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JOURNEY OF A MISSIONARY LAWYER

**Did I misread the heading? Surely it couldn't
have said "Missionary Lawyer"! There isn't any such
animal! Or is there?**

You can't be a lawyer and be a Christian."

Prior to the 1960s, this *non sequitur* was accepted as fact by many of the faithful. Often I have spoken to a pastor or professor who would shake his or her head wistfully and say, "I wanted to be a lawyer, but in those days. . . ."

Kids would get up at academy weeks of prayer and dedicate themselves to mission service as physicians, nurses, and pastors—but a missionary lawyer? Those rebels who dared to hope so were taken aside by teachers and counseled about their eternal souls. To

be Adventist and interested in law was to live life on the denominational edge.

Truth is, few Adventists of that era had even met a lawyer. Their image of the profession was largely caricature and fiction. Then, with the school prayer and Sunday law cases of the early 1960s, awareness

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grew that lawyers were contending for the faith in courts. Soon, pre-law students became a common presence at Adventist colleges, although even today, Adventist lawyers number only about one in 8,000 members.

Still, the concept of a missionary lawyer seemed about as likely as a mechanic theologian. Bible teachers sedulously guarded the borders of orthodoxy. Granted, if you defended the rights of Sabbathkeepers or battled labor unions, Churchdom, though restricted by theology from granting dispensations, conceded an exemption from perdition. However, if you represented corporations, sued doctors, or defended criminals, your concept of Christianity, if not your church membership, was questioned. Christian witnessing and lawyering seemed mutually exclusive. After all, Jesus had criticized the lawyers of His day (Luke 11:46). And the Apostle Paul bestowed an inspired frown on lawsuits between believers (1 Cor. 6:1-8). What in the world could a lawyer expect to do for the Kingdom?

It was out of this milieu that I enrolled in law school and became a business and employment lawyer. I worked for a large Adventist institution as an administrator and house counsel. Three years later, I joined a law firm. My firm's status in our town gave me access to civic leadership and I served on boards and committees. I became extremely busy "doing good" while my church relationship was going sour. My favorite client, Loma Linda University, was split in two by a constituent fight over whether it should consolidate its two campuses. The church became a business to me, and the Lord heard only an occasional desperate prayer on the run.

Then, while I was on a business trip, God entered my life in a powerful, direct, and intimate way. I returned home broken and quiet, but filled with a new life such as I had never dreamed existed. Prior to this experience, had you asked me about evangelism, I would have talked about *Uncle Arthur's Bible Stories* in the office lobby or brochures for Revelation Seminars and five-day



Digital illustration by John Knox

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stop-smoking plans. After rebirth, I learned that personal knowledge of the truth is as much a requisite for a Christian witness as for a trial witness.

The proof (you'd expect a lawyer to produce this): When I returned from my business trip, of the 26 in my office, only three were believers. Six years later, 13 have accepted Christ or renewed commitment to Him. I was not directly involved in all these reconciliations, and none resulted from proselytizing. Quietly, but assuredly, the life of the Spirit grows and, in the process, teaches. Here are four major principles of Christian witness that the Spirit has taught me.

1. If you are open to His call, God will draw persons who need Him right to you.

Four days after I returned from my business trip on which I met the Lord, I had a conversation with Joyce, our office manager. She and I had talked before about matters of faith and our doubts and troubles.

Abandoned when she was two years old, she was placed in a children's home where she was abused. She returned to live with her alcoholic father, married a young man who became a minister, and had five kids in quick succession. Her husband, unable to stay away from either women or alcohol, left her and the children in a two-bedroom apartment. She got a minimum-wage job, but developed uterine cancer. Years later, now on our staff, she was still hurting.

I told Joyce how God had spoken to me. She responded, “We used to call that ‘the opening of the spirit.’” The next week she went to church for the first time in seven years. Now part of a small Bible study group, she worships weekly with us in a home fellowship and speaks often and convincingly of healing and forgiveness.

Just two days after my trip, I worked a booth at my town's street fair. Nita, a friend whom I had met in a political campaign, joined me

there. A schoolteacher, she went through an exceptionally painful and public divorce in our community. Nita had once been a Baptist youth director, but now was alone and hurting. We were standing in the middle of thousands of people as I told her what had happened to me.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I have to follow,” I replied.

