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## The Importance of Worldview Change in the Discipling Process

Recent events in the Seventh-day Adventist Church have demonstrated the need and importance of discipleship. However, the discipleship process can have a variety of emphases such as change of behavior, change of beliefs, and change of the underlying core worldview values. This paper seeks to emphasize the importance of worldview change in the discipling process.

Before getting into the paper it is important to define three terms that will be used throughout.

1. *Worldview*—“The fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives. Worldviews are what people in a community take as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living” (Heibert 2008:15). Worldview involves the core values, premises, and constructs that create a person’s view of reality.

2. *Disciple*—“A follower who was committed to a recognized leader or teacher” (Wilkins 2000:278). “Jesus’s disciples were those who heard his invitation to begin a new kind of life, accepted his call to the new life, and became obedient to it. The center of this new life was Jesus himself, because his disciples gained new life through him (John 10:7-10), they followed him (Mark 1:16-20), they were to hear and obey his teachings (Matt. 5:1-2), and they were to share in Jesus’ mission by going into all of the world, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and calling all people to become Jesus’ disciples” (278, 279).

3. *Discipling*—The process during one’s life of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Over the years I have observed several situations where established Seventh-day Adventist communities that demonstrated Seventh-day Adventist behavior and beliefs completely failed when a crisis came. The

results were Adventists killing Adventists in Rwanda, dual allegiance or multiple allegiances in many parts of the world, and Adventists involved in ethnic cleansing in Kenya against people of other tribes who were living in their traditional tribal areas. These experiences have challenged me to ask where the church went wrong in its discipleship of new members. I have come to realize that what gets emphasized and funded indicates the priority the church places on various activities. However, the recent dropping of hundreds of thousands of inactive members through membership audits seem to indicate that much more emphasis must be made on disciplining that impacts the worldview of those coming into the Adventist Church (see General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2005; 2007-2009).

It is important for newly baptized Adventist church members to have a conversion experience that goes deeper than just a change in outward behavior or a change in their belief system. They must also experience and undergo a transformed and converted worldview. This does not happen quickly or without an intentional focus. People's worldview assumptions, premises, and values create their beliefs out of which behavior flows. Therefore, it seems important to place a much greater emphasis on worldview transformation in the disciplining process.

Most of the traditional evangelism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has focused on sharing the distinctive Adventist doctrines with those who are already Christians. New converts add biblical knowledge about the Sabbath, prophecy, diet, and health to their already existing beliefs about Jesus, his life, and death, and atoning sacrifice. Such Christians already have a worldview that has hopefully been shaped by biblical principles. They hopefully have already dealt with issues such as loyalty to God, allegiance to the Bible, and the importance of living according to the principles of the Word of God. As long as Adventist evangelism was largely carried out among Christians of other denominations it usually resulted in a Christian conversion experience that produced healthy Adventists with biblically-shaped worldviews.

However, in the 1990s, the global mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church expanded to include much more emphasis on outreach among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, African Traditional Religionists, secular people, and those with a postmodern perspective. Although this was a dramatic shift from trying to win already converted Christians to those who had little or no Christian background, the same methodology of evangelism was usually followed. This traditional approach of evangelism had some serious flaws when used among non-Christian groups.

Seventh-day Adventist evangelism continued to emphasize the importance of changed behavior, expecting new believers to honor the Sabbath,

to abstain from alcohol and tobacco, to give tithes and offerings—to exhibit behavior that was recognized as Adventist. Adventist evangelism also continued to emphasize correct doctrinal beliefs, teaching the importance of the seventh-day Sabbath, prophecy, the sanctuary, marks of the true church, and many other Adventist beliefs. However, serious problems began to emerge in various parts of the world.

For example, in August of 2016 I received a letter from a church leader in Zimbabwe in which he stated that many new converts

have had little time to be grounded in Adventist doctrines. In most cases, their former worldviews are still intact. . . . Currently, I am addressing a situation where five churches have had over 300 members removed from church membership because they participated in witch-hunting cleansing ceremonies. These cleansing ceremonies were incidental, [but] they are a symptom of bigger problems of unresolved worldview issues. The issue of the rituals is just one of the many problems. Several other questionable cultural practices are still considered as options when people are in crisis.

The problem seems to be not spending the time or the effort to change the worldview of these new Adventists. Too many reports are indicating that many new converts who are entering the church through a two to three week evangelistic series continue to exhibit attitudes and patterns of behavior that are not representative of what the Seventh-day Adventist Church expects.

