “Donut Shop Theology” gives a background to the rise of secularism and in how the Sabbath can be understood and appreciated in this context.

“The Seventh-Day Adventist Worldview on Healing” provides the urban disciple with a basis to understand both the historical and eschatological issues associated with false miracles. Finally, “The Most Important Thing on the Planet” discusses the often overlooked relationship between doctrine, faith and fruit. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing the church today is not only teaching the what of salvation but the how as well. It is my hope and prayer that this current work can provide some fruitful direction to this end.

The Disciples' Dilemma

Chapter 6

I was taking the ministerial course at Pacific Union College
when this sermon was developed.

I remember walking in the woods and kneeling down and asking
for the Lord's help as I prepared it to preach in
my homiletics class.

I was especially fearful because of a pretty severe
stuttering problem I had growing up
and the innate fear of sharing the thoughts and feelings
of my heart.

The Lord really blessed me with the sermon
and I have gone on to preach it several times as well as
getting it published in the Review while I was at the Seminary.

It still remains as needed in my life today
as when I kneeled and asked for the Lord's help
twenty-five years ago.

The Disciples' Dilemma

It is late, the disciples are tired and they don't know what to do. Since morning they have ministered to the thousands of Passover pilgrims who have flocked to see Jesus in a remote corner of the Sea of Galilee. Minds and bodies have been healed by word and touch. Food and rest have been forgotten in the midst of spiritual refreshment.

But as the sun sinks lower and lower in the west, the disciples become more and more perplexed. The day has lasted far longer than anticipated and little food has been brought to the isolated area. The disciples, anxious to resolve the growing problem, urge Jesus to stop His labors by saying: "This is a remote place . . . and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat" (Mark 6:35-36).

Although Jesus had been drained to the utmost by the long day of teaching and healing, He cannot draw away until one last blessing embraces them all. This is a golden opportunity to teach His beloved, careworn disciples the all-important lesson of God's miracle-working power in the face of deep human need.

Therefore Jesus turns to His disciples and suggests an altogether different solution to the problem by saying, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat" (Mark 14:16). The disciples, stunned that Jesus has not yet fully comprehended the seriousness of the situation, quickly reply: "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" (Mark 6:37).

The unbelief and bitter irony of the disciples' words cut the heart of Jesus. Nevertheless, He gently encourages them to look for food. The quick search reveals only the small lunch of a little boy who has been so enthralled by the beauty of holiness that his meager fare was forgotten. The disciples bring the five barley loaves and two small fish to Jesus with words full of irony, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (John 6:9).

What a dilemma the tired disciples faced! On the one hand they were surrounded by thousands of hungry people; it was getting late and all they had was the lunch of a kindhearted little boy. But on the other hand was the seemingly impossible statement of Jesus that they could indeed feed the multitude. How could Jesus expect so much when they had so little?

How often are Jesus' disciples today faced with a similar dilemma! We too are daily surrounded by needy, hungry people. They are everywhere. A person at work or in our neighborhood might be facing serious marital, financial or physical problems. Someone in the

church could by slipping further and further away. Even the members of our own families are not immune to problems.

But when confronted with the deep, urgent needs of those around us, we often feel just as empty-handed and pressed for time as the first disciples. Physically and spiritually drained by our pressure-cooker world, the hungry, hurting people around us are often seen more as obstacles than opportunities. So like the disciples our first thought is to send them away, reassuring ourselves that someone else with more resources will help them.

Despite our human limitations and rationalizations, the gentle pleadings of Jesus—"Love thy neighbor," "Do unto others," and "You can feed them" come to our hearts. The same dilemma—of how to give so much when having so little—grips us as it did those tired disciples.

Our inadequacy to meet the deep needs of those around us has always provided the perfect backdrop for the display of divine power. Therefore Jesus gives a simple five-word command that is the key that unlocks heaven's storehouse. The Crucified Creator of the universe says, "Bring them here to me" (Matthew 14:18). Place what you do have in My hands, dear, careworn disciples and you will see the power of God.

