
When the Jailhouse Rocks: In Defense of Evangelism For The Church of Today

by Charles Scriven

During the first semester of my doctoral studies in theology, I met a graduate of Notre Dame University who was proud to have played college baseball against Steve Garvey, then a Dodger superstar. He was also proud that while at Notre Dame he had studied with a visiting professor who had returned to his regular teaching post at the Graduate Theological Union. That was where my friend and I were then both enrolled.

The professor was James William McClendon, Jr. "Next semester he's leading a seminar on religion and relativism," my student friend confided. "You've got to take it."

I took the seminar. The teacher, as I came to know, sees himself as an "alienated, left-wing Southern Baptist."¹ He made me an Adventist. At least he helped me accept what I had begun to doubt: that our Adventist heritage matters and that it contains healing insight for today's society and even for other churches.

I had just finished a fairly bookish decade. Under seminary teachers such as Roy Branson, Earle Hilgert, and Edward Vick I had come to enjoy contemporary theological writers and had read quite a few of them by the time I met McClendon. One impression I had gained from this reading was that the fashionable university theologies tended, whether subtly or directly, to soften the differences between the church and the

world. Christianity made a difference, but not enough of a difference to make the church's opposition to dominant values seem very pronounced or to make its commission to convert non-Christians seem very important.

The authors of these fashionable theologies said faith in God makes you whole psychologically: it gives you self-acceptance, it gives you hope, it gives you purpose and meaning. They said faith in God makes you whole morally: it lifts you from yourself, it widens your concern, it nourishes commitment.

But the teachers of these fashionable, university theologies never said (or rarely said) that faith in God entails evangelistic fervor. They didn't have much time, or so it seemed to me, for what Matthew reports in chapter 28, verses 18-20. Notice these words:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (RSV)

Consider a piece of university theology with which I had become acquainted. It is from John Macquarrie, whose academic career climaxed with his appointment to the Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity at Oxford University.

There has been too much thought of gaining converts, of winning the world, of expanding the church. . . . What is important is the manifesting and propagating of Christ's self-giving love, and the awakening of this in ever-wider areas of human society. But this may well happen without these areas becoming incorporated into the

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Christian Church or explicitly confessing the Christian faith. . . [P]erhaps in the modern world the time has come for an end to the kind of mission that proselytizes, especially from sister faiths which, though under different symbols, are responding to the same God and realizing the same quality of life.²

Matthew tells us: heaven's authority belongs to Jesus; the disciples of Jesus must make more disciples in all nations. John Macquarrie tells us: heaven's authority belongs not just to Jesus but also to others; it is misguided to make disciples in all nations.

For Macquarrie, the church's mission is to be good, to love as Jesus loved. That mission does not include evangelism; it does not include preaching intended to make converts; it does not, at least, put emphasis on this. The difference between the church and the world, or the church and "contemporary society," is not great enough to warrant it.

I still remember when I raised the question of evangelism in the company of my friend James McClendon. By now I was writing a dissertation under his guidance. By now I had spent months—a couple of years actually—thinking with him about the church and the world. I had come to believe that the difference between the way of Jesus and the way of the world is enormous. Still, modern Christian doubts about recruiting new Christians for other ways of life were so great that *proselytize* had become virtually a dirty word. And I had not mustered the courage to broach the topic with my teacher.

But riding through the rain with him one night, I finally did. As we passed the university campus in Berkeley, I said, across the car seat, that many thoughtful Christians would agree with Macquarrie's view. What did he think? "Perhaps Macquarrie's wrong," he told me.

The answer seemed tentative, but I knew by then that my teacher typically responded to his students' questions in a way that evoked further thinking, further conversation. I understood the meaning of his remark to be: Macquarrie is dead wrong. I agreed, and still agree. I believe Christians should make disciples in all nations. I also believe we should advance our own Adventist perspective to whomever will listen, including other Christians. What follows explains why.

Let me clarify the claim. I wish to argue that Adventists do have something—something important—to offer contemporary society. I say that our community must look outward and invite potential members to join us. This is our obligation if we are loyal to Jesus, and it is one way to be God's copartners in service to the world. In other words, I am going to defend evangelism.

Indifference, even hostility, toward evangelism runs very deep, especially among the educated. But that is all the more reason, I believe, to make a case for it.

This is a daunting task. Indifference and even hostility to evangelism flourish inside as well as outside the church. At Sligo, during the summer of 1987 we conducted a three-week evangelism project. We called it the Festival of Faith. The preaching was by John Brunt, perhaps the first Adventist evangelist who embraces historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture. The project was in some ways wonderfully satisfying; in others, none having to do with the preaching, it was not. For example, although some long-time, well-educated Adventists became involved, most did not. One person about my age, aware that the festival was coming, told me a few weeks before it began: "I just wish we never tried to get anyone to join our church." Another said about halfway through the festival that she had not been to any of the meetings because she had never met an evangelist she didn't dislike.