One of the responses was that the Biblical Research Institute (BRI), in conjunction with the three African divisions, held a series of meetings dealing with dual allegiance and spiritualistic manifestations that were prevalent in African societies but which were also appearing within Adventist membership. In 2011, those presentations were published in *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa* (Donkor 2011).

An additional problem was in many of the countries where Seventh-day Adventists had well-established churches there was a growing trend for many second and third generation Adventists to develop their value system based more on the values of their culture and what was presented through the media than through the teachings of the Bible.

George Barna has conducted religious polling in the United States with a recent focus on whether or not Christians have a biblically-shaped worldview. It is quite shocking what he is finding.

For the purposes of the survey, a “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to

be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview. (in Stetzer 2009)

Barna found that “only 9% of all American adults have a biblical worldview as defined above.” And that “even among born again Christians, less than one out of every five (19%) had such an outlook on life” (Stetzer 2009). This study was among all Americans, but I wonder if there has been similar slippage among Seventh-day Adventists. This would make a fascinating research topic.

In other parts of the world the *Annual Statistical Report* of the Adventist Church indicates that in spite of impressive membership gains the actual number of members attending Sabbath School and church each week was only a fraction of the number of members listed. In addition, recent membership audits in some divisions have dropped hundreds of thousands of people. For example, on January 1, 2005, the Southern Asia-Pacific Division membership was 1,133,190, but by year end it had dropped to 830,946—a drop of 302,244 (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2005:38). Another example, the South America Division had a 2006 year end membership of 2,648,602 that dropped to 2,617,706 in 2007, dropped again to 2,250,520 in 2008, and dropped once again to 2,015,910 by year end 2009. During those same three years the division added 957,434 members (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2007; 2008; 2009:38). I just returned from the Philippines and talked with the president of the West Mindanao Conference. Their membership went from 61,000 to 31,000 after a membership audit.

Is it possible that many of these people who stopped attending the Adventist Church did so because of a lack of worldview transformation? Is it possible that although they said “yes” to the baptismal vows, that in the weeks and months following their baptism they faced challenges that a short evangelistic effort had not prepared them for?

Instead of having clear biblical principles to follow they lived in confusion as to what the Bible said, so in times of crises they reverted to the old ways of dealing with problems, or stopped attending church. Paul Hiebert suggests that people can come to Christ and be converted within their old worldviews. This means that they can agree with new beliefs and can change their behavior so they look like followers of Jesus; however, if their old core values and premises are not transformed by biblical principles they will remain as weak Christians that are prone to syncretism and dual allegiance (2008:11). This is the very thing that prompted BRI to initiate a series of meetings throughout Africa.

So, how do worldviews get transformed? How do those assumptions, values, and premises that go against biblical principles get changed and brought into conformity with the teachings of Scripture? Perhaps it would be good to compare this challenge with how children initially learn a culture's worldview. Day after day for many years their values and core assumptions are shaped and formed by parents and other members of their society. It is a long, drawn-out process that continues for years with both family and community involvement.

This was also the practice in the early years of Adventist mission. Evangelistic series often lasted three months with additional Bible study required for an additional year or two before baptism was allowed. The goal was to transform the old cultural ways and replace them with biblical ways of living, believing, and thinking. Recently however, a fast-food approach to Adventist evangelism has produced members who often look like Adventists on the outside, but in times of crises or when they are away from the church, these members revert to their old ways of living because they have not spent enough time allowing God's Word to transform and re-shape their worldview.

### **Biblical Examples of the Need for Discipling at the Worldview Level**

The Bible offers many examples of the importance and need for discipling at the worldview level. Judas was part of the twelve disciples for three and a half years, yet his core values seem to have been little affected by the teaching of Jesus.

Peter offers another good biblical example of the need for discipling to the worldview level. For three and a half years Jesus worked to impact Peter's behavior, his beliefs, and his value system. There were many ups and downs, but Peter's behavior and belief system were being changed. His worldview value system took the longest to transform, and not until after Jesus returned to heaven did Peter finally come to accept that it was not part of Jesus' way to look down on Gentiles. It took the miraculous intervention of visions, dreams, and an angel to convince him that God intended to include non-Jews in his kingdom (Acts 10).