Jesus accepted the small lunch and gave thanks for the barley loaves and fishes now dried by the afternoon sun. Then those miracle hands, surging with creative power, began to break the few loaves and fishes and multiply them into fresh loaves for thousands. The disciples' fatigue and perplexity was forgotten in the presence of divine power. With deep joy they helped in the feeding of the multitude. And the Scripture triumphantly records—"They all ate and were satisfied (Mark 6:42).

If you are a tired, pressed disciple today, seeking a solution to the dilemma of how to give so much when having so little . . . if your spiritual resources need to be replenished and refreshed for the needy ones around you . . . if you desire to experience the joy that comes from being a channel of blessing to others, then,

Bring your barley loaves to Jesus
Cold and stale they now may be;
But His nail-pierced hands will make them,
Warm, fresh loaves for those in need.

Donut Shop Theology

Chapter 13

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to witnessing facing Adventist believers today is just how to make the truth relevant to those around us.

This essay outlines the roots of Western society's pluralistic worldview which assumes that everything concerning religion is true and nothing is false.

For instance, when the Sabbath is presented to most people today, the primary challenge is not to show whether it is true but just why the seventh day is better than any other day.

This essay attempts to address this important issue in a very practical way as Sonny, Paul and Bob meet at the Donut Shop and experience a similar trying experience which tests the viability of their belief system.

Down At the Donut Shop

Sonny, Paul and Bob lived in the same town and had a weekly ritual of meeting at the local donut shop every Monday. During these informal meetings they often ventured to discuss religion. Sonny was a Protestant Christian, Paul was a Seventh-day Adventist and Bob just couldn't see the need for organized religion.

Sonny would say that any day was probably good for worship, but his church kept Sunday because it was the day that Jesus rose from the dead. Paul maintained that the Sabbath was the only Biblical day of worship because it memorialized God's completed work of creation in six days and resting on the seventh.

Bob felt a little like a fish out of water when the other two were talking about the Bible. He would sometimes chirp in that it probably really doesn't matter what day you go to church. Just as there are different people, there are different paths to God. All that matters is that we are good moral people and try our best to fulfill the golden rule.

The dominant and often unseen force that emerges from this short scenario is the pull of pluralism. Seventh-day Adventists in the Western world are having to battle this force whenever they attempt to explain their unique faith and practice. This article attempts to discover when pluralism arose and how a deeper understanding of receptivity and the Sabbath can help us in our everyday witness.

The Birth of Skepticism

The Age of Enlightenment or Reason, which began in the mid-eighteenth century, increasingly pushed the Bible, faith and religion from the once mighty citadel of divinely-revealed precepts to a humble cottage of just one truth among many. If a person really wanted to find out about the real world, they could now use the scientific method. Science was confident that through careful observation it could read the book of nature without having to know the Author of creation.

This same approach of understanding something apart from divine inspiration was also applied to the Bible itself and was called higher criticism. Using the emerging principles of the scientific method, the Bible began to be seen more as a book produced by human culture than divinely-inspired objective facts which nurtured faith.

One of the first areas of the biblical record that came under scrutiny was the Book of Genesis. With the discovery of other ancient stories relating to origins such as the Gilgamesh Epic, the higher critical scholars concluded that the Bible was just one of many ways primitive human cultures attempted to understand how things came to be.

As the divine account was interpreted as just one story among others, a vacuum was created which science filled with the evolutionary theory. The *Origin of the Species*, which was published in 1859, was as much a theological statement as it was a biological investigation. The theory of evolution emerged directly from the success of science on the one hand and the growing skepticism in the Bible on the other.