These remarks did not surprise me. They underscored what I knew to begin with—that indifference, even hostility, toward evangelism runs very deep, especially among the educated. But that is all the more reason, I believe, to make a case for it. Evangelism is important; it is our Christian obligation as a community. To show why, I am going to note four key objections to evangelism and then argue against each one. They are the relativity objection, the autonomy objection, the hypocrisy objection, and the irrelevancy objection. In the process of dealing with

them I hope to demonstrate why the Adventist perspective upon Christian existence is today especially important.

Against the Relativity Objection

Consider, first, the relativity objection. That first seminar with James McClendon focused on religion and relativism, on the whole matter, as he would put it, of religious convictions in a pluralistic world. How can one justify, and so be in a position to recommend, one's religious beliefs? Thoughtful people have since the 18th century understood how elusive a "neutral," or "objective," standpoint is. From our least important convictions to our most important, we are the products of a particular time and place. Since these times and places differ, our convictions differ. None of us can escape the particular conditioning that has affected us, so no one is ever in a position to decide—objectively—which convictions among all the ones that differ are the best. It is thus doubtful whether anyone or any institution can rightfully claim our ultimate allegiance or actually teach us the ultimate truth.

Imagine Gloria Steinem confronting the Ayatollah Khomeini on the question of how to treat adulterous women.

This is the sense of "relativity," and it is pervasive among cultural leaders in contemporary western society.³ Insofar as we are all affected by these leaders, we all share this sense of relativity, this sense that all things—including Scriptures, creeds, and prophets—are conditioned by their environment. This sense constitutes an obvious objection to evangelism, the activity of making converts to our (conditioned?) point of view. Can the objection be met?

It cannot be fully met. There is pluralism in this world, substantial variation, that is, in what different communities of people believe. And no one, nor any institution, including the church, can

overcome "relativity," the fact that all our thoughts and values are conditioned by the particular community we grew up in. Yet just this, overcoming relativity, would be required in order for anyone to be able to say for sure which thoughts and values are the best.

Despite this, however, we need not accept the radical claim that differences of background rule out making judgments on what others believe in attempting to change their minds. If we did accept this claim, by the way, we would have to stand by in amiable silence when confronted with the gas chambers. The reason we don't have to is that the cultural walls that divide humanity are not opaque. They do not, that is, prevent us altogether from communicating with one another, from actually getting across our reasons for why we believe as we do.

Imagine Gloria Steinem confronting the Ayatollah Khomeini on the question of how to treat adulterous women. Whatever Gloria Steinem thinks about this, we can be sure it differs radically from what the Ayatollah thinks. She is a feminist; he is an Islamic fundamentalist—under whose leadership adulterous women have actually been stoned to death.

The difference of conviction between these two is largely due to the difference between their respective backgrounds. Does this difference of background, this "relativity," suggest that Gloria Steinem would be unjustified in trying to change the Ayatollah's mind? I think not, and here is why.

First, all human communities share with all others at least some common ideals. The very idea of a community entails that some notion of justice and truth, for example, has taken root.⁴ We can imagine that were a real opportunity afforded her, Steinem would be able to appeal to such ideals as these. Even though her conception of them would not be exactly the same as her conversation partner's, it would be close enough for her to create in the Ayatollah at least a rough understanding of her objection to his views.

It is silly, of course, to suppose that in the short run the Ayatollah would actually change his position. But suppose there was lots of time. And suppose that besides having to deal with Stein-

em's arguments, he had to deal with—to actually confront—a community that was living out her vision. Then his position would resemble that of, say, white, racist Americans under the impact of the civil-rights movement. Such Americans had to face both the arguments and the example of those who disagreed with them. And some of them changed their minds. In principle this could happen even to the Ayatollah. Of course it won't in fact happen, since the confrontation we are imagining will never take place. The point is that under the impact of a challenge minds can and do change, despite relativity, despite cultural conditioning.

There is a second reason why Gloria Steinem, were she given the opportunity, would be justified in trying to change the Ayatollah's mind. It is because her differences with him are differences of moral conviction. Moral convictions by definition concern how things ought to be in general, not just in one's own community. The reactions and motivations connected with these convictions cannot evaporate when we meet someone who thinks differently from us. We cannot be merely nonchalant toward others, especially concerning significantly different understandings of what is right and what is wrong.⁵ If we are, we abandon morality itself. Surely we do not wish to do that.