Jonah offers another example of a person who needed to have a worldview conversion. His value system never came to grips with the fact that God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion for people also included the hated people of Nineveh. Jonah had a biblically-shaped belief system; most of his behavior would be called biblical, yet his core values still needed changing.

## Worldview Change

The important question to ask is, How do worldviews get changed? Charles Kraft suggests that worldview change can be encouraged in two ways (1996:56, 57). First, by giving people a new explanation of reality. This new explanation sets up tension within their worldview and causes them to reassess what they think and believe. Adventists are good at this approach and have used it effectively in presenting biblical truths in powerful and convincing ways. For example, when Adventists present biblical truths on the Sabbath or on the state of human beings in death or on other truths from Daniel or Revelation the new explanations often create tension. The Holy Spirit can then use that tension to encourage the person to reevaluate and even change their core religious values. This method is most effective among those who are already Christian.

However, many in our modern world are not interested in truth and the peoples in the world religions are often antagonistic toward Adventist teachings and doctrines. In this type of situation the second approach to worldview change can be more effective. This approach helps people have a new experience that again challenges their worldview and causes them to reassess their view of reality. This approach more closely mirrors the approach of Jesus, the disciples, and the early church in its emphasis on healing, setting people free from the evil one, and in helping people experience the power of a loving, caring God in some practical and experiential way.

Those who have a built-in prejudice and hostility towards Christianity can often be better impacted by the gospel when they first encounter it through some faith-building experience. Psalm 34:8 suggests to people they should “taste and see that the Lord is good” (NIV). When Jesus appears to Muslims in a dream or touches them through a healing or sets them free from evil spirits, that experience often starts them on a journey to faith in Jesus Christ (see Woodberry 2008:120, 121).

Christian mission has also struggled in the Hindu setting and has had an especially difficult time in reaching the Brahmin caste. However, when Hindus taste God’s goodness or have an encounter with God in some experiential way, they too more easily begin to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (see Bauer 2013:78-85).

It is interesting to note that in Jesus’ ministry he utilized both approaches. “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases [a new experience], and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God [a new explanation] and to heal the sick [a new experience]” (Luke 9:1, 2). “After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him

to every town and place where he was about to go (Luke 10:1). “Heal the sick who are there [new experience] and tell them, “the kingdom of God is near you [new explanation]” (Luke 10:9). “The seventy-two returned with joy and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name [new experience]’” (Luke 10:17).

Adventists have usually approached discipleship and evangelism from the perspective of offering new explanations with the hope that the new believers will experience the reality and goodness of God. In many parts of Asia and in the 10/40 Window only a few people will attend a typical evangelistic meeting. Therefore, they do not hear enough for the Holy Spirit to bring conviction. In such situations it is often better to help the pre-believer have some type of faith building experience—an answer to prayer, an experience of being accepted in a loving, caring community, or praying that God will give them a dream or vision of Jesus. Once people experience God’s goodness and grace in some way it is much easier for the Christian witness to then give an explanation of the Kingdom of God. Both an explanation and experiential knowledge are important for worldview change.

What are the consequences of a conversion experience that does not penetrate to the worldview level? I have already hinted at several results of an incomplete nurturing and discipling process, but for emphasis I will list them again briefly.

A primary consequence of conversion without worldview change is dual allegiance. This is not a problem limited to any one area of the world. Many Adventists in the Western world are more cultural than they are biblical in areas such as dating habits, divorce and remarriage, and following the biblical principles of modesty and simplicity. In other parts of the world the treatment of women, reverting to guidance from diviners and shaman, and fear of witchcraft are signs of dual allegiance and a shallow discipleship that has not penetrated to the worldview level.

Dual allegiance and shallow discipleship also manifests itself by allowing one’s primary allegiance to be focused on something or someone other than God. The rampant materialism and individualism of the West has captured the primary allegiance of many. Tribal allegiance remained primary among some Adventists in Rwanda allowing them to kill other Adventists from the other tribe. Dual allegiance also results in syncretism that allows for the blending of non-Christian or cultural beliefs and practices with the teachings of the Bible.

These symptoms can all be impacted through a commitment to discipleship that affects a person’s core values, through a more thorough grounding in the Word of God, through extended biblical teaching before baptism, but also through an intentional discussion of the cultural issues

that go against biblical principles. What is needed is for Bible conferences to be held at the local district level so that the cultural issues facing the local people can be discussed in a way to show how biblical principles can be applied to the issue.