She has been part of our small-group Bible study now for more than two years. She didn’t say anything for the first eight months with us. One night we discussed grace—the unmerited forgiving and witnessing power of God’s love working in our lives. It was then that she spoke. “I want to say something. None of you knows how much humiliation I’ve endured. I came here hurting and resentful, and you guys just let me sit here for eight months and didn’t make me say anything. You just loved me. Let this Baptist tell you something. You Adventists accept people.”

It was the nicest tribute I’ve heard about my church, and may God let it be true!

These were quiet and uncontrived conversations. I didn’t push any “hot buttons.” Rather, we talked as friends sharing what mattered in our lives. Jesus changed the world in a chat at the ancient equivalent of a

water cooler (John 4:1-41), in table talk (Matt. 9:10-13), and while out walking (Luke 18:35-19:10). He picks similar sites at which to reveal Himself today.

2. Bring Jesus to people where they are. Don’t try to drag them to Him.

A young woman came to my office to reveal that she had stolen from her employer and been caught. In questioning her, I learned that she had taken a lot more money than the employer realized; an impending audit would discover the truth. A lot of shame and anger came through her confession.

I told her frankly that she would go to jail. I would, however, refer her to a criminal defense specialist who would advise her on her rights and legal options. As I reached for the phone, the Holy Spirit pulled a verse up from my subconscious: “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you” (Acts 3:6, NRSV).

I prayed silently. “Father, I can’t represent this woman, but I know You will help her.”

Replacing the receiver, I asked, “Do you have any kind of a spiritual background?”

“I went to church when I was a little girl,” she said.

“I can’t represent you,” I said, “but I want to tell you about Someone who can help. You’ve done things that I haven’t, but I’ve done

things that hurt people and made me feel really bad. But I found out that God loves me and forgives me and no matter what the consequences of what I've done, He'll meet them with me. Is it OK to talk about this for a while?"

She nodded.

"You'll likely go to jail. The FBI may come and arrest you at your house and take you away in handcuffs in front of your neighbors. But you know what? God promises that He will be there every step of the way. He'll go to court with you. He'll go to jail with you. Nothing can separate you from His love." I read and explained some favorite texts to her—Psalm 142, John 3:16-18, and Romans 8:31-39. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Tears ran down her face as she nodded again.

As I picked up the phone to arrange for defense counsel, she reached across my desk, took my Bible and leafed through it. When I concluded my call, I asked, "Would you like to have my Bible?"

"You'd give me your Bible?"

"Yes, if you want it."

"I do. Thank you."

Months later she sent me a card with this message: "I want to really thank you for what you have done for me. . . . I have been doing better these past days. I met with the FBI. My lawyer was there. He is a great lawyer. But like you said, lawyers,

judges, and people could not really help. It's just praying to God who could help and believe in Him. He said during our times of trial is when He carries us. God bless you."

3. It's relationship, not doctrine, that counts for Christ.

Paul said that "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6, NIV).

I needed a new secretary. Joyce and I prayed that the right person would come along. Over three months, there were many interviews, but no one impressed us. Then a woman came in who tested well. She had a calm and pleasant personality. I hired her on the spot.

Later I learned that she hadn't even needed a job. A friend had urged her to apply. Two weeks before, she had visited her brother, a Presbyterian minister, on an island in the Puget Sound. He had told her, "It's different being a Christian in a small town. You have a chance to build relationships and trust, and there comes a time when you can share Christ."

That night, Linda prayed, "Well then, Lord, give me a small town."

Our office turned out to be her small town. Linda prays with faith and fire. She prays about anything and everything. I was away when our bookkeeper was diagnosed with serious, aggressive cancer, and surgery was scheduled. As she and I prayed

Clients started calling for prayer over disputes, forgiveness, divorce, financial struggles, illness. Linda's prayers helped several mend relationships with spouses and led one secretary to Christ.

on the phone, Linda, Joyce, and another secretary were praying in the hallway. This at 11:00 a.m. on a workday. When my wife came in, she joined them.

Clients started calling for prayer over disputes, forgiveness, divorce, financial struggles, illness. Linda's prayers helped several mend relationships with spouses and led one secretary to Christ.

"Bill" came in one morning with an employment problem so insignificant that it wasn't worth the trip. As I finished drafting a brief letter for him, he blurted out the real reason for his visit: "My divorce is final on Monday."

"I'm sorry."

"I know," he groaned, "but you're the only one who says so. Everybody else congratulates me. All I can think about is how I messed up. My work became my lover, and I failed my marriage."

We talked and I told him about Christ. He wouldn't yield his heart, but our relationship continues. Someday I expect Christ to make something of the loaves and fishes of this relationship.