Everyone a Heretic

Lesslie Newbegin, an Anglican scholar who served nearly forty years as a missionary in India, states that the original meaning of heresy was:

choosing for oneself, making one's own personal decision instead of accepting the given tradition. In premodern cultures the heretic was in a minority. In medieval Europe or in a contemporary Saudi Arabia, for example, only the rare individual questions the accepted framework of belief. It is just 'how things are and have always been.' In modern Western culture . . . we are all required to be heretics. . . With respect to ultimate beliefs, pluralism rules, and thus each individual has to make a personal decision about ultimate questions.¹

Newbegin clearly shows that it is now acceptable to be a "heretic" in the sphere of religious faith and practice but, "there is a world in which we are not all heretics."² This is the world of external facts which can be observed and explained by the scientific method. For instance, since the laws of gravity have been tested and shown to be true, all reasonable people are expected to accept it. "The one who does not accept them is the real heretic. Of course, he will not be burned at the stake, but his views will not be published in the scientific journals or in the university lecture rooms."³

For example, if a person insisted on the nightly news that the sun goes around the earth, not many of us would say that this "heretical" statement is just as true as any other. However, if a creationist during the same newscast reasonably asserted that life on the planet was created in only six days it would be dismissed as only one possible idea among many. Whereas science is allowed to state universal maxims that are objectively true for all peoples and time, different religious ideas are placed in an ever-expanding ideological supermarket where consumers browse to find their own answers to life's ultimate questions.

Hence the pull of pluralism in our Western society is just as pervasive as the pull of gravity in the universe. It influences all religious ideas to orbit around a singular scientific worldview which was created in the eighteenth century.⁴

Crisis and Receptivity

“There are no atheists in foxholes” demonstrates the principle that people tend to reevaluate their worldview in times of transition and stress. It is difficult to break the pull of pluralism until a crisis develops in a person’s personal solar system as Jon Paulien has written in *Present Truth in the Real World*:

The stimulus to make spiritual progress originates with need activation (becoming aware of a felt need), for people do not change unless that change is seen to benefit them in some tangible way. The activation of a need leads to a search for information, which can result in a change of beliefs, which normally leads to a change of attitudes, which leads to a change in behavior. At this point a person is close to a decision which, when taken, leads to spiritual growth.⁵

Receptivity to change is in direct proportion to the level of crisis in any individual. In our donut shop scenario we can see that Sonny and Bob’s receptivity to consider the Sabbath as an important spiritual truth will remain low as long as things are going well. If our imaginary Adventist friend Paul is “wise as a serpent but harmless as a dove” he will not force doctrinal truth put practice friendship evangelism during this time of stability.

Monte Sahlin has recognized the important role of building relationships as a prelude to sharing our faith:

Readiness to hear the gospel message comes with the awakening of significant feelings of need. And the most effective channel through which the gospel may be communicated is a trusted friend. Friendship evangelism is learning to build trustful relationships with unchurched persons in the context of secular life and then listening and watching with patience and caring for situations in which they evidence an openness to shared faith.⁶

In order to see how this might work in real life, let’s introduce a crisis in the lives of our three friends. It’s Friday. Sonny, Paul and Bob are all looking forward to a relaxing weekend. But just before they leave work, each of them receives an immediate layoff notice from their respective companies. Sonny, Paul and Bob head home for a weekend now filled with a terrible anxiety about an uncertain future.

How will the faith and practice of Sonny, Paul and Bob interact with the crisis over the weekend and what will be their testimony when they gather together Monday morning at the donut shop? Up until this time, plurality ruled and it seemed that one day of worship was as good as another. Let’s follow the three friends through the weekend and see what happens.

The Secular Disappointment

As our secular friend Bob drives home he is deeply worried. His wife Barb immediately senses the trouble and a funeral-like somberness envelopes the home. Together they churn through the emotional grief cycle of blame, shame, anger and negotiation. They hastily dig the morning paper from the trash and find few help-wanted ads. Questions about the mortgage and survival loom large as they leave the kids at the sitters and head for a dinner date.

Bob drinks a little more than usual that night in order to self-medicate his pain. Without realizing it, Bob is beginning to take the surprisingly short slide from being a “moderate” social drinker to a strongly addicted alcoholic.