The case of the disciple is similar, of course, to the case of the feminist: first, we can effect change in how people think, and, second, we must (if our convictions are moral) try to do so. These points go part way toward meeting the relativity objection.

But only part way; the objection cannot, as I have said, be fully met. Disciples themselves are culturally conditioned; they have no neutral or objective standpoint from which to certify absolutely that their thoughts and values are the best. But this uncertainty goes inevitably with being human; it is part of the mystery and riskiness of every person's life. We must attain as much certainty as possible—by comparing our thoughts and values to what others accept, by testing them as best we can, by adjusting them when needed. But the fact that we will never attain perfect certainty must not leave us limp and speechless before what we consider evil, any more than it

would leave Gloria Steinem limp and speechless before the Islamic Ayatollah. If it is risky to raise our evangelistic voices, it is an outrage to be silent.

Against the Autonomy Objection

W e come next to the autonomy objection to evangelism. This is based on the feeling, dominant among thought leaders in Western society since the Enlightenment, that a way of life is something that mature people choose for themselves. They choose it on the basis of careful, independent thinking. They do not rely in their choosing upon the direction of someone else, whether parent, teacher, or politician. Neither do they rely on the authority of revered prophets or sacred books or religious institutions. The mature person is courageous enough to depend upon himself alone in deciding how to live. The mature person dares to be autonomous.

According to this view, when I urge my way of life upon other persons I interfere with their freedom, with their right and duty to rely on their own thinking and conscience to learn what is true and what is right. In the end this view even undermines the authority of God to direct human lives.

I heard a friend of mine from graduate school make this point one day in a lecture he gave at a synagogue near Berkeley, California. Once, my friend said, a synagogue board was considering whether to accept the rabbi's request and begin using the Hebrew language instead of English in the worship service. Everyone opposed the rabbi, and when the vote was taken it was 7-1 against using Hebrew. The frustrated rabbi quickly offered a prayer, asking the Master of the universe to "give a sign that you want us to use Hebrew in the service." Suddenly, a fierce wind blew and a massive earthquake rattled the windows and shook the walls. The rabbi was pleased at the answer to his prayer. But the board president, a layman, was the first to speak: "OK," he said, "so it's 7-2."

The idea, remember, is this; use your own rea-

soning powers; don't depend on anyone else, not even God, to decide. It is a pervasive idea and to some degree seeps into all our minds even if we are Christians who revere Jesus and the Bible. But I want to say that the idea of choosing on our own is at best misleading and at worst pure self-deception. Scholars even in the fancy universities are beginning to see this.

The reason the idea is wrong is that no one can possibly be free from the direction and authority of others. What others think comes through in the language we learn as little children. All through our lives we continue to be influenced by families and schools, by radio and television, by books and billboards. This is true even of fancy professors. If they are from, say, East Germany, the professors are usually communists but if they are from, say, West Germany, they are usually not.

The idea that we should decide on our own makes evangelism suspect, of course. It makes it seem an intrusion, a piece of bad manners. But if we see that everyone has been influenced by the direction and authority of others, then the question becomes: Whose direction is best? Which authority can we trust? This is a complicated matter, as we saw in dealing with the relativity objection. But if no one can be absolutist about the truths he proclaims or the autonomy he enjoys then it makes excellent sense for people who have followed directions that are satisfying, and who have found an authority they trust, to recommend that others join them in their way of life. The autonomy objection, I conclude, rests upon a mistake.

Against the Hypocrisy Objection

Let us look now at a third objection to evangelism. It is the hypocrisy objection. This is the view, present at the level of feeling, if not actually expressed, that the church should not recommend its message to others until it gets its own house in order. Within Adventism we think of theological ignorance, patriarchal leadership, financial scandal, moral cowardice. It

seems to many church members odd, even immoral, to invite anyone into so flawed a fellowship.

Of all the objections this seems the most difficult. When I consider, for example, how our church has been treating its women, how it has refused to erase the sinful distinctions Jesus did away with, I feel disgusted and empty. Certainly, despite whatever arguments are presented, evangelism will never take hold among thoughtful Adventists until this most egregious of hypocrisies is done away with. If, however, we wait for a perfect community before we offer the gospel to the world, we will wait forever.

Consider the original readers of 1 Corinthians.⁶ They were a Christian community founded by Paul during his year-and-a-half sojourn in their city. First Corinthians was a letter that came to them from Paul after he had been away for some time. And one of the most remarkable things about the letter is the portrayal of the flaws in their life as a church. We learn that there was incest in the community and no one was trying to stop it; that some members thought it all right to see prostitutes; that other members regarded all sexual relationships as evil; that disputes among church members were being taken to pagan courts; that members were participating in pagan temple rituals; that at the Lord's Supper the rich were gorging themselves while the poor were going hungry; that fanatics were exalting speaking in tongues above every other gift of the spirit; that some denied the doctrine of the resurrection. The theological divisions had split the community into several factions.