4. Never underestimate people's hunger for God.

Lawyers are sometimes compared to vultures because we are so often found near dying relationships and broken lives, whether the context is business, crime, families, or property. Desperate persons do desperate things. What are they desperate for? Love, power, money, acceptance, self-esteem. So they scheme, risk, manipulate, and stretch themselves to the breaking point. Then they come for help.

Actually, they need God. Jesus saw crowds of people like our clients, and Matthew observed: "He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36, NIV).

Solomon considered the ultimate bankruptcy of human effort without grace and noted that the real hunger of the spirit is for God because He has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Eccl. 3:11, NIV). Our hearts were created as homing devices to lead us to our Father. Everything else to which we are attached is a poor substitute.

**When his questions turned to my faith, I told him that
“Christianity is not about cracking heads. It’s about choice and
commitment. It’s about living with purpose and power, not
just getting by through keeping the rules.”**

Our churches are very much like my office. After I testified to my rebirth during a homecoming weekend at Monterey Bay Academy, I was overwhelmed with church members who expressed their longing for God and His peace. Life hadn’t turned out for many as they had hoped after graduation, and now they were searching for real answers. I connected with their hearts when I explained that they didn’t need religion, they needed God.

The eyes of one alumnus, a healthcare professional, showed such pain that I later wrote to him and his wife. They responded:

“We struggle daily. Our practice has consumed us. We are so exhausted that we collapse on Sabbath and don’t even feel sociable. We have no time for Bible studies even though there are requests. I feel like a dry well—like the clouds that blow over this dry part of the state only to keep going, leaving us parched and desolate. With that state of mind we went to alumni weekend and you can see why your sermon was meaningful.

“We are suffering from shell

shock after being here for 16 years. Our church school is closed and our membership all in terrible need of being infused with life. We are tired of . . . bringing anyone to church where they get blasted and discouraged.”

We continued to correspond and Christ renewed their spirit. The next year they gave copies of a book I sent them, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, to every pastor in their conference.

Let me tell you about Mitch. He is a young, good-looking, very bright attorney hired from my own law school. His was a young executive on the fast track with a leading department store chain.

Mitch and I often talked about the law as we worked on cases together. He was distraught when his nephew died of crib death. We prayed together about it. He told me of his childhood faith, which had slipped away during soccer practices and studies in high school and college. When his father-in-law died during open heart surgery and when his wife miscarried, I again shared my Source of comfort through prayer.

At six one evening Mitch came

into my office and we talked about several recent Supreme Court decisions on civil liberties. When his questions turned to my faith, I told him that "Christianity is not about cracking heads. It's about choice and commitment. It's about living with purpose and power, not just getting by through keeping the rules."

At 9 p.m. that night, Mitch told me, "I want what you have." He accepted Christ. Later, he and his wife decided to change their lifestyle and raise their new baby in less pressurized surroundings. He left a partnership with our firm. She left her employment where, at age 32, she had risen higher than most people do in their entire career. Jesus Christ had entered their life. They'll never be the same.

Compelling Evidence

So you've read my "brief," which holds that there is such a thing as a missionary lawyer. I've got another "witness" to put on the stand—the Apostle Paul, who wrote to Titus: "Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way, and see that they have everything they need" (Titus 3:13, 14, NIV). The evidence is compelling: God will reveal Himself and lives can be changed at a law office's water cooler or conference table, if one is willing to be God's spokesperson.

I've not attempted to write a

"how-to" manual on evangelism. As the Apostle Peter wrote: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gifts each of you has received" (1 Peter 4:10, NRSV). I've sought simply to share the way God chose to use me, when I asked Him to take charge of my life.

As an attorney, I know that you may raise objections to my brief. You may say—

"I don't have time." If you love God with everything you are and have—His first commandment—you'll find that He'll give you time to fulfill His second commandment—to love your neighbor as yourself.

"I'm just not that spiritual."

Neither am I. Among my attorney colleagues, I am known for a combative nature and telling jokes. I am ashamed of my ferocious temper. Just two months after sharing my testimony with Joyce, our office manager, I dealt with a personnel matter with such anger that the office staff went silent for the whole day. Joyce was gentle: "Well, you made your point, but how many lambs did you slaughter?"

I need God's grace everyday. I need the power of the Cross to overcome my surly nature. Some days I don't surrender. Some days I fight alone. Some days I fail. Praise God, it is not Kent Hansen but Christ who witnesses through this very earthen vessel! □