Saturday’s round of golf helps but little and Sunday’s paper is carefully searched but no good prospects are found. Bob spends the rest of the day vacillating between anger and depression and for the first time in many years says a few words to the “Man Upstairs.”

The Christian Perspective

From childhood Sonny has been taught to give his problems to God. Driving home, his faith attempts to pierce through the darkness of uncertainty that now clouds his once secure future. As he relates the news to his wife Sandra they feel the sense of loss but also assure themselves with the promises of care from God’s word. Although the want ad section is retrieved and offers little hope of immediate relief, they resolve to leave the problem in God’s hands.

Saturday is an uneventful, lawn-mowing type of day for Sonny and he is most grateful when Sunday arrives and he can go to church. He has belonged to a men’s support group for years and there he finds Christian support and fellowship. The group promises to network together by praying, keeping in contact with Sonny and being on the lookout for any job opportunities.

A Pocketful of Prooftexts

How is our Adventist friend Paul going to fare with the unexpected news of the layoff? Can his unique belief in the Sabbath help him through the time of trouble he is now facing? I recently talked with an Adventist professional who had been unexpectedly laid off from his work and discovered that his belief in the Sabbath had not been consciously considered as a help in his current crisis. It is not hard to understand why this is the case.

Most Adventist literature on the Sabbath has been apologetic in nature while the deeper meaning and purpose of its observance has largely been unexplored.⁷ A recent Ministry article entitled “The Puritan legacy of Sabbatarianism” states: “It is clear from the literature that early Adventists transferred from Sunday to Saturday the standards common to the conservative Protestant world.”⁸ Could it be that we have worked so hard to defend the doctrine of the Sabbath that we have not adequately explored just how to enter into its promised rest?

It is obvious from our discussion of pluralism above, that Paul is going to need more than a pocketful of prooftexts in order to nurture his own faith and influence Sonny and Bob. Perhaps it would be well for us to rediscover that Biblical teachings such as the Sabbath have a purpose beyond the field of apologetics: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”⁹

Just as 1 Timothy 3:16-17 states that the object of the doctrines is to equip us for good works, Ellen White tells us that the goal of the Christian life involves deeper issues than a mere knowledge of the truth: “The object of the Christian life is fruit bearing--the reproduction of Christ's character in the believer, that it may be reproduced in others.”¹⁰ How can the Sabbath bear fruit in Paul's own life so that others might meet the Lord of the Sabbath as well?

The Sabbath Advantage

The main foundation of the Sabbath doctrine is that it provides a weekly opportunity to focus on the objective fact that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. The proper observance of the Sabbath should clearly bring into view the almighty yet compassionate picture of God as portrayed in Steps to Christ:

From the stars that in their trackless courses through space follow from age to age their appointed path, down to the minutest atom, the things of nature obey the Creator's will. And God cares for everything and sustains everything that He has created. He who upholds the unnumbered worlds throughout immensity, at the same time cares for the wants of the little brown sparrow that sings its humble song without fear. . . . each is tenderly watched by the heavenly Father. No tears are shed that God does not notice. There is no smile that He does not mark.

If we would but fully believe this, all undue anxieties would be dismissed. Our lives would not be so filled with disappointment as now; for everything, whether great or small, would be left in the hands of God, who is not perplexed by the multiplicity of cares, or overwhelmed by their weight. We should then enjoy a rest of soul to which many have long been strangers.¹¹

While it is true that this perspective is open to all believers, the Sabbath has the potential of providing a potent weekly reminder of the power and the care of God for His creation. If faith affirms that the Caring Creator is big enough to take care of me, then my stress will be turned to rest.

The Sabbath informs and gives direction to the good fight of faith. Objective faith in the Creator will bring about an inner peace that will be a wonderful witness to those who know Him not. Much like Martin Weber has done in his recent Ministry article “Koinonia is the key,” we need to begin relating our doctrines to practical living.¹² Unless we do this we will not be able to counter the pull of pluralism with a positive Christian witness.