If ever the hypocrisy objection would have made sense, surely it would have made sense to someone familiar with this church. But in his letter to this church Paul, despite his knowledge of these flaws, wrote passionately about the importance of preaching. The word of the cross was the power of God, which he enthusiastically proclaimed. Despite the skeptics, he wrote, "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24 RSV).

As for Corinth proper, it was a cosmopolitan port city along the Mediterranean coast and proverbial, some say, for its immorality. Despite this, the church there had been the scene of many memorable transformations. Paul wrote in chapter 6, verses 9f: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” Then he listed examples of unacceptable behavior: idolatry, adultery, thievery, drunkenness, robbery, etc. Many of you were like this, he went on, but “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God” (verse 11, RSV).

This in part, I am sure, is why Paul was still preaching: the gospel was making a difference, it was making bad people into better people. To be inside the Corinthian church was to be in a flawed community. But to be outside it was worse. And that is the point—for today as well as back then. Flaws disfigure the church and we should admit it. But that does not mean we have no reason to address the world. Transformations are still happening, and the gospel message still rebukes the philosophies of greed, unfairness, infidelity, and violence that flourish all around us.

Against the Irrelevancy Objection

But wait, in what ways does the gospel really make a difference? With this question we come to the fourth objection against evangelism, what I am calling the irrelevancy objection. We hear this objection amid the antagonism toward evangelism in the remarks I quoted from Macquarrie. Part of the author’s claim, remember, is that Christian existence does not, after all, yield a distinctive quality of life.⁷

It is true that belonging to a Christian church may not produce a distinctive quality of life. We have already noted that many Christian theologians, not least those of the mainline Protestant churches, have themselves softened the differences between the church and world. They have cast doubt upon the idea that there is distinctive Christian morality. They have done this in part

because of their bewitchment by the standard, modern account of moral rationality according to which thoughtful persons can discover universal moral truths “by reason alone,” without consulting the stories of their own history or the beliefs of their own people.

But this standard, modern account is pretentious and self-deluding. While it was being preached, so was the modern doctrine of relativity, the idea noted before that we acquire our thoughts and values from the particular communities we grow up in. But you can’t preach both things and be consistent. If we are really rooted in our communities, in the stories and beliefs that were handed down to us, then we can no more gain a neutral point of view in morality than in religion or anything else. Seeing this, we can once more, if we are fully satisfied that the gospel is true, embrace the particular stories and beliefs connected with that gospel.

The truth is, we can bear witness to the gospel, and we must. We have considered the relativity, the autonomy, the hypocrisy, and the irrelevancy objections to evangelism. Each of these objections is an important challenge to the church’s evangelistic mission, but each can be met. They are, in varying degrees, muddleheaded.

Because if no one witnesses to the gospel, everything will remain the same, and we’ll be stuck with the spiritual leadership of the Hollywood producers, the Wall Street brokers, the Pentagon bureaucrats—and all their counterparts across the bleeding earth.

When we do we will be able to share with others a truly distinctive way of life; instead of greed, servanthood; instead of unfairness, justice; instead of infidelity, faithfulness; instead of violence, peace; instead of partnership with the powers that be, partnership with God’s power.

You remember the story of the Philippian jailer. The conversion, you recall, took place when the jailhouse rocked, when an earthquake struck while Paul and Silas sang.

With our heritage in the Radical Reformation,⁸ Adventists can be a means by which God shakes the world today. In affirming our solidarity with Christ, in celebrating our Sabbath joy, in upholding our Advent hope, we can beckon others to a

truly liberated life. Against all injustice, sullenness, and pessimism, we can offer the resounding Yes of the Christian gospel.

As Adventists fully embrace the Gospel Commission, we will sing like Paul and Silas, and when we do, we too will see the jailhouse rock.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. James William McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1975), p. 90.

2. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966) p. 393.

3. See Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), ch. 2 for a helpful summary of the "cultural background" against which Christians must live and speak. Both relativity and autonomy, of which more later, belong, Gilkey says, to this background.

4. On this see Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 95;

see also MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980) pp. 178-180.

5. See Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Harper Torchbooks ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 24.

6. A sermon by John Brunt suggested to me the following response to the hypocrisy objection.

7. See above, p. 3.

8. See, e.g., my "Radical Discipleship and the Renewal of Adventist Mission," in *Spectrum* 14 (December 1983), pp. 11-20.