When I worked in Cambodia our church members came out of folk Buddhism with a fear of evil spirits. They were looking for power to protect them from the spirits. Not until we preached and talked openly about this topic did the new members begin to realize that God was greater than any spirit. I remember one old church elder that became very sick. He was prayed for and anointed, but his cancer remained. His non-Christian family urged him to call the *krukamai*, the traditional healer, to appease the spirits and bring him healing.

He initially refused, but later gave in and went through three days of traditional ceremonies. He died a few days later. As I shared this story with the new members I asked very pointedly, "If you are faced with the same situation, will you go back to the old power source, or will you remain true to God?" These kinds of cultural issues and the issues faced by the Western churches must be openly confronted with teaching from God's Word.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As mentioned earlier it has been suggested that people can come to Christ just as they are with their old worldviews, but if they remain in those old worldviews they will be stunted in their Christian walk and will continue to live with conflict and syncretism (Hiebert 2008:11). What is needed, especially when working with non-Christian peoples, is for Adventist evangelism to return to the early template where much longer periods of time were spent in extended Bible study, discipleship, and nurture *prior* to baptism.

In addition to longer evangelistic meetings, I would recommend that much more emphasis be spent on topics that apply biblical principles to the people's cultural issues. If Adventists continue the practice of having only short series of evangelistic meetings with poor or non-existent follow-up we will continue to bring people into the church with worldviews that have not been transformed by the Word of God.

A related issue is the wide-spread practice of people from the West going to areas of the world for two to three week evangelistic series. At the end of those series they baptize people who have heard excellent presentations on Adventist distinctive beliefs. However, as foreigners, they did not understand the deep value conflicts between the local worldview and a biblically-shaped worldview and they were unable to talk effectively



about the specific cultural issues facing the new believers. This lack of specific application of biblical principles to local cultural issues is a major factor resulting in syncretism, dual allegiance, and frustration.

Let me illustrate this in a dramatic and graphic way. Short series evangelism presented by foreign evangelists with weak discipleship and nurture is like an irresponsible man visiting a village and over a short period of time fathering 80-100 babies, but then getting on a plane and leaving. A year later he goes to another village and does the same. Most countries would put a person like that in jail. Yet we tolerate that same behavior in the spiritual realm. Every year thousands of newborn, baby Christians are dying because they are neglected and abandoned. No one took the time to help them find answers in the Bible to the cultural challenges they face. No one was around to nurture and disciple them. Yes, they had heard the Adventist distinctives, heard about an Adventist lifestyle, but the principles and values of God's Word had not had time to shape and change their worldview. Such practices are irresponsible and inexcusable.

Therefore I recommend the following:

1. The goal of all discipleship should be the development of a biblically-shaped worldview. Public series of meetings must include a nurturing and discipling plan with baptism delayed until biblical principles have had an opportunity to impact a person's worldview assumptions and values. This will mean that the Adventist Church will have to change the way it does evangelism so that all new baby Christians receive an adequate period of time (perhaps at least a year or two) of supervised nurture and discipleship after their baptism.

2. Adventists need to assess the Church's understanding of the importance of discipleship. The Gospel Commission commands the making of disciples, not just members. Therefore, much more time, effort, and finance should be allocated to this vital work.

3. Those of us who have responsibility at the division, union, and conference levels must ensure that when there is pressure to accept outside money in the support of evangelistic series that money from those same sources must be allocated for the discipling process following the public meetings. In many parts of the world post-baptismal care is assigned to a local church elder who must work six days a week to support the family. Such elders do their best on Sabbath to care for the many baby Christians left in their care, but realistically, they cannot nurture that many babies. Unless money is allocated for a Bible worker or a full-time person to work with the new believers we will continue to have high dropout statistics. We must remember that the ultimate goal of evangelism is making disciples.

4. I recommend that five percent of all public evangelism funds be set aside for evaluation and assessment of the Adventist evangelistic

processes. Surveys should be conducted six months after baptisms, after a year, and after two years to find out how many people are staying in the church, how many people are leaving, and why people leave. The goal is to improve what we are doing. If we just keep doing what we have always done we will keep getting the same results—results that indicate high dropout rates within six months of most public meetings. The assessment should also include questions to ascertain whether cultural worldview issues had been dealt with during the discipleship process.

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