An informed and deeply contextualized Sabbath worship experience will help our friend Paul as he faces a jobless future. The first thing he’ll do Friday evening is gather the family’s faith around God, not the crumbled want-ad section. The pull to seek human answers to human problems is great. Paul has learned, like the Psalmist of old, that help does not come from the human calvary charging over the hill, but “the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:2).

Like his Christian friend Sonny, Paul has found a supportive small-group type Sabbath school class which not only studies the lesson but takes time to share and do ministry together. They unite in prayer for Sonny and promise to do all they can to help him find new work.

It is fortunate that Paul’s church has sought to incorporate in word and song the three main themes of the Sabbath, Salvation and the Second Coming during the worship service. These powerful themes strengthen his faith in the Lord of the Sabbath, the Redeemer of all men and the soon coming King.

Sabbath afternoon is spent walking with his family in a large park where the sound of running water, the chirping of care-free birds, and the blooming of quiet flowers all speak of the Creator’s power and goodness. As the family gathers to watch the glow of the setting sun, they pray that the peace that God has ministered to them will be treasured in the coming days of uncertainty.

Back at the Donut Shop

Our three friends are back at the donut shop early Monday morning. Bob is feeling a little hung over and mildly depressed. Sonny is feeling a little better after knowing that he has help from above and the support of his men’s group. And wouldn’t it be a wonderful witness if Paul came into the donut shop with a faith grounded in the Maker of heaven and earth and the peace that passes understanding?

His confidence in a God who is big enough and powerful enough will manifest itself in the fruits of love, peace and helpful, self-forgetting concern for his friends. Although a mere knowledge of the doctrines will not often persuade others, a spirit-filled, fruit-filled life will. “If we would humble ourselves before God, and be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful, there would be one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one.”¹³

The Sabbath was designed to strengthen faith in the Almighty, so our hearts like so many anxious birds, can find our best rest in Him and sing out our songs of faith to others who are also seeking solace from life’s cares.

As Exodus 23:12 reminds us, the Sabbath was designed to be a blessing to all those who are within our sphere of influence: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the residentialien may be refreshed.” Let us determine to not only find but also to share the blessings of Sabbath rest and thus refresh and win souls for His kingdom!

Endnotes

1. Lesslie Newbegin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), page 11.
2. *Ibid.*, page 16.
3. *Ibid.*, page 16.
4. Most people living today have an 18th century mechanistic view of the universe. Modern physics however has become more pluralistic itself with such words as relativity, uncertainty and chaos entering the vocabulary. The late Nobel prize winning physicist American Richard Feynman could write that the laws of the new physics “often seem to become more and more unreasonable and more and more intuitively far from obvious.” Richard Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law*, (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press), 1987, page 172.
5. John Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World*, (Boise: Pacific Press, 1993), page 217.
6. Monte Sahlin, *Sharing Our Faith with Friends*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1990), page 50.
7. A search of Seventh-day Adventist material reveals a paucity of material describing the personal experience of Sabbath keeping. There is a great deal of theologically oriented material that describes the joys and benefits of Sabbath observance. There are narratives of how individuals were severely tested over their commitment to keep the Sabbath free from work. But I was not able to find a reports of how a person was attracted to the Sabbath as a Sabbath along with a description of the

difference it made in their lives when they began to observe it. I am sure that there are such stories, but I was not able to locate one. Ed Allen, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, page 250.

8. Ed Allen, "The Puritan Legacy of the Sabbath," (Ministry, March, 1994), page 15.
9. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV, (emphasis mine).
10. Ellen White, Christ Object Lessons, (Wash. D.C.: Review & Herald, 1900), page 67.
11. Ellen White, Steps to Christ, (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1892), pages 85-86.
12. Martin Weber, "Koinonia is the key," (Ministry, June, 1994), pages 4, 23.
13. Ellen White, Testimonies, Vol. 9, (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1909), page 189.